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DEFENDANT MAURICE CHEVALIER

Posted By Ann Firestone Ungar on Feb 16, 2016



Review by Ann Firestone Ungar

Defendant Maurice Chevalier, a play with music, was written by Alexis Chevalier, the great grandnephew of the famous French singer and entertainer. In 1944 Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972) was accused of collaborating with the Nazis and tried in Paris by representatives of the Provisional Government of the French Republic based in Algiers. He was ultimately found innocent, with a consistent alibi. But it's clear that the trauma to the Chevalier family has found its way to the stage through the pen of Alexis who writes with clarity, humanity and a strong sense of theater. His play and this production, skillfully directed by Alex Notkin, tells the story of the trial and Maurice's complex and convincing self-defense as he is pushed and pulled by the politics and societal strain which France endured when the Nazis invaded and life changed radically from the light and lovely, as we tend to think of Paris in particular.



Kian Kavousi as LaPorte with Ken Straus as Maurice Chevalier – Deal with French Resistance
Photo credit: Angie Kremer Photography

The production is staged in an abstract manner with the tribunal judges placed high above the stage. Maurice's scenes as he and the company illustrate the history of Maurice's career are generally played on the ground level. The scenes alternate between the tribunal commenting on Maurice's defense and that illustrated history.

The history is complex and begins with Maurice (Ken Straus) in Hollywood, already an international star. In a chat with Irving Thalberg, the movie mogul, we learn that Maurice wants to be challenged artistically and has decided to return to Paris to perform for live audiences. Thalberg offers his star a lot of money to stay and warns him that the Nazis will probably invade France and that could make life very unpleasant; Maurice says it's unlikely and anyway he isn't Jewish. So he leaves the United States, returns to Paris and falls in love with and marries a talented Jewish woman, Nita Raya (Deanna Jelardi). They live happily as successful artistic partners until the Nazis do invade the country. Nita is accepted less and less by her audiences as an entertainer, and Maurice is disgusted and frightened by the situation in which they and the whole of France find themselves. Consistent bombing of Paris forces Maurice and Nita to escape with her parents to Cannes in the south of France in 1940 where the government is free, as opposed to the northern occupied zone.

Maurice tells the court that yes, he was originally a supporter of Petain who was the head of the free zone; but that support diminished as Petain became a puppet of the Nazis.

The Nazis visit Maurice to try to convince him to return to Paris to sing. They want the voice of Paris, this beloved entertainer, to appear on the stage and therefore as a silent supporter of their regime. Chevalier resists although Nita strongly urges him to return. She doesn't want his reputation to suffer because of her. She tells him she'll be proud of his mocking of the Germans through his songs and presence.

Into their lives comes a pianist/composer named Henri Betti (Sam Schall). He brings new direction to Chevalier through a collaboration as Chevalier writes lyrics and Betti composes music. Ultimately Chevalier and Betti return to Paris while Nita and her parents remain in Cannes.

That return to the stage is unfortunately bookended by a racist exhibition in Paris called "The Jew in France." The court sees this juxtaposition of events as more than unfortunate. They see collaboration, a willingness on the part of Chevalier to be understood as part of the Nazi regime. Chevalier tells them he refused to see the hugely biased exhibition which is part of the reason why he is separated from his wife who cannot perform and has been rejected by society at large.

In a touching passage Maurice writes to Nita about the terrible situation in Paris where people are being treated like animals, dragged who knows where, and compelled to wear the dreadful yellow star. He tells her that Petain is an "old imbecile" and urges his wife to read and sing even though they are separated.

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After one of his Paris shows a Nazi major (Ben Rademacher) tries to bribe Maurice to sing in Berlin. Chevalier declines. He will not sing for the Germans there. But he makes a bargain with the major. If he can sing at a prison camp, Alten Grabow, and if the Germans will release ten French prisoners, he will sing in Germany. Chevalier was himself a prisoner of war at Alten Grabow during World War I. The German agrees and Maurice appears, thus gaining the freedom of ten. He had tried to bargain with the German for twenty, but had to settle for ten. A victory of sorts.

