

'Berlin Cowboys' Captures the Chill of the Cold War

When the Cold War was at its hottest in post-World War II Berlin in 1953, there were possibly more secret military personnel in Germany than there were Berliners. And the battle between them, while primarily "underground", raged furiously, and possibly more dangerously than had been experienced during the "hot" war.

While it was hard to keep these keen "peacekeepers" apart, the unmarked, but clear division between the various European spy organizations was, nevertheless, warfare of a different kind, but possibly just as viral as its predecessor. While the "soldiers" of this new "war" were of a different stripe from the battlers of the Hitler era, they were still very much a divided spy-nation with its own rules of battle.

The lingua franca, at least in Will Manus' play, is English, but it is obvious that the interpretation by its compartmentalized, mainly "underground" warriors was as violent, in its own way, as that of the "pre-peace" war.

In "Berlin Cowboys", Manus captures the chill, fear and loathing that motivated the still-warring "soldiers" of the newly-minted battle. Mixed in with this still-vicious battle were the leftover vixens in

Mad About Theatre



by Madeleine Shaner

spielers who captivated and captured, in their own special way, the attention, interest and desires of the war-weary young men away from home. Ursula (a decidedly sexy Cindy Marinangel) and Heidi, not-the-little-girl-of-the-folk-tale (the sinuous Sophie A. Bell) reminiscent, in their songs and personas, of Marlena Dietrich, dominate and divert the attention, if not the underground conversation, in a dangerous way that only beautiful women can. Danger and diversion are standard procedure in spy country, and there is plenty of both in Manus' texty play.

Spying is a dangerous game in post-war, pre-Berlin Wall Germany, and Manus captures the atmosphere well and truly. It's a problem keeping all the sometimes dastardly characters in place but, at the same time, dastardly is as dastardly does,

as nicely chilling in a friendly kind of way.

Coming from a familiar era (though I was only a child, and was kept in the dark about the worst of the wartime, and post-wartime atrocities) the play is nevertheless a plain-speaking, chilling document from my memory bank, though nevertheless entertaining in its presentation. Jack Seal, Marc Cervania, Tyler Cook, John Long, Jack Seal and Rico Simonini are solid, nevertheless attractive, as the still embattled Cold War warriors of the secret services of the post-war period. The CIA, the KGB, MI 6, the famed and infamous defectors, whatever the war had wrought, the Cold War is still almost as hot as yesterday, and the memory of the Berlin Wall is still there to remind us that "never again" must still be a watchword.

We surely felt it. Manus surely captured it in his play, cunningly directed by Iris Merlis; with lighting by Tom Meleck; musical stage arrangement by Rocco Vitacco; and production by Alex Rodrigo and Anne Mesa.

Taste a piece of yesterday with "Berlin Cowboys" at Write Act



photo by Lou Briggs

Tyler Cook (left) appears as "Lon", Marc Cervania stars as "Wolfgang", Jack Seal portrays "Charlie" and Rico Simonini appears as "Costas" in "Berlin Cowboys" at the Write Act Repertory Theatre.

Rep, 6128 Yucca St., on the grounds of St. Stephens Episcopal Church. For reservations, call (323)469-3113, or visit www.writeactrep.org.

(My husband and I stood on The Wall during a peacetime theatre tour of East Germany in 1987 and gazed down at a jeering crowd of tourists on the west side of the now

destroyed wall. Talk about the Big Chill!

A few years ago, a couple of the theatre students who'd hosted us visited us in Southern California, able to travel freely after years of isolation behind the Wall. They brought us an actual chunk of the now fallen wall. We use it as a doorstep.)