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Culture Monster ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

The Spotlight: Casey Stangl directs Antaeus' 'Peace in Our Time'

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Nazis occupying the houses of Parliament. Churchill shot by an SS firing squad. Noel Coward's alternative history of World War II, chillingly imagined in his 1946 drama "Peace in Our Time," is now on stage at Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood. The production by the [Antaeus Company](#), says the play's director, Casey Stangl, offers us a chance to examine our ideas of patriotism. With a few musical numbers thrown in.

How was this new version of "Peace in Our Time" created?

Three years ago, then-artistic director Jeanie Hackett made a connection with the Coward Foundation to discuss bringing Coward to new audiences. The foundation gave Antaeus member Barry Creyton permission to do the adaptation. The original version is long-winded and has political references we don't know. Barry cut it while retaining the wit and the characters. Now there's a laser-beam focus. The other idea was to add songs.

We associate Noel Coward with dry martinis and witty banter. This play shows a different side of him.

I think of Coward as being so removed in his comedies; there's always a certain barrier. Here, his heart's on his sleeve. There's a longing for heroism. How can individuals band together and make something change?

There are rumors Coward served in the British Secret Service.

What we do know is that the Nazis had specific plans for an invasion of Britain. They had a list of 100 Britons who would immediately be silenced. Coward was on that list.

You've directed a lot of opera. How did you use the songs dramatically in this show?

Right near the open, we do "Don't Let's Be Beastly to the Germans." It fits seamlessly — the very next moment, a Nazi walks into the bar and hears the last lines. The tension's heightened because of the song. And the character singing it is the pub owner, Fred. It's a marvelous introduction. The audience goes, He's my guy — I'm following him in this story.

The last song serves as a Brechtian counterpoint to the final action. The question is: Should we avenge? Once we begin doing that, are we any better than the people who started things?

While indigenous peoples here were colonized, America as a nation has never dealt with occupation by an enemy force. How did your actors get into the right mind-set?

During the first week of rehearsal, a friend of the theater spoke to the cast. She was a child in occupied France. Even though she was only 5 or 6 at the time, she has vivid memories. Neighbors being taken away. Having to go into hiding. Whispered rumors about where people were being taken. She described how the occupation happened incrementally. First you couldn't get fruit. Then you couldn't get tea. After the initial shock, it starts to feel normal. That reminded me of 9/11. Everyone said we were changed forever. In some ways that's true. But pretty quickly, we went back to our daily lives.

Something else I noticed: The deeper the experience this woman recounted, the more stoic she became. I used that idea in production. A person under occupation is a pressure cooker. Instead of seeing the water boil, you see the top rattle. That's human nature.

Do you think old-fashioned do-or-die patriotism is lost in America now?

I'm attracted to the pub setting of Coward's play, because it's every walk of life: artists, laborers, lawyers. All these different people who believe in the same thing. I can't think there's an American today who doesn't wish for more unity, whatever side of the aisle you're sitting on. The polarization is killing us.

The cast is huge — and you have two of them.

The double casting started as a logistics thing. This is a company of working actors; there's no way they can commit to long runs. But it's really turned into an aesthetic, an exercise in collaboration and trust. We didn't separate into two distinct groups until recently. That really forces people to listen.

-- Charlotte Stoudt

"Peace in Our Time" runs at Deaf West Theatre through Dec. 11. To read The Times review, click [here](#).

Photo: Casey Stangl on the set of "Peace in Our Time" at the Deaf West Theatre. Credit: Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times