At the conclusion of this performance, at which there were no press representatives at Chevalier's request (again a fear of appearing to collaborate), the major tells Chevalier that he is to get into a car and travel to perform for Hitler. Chevalier refuses. The major attacks his songs, saying they're part of the resistance. Chevalier denies this. He suggests to the major that he himself may want the war to be over. The song in question is "Mon Espoir" and is a song of hope, "My Hope." The Nazi suggests that there is no hope because his wife and son were killed recently in a car bombing; and it's clear that he himself is silently contemplating suicide. Interestingly, the Nazi is seen in this scene playing the piano, a Gershwin tune. Did he know that the composer was a Jew? A nice directorial touch.

And the plot continues as Chevalier tries to explain to the tribunal the trauma that he and his family underwent. Another Nazi, who had as a younger man been in love with Nita, visits Chevalier who has returned to Cannes. He demands to know about Chevalier's relationship to Nita, if she is Jewish, and if she will swear she's Catholic. This forces Chevalier into a meeting with a Resistance poet, LaPorte (Kian Kavousi). After much accusation of Nazi collaboration by each man, LaPorte agrees to get papers for Nita; Chevalier agrees to deliver a package for LaPorte. The package turns out to be a bomb which was used to destroy a book store which was selling Nazi propaganda.

The Chevaliers return to Paris. London radio announces the decree from the Provisional Government of the French Republic now based in Algiers that all traitors must be executed. "This is the case of Maurice Chevalier. Chevalier hasn't proved supportive to the spirit of Resistance and has implied collaborative ideas. It is a proof of high treason and above all a great disappointment for all French citizens who believed in him."

In the end, Nita's career blooms, but Maurice, until he is exonerated by the court, is diminished, even spat upon by the public. His wife continues to be hugely supportive of him. The press reports that he's been killed; it's a false report. The court itself, finding him innocent, refuses to kill Chevalier.

The play concludes with him singing *I Love Paris*, and it's a satisfying conclusion of a song and dance man whose reason for being was to entertain.

Defendant Maurice Chevalier is staged in a Brechtian manner. It's a play with musical interludes, very nicely sung and danced by everyone, including Mr. Straus as Maurice, ailing a bit during the matinee at which I saw the play. He was, however, fully excellent in his portrayal of Maurice Chevalier: warm, generous, introspective, hopeful, yet nobody's fool. Ms. Jelardi is absolutely lovely as Nita. Mr. Kavousi, Mr. Rademacher, Mr. Stinson, Mr. Serra, Mr. Schall, Ms. Kainoa and Mr. Kane all perform admirably. The staging by Mr. Notkin is fluid, clever and unobtrusive.

I, who as a child knew Maurice Chevalier's work in *Gigi*, welcome this compelling exploration of his complex and difficult life. The story brings a reality to stage and film myth, and that's a welcome addition to historical knowledge. And I realize, once again, that I have to ask myself: If the fascists came to power in the United States, where would I stand? Would I try to be nice to them, and hope they'd be nice to me? Would I become a collaborator? Would I join the underground resistance? Or would I just get the hell out of Dodge City? I suspect that in all honesty most of us don't know how we'd behave until we found ourselves in that situation. Let's hope we never do.

DEFENDANT MAURICE CHEVALIER - written by Alexis Chevalier and directed by Alex Notkin

WITH: Ken Straus (Maurice Chevalier), Deanna Jelardi ((Nita Raya), Kian Kavousi (Double Metre/LaPorte), Ben Rademacher (Major Steinsteiger), Micah Stinson (Drinand), Matthew Serra (Captain), Sam Schall (Henri Betti), Alexandra Kainoa (Paulette), Miah Kane (Irving Thalberg)

Kian Kavousi (production manager), Christina Dinella (vocal coach), Chang Liu (music director/technical director), Inna Muratova (choreography), Alexandra Kekeris (stage manager), Ethan Steimel (lighting designer), Damien Charpentier (set designer), Jessica Rae Taylor (costume designer), Emmi Stiegler (lightboard operator)

Nascent Productions presents *Defendant Maurice Chevalier* at American Theatre of Actors in the John Collum Theatre, 314 W. 54th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues, New York, NY, through February 21, 2016.

Performances are Monday through Friday at 7:00pm, Saturday and Sunday at 2:00pm and 7:00pm. For tickets go to www.smarttix.com or call 212-868-4444.

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