

Review of The Fifth Column

by David Finkle, Theater
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NOEL COWARD, who knew as much about theater as anyone in the first half of the 20th Century, once declared in notes to a friend that ‘novelists can’t write plays and playwrights can’t write novels.’ More than likely, he wasn’t thinking specifically of Ernest Hemingway’s only full-length play, *The Fifth Column*, but he might as well have been. The three-act work, now getting its premiere at the Mint Theater, is a curiosity in many aspects — but no way is it a successful drama.

In his eagerness to produce the revered author, Mint Theater artistic head and chief director Jonathan Bank assigned himself a daunting challenge, and he only begins to address the play’s built-in problems. While he keeps the frequent shifting of Vicki R. Davis’ serviceable sets going smoothly, he hasn’t solved the central conundrum: a lack of mounting tension constructed from the series of vignettes that Hemingway thought constituted a play.

Written in 1937 — when Hemingway was living in Madrid’s Hotel Florida where the play is set — the play concerns Philip Rawlings (Kelly AuCoin), a secret agent for the uprising Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, who is trying to make headway with a band of like-minded ‘comrades’ against the Franco sympathizers (the so-called fifth column) operating within the city. Rawlings is conveniently resting his weary bones next door to Dorothy Bridges (Heidi Armbruster), a vapidly promiscuous Vassar grad and freelance writer, who happens to be a dead ringer for Martha Gellhorn, Hemingway’s main squeeze at the time and another Hotel Florida habitue.

Dangling marriage before the luxuriantly long-haired blond Bridges during the night hours when he has ‘the horrors’ and rescinding the offer during the day when he’s sobered up, Rawlings most often slips in and out of rooms 109 and 110 with activist comrade Max (Ronald Guttman), a European co-sympathizer. Although he knows his life is in danger -- a young colleague mistaken for Rawlings is shot in 110 -- Rawlings alternately joins in interrogations presided over by a stern Republican called Antonio (James Andreassi), participates in a foray or two against Franco partisans, and indulges in more-than-occasional R&R with the available and very direct Anita (Nicole Shalhoub). There is a lot of attitudinizing here in Hemingway’s conception of Rawlings, but that alone doesn’t add up to a full-fledged character study within a satisfyingly developed work.

AuCoin gives a solid performance as the troubled but determined Rawlings, who is the sort of conflicted hero who appears repeatedly in Hemingway’s canon of novels. He is the kind of man who wants to do good (‘good’ being a standard Hemingway assessment), but isn’t sure what the path to goodness is and even strongly suspects that there is no such path. Indeed, the lean and wiry actor unquestionably looks like a guy who’d leap into danger because he hasn’t yet decided whether life is worth living.

Guttman has a definite freedom-fighter matinee appeal as Max, and the rest of the cast — many of them doubling in Jeff Nellis' tenebrous lighting and throughout Jane Shaw's bomb-heavy sound design blares — are up to their parts. The sole exception is Armbruster, who seems to think playing vapid means just being vapid.

When Hemingway was being lionized as America's foremost writer, it was often the clipped dialogue that won him praise. So when Max says, 'The bed is good,' he's speaking pure Hemingway. The same can't be said of the play, though. As Papa might have penned: 'It is not good.'