

Who Does This Playwright Think He Is? Hemingway?

New York Times review of
The Fifth Column, March 28, 2008

BENEATH the image of the ice-in-the-veins alpha male that Ernest Hemingway cultivated in his novels, there always lurked a romantic. In ‘The Fifth Column,’ Hemingway’s play about love and espionage in the Spanish Civil War, now being presented by the Mint Theater Company, the tough guy with a heart of gold is center stage.

Hemingway wrote the play in 1937 when he and Martha Gellhorn, the future Mrs Hemingway No. 3, were in Madrid during its siege by Franco’s troops and their Nazi allies. Philip Rawlings and Dorothy Bridges, the two main characters, happen to be journalists holed up in the Florida Hotel in Madrid, covering that same conflict and eking out an existence on tinned *foie gras*. Rather, journalism is Rawlings’s cover. He’s really doing mysterious work on behalf of the anti-Franco forces. It’s a romanticized view of a war correspondent’s life that only Hollywood could find credible.

Rawlings and Bridges begin an affair that in days leads them to contemplate giving up their war-groupie life. Suddenly Rawlings begins to pine for domestic bliss behind a white picket fence, or at least for a quiet villa in St Tropez. It’s never very clear exactly what Rawlings and his secret band are up to, and one of the problems with the play is that this lack of specificity fails to engage the audience — either with Rawlings’s mission or Bridges’s seduction of him.

A bigger problem is the couple’s characters. Dorothy is vain and spoiled, a daughter of privilege more interested in a wartime bargain on a fox coat than what happens in the war. (Is that really how he saw Gellhorn?) Philip is conceited and arrogant, an incipient alcoholic who drinks his breakfast and has blackouts, yet is irresistible to women. Hemingway’s heroes have always been something of a stereotype, and Philip fits the mold.

Yet another problem is that, at nearly three hours, the play is full of repetitions, extraneous scenes and lazy devices, like using telephone calls to advance the plot or having characters take baths to get them offstage. Paging Max Perkins.

A 1940 Broadway production, directed by Lee Strasberg and starring Franchot Tone, used a script that had been doctored, or ‘adapted,’ by the screenwriter Benjamin Glazer, to emphasize the play’s anti-Fascist elements. The Mint Theater has been staging what it regards as neglected plays for more than a decade, but the original version of ‘The Fifth Column’ remains more a literary curiosity than the rediscovery of a dust-covered masterpiece.