

The Anfractuosities of History

Jim Link



Author Anthony Gallo and his Seventh Street Playhouse thespians have brought another of Gallo's signature detailed, deeply researched historical probes to the Greenbelt Art Center. Margherita tells the complex, paradoxical story of Margherita Grassini Sarfatti, a Jewish-Italian socialist, who married Cesare Sarfatti, a Jewish-Italian lawyer who subsequently became Benito Mussolini's confidante and adviser. Margherita converted to Catholicism and became Mussolini's mistress, thus cuckolding her husband! After 1938 none of this extraordinary good will saved Margherita from suffering under Mussolini's new anti-Semitic legislation, a result of pressure from Hitler. By the way, Margherita is not to be confused with Mussolini's more infamous mistress, Clara Petacci, who was shot and hanged with him by a mob in Milan in 1945. The path of true love never did run smooth.

Prior plays by Gallo – he has *penned 24 in all* – seen at GAC include *Vandergrift*, *The Agony of David*, *The Tragedy of King Saul* and *Lincoln and God* and *Teresa*. All of these portray towering figures wrestling with deep existential, political and religious issues of great consequence. Gallo is never low-key or sotto voce. This history-haunted writer always swings for the bleachers and Margherita is no different.

The play opens after a 3 year estrangement between Margherita and Mussolini, when he suddenly visits Margherita ostensibly to rekindle their passion, but really to procure the potentially damaging cache of love letters (over 1000) he has written her. Thus begins a game of cat and mouse with Margherita bargaining to escape a looming trip to a concentration camp and flee Italy forever. Does she really have the letters? Is she bluffing? Can speaking truth to power save Margherita?

Bob Cohen is excellent as the smooth, suave, charming, gallant swain Benito whose iron fist emerges from his velvet glove when he morphs into the ruthless dictator who blames his victim for the physical abuse he inflicts on her. “Don’t ever make me do that again!”

Emily Canavan is very convincing as the vulnerable, conflicted, courageous Margherita. At one point she attempts to decapitate the sleeping Mussolini, a la the biblical Judith with Holofernes. Now that assassination would have changed the historical narrative considerably!

There are only 2 other characters in the play: Major Klemmer and James Bullock. James McDaniel is spot on as the unctuous, dapper, sinister Nazi Klemmer, who is vying for Margherita’s love letters also. The excellent Sam Simon plays the American Journalist Bullock, who offers Margherita \$1,000,000 for the coveted letters. A tangled web, indeed.

The ever formidable Beatrix Whitehall is the director and sound designer. Tommy Zanner does the lighting. That’s it – just 2 crew members, 4 actors to deliver a play with a very big punch. Multum in parvo, indeed. See it on Friday and Saturday, July 27 and 28 at 8 p.m., Sunday July 29 at 2 p.m.