BWW Review: A Gripping Struggle for Souls: WE WILL NOT BE SILENT at CATF

by Jack L. B. Cahn (Spider) | Jul. 15, 2017

We have witnessed the scene in various ways at various times, but the essentials do not differ. There is always a table. There is always uncomfortable lighting. The inquisitor always has the full powers of the state at his back. The prisoner answering the questions is often restrained, sometimes under torture, usually in fear for his or her life. And, given the situation and the nature of the prisoner, the outcome is usually a foregone conclusion. The state will win the legal contest, and the prisoner will pay with life or freedom.

But on the stage in front of us, the prisoner and the interrogator are primarily fighting over something other than the prisoner's survival, and for that reason the odds in the contest are not as lopsided as they may seem. The fight is over souls not only the
At the Contemporary American Theater Festival, that struggle is joined anew in *Chicago* (people/David-Meyer/David-Meyer), a play we will not be silent, concerning the last three days of Sophie Scholl (Leila Lapp-Leila Lapp), one of the leaders of the White Rose, a student group that opposed Hitler and died in 1943 against his will. This interrogator is named Kurt Grunwald (Paul DeBoy), although it would appear that he is based on a real-life Gestapo investigator named Robert Mohr. Like the historical Mohr, Grunwald apparently tries to save Scholl by having her inform on her brother. Perhaps unlike Mohr, Grunwald also tries to give Scholl a chance to go free by letting others take all the responsibility, though Grunwald carefully and correctly anticipates that she is unlikely to agree to saving her in that way.

And this is the interesting twist: we do not know what kind of game Grunwald is really playing. On the evidence presented to this point in the play, when he offers these two to Sophie, he might be very serious or he might just be trying to provoke acts of self-sacrifice which will have the not-so-incidental effect of more firmly inculcating her. And that ambiguity as to Grunwald's strategy betokens an ambiguity about his motives, indeed about what he is going through. As he says, he is not in the Gestapo, but that cannot be correct, because no one but a Gestapo man could have had the authority to conduct this examination, and the interrogator upon whom he is based was in the Gestapo. So why should anything he says be believed?

Is Grunwald nonetheless really a secret admirer of Sophie's heroism, unswerving to emulate her simply because he lacks her courage, or are his professions of empathy with her situation simply a secret policeman's trick? Does he know the answer himself? The author does not tip his hand on this dilemma until the last three pages of the script.

The genius of the play is how this ambiguity is handled up until those last three pages. There is a certain progression in such dramatic interrogations. We know it from examples like the interrogations of Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*, and Grunwald's examinations of Anne Boley (people/Alice-Boley) and her doomed associate in Mike Poulton (people/Mike-Poulton) a dramatization of Hamlet (people/Hamlet) and his master-class with the central figure in *The Crucible*. John Proctor (people/John-Proctor) in *The Crucible*. It is a Shakespearean movie. It typically if not invariably includes stages like denial by the accused, apparent exoneration, partial confession, attempts to win the interrogator, self-doubt of the interrogator, and occasionally the interrogator's admission of loyalty attached to unacceptable conditions, existential guilt on the part of the prisoner, and finally a reckoning, in which we learn which of the two has prevailed. The list of stages all occur here. And in one and every but the last, the ambiguity is present and grows greater. However, Grunwald pressing Scholl for either a confession or a conviction could plausibly stem from a desire to make an example of her for the Third Reich, or a martyr of her for those who find the Third Reich horrifying.

There are indeed moments when Grunwald is horrifying. Delboy, a much larger and more mature actor, uses his stature to full advantage when shouting at Lapp Scholl; by contrast, she is quite young as the historical Scholl and quite a bit more fragile, that only increases as the character grows more isolated, dehydrated, sleepy, and confused. Even so, we cannot be sure whether Grunwald's menace conceals a secret complicity, and if so, who, realizes this himself.

Ultimately, just as the play establishes, Scholl went to the gallows a day after a brief trial. But her message has almost as much allure in today's Germany. So in some, she fulfills the exemplary function of martyrdom; in the world of the play, however, it seems most likely that her example will be forgotten. That risk of oblivion heightens the existential question confronting her. If by negating her principles she could prolong her life, as opposed to adhering to her principles, dying, and having no impact at all, which choice should she make? And this is not just her existential question. It is as well. It would appear that Grunwald has made the opposite choice. But has he? At the very end of the play, that question is reopened.

The theatergoer will not receive these moral and logical dilemmas entirely, but will leave the theater breathing from identifying and working through them as far as he or she can. Delboy and Lapp do an excellent job, bringing them to life, and Ed Herendes's sharp direction keeps them alive.

We Will Not Be Silent, by (people/David-Meyer/David-Meyer) directed by Ed Herendes. Presented by the Contemporary American Theater Festival through July 15 at the Marriott Theater, 62 West Madison Street, Shepherdtown, WV Tickets $35.56. http://baltimorereview.org/tickets (800.995.CATT or 304.876.5173)

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