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EMPOWERING ARTISTS AND ENGAGING AUDIENCES SINCE 1975

Tales From the WWII Home Front: *Peace, Sons, Robber,* *Plus 9 Circles*

NEWS by DON SHIRLEY | October 24, 2011

The 1940s takes the trophy as the most dramatic decade ever.

Or so it seems when I look around the LA theater scene right now. Last weekend two plays that originally appeared in 1947, examining the behavior of English and American civilians during World War II, were revived with strikingly original strokes. They follow on the heels of two new plays set in Nazi-land during World War II — the terrific *Way to Heaven* (at the Odyssey) and the not-so-terrific *Missile Man of Peenemunde*.



Rebecca Mozo, Daniel Bess, Josh Clark, Jason Henning and Bill Brochtrup in "Peace in Our Time"

We often look back at World War II as the last American war that offered a crystal-clear dichotomy between the bad guys and the good guys. This is the prevailing sentiment in both Noel Coward's *Peace in Our Time*, which depicts how the English might have fared had the Nazis indeed conquered their island around 1940, and in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

However, while the wartime enemy was unequivocally bad in both plays, Coward and Miller were more interested in writing about the shades of good, bad and gray among the civilians who were ostensibly on the right side of the war. In both of these plays, the writers made stern moral judgments about those who failed to maintain their integrity in the service of the common good.

Noel Coward made stern moral judgments right alongside those of Arthur Miller? That's not what we expect from Coward.

So one of the many joys of the enterprising Antaeus revival of *Peace in Our Time* is that it shows us an entirely different side of the writer than the one we usually see (as recently as last month in International City Theatre's *Private Lives*).



Belen Greene and Josh Clark

I haven't read Coward's original text. Barry Creyton adapted it for *Antaeus*, adding some of Coward's songs while deleting some characters and lines that reportedly included some of the more arcane references.

But Coward's voice comes through loud and clear. Sometimes that voice is relatively familiar, in the alternately witty and wispy lyrics of his songs and in some of the brittle dialogue among the more educated characters who frequent the bar that's onstage throughout the play. At other times, however, this is a Coward who looks as if he could have specialized in action thrillers, if he had chosen to do so.

Coward and Creyton write scenes replete with subtle menace, whenever the local Nazi overseer enters the pub, and with heart-racing suspense, as the war nears its end with reports of American and Canadian forces closing in on occupied England and with volunteers from the resistance doing their best to prepare for the day of liberation. Too often plays set entirely in pubs or bars become weighed down by alcohol-fueled monologues. This one is set on Tom Buderwitz's photo-realistic version of a period pub, but nothing in Casey Stangl's staging of Creyton's adaptation ever wears out its welcome. Actually, there is additional visual stimulation in the form of John Apicella's projections of period footage on a small strip above the small stage – try to sit far enough away from the stage so you don't have to crane your neck to see it, because it fills the transitions between scenes with useful information as well as evocative imagery.



Ann Noble, Melinda Peterson and Rebekah Tripp

At the performance I saw, former *Antaeus* artistic director Jeanie Hackett, who initiated this project, was in the audience and received due credit in remarks from two of her three replacements, Tony Amendola and John Sloan – while the third member of the new triumvirate, Rob Nagle, was backstage preparing to play the aforementioned Nazi overseer.

As usual with *Antaeus* stagings, there are two complete, alternating casts on weekends, with Thursday and Friday performances that will feature actors from both casts, depending partially on who's available on any given day.

The cast I saw, featuring Nagle and his fellow “Stubbs” team, seemed just about perfect, but Charles McNulty of the Times was equally enthusiastic about the “Epps” cast, so I look forward to seeing *Peace in Our Time* again with at least some members of the “Epps” group.

At least in this production, Antaeus steers clear of the kind of non-traditional casting that might break the illusion that we’re in a pub in London during the 1940s. In fact, before the performance started, I overheard an Antaeus company member who was sitting in the audience casually remarking to friends (and not in a complaining way) that no, he wasn’t in this production, because with his appearance, he couldn’t look sufficiently “Brit” or German.



