

## A Bright Room

### Elemental grows with Kushner play

Just because you're paranoid, the saying goes, doesn't mean that they *aren't* out to get you. There's a creeping menace that pervades Elemental Theatre's production of Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*, which arises equally from current events, our knowledge of what happened after Hitler's (legal) rise to power, and a complex, gripping performance.

A present day narrator (Zillah Katz, played with equal parts humor, ferocity and pathos by Nehassaiu deGannes) provides the historical

By Michael Pugliese

frame-work for the action of the play while also sharing her own growing sense of panic at the political direction of the United States in 2005. As the Nazi regime slithers into power, deGannes grows more frantic at what she sees as the reanimation of an omnipresent evil with a capital 'E' taking solid shape again as people either fail or refuse to recognize it. The rewrites done to include the present federal administration blend almost seamlessly with Kushner's original (1985) script, and the sense of flow between Weimar Germany in its death throes, Reagan's America, and George W. Bush's new American century is unbroken throughout the show.

For the most part, this comes from the strength of the acting. As I watched this "bohemian group of artists, activists and expa-

triate struggling to preserve themselves in 1930s Berlin," I was astounded at the energy they displayed in establishing both the earnestness of their friendship and the depth of their political convictions. These are, mostly, true believers, cut from a kind of cloth that many would argue, persuasively, does not exist in this country anymore. That they are Communists is important to the plot, given that Communism in Germany at this time was the major antagonist of Fascism and also represented the great fear of the wealthy and powerful, but in the broader context of the play's commentary on political apathy it is hardly an issue. The evil that found its expression through Fascism in Germany is always present, and will not, Zillah warns us, ever again look like the little Austrian corporal with the chainsaw voice and funny moustache.

In facing that evil, the characters grow into themselves. At first, they seem dangerously close to succumbing to that trap that exists for every highly intelligent, highly political drama: actors becoming mouthpieces for socio-political theories, mere speeches in costume. Credit the entire cast for wringing from Kushner's stylized, occasionally difficult prose a real sense of these people as **people**. Paulinka and Baz (Tanya Anderson and David Rabinow) represent two poles in the Germany under the growing power of Nazism; one can thrive as an actress in the new system should she so choose. The other, even were he not an intellectual

whose field of study is human sexuality, would be condemned for his homosexuality. Anderson and Rabinow convey the hedonism, flightiness, and love of life that defines 'bohemianism' to this day, both for its admirers and its detractors. How they face the choices pressed on them by the cruel forces of history thoroughly humanizes them.

Alexander Platt's Vealtine Husz Hungarian expatriate film-maker and dedicated Communist, sees more clearly, perhaps, than any of his friends what is happening in Germany. But because of his experiences in revolutionary combat, he cannot refuse to fight, though he knows in his heart that the strength to win that fight does not exist within either himself or any of his generation. Platt's moving portrayal of Husz's soul-deep commitment to the ideal of a better world is brought to an astounding climax during a group singing of the *Internationale*. The others are having fun, but Husz in that moment literally becomes the vision for which he fights so passionately. Noone, not even the artist turned agitator Annabella (Jen Swain) is as spiritually committed.

This adds a necessary layer of complexity to Husz's relationship with Agnes (D'Arcy Dersham), who rises from the relative anonymity of her initial impression as a good-natured but intellectually slight and politically naive hanger-on in this group to become the center of the play. As the performance moves back and forth between the historical and the personal, Agnes' position as an 'ordinary German' becomes immensely more complicated. Her friends are targets, her lover is in constant danger and she, because of her relative safety (she's a middling, undocumented Communist whose ideological convictions run

nowhere near as deep as Husz's or Annabella's) faces perhaps the worst choice of any of the characters: accept the horror happening all around you because you can survive it, and lose your soul, or fight it, and lose your life. Dersham's transformation of Agnes from a spirited, sexy, joyous young woman to a haunted ghost of her former self limned by fear is reflected in her total embodiment of her character, her face devolving through the second half of the show into a stark mask of animal terror. She is by the end not just the average German who may have hated Nazism and all it stood for but lacked the courage to stand up against it. She is also the reflection of our capacity to simultaneously recognize evil and refuse to accept it, surviving, but hollowed out. Dersham's Agnes is a subtle and fluid creation who it is impossible for us to condemn, perhaps because she represents too well so many people's reactions when faced with the human manifestation of evil. Her very familiarity serves, as does the whole play, as a perpetual warning.

*A Bright Room Called Day* will resonate more strongly these days than it may have, say, 10 years ago, but this is not agitprop. Kushner's vision, brought to life so remarkably here, will unfortunately remain timely as long as there are governments which spread fear and hate, which lie and kill to preserve power. A chilling thought, but the existence of works like *A Bright Room Called Day* and casts like this one make it a little easier to bear.

*A Bright Room Called Day*, Elemental Theatre in association with RITE, The First Universalist Church, 250 Washington Street, Providence, RI. 383-5146. Directed by Peter Sampieriit runs Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 pm and Sundays at 7 pm through Nov. 6.