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

by Jack L. B. Cohn (/author/Jack-L-B-Cohn) Jul. 13, 2017



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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

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prisoner's but the interrogator's. And from a dramatic standpoint, this is the real struggle.

At the Contemporary American Theater Festival, that struggle is joined anew in (/people/David-Meyers/David Meyer (/people/David-Meyer/s) play We Will Not Be Silent, concerning the last three days of Sophie Scholl (Lexi Lapp (/people/Lexi-Lapp)), one of the leaders of the White Rose, a student group that opposed Hitler and leafleted in 1943 against Hitler's war. Her antagonist the interrogator is named Kurt Grunwald (Paul DeBoy (/people/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 Sophie a chance to go free by letting others take all the responsibility, though Grunwald fully and correctly anticipates that she is unlikely to agree to saving her skin 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 outs to Sophie, he might be serious or he might just be trying to provoke acts of self-sacrifice which will have the not-so-incidental effect of more firmly incriminating her. And that ambiguity as to Grunwald's strategy betokens an ambiguity about his motives, indeed about what he is going through. He claims 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 can be believed?

Is Grunwald nonetheless really a secret admirer of Sophie's heroism, unwilling to emulate her simply because he lacks her courage, or are his professions of empathy with her situation just 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 Cromwell's examinations of Anne Boleyn (/people/Anne-Boleyn/n's doomed associates in Mike Poulton (/people/Mike-Poulton/s) dramatization of Hilary Mantel (/people/Hilary-Mantel/s) Wolf Hall, and the Mossad dialogues with Adolf Eichman in Evan Weiner's Captors, Danforth's interrogation of John Proctor (/people/John-Proctor) in The Crucible, and a thousand movies. It typically if not invariably includes stages like denial by the accused, apparent exonerated, partial confession, attempts to win over the interrogator, self-doubt of the interrogator, promises of leniency attached to unacceptable conditions, existential crises on the part of the prisoner, and finally a reckoning, in which we learn which of the two has prevailed. The listed stages all occur here. And in every one but the last, the ambiguity is preserved and grows richer, because 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. DeBoy, a much larger and more mature actor, uses his stature to full advantage when shouting at Lapp's Scholl; by contrast, she looks quite as young as the historical Scholl and quite a bit more fragile, a fragility 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, whether he realizes this himself.

Ultimately, just as the play establishes, Scholl went to the guillotine a day after a brief trial. But her memory has been kept very much alive in today's Germany. So in real life 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 betraying 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 his 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 resolve these moral and logical dilemmas entirely, but will leave the theater breathless from identifying and working through them as far as he or she can. DeBoy and Lapp do an elegant job bringing them to life, and Ed Herenden's sharp direction keeps them alive.

We Will Not Be Silent, by (/people/David-Meyers/David Meyer (/people/David-Meyer/s), directed by Ed Herenden, presented by the Contemporary American Theater Festival through July 30 at the Marinoff Theater, 62 West Campus Drive, Shepherdstown, WV. Tickets \$35-\$65, http://catf.org/tickets/ (http://catf.org/tickets), 800.999.CATF or 304.876.3473.

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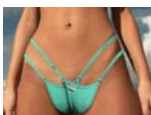
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A lawyer, blogger, and critic of many years' standing, Jack is a regular columnist on public affairs and the law for the Maryland Daily Record. (read more...) (/author/Jack-L-B-Gohn)



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