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Defendant Maurice Chevalier

A well-performed but rambling biographical fantasia about the famed French entertainer focusing on accusations of his German collaboration in W.W. II.

Posted on February 11, 2016 by Darryl Reilly in Off-Broadway, Plays, Still Open

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Darryl Reilly, Critic

Defendant Maurice Chevalier is very lucky to have Ken Straus in the title role. Mr. Straus' spirited performance elevates and anchors this rambling biographical fantasia about the famed French entertainer that focuses on the accusations of his collaborating with the Germans during W.W. II.

Wearing a tuxedo, a straw boater hat, and occasionally twirling a walking stick, the amiable Straus winningly conveys the essence of the stage and screen star with his charming presence and accomplished acting, singing and dancing skills. He holds this uneven production together.

Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972) was born in Paris and as a young man became known as a musical performer. He appeared on Broadway and when sound came to films went to Hollywood to star in movies as the quintessential Frenchman. He was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Actor in 1930, and received an honorary Oscar following his comeback supporting role in *Gigi* in 1958.

Dissatisfied with the two-dimensional parts he was being offered, he left Hollywood in 1935, and returned to France. In 1937, he married the much younger Jewish performer Nita Raya. During the German Occupation he continued to star in revues and remained immensely popular with audiences including the Germans while his wife was secluded in Unoccupied France. His performance in Germany at a camp for French prisoners of war later led to disproved charges of treasonous collaboration.

His great grandnephew, the French-born and raised Alexis Chevalier has written this well researched play with music that is based in part on Maurice Chevalier's memoirs. It is structurally problematic with fantasy episodes, extraneous musical and dance sequences, and numerous often-lengthy scenes that don't cohere. The dialogue is straightforwardly purposeful imparting historical facts and details with occasional bursts of poetic qualities.

The first act is comprised of 26 scenes and the second act of 25. Certainly that's feasible in a film but on stage it is cumbersome. Cast members perpetually dragging in and taking out tables, chairs and other props to indicate the change of locale slows down the action. Frequent musical numbers staged in a fashion that leads to audience applause also distracts from the narrative.

At the beginning of the play, playwright Chevalier employs the viable conceit of the singer being interrogated by a tribunal of French resistance members and facing a death sentence for his wartime activities. Through flashbacks, he recounts his life and career and in the background are title cards proclaiming "Hollywood," "Paris," "Cannes," and so forth. The result is like that of a stodgy 1930's Hollywood biography picture. With streamlining and condensing, the play could be very effective as there are a number of well-crafted sequences.

A powerful one involves the German Major Steinsteiger's offer to Chevalier to perform at a gala in Berlin and then at a celebration



Ken Straus as Maurice Chevalier and Deanna Jelardi as Nita Raya in a scene from "Defendant Maurice Chevalier" (Photo credit: Angie Kremer)

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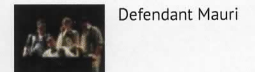
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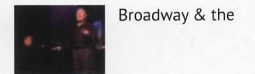
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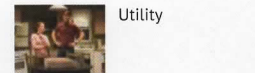
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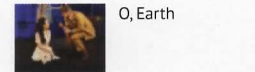
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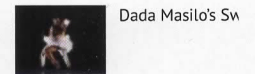
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Kian Kavousi, Ken Straus, Alexandra Kainoa and Matthew Serra in a scene from "Defendant Maurice Chevalier" (Photo credit: Angie Kremer)

presided over by Adolf Hitler. German-born actor Ben Rademacher is commanding and chilling as the pragmatic autocrat.

Sam Schall is quite personable as Chevalier's accompanist and is an excellent pianist. Mr. Schall's convivial chemistry with Mr. Straus is highly entertaining. Deanna Jelardi is lively and appealing as Nita Raya. Ms. Jelardi and Mr. Straus perform a wonderful "I Remember It Well" together. As MGM executive Irving Thalberg, Miah Kane makes a strong impression in the scene where he and Chevalier debate art verses commerce.

The rest of the talented company includes Kian Kavousi, Matthew Serra, Micah Stinson and Alexandra Kainoa who all expertly appear in other and sometimes multiple roles.

Director Alex Notkin has adeptly and creatively staged this unwieldy play for the most part. Making use of the theater's ramps to set scenes, having the inquisitors confront Chevalier from above, soldiers patrolling through the audience with flashlights and a picture of a suspect are among the bold flourishes Mr. Notkin utilizes.

The set design is an artful configuration of a multitude of black boxes with light stripes on them and a spiral staircase. It's all a clever suggestively abstract backdrop for the various places and times depicted. Ethan Steimel's lighting design is a striking mixture of bright, dark and dim that vividly highlights the events and tones. Costume designer Jessica Rae Taylor has outfitted the cast of nine with authenticity and flair.

The choreography by Elena Notkina and Inna Muratova is inspired and inventive during the nightclub sequences and eerie during the fantasy interludes.

Due to its historic subject matter and compelling central character, there is a story rich in drama to be told about the legendary singer and *Defendant Maurice Chevalier* fitfully succeeds at that.

Defendant Maurice Chevalier (February 21, 2016)

American Theatre of Actors, in the John Cullum Theatre, 314 West 54th Street, in Manhattan

For tickets, call 212-868-4444 or visit <http://www.tix.smarttix.com>

Running time: two hours and 30 minutes including one intermission

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About Darryl Reilly (181 Articles)

A native New Yorker, Darryl Reilly graduated from NYU with a BFA in Cinema Studies. For the Broadway League, (formerly The League of American Theatres and Producers) he developed, and for five years conducted their Broadway Open House Tours, which took visitors through The Theatre District and into several Broadway theaters. He contributed to Broadway Musicals Show by Show: Sixth Edition (Applause Books). Since 2013, he has reviewed theater, cabaret, and concerts for Theaterscene.net.



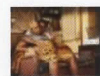
Kian Kavousi and Ken Straus in a scene from "Defendant Maurice Chevalier" (Photo credit: Angie Kremer)



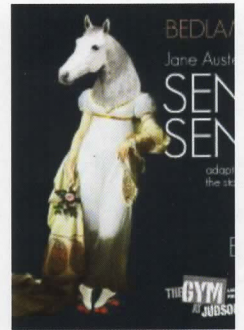
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