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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2011

THEATER REVIEW: PEACE IN OUR TIME



No, el coward

By Ed Rampell

The Antaeus Company -- which "strives to keep classical theater vibrantly alive by presenting productions with a top-flight ensemble company of actors" -- has succeeded admirably in doing so by reviving two great anti-fascist dramas. Both plays presented by Antaeus are alternative histories that imagine "what if" fascism had

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taken over England and America.

Noël Coward is primarily remembered as a sophisticated showman, composer of songs such as *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and an urbane writer of risqué romances, such as *Brief Encounter* (about an extramarital affair), *Private Lives* (which Liz and Dick rather famously revived onstage in 1983) and *Blithe Spirit* (about a ghost haunting her husband after he remarries). But Coward's 1946 *Peace in Our Time* shows that when the playwright encountered Nazism, he was anything but blithe in his spirited drama about the public lives of Englishmen confronting Hitler's mad dogs.

Peace in Our Time is actually more in the mode of Coward's 1942 Oscar-winning moral boosting masterpiece World War II film, *In Which We Serve*, which he wrote, scored and co-directed with David Lean, than his sexy stories. Like *Serve*, Coward's love affair in *Peace* is with England, as Brits battle blitz. John Apicella's projections of archival footage of the Battle of Britain, etc., help set the scene. During the first act the Third Reich conquers the U.K., and the rest of the two-hour and 45-minute or so play takes



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place in a London pub where we encounter a cross section of British society.

Just as a school served as a microcosm for Britain in Lindsay Anderson's 1969 student revolt film, *If...*, *Peace's* pub likewise doubles as a microcosm of an imagined occupied England. There are resisters, collaborators and of course, Germans, in the pub, which is an abbreviation for public house. Antaeus' Co-Artistic Director Tony Amendola pointed out to me that these drinking establishments played a central role in British culture as a central meeting place, which Shakespeare noted in his plays featuring Falstaff. Scenic Designer Tom Buderwitz has done yeoman's work and performed marvels in transforming the Deaf West Theatre's stage into a highly realistic replica of a pub, and deserves kudos for his realism and attention to detail.

Australian Barry Creyton's adaptation of Coward's *Peace* adds nine of Coward's own Music Hall-style songs that weren't in the original version of the drama, and they are seamlessly interwoven into the play, accompanied by an upright piano with Richard Levinson tickling the ivories. The ditties obviously serve to liven things up,

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and numbers such as *London Pride*, *Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans* (banned by a humorless BBC!) and *Could You Please Oblige Us with a Bren Gun?* fully display Coward's clever wordplay and wit, which Monty Python, Dudley Moore and Peter Cook evolved out of.

Casey Stangl does a far better job directing his ensemble cast than the baseball manager with a similar name did managing the New York Mets back in the 1960s. Unlike the Mets, the Antaeus team never drops the ball, which continues rolling along. As there are 22 speaking parts, and the roles are double-casted on alternate nights, your intrepid reviewer only has space to single a few thespians out who trod the boards opening night.

Steve Hofvendahl is steadfast as Fred Shattock, the stalwart bartender with a slow fuse who precariously presides over his slice of British life. Emily Chase has a masterful, veddy English accent that sounds as if she shoplifted it from PBS' *Masterpiece Theater*. Chase alternates in the role of the writer Janet Braid, who personifies patriotic spirit and love of the "sceptred isle," unblushingly

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quoting Sakespeare's immortal lines -- "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" -- as a rebuke to the Nazi collaborator. Take that!

As said turncoat, JD Cullum is perfect as Chorley Bannister, the snobby editor who, after the Hitlerian invasion, goes along to get along. However, it seems that this character is supposed to be gay, and if this is the case, it's sad that Coward, himself a closeted homosexual, would choose to make the Brit who sells out to the Germans a practitioner of the love that dare not say its name (especially under Third Reich rule!). If Coward equated collaborating with being queer and considered homosexuality to be a signpost of a personality or character defect, then the otherwise valiant anti-fascist Coward was here a rather cowardly lion.

Peace in Our Time runs through Dec. 11 at the Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA 91601. For more info: (818)506-1983; www.Antaeus.org.

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