



Will There Ever Be Peace in Our Time?

by Barnaby Hughes

The title of Noel Coward's play "Peace in Our Time" is a direct quotation from *The Book of Common Prayer*, which includes the petition, "Give peace in our time, O Lord," sung daily at Evensong. To American audiences it is more likely to evoke British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's infamous 1938 speech in defence of the Munich Agreement.



The "Stubbs Special" cast of *Peace In Our Time*

Photo by Steven Brand

Proclaiming "peace for our time," Chamberlain's proclamation is lamentable chiefly with the benefit of hindsight. It is on a par with the diplomacy of President Patrick Buchanan (1856-1860), which helped delay the onset of the American Civil War. Coward's play explores the moral quagmire of war and peace, testing the integrity and patriotism of both individuals and groups. A work of

speculative or alternative history, "Peace in Our Time" imagines what might have happened had the British lost the Battle of Britain and how life would have been under German occupation.

Noel Coward wrote his play shortly after World War II, in 1946, when people's memory of the war was still fresh. It is now largely forgotten, probably last performed in southern California in 1950. For the Antaeus Company's new production, Barry Creyton added nine of Coward's own songs to the play to make it a musical. This has the benefit of adding some welcome humor to an otherwise rather serious play, as well as some variation. Creyton's adaptation works incredibly well. He has retained all of the major characters (though some minor ones have been excised), and fittingly put many of the songs in the mouth of cabaret singer Lyia Vivian (Rebecca Mozo), while giving Archie (John Allee) the task of accompanying on piano. Each song is relatively simple and well-suited to the period and subject matter of the play.

"Peace in Our Time" is no small production, lasting more than two and one-quarter hours

and requiring more than two dozen cast members. Its size makes it a good fit for the Antaeus Company's numerous and talented members. Like all Antaeus productions, "Peace in Our Time" is double cast. This reviewer had the pleasure of watching Stubb's Specials, the other cast being named Epp's Cocoas, while the mixed casts are dubbed Gordon's. Each name refers to one of the drinks mentioned or served in *The Shy Gazelle*, the London pub where Coward's play is set.



L to R: Rebekah Tripp, Ann Noble, Eve Gordon, Abby Wilde

Photo by: Steven Brand

The hero of "Peace in Our Time" is the publican, or pub owner, Fred Shattock (Josh Clark), who is present in every scene. Although Fred can't avoid serving Nazi officers during the Occupation, he makes a great show of his integrity by refusing a German's offer of gin to be set aside for "special customers." In reality, Fred already has a bottle of gin set aside – for patriotic Englishmen. And when a Nazi collaborator comes in with his own bottle of whisky, Fred empties out half of it and refills the bottle with Stubb's. Is it pure coincidence that Coward's Nazi collaborator, Chorley Bannister (Bill Brochtrup), is a theatre critic by profession, or that Janet Braid (Rebekah Tripp), who first upbraids and then slaps Chorley, is a writer? The cast is filled out by the pub's regular customers and hard-working staff, German soldiers and the brave young people who join the Resistance.

Josh Clark's Fred Shattock anchors the Stubb's Specials performance of "Peace in Our Time" with his jovial, principled and patriotic presence. Bill Brochtrup as Chorley Bannister is utterly odious with his supercilious speeches and pompous manner, whereas Rebekah Tripp's Janet Braid is admirable for her righteous indignation. Patrick Wenk-Wolff provides unexpected humor in the role of Mr. Kurt Forster, a bore of an Austrian artist who gets a drink "accidentally" spilled on him by one of the pub's patriotic regulars. Fans of the Lauren Tate Show might appreciate Katharine Flaathen's Lily Blake, with her working class English accent and wry sense of humor. Although cast members pull off their foreign accents well enough, it would have improved the play's plausibility and enjoyment had a greater diversity of English accents been portrayed. Above all, London accents should have been more prominent. But this does not detract from what is an immensely entertaining and enjoyable gem of a play. The Antaeus Company is to be commended for rescuing Noel Coward's "Peace in Our Time" from obscurity and for adapting it so smoothly and seamlessly. In an age when many Americans feel powerless in the face of a stagnant economy and inert government, "Peace in Our Time" reminds us that resistance is not futile.

"Peace in Our Time" runs October 20-December 11, with performances on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA 91601. Tickets are \$30 on Thursdays and Fridays or \$34 on Saturdays and Sundays. Purchase by phone: 818-506-1983 or online: www.antaeus.org



L to R: Rebecca Mozo, Daniel Bess, Josh Clark, Jason Henning, Bill Brochtrup
Photo by Steven Brand