

# Just entertainment

## Making the political personal

Lillian Hellman's "Watch on the Rhine" at age forty-five retains its immediacy; the New Rose production is taut, polished.

BY RODGER LARSON

Just before my birthday last year I went downtown to a used book store and bought a copy of *Life* published the day I was born in the early 1940s. I was fascinated by the magazine — not only by the news stories, photo essays, and feature articles, but also by the ads, the products and the graphic style.

Something in the New Rose Theater's production of Lillian Hellman's play *Watch on the Rhine* reminded me of my birthday magazine. This is a play set in 1940; the spirit and sense of the time is captured, but in this case what the audience sees is not nostalgia.

Lillian Hellman was a powerful writer and creative dramatist. In *Watch on the Rhine* she has skillfully made political ideas personal. The story is about commitment and the struggle against evil. And while there is no easy optimism in the play's ending, there is a strong sense that a person's choices do matter; that we can make a difference.

*Watch on the Rhine* is refreshing in its directness. There is very little theatrical trickery and no attempt to disturb the illusion that we, the audience, are watching a bit of real life as it unfolds. The story begins as Sara Muller returns to her mother's elegant home near Washington, D.C., after an absence of twenty years. Her husband, Kurt, a German, and their three children are with her. They have fled the war raging in Europe and are seeking sanctuary in America. Sara's mother, Fanny, has already opened her house to two other refugees, Teck and Marthe De Brancovis, who are poverty stricken members of the Romanian nobility. Sara's brother, David, is also on the scene. He lives with his mother on the comfortable family estate.

It is not long before tensions develop between the European guests. Teck, the Romanian, has been cultivating the friendship of some pro-Nazi colleagues. Kurt, the German, is an outspoken anti-fascist with a mysterious past. Their American hostess watches in dismay as the wars of a



Vana O'Brien as Sara and Ted Roisum as Kurt in New Rose Theater's production of *Watch on the Rhine*.

distant continent invade her living room. Fanny will not remain a spectator for long. By the end of the play she will be involved in the struggle. By that time Kurt will have been exposed as a member of the anti-Nazi resistance and Teck will have shown his true colors as a Nazi sympathizer. Kurt will have been forced to choose between the safety and comfort of his American sanctuary and a renewed commitment to a seemingly hopeless struggle. His choice will deeply affect the lives of all the characters in the play.

Hellman's play is not subtle; it is not a study in shades of grey. The good guys are very, very good and the bad guys are thoroughly evil. As the naive Americans' eyes are opened they have to choose sides. There is no question about which side is the right one. Such clear lines of demarcation are a source of the play's strength. It becomes a call to arms, a summons to join the struggle.

On the other hand there is a question that occurs to me as I watch this play from the early forties in the present, the late eighties. Do I have such choices to make? Certainly we gay men and lesbians are

called upon to struggle against racism and sexism and homophobia, but can the fight against such abstractions inspire the same sort of passionate commitment as the battle against hordes of goose-stepping Nazis? Surely our present struggles pose less of a threat to life and limb than Kurt's did. Perhaps when the enemy is amorphous and ill-defined it becomes so much more difficult to maintain a sense of urgency, a sense of fervor.

The New Rose Theater is to be commended for bringing us *Watch on the Rhine*. The directing is taut and polished and the acting is excellent. Ted Roisum's performance as Kurt is extremely effective. Jeremy Whelan's portrayal of the evil Teck makes the Romanian seem so loathsome that even the act of smoking a cigarette inspires hatred. Vana O'Brien, too, puts in a fine performance as Sara, a woman who is torn between a desire for security and the political commitment she shares with her husband. The three children are also quite good, especially David Folsom, who plays the Muller's precocious, slogan-spouting younger son.

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*A lecture  
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Shuli Goodman, M.A.  
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