

STAGE REVIEW:

'Riding the Comet'

*New drama explores the darker side of fear,
and what it does to good people with good intentions*

DATE POSTED: Thursday, September 29, 2011 12:07 PM EDT
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Mark Violi's new play, premiering at the Heritage Center in Morrisville through October 2, packs a big punch in a small space. It's based on events in the European Theater during World War II, when a line of resistance operatives formed a sort of underground railroad for stranded Allied soldiers, helping them escape to Britain through Belgium, France and Spain.

In occupied France, this Comet escape line ("Le Réseau Comète") was under constant surveillance from the Nazis, who pressured locals into betraying family members and neighbors. Those who were exposed were hauled off to brutal interrogations or to concentration camps. Some were executed. Fear took two forms: Fear of the Nazis, and fear of friends and relatives who were trying to save themselves. Violi takes the basic history and imagines the story of one such family in rural France.

What begins as a standard WWII resistance drama soon takes an unexpected turn. We've all seen movies from the 1940s and 1950s, puffed up with the heroics of brave resistance fighters and citizens. Violi is more interested in the darker side of fear and what it does to good people with good intentions. As the director Kyla Mostello Donnelly says in the production notes, "When faced with overwhelming obstacles in life, the fight or flight instinct takes over ... heroism is often romanticized."

The opening scene literally starts with a shot in the dark. When the lights come up, the pater familias, Burke (Ed Patton), is disposing of the body of a young man who lies on the dining-room floor. We know Burke is furious at the newly deceased. We don't know who he is or why. Witnessing the scene is Burke's youngest daughter, Andie (Anna Chandless), who is cautioned to keep this a secret. The girl, clutching a rag doll, goes speechless.

When Burke's other daughter, teenager Linette (Kathryn A. Skelly), enters, she can't find her brother, Peter. Burke explains that the Nazis have taken the young man away. We realize that Burke has killed Peter, a collaborator, to prevent him from turning in the family, a lie that Andie is silently complicit in.

The drama heightens with the arrival of two American soldiers, Sgt. Decker (Brian Jason Kelly) and Pvt. Vizzaro (Patrick Albanesius), whom Burke is sheltering before passing them along to the next rendezvous in the Comet line. Their timeline is critical, as Vizzaro has a codebook that must get to the Allies. His timetable is threatened when Burke tells him conditions aren't yet right. Meanwhile, Linette, who has developed a crush on the young private, is anxious to find Peter and reunite a family shattered after her mother's execution by the Nazis.

The Americans narrowly avoid detection when an S.S. Officer (John Helmke) and his aide (William H. Schnakenberg) burst in, asking about two strangers who were seen heading toward Burke's farmhouse. The officer exploits Linette's anxiety about her brother, sowing the seeds for betrayal and complicating the Americans' escape. The character who speaks loudest, in the end, does so without uttering a word.



Two American GIs stranded in Europe after a crash (played by Brian Kelly, left, and Patrick Albanesius, right) discuss their escape route along the 'Comet Line' with a French farmer turned resistance fighter (played by Ed Patton) in the world premiere production of 'Riding the Comet' by Trenton playwright Mark Violi.

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There are a number of twists in this gripping tale. Suffice it to say, it turns the cliché of romantic, heroic resistance fighters on its head. The implications go well beyond the events of the last world war. One can see them working out even now in struggles throughout the Middle East.

The Actors' NET presented a staged reading of this play a couple of years ago with some of these same actors. They are certainly solid performers and familiar faces in local theater. This work demands more of them physically than any play I've seen in this venue. And more guns go off. I would single out Skelly, who does a very convincing French teenager, flirting and going hysterical. Hats off, too, to 10-year-old Chandless in her stage debut. She's the key to the shocking end.

Also credited are Isabelle Elden as "French Consultant" and Gordon A. Jacoby, Ph.D., as "Dialect Coach." Such expertise in regional theatre is unusual. How well does it work? Perhaps too well. I'm reminded of the film Monty Python and the Holy Grail. When King Arthur (Graham Chapman) asks a castle guard (John Cleese), "What are you then?" he answers, "I'm French. Why do seenk I 'ave zees outrageous accent?"

Riding the Comet continues at the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Avenue, Morrisville, PA, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 pm, Sundays at 2:00 p.m., through Oct. 2. Tickets: \$20 adults, \$17 seniors, \$10 children under 13. Call 215-295-369,
