

Review: 'Riding the Comet'

Riding the Comet," running through Sunday, October 2, at the Actors' NET of Bucks County, is the work of Hamilton playwright Mark Violi, the author of the recently produced "Roebing: The Story of the Brooklyn Bridge." Like "Roebing," "Riding the Comet" takes place in a specific historical period, World War II, but in this case the story follows events that could have happened rather than ones that actually did. The title refers to the Comet Escape Line, an underground route that helped people escape the Nazis.

"Riding the Comet" takes place on a farm in northern France. The farmer is part of the Resistance movement, and the action in the play centers around his work helping GIs reach safety and the effects this endeavor has on his family. The two U.S. servicemen we meet are Sergeant Decker (Brian Jason Kelly) and Private Anthony Vizzaro (Patrick Albanesius). Burke, the farmer (Ed Patton), is helped by his two daughters. The older daughter, Linette (Kathryn A. Skelly), is a young teenager. Andie, the younger daughter (Anna Chandless) is said to be nine, but Chandless plays the role as if she were closer to five. Judging her age on stage is in any case made more complicated by the fact that Andie has decided to stop speaking.

The girls have an older brother, who never appears on stage, but whose behavior has clearly been a cause of concern to his father. Burke frequently disappears from sight, presumably heading to his short-wave radio, where he keeps

his underground work going. Patton's portrayal is dark, hardly surprising when you consider the kinds of decisions he has to make.

The set of the Burke family's farmhouse — designed and constructed by C. Jameson Bradley, one of the Actors' Net's original members who has also been seen frequently onstage — is simple, but it contains some important (and attractive) details. For example, the chest against one wall can be shoved to the side to reveal stairs

In a way it's surprising that the play is able to present us with so much sunshine in such a dreadful world.

presumably leading to a safe basement. Something about the stage picture gives a sense of the family coherence.

This is France under the occupation, and obviously it is a dark time. In a way it's surprising that the play is able to present us with so much sunshine in such a dreadful world. Many unthinkable events are occurring in the immediate area, but the audience does not realize what is happening when it first happens. Ugly events are alluded to in passing, but it is not until late in the play that a member of the SS and his associate appear in person on the stage. Not surprisingly, they offer the characters no-win choices, and

although we may know the Nazis will not triumph in the war, we do not know what will happen to these people.

The audience gains a clearer sense of what Burke's work entails when the two GIs first appear and ask for help getting to safe territory. The GIs also provide an opportunity to introduce a case of unrequited love — Linette falls for Private Vizzaro — but this thread is not one of the play's more convincing ones.

Despite its seemingly sunny side, you are likely to experience the play as dark. Dreadful things happen, but they happen quickly; the lingering bits are more cheerful. It is one of the more striking aspects of this play that so little stress is placed on the dreadful events — it is almost as though if you aren't paying attention you won't notice them.

As one member of the audience was heard to remark, the mortality rate in "Riding the Comet" approaches that of "Hamlet," yet the play does not seem to be constructed so that the audience would focus on that aspect. It is an interesting characteristic of "Riding the Comet" that it can be so cheerful when the world it is describing is so black. Is there a message here that the younger generation looks at life so differently from those of us who can remember World War II?



Going Underground: Brian Jason Kelly, left, and Patrick Albanesius play American GIs seeking to escape the Nazis.

The Actors' NET of Bucks County is the resident theater company at the Heritage Center in Morrisville. Volunteers from the company converted a municipal garage into what is now an intimate 85-seat theater. The appearance of the theater is simple but attractive, and the size makes it easier for the actors to be convincing. They certainly achieved that in this production of "Riding the Comet." And the rapt attention of the audience and its enthusiasm at the curtain clearly indicates that "Riding the Comet" is deeply affecting.

— Barbara Westergaard

"Riding the Comet," Actors' NET, 635 North Delmorr Avenue, Morrisville, PA. Through Sunday, October 2. World premiere of a new drama by Mark Violi, a Hamilton resident and playwright of "Roebing: The Story of the Brooklyn Bridge." The World War II era drama centers on a farming family in German occupied France following D-Day. They are members of a secret underground railroad designed to help Allied soldiers get back to London. Directed by Kyla Mostello Donnelly. \$20; Veterans, \$10 to \$15. The season includes seven more shows, ranging from Shaw and Shakespeare to Lillian Hellman and Stephen Sondheim. 215-295-3694 or www.actorsnet-bucks.org.

Riding the Comet is written by Mark Violi.

www.markvioli.com