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Peace in Our Time

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By BOB VERINI

Many excellent plays are neglected, but not all neglected plays are excellent. Fifteen minutes into Casey Stangl's production of Noel Coward's "Peace in Our Time" as adapted by Barry Croyton, it's clear why this rickety, bankrupt what-if-Germany-had-conquered-England-in-'39 melodrama hasn't been seen locally since 1950, or almost anywhere since its sputtering 1947 West End premiere. The two questions this version raises are why anyone thought interpolating Coward musical numbers would contribute to its impact, and why the accomplished Antaeus company is wasting its resources on material of this caliber.

"Peace" makes use of Coward's laziest structure, the panorama play: one or two scenes per year, all ending in heavyhanded ironies or unresolved cliffhangers. Strike one. Its cast of characters reflects the demographics he avowedly knew and cared least about, the bourgeois and working classes. Strikes two and three right there.

Occupation, as filtered through the experience of a London public house, is presented as a cavalcade of inconveniences and social snubs: You can't get a good glass of gin anymore, dahling, and ooh, isn't it awful what they're doing to the poor Jews? Everyone is neatly divided among weaselly collaborators, blowsy bon vivants and stiff-upper-lip patriots.

Once local resistance has stiffened at the Allied invasion, the action devolves into a series of cliched situations straight out of the corniest RKO wartime mellers. A sniveling Quisling gets his comeuppance when they (gasp; chortle) pour rotgut into his whisky.

A tart who's consorted with the enemy is brusquely told she won't be served here anymore - in some towns they're cuttin' off their 'air, a biddy helpfully chirps - and departs, crestfallen. Coward the master, indeed. Shouldn't a master have some understanding of such creatures, and allow her a little eloquent defense?

Given the strong talent roster, some nuanced work is to be found among the first-night cast (Antaeus always alternates two full troupes). Pub owners Steve Hofvendahl and Lily Knight convey the ambivalence of those initially hoping to stay on the sidelines but gradually forced to take a

stand.

Graham Hamilton chillingly brings in a taste of the outside world as a prison-scarred escapee, and married couple Drew Doyle and Zoe Perry are amusingly, believably more concerned with their domestic dipsomania than current events. Others are mostly content to wallow in clipped Oxbridge accents and simpering smirks, as if told to play "Private Lives."

Coward's monotonous ballads and music-hall ditties, sung live, serve to diminish whatever little tension script and performances manage to build up from scene to choppy next scene. With their conquerors well in place and Gestapo lurking everywhere, the bar habitués think nothing of roaring the satirical "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans" at the top of their lungs. So much for attention to given circumstances, notwithstanding Tom Buderwitz's impressively realistic set and the uncredited, clever scene-setting photocollages.

The superb film "Went the Day Well?," about a German platoon's (fictional) invasion of a country town, is crystal clear about the harsh realities of Nazi domination, the complex motives of those in bed with it and the sheer ruthlessness required to resist it. If such 20/20 vision was possible in 1942 before the war's outcome was decided, then Coward's twee brand of historical myopia is baffling for 1947 and utterly inconceivable in 2011.