

Judgment at Nuremberg: A Review

By Mary Winsky

Where were you in 1948? How aware might you have been of the landmark post World War II trial being conducted in Nuremberg, Germany? What about 1961 when the classic film “Judgment at Nuremberg” starring Spencer Tracy hit American movie theaters? And might any awareness of the trial or movie have faded? Or lost its relevance to justice and ethics and morality and the human condition?

The Heritage Hunt Little Theater, with its director M. J. Brickach and producer Denny Cumber, called us to experience this powerful trial of a country’s leaders and responsibility then - and now.

I say “experience” because as I looked around at the rapt silence of the capacity audience, I witnessed a solemn recommitment to both the personal and collective responsibility of an individual, a nation and its leaders. We experience the initial humble reluctance of the American Judge Haywood, played with dignity and compassion by Chuck Breder. We feel the protocol and politics Bill Harrison portrays in General Merrin who greets him in the corridor of the Ministry of Justice. We know immediately the commitment and passion of Colonel Parker, the prosecuting attorney, played by Gene Schmiel. We are engaged. And in that engagement comes the part the audience is to play in the conscience of society.

Would we agree with Captain Betty Byers, played with crisp efficiency by Denny Cumber, when she tells the judge before the trial that these war crimes could have happened anywhere? Would we instinctively side with the prosecution’s opening plea for justice? Or consider the assertions of Oscar Rolfe, the German counsel, passionately and booming played by Sil Zinicola who insists the German judges on trial were only being loyal to their nation’s leader? Would we agree with the reason and courage of Dr. Wickert, played to subtle perfection by Ed Prendergast, when he insists he did not go along as these accused judges had, (even though he did sign Hitler’s loyalty oath – “everyone did”) and that they did have a choice? Would we even believe in the legitimacy of this trial? Or would we have stonewalled it with silence like the scholarly Ernst Janning, played with an amazing evolution of emotion by Art Moscatello? And how about the atrocities signed off on by the other two accused, Frederick Hoffsteter played with tall stature by Joe Ganey, and Emil Hahn, played with blurts of counter accusations by Mel Ross?

We had to take a stand.

So did we believe the impassioned insistence of Frau Bertholt, the widow of the executed former owner of the mansion played by the versatile and talented Nanette Ross, when she insists, “We did not know!” Could it possibly have been right to sterilize Anna Peterson, played with a totally believable mix of simplicity and defensiveness by Lynne Block, for her supposed mental incompetence? Should the defense have humiliated once again Maria Wallner, played with just the right mix of innocence and sincerity by Sharon Ferguson, for her alleged affair with her Jewish friend Dr. Feldenstein? She had already been on trial and Feldenstein executed. Were we convinced by the snoopy Elsa Lindnow, played with snippy innuendo by Joyce Mancini who had seen her kiss the much older doctor and sit on his lap? How about the housekeeper, Mrs. Halbestadt played with nervous service by Sandy Mills? She was just an ordinary German citizen going about her work, not acknowledging the nearby concentration camp. She is not on trial. But is she blameless?

We hear more layers as the witness, Dr. Geuter, played with both opinionated accusations of the fanatical, mocking Emil Hahn, and hope for the scholarly, thoughtful Ernst Janning. Gene Brickach, makes us wonder at their relative guilt. Are they all equally responsible, or are there subtle differences?

Finally, we hear from Janning who articulates the fear of the times, the seductive call of Hitler to pick up their heads and be proud. He knew there were devils among them, that it was all lies, but they loved their country. What did it matter if a few radicals and gypsies were destroyed? But Hitler succeeded beyond their wildest dreams as the Reich spread over the land like a disease and became a way of life. The Feldenstein case was a sacrificial ritual, not a trial; they had decided the verdict before entering the courtroom. He asks where they all were when the long list of atrocities was happening. “We knew. We knew.” He insists, “And if we didn’t know, it was because we didn’t want to know.” After his moving testimony, the defense declares, “If he is guilty, we

all are." The Vatican in 1933 and Russia in 1939 had each signed a concordant pact with Hitler. "The whole world is responsible for Hitler."

The three American judges mull all this as the Russians invade Czechoslovakia and blockade Berlin, and the political winds change. Judge Ives, played with slick political savvy by Jack Merelman veers with that wind. But Judge Norris, played with fairness and thoughtfulness by Don Jewell stands with Judge Haywood as they reach their verdict. All three German judges are found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. The trial is over, the blame for political sterilization and racial cleansing assigned.

As Judge Haywood is about to return to America and we to our comfortable homes in Heritage Hunt, Janning calls the judge to his prison cell. He wants the judge to keep the record of his cases because he respects the American. He wants him, not to forgive, but to understand. How can Haywood understand the millions of exterminations, the unspeakable atrocities? For it had come to that the first time Janning had sentenced one man. What Haywood understands instead is "justice, truth and the value of a single human being."

We left the German courtroom and jail and HH ballroom with that message. If we heard it in 1948 we were too young to understand. If we heard it in the 1961 film, we were too busy. Now, in 2010, we needed to hear it again. Thanks to the Heritage Hunt Little Theater we got to renew our personal responsibility once more. Thank you HHLT for the courage of your convictions.

And thanks to everyone in the amazing production crew: Jane Becker, Sandy Thompson, Ted Day, Dennis Massie, Joey Wagner, John Bisaga, Dave Milbradt, Kathryn Schmiel, Sandy Iasiello, Treva Whyte, Phyllis Schrader, Jean Herr, Margaret Gorzka, Myrna Fitzgerald, Bets and Ed Knepley, Betty Hitchcock, Ina Mayer, Pat Boggs, Faye Green, Natalie June and Roger Del Rosario without whom the excellence and truth of this play could not have changed Heritage Hunt for the better.