

Crevasse



Photo by Matt Kamimura

Victory Theatre Center

In 1938, brilliant but discredited German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl came to Hollywood. Her mission was to attend per-arranged meetings with the most influential film industry executives, the same folks not interested in distributing her documentary *Olympia*, an epic film which commemorated the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin.

Despite the fact that her movie intentionally focused on the athletes of the Games and was purported to try to harbor peace and unity in our ever-conflicted world, particularly paying worshipful deference to our own American hero and four-time medal winner Jesse Owens, it was Riefenstahl's personal reputation that thwarted her efforts to see her baby reach our shores.

The snub was basically the result of her infamous 1935 propaganda feature *Triumph of the Will*, clearly glorifying the potentially ominous events which had unfolded the year before in Nuremberg at the Nazi Party Congress, a gathering which celebrated its leader and the man who had commissioned Riefenstahl to make the film. Her *Triumph des Willens* chronicled a turning point for world politics attended by some 700,000 supporters of the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler—you know, that pre-Trumpian maniac who promised to Make Germany Great Again.

When her planned visit came directly on the heels of *Kristallnacht* and after the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League took out a full page in the *Hollywood Reporter* criticizing her arrival and hinting at the rumor that Riefenstahl was the mistress of *der Fuhrer* himself, all but one of the meetings with the studio heads was cancelled. The only executive who did

not jump ship was Walt Disney, something perhaps even more notable since he was the only one of the men who was not a Jew.

We're told that Riefenstahl wasn't happy about this turn of events in the world premiere of playwright extraordinaire Tom Jacobson's arresting two-hander *Crevasse*, now playing at the Victory Theatre Center co-produced by its director Matthew McCray in collaboration with the Victory's founder and artistic director Maria Gobetti.

Riefenstahl (Ann Noble) didn't much like the Faustian thought of selling her "soul for Hollywood notoriety" in the first place, but when Disney, then mainly known as the creator of that red lederhosen-wearing rodent and struggling financially to keep his cartoon studio afloat, emerged from the rubble of her visit as the only person willing to meet with her, she was ready to skedaddle right back to the Homeland.

It was her manager Ernst Jeager (Leo Marks) who persuaded her to stay, reminding his client that the "Michael Mouse Club" had more members than the Hitler Youth. Although she saw the proposed meet-and-greet as akin to a "funhouse mirror facing true reality," she reluctantly agreed to stay.

Marks also plays Disney, as well as Hitler's Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, while Noble appears as Jeager's doomed Jewish wife Lotte and also briefly as an FBI official interrogating him. Both stunningly gifted performers send their already soaring individual recognition as two of our town's finest actors into the stratosphere with this auspicious debut of one of Jacobson's best and most fascinating plays.

Noble and Marks' rapid onstage transformations between these characters and the play's many locations are smoothly accomplished thanks to McCray's incredibly fluid staging winding through set designer Evan Bartoletti's series of shimmering gossamer draperies, possibly meant to subtly conjure the symbolic image of a glacial *Crevasse*, a deep crack in the ice that here evokes the real life moment when the cool and stiff-backed Midwestern demeanor of Walt Disney was potentially melted by the fiery and seductive ambitions of Leni Riefenthal.

Azra King-Abadi's striking lighting, Michael Mullen's provocative costuming, Nicholas Santiago's clever but ghostly projections of Bambis and dwarves and bald mountains, and especially John Zalewski's metallic *Metropolis*-esque sound plot, beautifully augment this bareboned but highly evocative production, while from somewhere below the expert razzle-dazzle emerges a rather scary tale of the potential selling of one's soul and abandoning one's ethics in return for wealth and success.

Perhaps the most shocking and frightening image I'm left with might be Marks as the milquetoast but later well-known anti-Semite Disney, sometime after Riefenstahl has asked him if he's a "puppet of Hollywood or a real boy," hiding behind a stuffed toy of his famous Mouse and doing his beloved creation's signature voice while raising one plush arm at an angle as he intones "*Sieg Heil*."

Hollywood is, as Tom Jacobson reminds us, a place where the creation of art and beauty is expensive—and in his *Crevasse*'s final tableaux, featuring Disney sitting alone under a desk lamp as he picks up the red-covered copy of *Mein Kampf* Riefenthal has left him, the suggestion of the abandonment of one's ideals in the face of the profitability of pure evil could not be more disturbing.

What an ominous business model for the creation of the world's greatest and biggest motion picture and theme park empire Hitler's autobiographical manifesto might have been—something our current returning equally malevolent candidate for President is not at all skittish to embrace.

THROUGH AUG. 18: Victory Theatre Center, 3324 W. Victory Blvd, Burbank. 818.841.5421 or thevictorytheatrecenter.org