

Berkshire Bright Focus...

**Leni, by Sarah Greenman. Directed by John Sowle.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.**

"Fame suits me beautifully, I think."



Olivia Howell and Roxanne Fay in Leni

German film-maker Leni Riefenstahl was born in 1902 and died in 2003. As a young woman she distinguished herself as a dancer and actress and eventually moved into the production arena as a movie director/editor transforming the psychology of National Socialism into very moving pictures, films that glorified the political regime of Nazi leader Adolph Hitler. Celebrated for her artistic vision while at the same time vilified for her political subjectivity, she faced long years of rebuke and failure after World War II. "Triumph of Will" and "Olympiad" were her two greatest achievements and, if we can believe playwright Sarah Greenman, she only suffered the loneliness of a political miscreant in her later years.

Greenman's play, "Leni" examines her final efforts at bringing herself into the picture, a motion picture, in which she is accuser, defender, judge and jury in the world court's case against her. She is a hundred years old and looking great. She is sixty years gone from the war she helped to publicize through her art, and she is still pushing an agenda.

There are two of her in this moment: Helene Bertha Amalie Riefenstahl, a mature woman with a unique perspective on her own life, played by Roxanne Fay and Leni Riefenstahl, a pretty woman of thirty-five who can only see the immediate world she occupies played by Olivia Howell. Sometimes Leni questions her older self, directs her on how to direct her story, and sometimes Helene relates to the younger actress who she "is" and how she develops. The playwright's concept is a delicate matter which, in the production directed by John Sowle at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, NY, works brilliantly.

What does work well, works very well indeed. Most especially in the forefront of the piece is Roxanne Fay as the older version of the woman. She has decidedly taken hold of the mess that Leni's life has become through her own impressive talents as a film-maker and is using the format to look at her own past and make of it what she can. Fay seems to have channeled the actress Lotte Lenya. She sounds like her at times and her chin and jaw bring the Viennese actress/singer into view whenever she presents herself in left profile. She is James Bond's foe,

Rosa Kleb, to the teeth in those moments and this works for the reality of the character Fay is presenting: a martinet, unrepenting and singularly focused.

As Fay barks Leni's commands, and sings without musicality the language of the playwright, she is defining Leni in those years when she could look back at how she destroyed her possibilities through loyalty to a vision that, though not her own, gave her work its focus. Fay moves with an angularity that removes the femininity of the younger version of herself. It is appropriate that she shows us this woman as a man-figure who lives to fight another day even when her understanding of the current battle is only half-real.

Fay's Helene is genuine. She brings strength and reality onto the stage in this role. We can actually believe she is standing there, is perched on the edge of a stool, is moving a set piece and a klieg light, is in command of her world as only a director could be in a defensive situation. This is a dynamic realization of Riefenstahl lost within her own special world, one in which she

There is a moment in this play in which Leni discovers that the political world in which she works is not the world she has believed in all along. Both Helene and Leni react as she must to the understanding of the horrors of the concentration camps she had heard of but never visited. Both Fay and Olivia Howell as Leni, discover compassion within the woman they play that aches to turn inward but is forced to remain half-expressed, half-remorseful.

Howell's young director is a beautiful woman with a graceful manner whose background as a dancer allows her a seductive quality that is never fully realized because her actress aspect won't allow her to fully flirt with the Hitler who supports her vision and imparts his own to her. Howell is lovely, a face and figure that present a sensuality not seen in the older version of herself. She moves into chairs like a huntress on the prowl. She takes the stage with a stride that would make a palace guard proud. Howell plays both sides of the woman with equal force and restraint and her interrogation of the older Helene, a look forward with insight that is occasionally hard to make real, is a constant reminder that creativity, true artistry, is alarmingly invasive employing a curiosity about one's own world that cannot provide answers but only provoke more questions.

John Sowle has directed this play with an aggressive, forward, almost angular energy. His two Lenis often look as though they need to merge into a single entity, as though they long to become one. It's an odd technique and it works so well as he manipulates them into being the same though different, peculiarly singular even as they become mirrors of one another's psychological humanity. Sowle also designed the setting for this play, a sound-stage in limbo, a natural environment for both ends of the character and its various individual elements all work for the story and its tellers.

The play is an unusual experience as a woman looks at her life and her work and her mistakes and her convictions with clarity. This is a thought-provoking, intriguing work with excellent talent on hand to bring it to life. It is not a play you will see often and so the chance to see it at all should be embraced by anyone who loves good theater.

Leni plays at the Bridge Street Theatre, 44 West Bridge Street, Catskill, NY through May 27. For information and tickets go to BridgeStreetTheatre.org or call 518-943-3818.