

## PEACE IN OUR TIME @ DEAF WEST THEATRE

By **Ernest Kearney** | October 31, 2011



Conquered people drown their sorrows at the Shy Gazelle.  
Image courtesy of Geoffrey Wade

The theater offers the most impermanence of experiences. One can see the same play performed by the same cast three nights running and each night the experience will be a different one. It is a quality that adds to the uniqueness of theater.

There are however evenings which one wishes could be enshrined, performances one would want to have preserved forever in golden amber. For me The Antaeus Company's production of Noël Coward's "*Peace in Our Time*" will be one.

Today, Coward (1899 – 1973) is best remembered as the flamboyant playwright of charming and lithe comedies such as "*Hey Fever*", "*Blithe Spirit*", and the ever popular "*Private Lives*". But Coward also had a serious side, a side which found its best expression in his patriotism during World War II. One can see this in the war time film, "*In Which We Serve*" by David Lean which Coward both wrote the screenplay for, and appears in, as Captain Kinross (a role loosely based on Lord Louis Mountbatten.)

It was this film, as well as his homosexuality, that likely earned Coward a place, along with such notables as Bertrand Russell, Virginia Woolf, H.G. Wells and Paul Robeson, in the Nazi's Black

Book: a roster of those marked for arrest and probable liquidation after the “inevitable” German victory. *“Peace in Our Time”*, which was Coward’s first post-war play, opened in 1947 at the Lyric Theater in London and addresses that possibility.

Proceeding such works as Len Deighton’s *“SS-GB”*, Philip K. Dick’s *“The Man In the High Castle”*, and more recently Robert Harris’ *“Fatherland”*, Coward presents his audience with an alternate history – the “what if?” scenario of a German victory in the Battle for Britain leading to a Nazi occupation of England.

The play opens after the end of the Battle of Britain in November of 1940; the Antaeus production uses well edited and slightly doctored news photos of the day to establish the passing of time. The play focuses on the patrons of a London pub, using them as a microcosm to explore how different individuals react to being a “conquered people.”

The original 1947 play starring Kenneth More and Bernard Lee (best known as “M” in the first 11 James Bond films), was a moderate hit, but has been seldom staged since. Barry Creyton’s adaption, being used by the Antaeus, seeks to remedy that by addressing the hindrances to a production while increasing the appeal.

Normally the job of “adaptor” is a chance proposition at best, but Creyton has shown an astute understanding of his material and its history. First, about ten characters were cut and so were some material that would be obscure to modern audiences (however it was nice that he left intact a reference to Lord Haw-Haw, Germany’s equivalent of Tokyo Rose), but the true stroke of brilliance on Creyton’s part was the choice to add music to the play. It was after all the era of the Music Hall, when sing-along in the cinema house and pubs were common features. Creyton uses the inclusion of 13 of Coward’s own songs as a means to counterpoint the hopes, fears and anxieties of the pub patrons themselves. The songs are some of Coward’s best but least known, perhaps the exception being *London Pride*. Some pre-date the play such as *Don’t Be Beastly to the Germans*, a satirical little ditty Coward penned in 1943, whose subtle humor was lost on some and lead to the BBC banning it. Others like *London is a Little Bit of All Right*, and *Come the Wild, Wild Weather* date from the sixties. Their addition, like Creyton’s edits have been rendered seamlessly into the fabric of the play. Creyton’s adaption could, and perhaps should, become a standard for all future productions of this work.

But a strong adaptation does not a successful play make; needed also is a company capable of meeting the dramatic demands placed on it, and it is difficult to imagine any better in this capacity than the talented folks at The Antaeus Company. Since 1991 they have been regarded as one of the jewels in L.A.’s theatrical crown, and *“Peace in Our Time”* is a superb illustration of why.

From the moment you walk into the theater you can tell you're in the presence of people who care about their craft. The pub set by Tom Buderwitz is so stunningly authentic one must fight the urge to walk up to the bar and order a pint of bitters. Jessica Olson's costumes contribute in no small way to the reality of the show, while Jeremy Pivnick's lighting design and John Zalewski's sound serve to capture the mood and sense of a city in wartime.

Director Casey Stangl hurls us deftly into the action of the play and keeps us there right to the end, aided by acting that is peerless throughout. We feel the force of the storm by how it batters the characters, all of whom come seeking in the Shy Gazelle some brief respite from its fury. There's Mr. and Mrs. Grainger (expertly played by John Wallace Combs and Amelia White) whose son is a POW being held at a concentration camp and who find a release from their fears for him in their visits to the pub. Lyia Vivian, (Raleigh Holmes with the perfect voice and glamour required) is a star of the music halls, who also finds release at the pub in the shows she sings.

There's Janet Braid the authoress whose tenacious patriotism can only be unbridled in the safety of the bar (skillfully portrayed by Emily Chase). She has her nemesis in Chorley Bannister, the effete intellectual who has accepted the occupation as a fact and can see no reason why one shouldn't try to get along as best they can, and who Coward has perversely made a critic. JD Cullum in the role comes close to stealing the show, and among lesser talents would have done so with the ease of swiping candy from a baby.

At the center of the storm the play presents the Shattock family; Fred, the pub's proprietor (Steve Hofvendahl) and his wife Nora (Lily Knight) and their two children Doris (Danielle K. Jones) and Stevie (Jason Dechert). As the play's symbolic "everyman and his missus" Hofvendahl and Knight shine. In Fred, Hofvendahl skillfully gives us a man who faces adversity shielded by an unwavering sense of decency. He is the embodiment of Arthur Ashe's definition of heroism as "the urge to serve others at whatever cost." Knight, as his wife who never wavers in her support of him, regardless of suffering that befalls the family, is truly heart rendering.

Richard Levinson as Archie the piano player, Christopher Guilmet as George Bourne who wears the mask of a bon mot to disguise a greater purpose, Jason Henning as the ever watchful Gestapo officer excels, as do the rest of the entire cast. The only reason I hesitate to identify them all individually is for fear of over taxing my thesaurus on synonyms for "excellent." Let it just be said, that Stangl and the actors of Antaeus have given us an opportunity of experiencing theater at its finest. Don't let the opportunity slip by. (Note this show is double cast, but with the high standard of the Antaeus ensemble I'm sure if together in a ring it would be like Cassius Clay matched against Muhammad Ali.)

**Peace In Our Time**