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Theater review: 'Peace In Our Time' at Deaf West Theatre

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In “Peace in Our Time,” stunningly revived by the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, Noel Coward imagines what would have happened if Britain had fallen to the Germans early on during the Second World War. He began writing the play, first produced in 1947, after a postwar visit to Paris, where he was haunted by the atmosphere of guilt and evasion, disillusionment and defensiveness. Would the British character have fared any

better than the French under brutal occupation?

Coward was disappointed that this ambitious drama exploring resistance and complicity, courage and cowardice was received with only mild acclaim. “I’m fairly depressed about ‘Peace in Our Time’ not being the smasheroo we thought it was,” he confided to his secretary. “I suppose the public really don’t feel like seeing anything serious at the moment and I must say I can’t blame the poor sods. All the same it’s disheartening.”

This beautifully mounted production, directed with poise by Casey Stangl, deserves to be a smasheroo in Los Angeles. The absorbing fictional world that it creates is like a sepia-tinged photograph sprung to life. Every aspect of the staging, from Tom Buderwitz’s London pub set to Jeremy Pivnick’s shadowy lighting to Jessica Olson’s convincing period costumes, ushers us back in time to a moment not so long ago when civilization was hanging by a thread.



The play, newly adapted by Barry Creyton to include several dramatically unnecessary yet atmosphere-building musical numbers by Coward, has a freshness that took me somewhat by surprise. I had never seen “Peace” before and had qualms about spending an evening steeped in Coward’s harrowing rewrite of history, only sparingly enlivened by the author’s magisterial wit. But the work shows off Coward’s technical

mastery as a playwright, fluidly telling the story of a swath of British society living under Nazi terror and compellingly exploring, in admittedly a mild middle-class manner, the compromises of conscience that can occur as everyday citizens adapt to a new wartime order.

This is a true ensemble piece, and the production, in keeping with Antaeus' practice, is double cast. The "Epps Cocoa" company that I saw was superb, offering a banquet of fully realized characterizations. (The other group is called "The Stubbs Special.") I'm tempted to say that the smaller the part, the more notable the performance, but only because the minor characters play such a major role in fleshing out this milieu.

As the proprietors of the establishment in which "Peace" takes place, Steve Hofvendahl and Lily Knight seem to carry the values of their hardworking characters in their pores. Danielle K. Jones, who plays their daughter, makes heroism a wholly realistic element of her otherwise ordinary character.

Playing stoical parents silently consumed with worry over their missing son, Amelia White and John Combs seem almost too real to be on a stage (though they look awfully comfortable there, even when singing). Raleigh Holmes escorts us back in time with her interpretations of Coward songs, smoothly accompanied by Richard Levinson's piano player. Jason Henning strikes just the right balance between courtesy and menace in his portrait of a German officer known as "the pride of the Gestapo."

There are simply too many acting talents to single out. But I would be remiss not to mention the charged scene that occurs between JD Cullum's snarling Chorley, a posh editor who prides himself on his "reasonable acceptance of inescapable facts," and Emily Chase's self-possessed Janet, a sharp-eyed working woman who, pained by the loss of her son, challenges the way Chorley rationalizes his spinelessness. Coward is careful not to impugn his more self-seeking characters too forcefully, but he damns them quietly by contrasting their choices with those of their neighbors.

At a time when Americans seem more polarized than ever, it is stirring to witness characters struggling to rise against a common enemy. But "Peace" deserves to be seen for its theatrical craft alone. Hats off to Creyton's audience-friendly streamlining of Coward, Stangl's majestic staging and a flawless acting company embodying Antaeus' classical values.

— Charles McNulty

[twitter.com\charlesmcnulty](https://twitter.com/charlesmcnulty)
charles.mcnulty@latimes.com

"Peace In Our Time," The Antaeus Company @ Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays. Ends Dec. 11. \$30-\$34.(818) 506-1983 or www.Antaeus.org Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Photos: Upper: The "Epps Cocoa" cast of Noel Coward's "Peace In Our Time." Lower: Amelia White, Lily Knight, John Combs. Credit: Geoffrey Wade