A glimpse of life among the Nazis

By Jeff Stokes

Bertolt Brecht's 'The Fear and Mystery of the Third Reich,' currently being presented at the Theatre Company of Boston, is an excellent example of how too much emphasis on the music can diminish the emotional intensity of a play. 'Third Reich' is more than 'life with a leaning;' even more than the rest of Brecht's plays it is a leening with life built around it. The music of the play declares the didactic intentions of the author. Brecht's works have been described as 'parodies for the theatre,' and in 'The Fear and Mystery of the Third Reich' he has collected fifteen anecdotal parables for the theatre, demonstrating with gripping irony the ascension of the time.

Of course, one of these anecdotes of life in Hitler's Germany manifests a grim and dehumanizing view of Hitler's character that is thoroughly human. But when fifteen of those ironic gems are piled together, the characters take on a stereotype that gives the moral of 'Third Reich' all too big a role: the victims of Hitler's regime, though authentic, become caricatures of human beings, and we are reminded of a thriving species of drama called the soap opera.

The soap-opera touch

Not that pity and anger produced in such purity are unpleasant emotions—not by a long shot. But we don't pay our way into a theatre to dine on soap-operatic pathos; we come for a deep, probing multidimensional emotional experience enlivened by discovery and startling disclosures, a unified swelling of emotional appeal followed by its sudden dramatic decline, leading to a sense of order and of understanding.

In 'Third Reich' there is no understanding or resolution of chaos—only the prevalent appeal to our capacity for pity. The playwright, by chopping the action into fifteen parts, prevents our emotions from developing further into a kind of primitive, sentimental sympathy. The advent of each new scene, which brings with it a completely new set of characters, destroys the emotions built up by the preceding scene. Unity of action has been sacrificed to a didactic sympathy. And what happened to 'The Private Life of the Master Racer?'

Acting superb

The redeeming feature of the performance lies in the quality of the acting. The group seems particularly well-suited to the brutal realism called for by 'Third Reich.' Josephine Lane and Paul Benedict, who have a flair for the kind of irony that runs through Brecht's work, Ted Kaczewski, who plays the roles involving the intellectual Fervor to Renounce the Competence of the State, supports his roles with convincing humanity. Naomi Thornton, who usually plays the part of the woman in spite of an instinct for goodness. The Private Life of Dr. Mabuse, performed with a reserve and authenticity that offsets the natural tendency of the play toward hyperrealism. All of them, in fact, do as much as possible to redeem the play from its structural flaws and didactic pathos. Inexperienced hands the dismal irony of 'Third Reich' could only weigh our spirits down.

Sunday, January 15

The Beaddles in HELP

Saturday, January 15

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Peter Lorre in M

8:00 P.M. 50c