

Noël Coward's Peace in Our Time

Vol. 7 Issue 18

10/31/2011

Theater Review by Samuel Bernstein, West Hollywood, California

"You mustn't confuse bitterness with contempt."

Everything you need to know about the Antaeus Company's new adaptation of Noël Coward's *Peace in Our Time* is contained within that one brilliant line.

It's funny and clever, certainly, yet there is also a universal truth held within the turn of phrase that transcends the character who says it – that transcends the time and place and situation of the play.

We only experience real contempt when the stakes are very high, and our emotional investment is very deep.

Peace in Our Time, first produced in England in 1947, and set entirely in a London pub, has quite a lot to say about contempt. About love. Freedom. Family. And about life in a time of war.

It's a "What-If?" play based on the premise that England has lost the Battle of Britain and is occupied by the Nazis as World War II rages from 1940 through 1945.

It's been seldom seen since the postwar era of its premiere.

Barry Creyton has beautifully adapted the original script and added ten songs, mostly lesser known gems from the Coward catalogue. It's a perfect fit. Would anyone imagine that the terrific "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans" wasn't written precisely for this play?

And it's a pleasure to hear the sound of the human voice singing without electronic amplification in numbers like "Let's Live Dangerously" and "That is the End of the News."

But this isn't a musical, per se. Rather the characters sometimes sing, alone or in groups, around the piano at the pub. The piano player is usually there.

There is also a cabaret singer, played opening night by the excellent Raleigh Holmes. Her torchy "Come the Wild, Wild Weather" is lovely and quite moving.

The show has two sets of actors for its gigantic cast of 23 --- an unheard of amount for a straight play in modern times, but par for the course back in the day.

Creyton has expertly trimmed and massaged the original script with obvious tenderness, and a keen understanding of how best to communicate Coward's story to a modern American audience.



L to R: Susan Boyd-Joyce, Joanna Strapp, Chris Clowers, Steve Hofvendahl, Lily Knight

Photo by Geoffrev Wade



L to R: Richard Levinson, Jesse Sharp, Rob Nagle

Photo by Geoffrey Wade

The plot is interwoven with newsreel footage, mostly fictional war news, and the stories of the people who live in the Nazi-occupied London of Coward's imagination.

As one would expect, there are true believers who never give in as well as those who straddle the two sides, and those who accept their new lot with an eye toward the main chance.

That the Allies eventually prevail isn't unexpected. The way in which the characters change and adapt, is.

The world conjured by the Antaeus Company feels vivid and quite real.

Tom Buderwitz's set is truly extraordinary, as are Jessica Olson's costumes, Jeremy Pivnick's lighting, and the uncredited hair and make-up design.

Kudos also to dialect coach Tuffet Schmelzle. To my ear, the variety of accents seems just right.

The cast is uniformly effective, without a false note in the bunch.

Lily Knight is wonderful as a wife, mother, and pub landlady, who struggles mightily to hold her family together in the midst of an impossible situation. She has a moment of tearful, shocked recognition that is the sort of scene many actors fumble—going for grand gestures and showy technique.

Knight is simple, honest, and she takes your breath away.



Kendra Cheil

Photo by Geoffrey Wade



Rob Nagle & Graham Hamilton

Photo by Geoffrey Wade

She and her husband, nicely played by Steve Hofvendahl, create a pub world that you can imagine everyone in the neighborhood wanting to come back to again and again—and not for the wartime abominations of rum and synthetic pineapple juice, or for the rather ghastly beer the Nazis permit the British to drink.

It is a community. And a way of life that seems quite lost in our age. Having hundreds of friends on Facebook doesn't quite compare.

Playing a writer who is unquestioning in her patriotism and courage, Emily Chase's timing is impeccable, but it is her passion and unrelenting clarity that drive the performance. It is an unqualified success.

JD Cullum does a fabulous job as a

turncoat. (Chase delivers the line about contempt to him.) Thankfully, he is a villain without Snidely Whiplash embellishment.

"If there's one thing in the world I detest—" he starts at one point, only to be cut off by Chase with, "There's more than one thing in the world I detest."

Casey Stangl's direction is nothing short of miraculous. This is a small house with a small (though rather deep) stage space, but she keeps the large cast in effortless motion. And she understands how to use light, movement, and shadow to focus attention—leaving images that linger in your memory as giant close-ups.

Coward is sometimes dismissed as a writer who was merely clever, which is as stupid as it is dispiriting. To anyone who would consign him to second tier status I say this: Don't confuse being clever with being glib.

Private Lives has as much to say about marriage as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*.

And *Peace in Our Time* has as much to say about war and peace as... well, you get the drift...

Presented by the remarkable Antaeus Company, *Peace in Our Time* runs through December 11 at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8 pm and Sundays at 2:30 pm. Tickets and information: antaeus.org or (818) 506-1983.

Samuel Bernstein is an award-winning author and screenwriter living in West Hollywood with husband Ronald Shore and their two obstreperous dachshunds.