

Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, NY
East of Berlin, by Hannah Moscovitch. Directed by Margo Whitcomb..
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“It has revolutionized our notion of evil.”

Men and women fall in love without considering the dim past that preceded them. This is not unusual. However, when that past does more than their present does to create them and their confounding intents there is a problem. This is the basis for the second half of Hannah Moscovitch’s fascinating play, “East of Berlin.” Rudi, played by Orlando Grant, under a false identity, falls in love with Sarah, Kara Arena, who is incapable of living in or with a falsehood. Their relationship is volatile, so much so that within the confines of this short, believable play, it takes amazing chances and defining actions. This is a play about how people address their moral obligations to one another and to the world they live in. It is pure dynamite in this excellent production at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York.



Orlando Grant as Rudi, Kara Arena as Sarah;
Photo: John Sowle

Rudi and Sarah meet in a government archive where each is researching family history. Her mother survived Auschwitz; his father worked there. While each maintain secrets, she is very open about hers while he is highly deceptive about his. Physical and Societal opposites they are attracted and begin a new friendship that turns to lust and then love. The line is clear and obvious until it suddenly isn’t.

The change occurs when Rudi’s childhood friend, Herman, well played by JD Scalzo, shows up one day; after that nothing is the same.

Grant handles long monologues as though they were Noël Coward dialogues. He is witty, wise and well-meaning from start to finish. The actor’s natural charm is infused into his character with ease and the combination of his style and the author’s words create a theatrical marriage that captures the audience internally and externally. He is totally believable as the tortured teenager who remains a tortured man. When Rudi takes action he takes it completely and definitively. His final scene, like his opening narration, makes the play’s point emphatically.

Arena is an actress who presents her character powerfully, right from her first line. That power is undiminishible and Sarah dominates Rudi's story, for this is Rudi's story that the play delivers. Moscovitch, the author, makes Sarah almost as important as Rudi and seeing that she only appears in the second half of the story this is amazing writing. Director Margo Whitcomb helps immensely by placing her at a remove from Rudi and in a dominant position on the stage. It is a brilliant choice.

Scalzo has the very interesting role of a man lost in a friendship that can not persist. Herman does not see the utter inevitability of this loss and so his reappearance in the play makes a remarkable impact on his best friend and on a woman of whose existence he has known nothing. The actor is at his best in the early scenes of the play giving motivation to a high school student who finds himself in the thrall of another boy. The author has written this so well that Scalzo has no difficulty making the reality's impact.



Orlando Grant, JD Scalzo;
Photo: John Sowle

John Sowle's set is wonderful, giving each scene all that it can, aided by projections and by the fine sound design by Zak Kline. This company is fearless, taking on unusual and sometimes volatile plays; this is definitely one of those. Worth a trip to the Hudson River community, "East of Berlin" is a winner in so many ways.

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East of Berlin plays at Bridge Street Theatre, 44 West Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through June 4. For information and tickets call 518-478-5982.