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Coward's play pursues peace

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Who would have suspected the sophisticated, bonair, and wittily dismissive Noel Coward to be a mooshy patriot? Anyone who's ever seen his play *Peace In Our Time*, that's who.

This intense drama, first performed in 1947, is being given a brand new outing by the excellent Antaeus Company. Seldom performed because of its large cast, it has not been seen in L.A.

since 1950. Now, adapted by Barry Creyton, directed by Casey Stangl, and performed by

duplicate casts of 23 persons each, it is a dated, ingenuous exposition of how Britain presumably would have reacted had it been defeated and occupied by the Nazis after the Second World

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Set in a friendly neighborhood pub, the Shy Gazelle, this current rendition of the play is simplistic, but oddly moving, mainly because of its excellent actors and Coward's slyly witty dialogue.

Also enhancing the production are Jessica Olson's wonderfully authentic costumes and Tom Buderwitz' scenic design that incorporates grainy wartime movie footage and projects it on a molding overhanging the stage. Among the most startling of these edited snippets is one of the King and Queen standing grim-faced on the palace balcony behind a line of Nazi soldiers.

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As anticipated, the motley crew of regulars at the pub, led by its proprietors, Fred and Nora Shattock (Josh Clark and Eve Gordon), quickly transform themselves into a cell of active

resistance fighters. Their daughter Doris (Abby Wilde) becomes a courier; the local doctor (Mark Doerr) turns up to help the wounded; and even the seemingly self-absorbed chanteuse, Lyia (Rebecca Mozo) becomes a participant.

Leading the parade of “villains” is the always marvelous Bill Brochtrup, who plays Chorley Bannister, the local newspaper editor, who toadies up to the occupying Nazis in a vivid demonstration of “going along to get along,” and chides the other pub-goers for their “archaic abstract idealism.”

Rob Nagle plays the insidious Nazi who, with his troop of thugs, continually badgers “the good guys.” And Rebekkah Tripp delivers a heroic over-the-top denunciation that, one would guess, expresses Coward’s true emotions about the Nazis and the war.

Coward had expressed his emotions early. At the outbreak of the war he volunteered for war work, running the British propaganda office in Paris and, working in intelligence with the British Secret Service, used his considerable prestige to try to persuade the Americans to help in the war. Then, at the urging of Winston Churchill, who told him to “go and sing to them (the public on the home front and the troops) when the guns are firing---that’s your job,” he toured, acted and sang in Europe, Africa, Asia and America. In

1943 he won an Honorary Certificate of Merit at the Academy Award ceremony for his patriotic film *In Which We Serve*, and in 1969 he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. The following year he won a Tony Lifetime Achievement Award for “multiple and immortal contributions to the theatre.”

“Peace in our time,” the declaration made by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1938 after his disastrous appeasement negotiations with Germany, is an ironic title for this postwar Coward play. Adapter Barry Creyton has spiced up that theme, however, by lacing the play with a dozen appropriate Coward songs, including “Don’t Let’s Be Beastly to the Germans,” “Could You Please Oblige Us with a Bren Gun?” “Let’s Live Dangerously,” “London is a Little Bit of All Right,” and Coward’s tribute to the courage and valor of his countrymen during the blitz, “London Pride.” The songs add a memorable flourish to this old-fashioned drama and make the whole production well worth seeing.

Peace in Our Time will continue at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2:30 through December 11th. Call 818-506-1983 for reservations or visit www.antaeus.org



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Cynthia Citron has lived and worked on every continent except Antarctica as a journalist, communications specialist, documentary screenwriter and...

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