



**ALT ACCESS**

## **“Leni” explores the relationship between a disgraced artist and their influential work**

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Responsibility in art looms large: is it our responsibility to separate an artist from their work? Where should an artist’s responsibilities lie – or, as an artist, should they have any at all? Who is responsible for reactions to the artwork – the artist or the viewer?

Helene (Roxanne Fay) enters a dark soundstage, the walls lined with film canisters, books and Nazi paraphernalia. We soon learn she’s Leni Riefenstahl, the German filmmaker accused of shooting propaganda for Hitler, and that she’s recently died. A younger version of herself, Leni (Olivia Howell) enters, and Helene, as if shooting a film, directs Leni through scenes of “their” life: conversations with Hitler about the films Leni made and questioning by officials after the war about her Nazi ties. Leni and Helene begin to have heated discussions about the nature of “their” work, the responsibility of the artist, and Leni’s life and legacy.

There’s nothing about this production that isn’t top-notch. Bridge Street’s sets are among my favorite in the entire area, and the set here is no exception. Every piece on this stage is perfectly chosen, and the starkness of the space is emphasized by the lighting – at times eerie, at times harsh, always a bit horror-movie off-kilter. Their use of film and projection is also some of the best, and it of course serves them well in a play about a filmmaker; clips of Riefenstahl’s work are shown throughout the piece to let the audience into her world. Michelle Rogers’ costumes are also spot on – both women look perfect for their time period and the costumes themselves are a visual treat.

John Sowle’s directorial eye is keen and not a detail is left to chance. The women are perfectly cast. This is the third time I’ve had a chance to see Fay’s work and she continues to amaze me; what a powerfully talented actress. Her Helene is a woman to be reckoned with – a woman having lived through Hitler’s rise and fall, having survived both and having lost her career, yet still holding fast to her beliefs, talent and ideology. She takes on Riefenstahl and brings her alive for us, warts and all. Howell more than holds her own; her Leni is the young, idealistic version of Helene, but in ways wiser than the older woman, and the two of them together bring such dignity and truth to the stage.

It’s a proven fact that Riefenstahl’s work was ahead of its time and massively influential – yet should it be viewed through the lens of who funded it? “To whom am I responsible?” Helene asks at one point, furious and proud, while later, almost in response, Leni says “Art cannot exist in isolation” – two sides of the same coin. Can we love the art but hate from whence it came, or are the artist and the work inexorably linked? What a thought-provoking show, and how timely in the Woody Allen/Harvey Weinstein/Roman Polanski era. Our summer theater season is kicking off with a bang.