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Defendant Maurice Chevalier

By Alexis Chevalier; Directed by Alex Notkin
Produced by Nascent Productions

Off Off Broadway, Play
Runs through 2.21.16
American Theatre of Actors, 314 West 54th Street

- ◆ Based on a true story about a famous French singer and entertainer
- ◆ Outstanding performances
- ◆ Notable choreography
- ◆ Two hours with one intermission

by *Sarah Weber (whoware.php)* on 2.14.16



Ken Straus and Deanna Jelardi in *Defendant Maurice Chevalier*. Photo by Angie Kremer.

BOTTOM LINE: World-famous entertainer Maurice Chevalier returns to France just as World War II begins, and he must make difficult decisions to protect his family and his country.

You may not recognize his name, but you've probably either seen or heard Maurice Chevalier in more movies than you realize. American cinema loved to use Chevalier as a model Parisian with an infinite supply of charm. But his life was far more complicated than the character the world adored. In *Defendant Maurice Chevalier*, Alexis Chevalier deconstructs his great-granduncle's controversial life around World War II.

The story begins with Maurice (Ken Straus) in front of a court of former French Resistance—they're condemning him to death for collaborating with the Nazis, and he has one chance to prove his innocence. So Maurice retells the last ten years of his life: how he tried to use his status as a world-class entertainer to protect his wife Nita Raya (Deanna Jelardi), a fellow entertainer and a Jew. As the war escalates, Maurice's choices, good or bad, are all in an effort to save Nita and his country, even if it means entertaining Nazi soldiers. One of the most problematic episodes is

when he's confronted by Major Steinsteiger (Ben Rademacher) to perform in a huge concert in Berlin. Instead of accepting a large sum of money and performing there, Maurice convinces Steinsteiger to allow him to perform at a prison camp in exchange for the release of French prisoners of war. On the flip side, to hide his wife's identity Maurice helps Laporte, (Kian Kavousi) in a French Resistance plot in exchange for falsified papers.

Alexis Chevalier peppers his story with songs and dances featuring some of Maurice's most famous pieces. Having both the biographical story and the dance numbers offers the audience context behind Maurice's character and his choices. Coupled with Straus' committed and passionate performance you can almost believe you're actually watching Maurice. I especially enjoyed the chemistry between his and Jeraldi's assertive performance—Maurice and Nita were an imperfect couple and yet were exactly what each other needed in a partner.

Further immersing us in the show, Inna Muratova's period-appropriate choreography during the song and dance numbers juxtaposes the life that Maurice wants—one dedicated to art for art's sake—with the reality he's forced to live instead. Alex Notkin's direction contributes to Maurice's conflict as well, though many of his choices also feel a bit clunky. The transitions between scenes are either repetitive or abrupt, often dragging down the show's momentum, although this stop-and-go feeling may also lie partly in the cinematic style of Chevalier's writing.

That said, *Defendant Maurice Chevalier* offers a fascinating window into a celebrity American audiences don't know much about. Though the show certainly has its biases, Chevalier has written a portrait of an imperfect man who happened to become the world's symbol of France. If you want to learn something new, or you're a history buff with fantasies of seeing Maurice Chevalier's songs on stage, this is the show for you.

(*Defendant Maurice Chevalier* plays at the American Theatre of Actors at 314 West 54th Street through February 21, 2016. The running time is two hours with one intermission. Remaining performances are Tuesdays through Fridays at 7; Saturdays at 2 and 7; and Sundays at 2pm. Tickets are \$35. Tickets are available at smarttix.com

([http://tix.smarttix.com/Modules/Sales/SalesMainTabsPage.aspx?](http://tix.smarttix.com/Modules/Sales/SalesMainTabsPage.aspx?ControlState=1&DiscountCode=&SalesEventId=4878&DC=)

[ControlState=1&DiscountCode=&SalesEventId=4878&DC=](http://tix.smarttix.com/Modules/Sales/SalesMainTabsPage.aspx?ControlState=1&DiscountCode=&SalesEventId=4878&DC=)) or by calling 212-868-4444.)

***Defendant Maurice Chevalier* is written by Alexis Chevalier. Directed by Alex Notkin. Production Manager is Kian Kavousi. Technical Director is Chang Liu. Lighting Design by Ethan Steimel. Technical Assistant is Emmi Stiegler. Vocal Coach is Cristina Dinella. Costume Design by Jessica Rae Taylor. Choreography by Inna Muratova. Stage Manager is Alexandra Kekeris.**

The cast is Ken Straus, Deanna Jelardi, Kian Kavousi, Micah Stinson, Ben Rademacher, Matthew Serra, Miah Kane, Samuel Schall, Alexandra Kainoa.