

The Man in the Glass Booth — A Review

by Ginni Stern

I walked out of the stifling theater in a stunned state of vertigo, unable to breathe, after seeing Green Candle Theater Company's production of Robert Shaw's highly provocative and controversial play, *The Man in the Glass Booth*. The Burlington company's June 1998 presentation was powerful. The mind-boggling twists, the passionate intensity and the piercing crescendo of this play saturated my consciousness for a long while.

The time is the mid-sixties, the place an up-scale penthouse in New York City, and the man at first appears to be an eccentric, wealthy, German-Jewish business man. Played with guts, sweat and a diagnosable paranoia by local talent John Alexander, the character of Arthur Goldman quickly creates an atmosphere of enmity, arrogance and intrigue. Before long, we discover Goldman's paranoia is not baseless. The Mossad are, indeed, aggressively searching for him and herein the viewers are exposed to the main theme of the play: *What is Goldman's true identity? Is he the Jewish Holocaust survivor and sharp business tycoon who fled to New York City after the war? Is he Adolf Dorff, the infamous S.S. officer, being sought to stand trial for his sadistically violent and vigorously fevered torture of Jews?*

The exasperating enigma of Goldman/Dorff becomes layered with even more complexity as the story presses onward. Clear, and not so clear clues that this is indeed the Nazi war criminal abound and demand acute attention from the audience.

The audacity of a German-Nazi war criminal posing as a German-Jewish Holocaust survivor is enough to get under the toughest of skins. This revolting character continues to unfold after he is arrested and imprisoned. He spouts Hitler's ideology in impassioned monologues; lewdly and graphically sexualizes the female Mossad investigator, Mrs. Rosen, (played convincingly by Bridget O'Conner); harshly berates the Jewish victims for their weaknesses; and exonerates the German people for their war-time behaviors by expounding about how any human being would perform inhumane acts given the right circumstances.

For the trial, Goldman/Dorff requests an S.S. military uniform, which he puts on ceremonially, amid zealous and detailed monologues on the themes of morality, the potential evil in all humans and his devotion to Hitler's ideals.

At the trial, Goldman/Dorff is in the glass booth, to protect him from the witnesses and the audience. His words, riddled with fiery—almost hysterical—rhetoric illustrating his faithfulness to Hitler's ideals, press in on the audience with irritating boldness.

Elderly witnesses of his war crimes come to tell their stories of what they saw Dorff do. Children of survivors describe what their parents suffered at his evil hands. Then, an elderly witness, Mrs. Lehman, played with powerful understatement by Geri Amori, stood from the audience. She haltingly approached the stage and calmly and positively recognized this man. She'd known him intimately and had witnessed the young Goldman, a German Jew, bravely saving the lives of Jews about to be coldly executed by Adolf Dorff. The presence of Mrs. Lehman, with her calmly descriptive and discernibly articulate memory, shattered Goldman. He crumbled before our eyes, a deeply wounded Holocaust survivor.

This play boldly addressed what I suspect could be the deepest wish of every Holocaust survivor—to hear a Nazi war criminal admit to his evil deeds, to acknowledge his infernal ideology, to bear the consequences of his actions, to reveal his diabolical nature, and to plead guilty to his vulgar deeds.

In his book *Admitting the Holocaust*, Lawrence L. Langer's essay, "Killers and Victims in the Holocaust," suggests the cruel Nazi values and behaviors indicate a "collective Nazi mentality." The result is an attitude that survived the war quite well. However, the danger of being arrested for war crimes became greater and the pressure from society appalled at the atrocities became much more public. These two factors forced war criminals to keep their rhetoric, their passion and their ongoing values to themselves. This silence—rarely broken even today—is what the character of Goldman is responding to. The truth must be told.

Goldman's rantings become a last testament of sorts, giving those witnessing the play a first hand view of what the survivors, and those who died, witnessed during their anguished imprisonment. They embody the Nazi collective personality that absorbed Dorff's being, evoked his actions and justified his past behaviors. By offering himself as a sacrifice Goldman magnanimously and desperately attempted to offer this view of the truth to the witnesses of the Holocaust, to their children, to the audience, to society and to all humanity.