MYSTERY MAN

By Marc Awodey

Twenty years before Robert Shaw's *The Man in the Glass Booth* was first produced in New York City, Allied authorities were combing the smoldering ruins of the Third Reich and questioning all German bureaucrats as part of the "de-Nazification process." When a 38-year-old Ministry of Economics expert on international trade named Otto Ohlendorf was asked the routine questions, he stated that except for a year of official duties elsewhere, he had been in Berlin for the entire war. When pressed about his year of "official duties," Ohlendorf coolly stated, "I was chief of Special Action Group D." The *Einsatzgruppen* labeled A, B, C and D were the roving death squads who implemented Hitler's "final solution" before the camps were fully operational.

Similarly, during much of Green Candle Theater's version of *The Man in the Glass Booth*, the audience is compelled to wonder just who the leading character — real estate developer Arthur Goldman, played by John Alexander — really is. Is Goldman an unhinged Holocaust survivor, or an unrepentant, Eichmann-esque war criminal named Col. Karl Dolff who has cynically assumed a Jewish identity?

Though Goldman changed his name, he cannot change his history, and the unraveling of his mystery is what turns the play upon its edge. Beyond this psychological tension, the plot is very simple. Goldman is kidnapped by the Mossad (Israeli intelligence) and taken to Israel to stand trial. As is often the case when dealing with an especially dangerous defendant, the prisoner — who has confessed to being Col. Dolff but admits no individual culpability — participates in his trial sealed in a glass booth.

Appropriately and compellingly, the actor Alexander is nearly always center stage; with great physicality and a commanding voice, he completely dominates each scene. Perhaps less appropriately, his expansive performance also overpowers the rest of the cast. Director Mark Nash — or perhaps the play itself — has left little room for those in key supporting roles to find a voice beyond their basic job descriptions, particularly the accomplished actor Ryan Ober as Charlie Cohn, Goldman's personal secretary. Rather, they all seem to turn into petrified wood immediately following the cursory delivery of their lines. The convincing strength of John Alexander's performance nearly buries any other potential talents, though Bridget O'Connor as the terse Mossad interrogator holds her own, as does Geri Amori as a last-minute witness in Goldman's trial. The play gives everything to the role of Goldman — who often has veritable soliloquys — and little to anyone else. While we're quibbling, Nash might also have lopped half an hour or so off this lengthy play without losing any of its import.

The Man in the Glass Booth, written by Robert Shaw, directed by Mark Nash, produced by Tracey Lynne Girdich and Green Candle Theatre Company. Memorial Auditorium, Burlington, June 5-6, 11, 13, 18-20, 8 p.m.; June 6 & 13, 2 p.m.

Though a hasty change of venue delayed opening night, most of the technical aspects of the production seem to have suffered not at all. The incidental music (much of it Verdi rather than the expected Bruckner or Wagner that usually appears in Holocaust-themed productions) is excellent. However, the set builders ought to have constructed an additional glass booth to sequester the person responsible for hair and make-up.

Like Charles Van Doren during the quiz-show scandal of the 1950s, the unmasked mind of Col. Dolff finds full bloom when sealed within his glass booth — this is when Alexander's Shakespeare-strength rants take full control of the play. And it is here that playwright Robert Shaw borrowed lines directly from the real-life interrogation of Otto Ohlendorf — as excerpted in William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* — to give Dolff's recollections spine-chilling detail.

This fact is not disclosed to the audience in the playbill or afterwards, and it is within this trial scene and its dramatic conclusion that the most troubling questions set in. How far should art go in imitating life, and reinterpreting history? Should the actual testimony of a nearly forgotten minor mass murderer be inserted into the mouth of a dual-natured dramatic character? Does this idea dangerously obfuscate the line between guilt and innocence? How does the invented experience of a fictional person relate to the actual experience of a people, or a nation?

And finally, is this Goldman truly deluded, or simply feeling guilty? While his identity is finally resolved in the last scene, the man in the glass booth raises more questions than he answers. Still, the questions themselves make for a theater experience far more thought-provoking than most.