



Hendrick (Scott Hylands) pays a visit to Juliette (Patricia Idlette), his mistress in Act I.

Sing a song of Hitler

Mephisto
Citadel/Shoctor Theatre
through February 17

review by Dean Bennett

How about *Mephisto* the mini-series? This is one of the questions that spring to mind as one exits the Citadel production of Klaus Mann's novel (adapted for the stage by Ariane Mnouchkine).

The play portrays Germany in the 1920's and 30's. It traces the experiences of a small Hamburg theatre group in a society that is leaving the throes of Post World War I depression to head straight into the hands of Nazi domination.

There are so many different characters coming in and out, however, that the viewer is kept busy just remembering who everybody is; one doesn't really get a chance to care for these people. In the second act, the director of the theatre and his wife commit suicide rather than face the Nazi regime. But we don't really feel any compassion. It's like having a great aunt die. You feel bad, but you can't feel much else because you didn't know her from a hole in the wall.

One of the important facets of the live theatre is that it can be a very absorbing experience. You can forget the problems of daily life and watch some other poor slob suffer for a while. Such is not the case for *Mephisto*. *Mephisto* never lets you forget it is a play. The scene changes are too lengthy and too numerous. The momentum of a scene can build beautifully only to fall when ten-to-twelve shadowy figures rush on stage

in dim light and begin rearranging furniture. This play could do with some quick editing.

On the positive side, the play does at least partially succeed in recapturing the turbulence and uncertainty of the times. The musical interludes accentuate what few light moments there are in this mostly somber production, and the sight of the huge red banners emblazoned with swastikas is memorable indeed.

The show uses a number of innovative theatrical devices to keep the audience interested. The stage itself is the stage of the Hamburg theatre, and the players play to a mythical audience on the back wall. We are, in a sense, watching a play from backstage. There are a number of plays-within-the-play, as we see the characters going through their rehearsal process. These musical revues and skits are definitely the highlight of the whole production.

The overall acting performance of *Mephisto* is admirable, particularly Scott Hylands, who in the role of Hendrick Hofgen, portrays a great German actor who sells out his Communist beliefs to work under the Nazis.

Should *Mephisto* have ever been transferred to the stage? I don't think so. In 1982, a German film company adapted it, and the movie later won an Academy Award in 1983 for Best Foreign Film.

The stage *Mephisto* if nothing else, gives insight into how a beleaguered post-war nation could turn to essentially one man to alleviate its misery. And there's nothing wrong with theatre as a history lesson.

Revolution and friendship

The Killing Fields
Warner Bros.
Varscona Theatre

review by Ross Crockford

George Steiner wrote in 1955 that it seemed incomprehensible to him, even ten years after World War II, that while people sang and danced in one part of the world, at the same moment other men and women were being tortured and gassed in Nazi death camps. Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields* reminds us this emotional gulf between men is not limited to World War II: it is here and now.

Joffe's film, based on a true story, is about New York Times correspondent Sydney Schanberg (Sam Waterston) and his Cambodian friend, assistant, and interpreter Dith Pran and their attempts to cover the violent take-over of Cambodia by Khmer Rouge revolutionaries in 1975. Once the revolutionaries took power, Schanberg was forced to flee the country while Pran, like hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, was sent to the Khmer Rouge concentration camps. The second half of the film then portrays Pran's horrific experiences and Schanberg's emotional distance from his friend. *The Killing Fields* strives to tell us that the horror of war is not just its carnage but our inability — like Schanbergs — to deal with it.

The difference between Schanberg and the rest of us, of course, is that he was there. But in the first half of the film, he seems unaware of that fact. As a photojournalist, he hides behind his camera; his interest is only in "the story." He reduces everything to images for the folks back home — in some respects, making him seem as cold as the U.S. government he later attacks. As a dopey colleague of Schanberg's tells him after they've narrowly escaped being executed, "It's been real." But neither one of them are sure that's the case. "Reality" for Schanberg is back in New York, where he realizes, too late, that the pictures he has taken pale when compared to the slaughter he has seen. His interest only in "the story" prevented him from doing some good — in particular, from helping Pran escape — while he had the chance.

Fortunately, director Joffe and screenwriter Bruce Robinson know that though most of the "meaning" of the film (relevant to a North American audience) has to do with Schanberg, the real story is about Dith Pran's terrifying struggle to survive. Joffe makes several clunky, manipulative cuts between Schanberg's life of ease and Pran's ordeal, which only makes Schanberg seem even

more insensitive, but he eventually focuses on Pran...which is vital to the film. It is Pran's struggle which makes *The Killing Fields* more disturbing than most war pictures because the butchery we witness is not committed by an external enemy, but (Pran makes us feel) by ourselves — our children, our neighbors, even our friends. Joffe and Haing S. Ngor (who plays Pran) undertake the difficult task of making us understand how one can feel alien in one's own land, and they succeed, with horrifying effect.

The Killing Fields has a few flaws (Mike Oldfield's score tends to well up when it should only murmur, for example) but they are insignificant compared to the story and the overwhelming sense of confusion and despair the film evokes. This sense is partly the result of the setting — everywhere there is mud and gore and rubble — but it is mostly due to Joffe's inclusion of unnerving details: one moment we see screaming children covering their ears to block out the bursts of explosions; the next, nurses mopping up pools of blood from corpses strewn around their feet. Joffe does not dwell on these details, but there are so many of them we feel as if we are watching a documentary broadcast from another planet. We are not though, and we know it — and it is that knowledge which makes *The Killing Fields* such a marvelous, terrifying film.

A film about the right to challenge the law

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