A.K. Murtadha and Alex Morris in "All My Sons"

So it’s somewhat noteworthy that I spotted this same actor in the audience later in the weekend at Joe Stern’s new production of Miller’s *All My Sons* at the Matrix Theatre. Stern’s company used to produce plays in a manner similar to the way Antaeus produces today – using alternating casts of mostly white actors in roles that were originally written for white actors (however, as a photo in a Matrix corridor reminded me, Stern’s company also produced the mostly-black *No Place to Be Somebody*).

Recently, however, Stern has made a concerted effort to diversify the racial and ethnic makeup of his audiences – first by presenting two African American plays and now by presenting *All My Sons* with a rigorously multi-culti cast. Stern himself decided that the compromised arms manufacturer Joe Keller would be played by a black actor (Alex Morris) and his wife Kate by a white actress (Anne Gee Byrd). Their son Chris is played by an actor (A..K. Murtadha) who appears as if he could have been born within a mixed-race marriage.

Meanwhile, Joe’s former business partner, who remains offstage, is apparently Asian American, judging from the actors who play his son (James Hiroyuki Liao) and daughter (Linda Park). One set of neighbors looks Anglo; the other has been cast with two Latino actors. The one remaining character, a neighborhood boy, is double cast with two apparently white kids. What — no Native Americans? Perhaps Stern would like to talk with the people who run the Native Voices company at the Autry.

The locale of *All My Sons* is never specified in the script. Judging from references to its distance from New York, it sounds as if it's probably a small city in the Midwest – maybe Ohio, Michigan, western Pennsylvania? And judging from Joe's income level, he probably lives in a relatively well-off neighborhood.



A.K.Murtadha, Anne Gee Byrd and Alex Morris

No, such neighborhoods with this particular ethnic mix probably didn't exist in the Midwest in 1947. And with many Americans caught up in anti-Japanese hysteria during World War II, would an arms manufacturer be likely to hire an Asian American senior executive?

So if you're a stickler for surface realism, you might not find this revival particularly credible, especially considering that *All My Sons* is a much more realistic play than many of the older plays that often feature non-traditional casting. It's even more tied to a realistic style than, say, its more famous successor in the Miller canon, *Death of a Salesman*, which features time-shifting and even the hallucinatory nature of the appearances of Willy Loman's brother.

Still, if you have much theatrical experience under your belt, you've probably seen enough of this kind of casting to be able to suspend disbelief and just let the play work its wonders. Cameron Watson's staging worked that way for me, striking all the momentous emotional chords as it gradually revealed the webs of deception and culpability that stem from the cracked airplane parts that Joe's company shipped out during the war.



Linda Park and Anne Gee Byrd

Having said all that, I can't help but wonder if it might have been possible to have re-set the play in an area where such mixing of the races might have been just a tad more plausible in 1947. I have no idea if the Miller estate would allow such liberties to be taken, but then who knew that the Coward rights holders would allow *Peace in Our Time* to be so repackaged (although admittedly not re-set)?

Diversity usually comes first to big cities, and within the US, along the Pacific Rim – particularly if Asians are in the mix. Did Stern think about re-setting a multi-culti *All My Sons* in, say, LA? That might not only be marginally more believable that it is in Heartland, USA, but for the purposes of this production it would also give audiences a local connection that might have added an extra layer of interest.

At any rate, judging from my admittedly unscientific glance around the Matrix on Sunday, Stern was probably pleased that the audience didn't look as predominantly white as his audiences used to look. There were quite a few African Americans and a sprinkling of Asian Americans. If this kind of casting succeeds in bringing people to *All My Sons* who otherwise might never see this great play, then it's probably worth the discomfort it might provide for those who just can't get beyond the superficial implausibility of the casting.

***Peace in Our Time*, Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood.
Thur-Sat 8 pm, Sun 2:30 pm. 818-506-1983. Closes Dec. 11. www.Antaeus.org.**

*****All *Peace in Our Time* production photos by Steven Brand**

***All My Sons*, Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Ave., LA. Thur-Sat 8 pm, Sun 2 pm. Closes Dec. 18. 323-960-7773. www.matrixtheatre.com.**

*****All *All My Sons* production photos by Karen Bellone**