

THEATER REVIEW

"Operation Epsilon" — Ten scientists, one stage

Professor Alan Brody's masterful new play addresses science and ethics



A.R. SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHY

Left to right: Kurt Diebner, Carl-Friederich von Weizsäcker, Otto Hahn, Werner Heisenberg, Paul Harteck, Walther Gerlach, Max von Laue, Horst Korsching (seated on floor), Karl Wirtz, and Erich Bagge in "Operation Epsilon."

By Grace Young
ARTS EDITOR

It's the close of World War II. The British and Americans have imprisoned Germany's top ten nuclear scientists in a lavish English estate, Farm Hall. Every room in the house, from the piano room to the parlor, is bugged. The Allies listen to the scientists' conversations to determine how close Nazi Germany is to building an atomic bomb.

Based on the transcribed conversations of the scientists at Farm Hall, playwright and MIT Professor Alan Brody reconstructs what it might have been like at Farm Hall during "Operation Epsilon" (the codename for the Allies program to capture and spy on the scientists).

Directed by Tony Award winner Andy Sandberg, the play masterfully portrays history and stimulates the audience throughout. It reminds us of the frantic race build the first bomb and conveys the personal tensions between the detained, at times emotional, scientists. It also highlights the subtle irony of how official anti-Semitism thwarted the Nazi war effort by depriving Germany of some of its best scientists.

The casting is brilliant. MIT students will recognize some of the physicist characters, including Nobel Prize winners Otto Hahn (who discovered nuclear fission) and Werner Heisenberg (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle). Unlike today's stereotypical researchers, the ten captives unfailingly dress in classy knits and pinstripe

suits. They are so distinct in personality that after ten minutes the audience can distinguish them, even though they look and dress somewhat alike. Erich Bagge (Kendall Hodder), always the first to rush to tea or dinner, cannot keep his mind off his stomach, providing some comic relief. Haughty Horst Korsching (Ross MacDonald) pokes fun at the older scientists. Werner Heisenberg (Diego Arciniegas, professor of theater at Wellesley) commands the room's attention whenever he speaks, despite his disagreeable personality. Wiser and calmer than the rest, Otto Hahn (Will Lyman) is the first to cry when he learns the Americans dropped the bomb on Japan.

At times the audience feels it is watching events roll out in a 1940s-dollhouse.

The set, designed by Janie E. Howland, is perfect: clean and elegantly simple. It could be the apartment in *Brideshead Revisited*. The arrogant young Korsching lounges on bookshelves along the edge of the room and flips through titles distractingly during conversations. Heisenberg plays the piano in the back room. Walther Gerlach (Robert Murphy) darts out of the back door to tend the garden. Their British army officer minder mostly keeps to his office, tucked in a side wing on the stage.

While action and lighting are directed on the second level, downstairs someone might be reading on the sofa, giving life to the entire stage. At times the audience feels it is watching events roll out in a 1940s-dollhouse.

When the scientists hear the news about the American bomb, disbelief hangs thick in the air. Hitler's "Uranium Club" was, in fact, behind America's Manhattan Project. The scientists, confounded, discuss what must have happened, and blame Heisenberg's miscalculation. Heisenberg spends days without sleep or food going over his calculations, somewhat reminiscent of a student working on a tough problem set. The only engineer of the group, Paul Harteck (Allan Mayo), is always there to support his inmates, somewhat like a GRT.

The play is connected to MIT in many ways. It is the Nora Theater Company's first project with Catalyst Collaborative@MIT, a program promoting collaboration between science and art. In addition, MIT supports Central Square Theater and, of course, the playwright Alan Brody is a professor in the Music and Theater Arts department.

Brody learned of the Farm Hall transcripts from fellow MIT professor Alan Lightman. "I knew instantly that this was worth pursuing as a project," Brody said in an email to *The Tech*. He started research for the play seven years ago, during the Bush/Cheney era of escalating militarism in American society. "I believed there were moral and ethical issues buried in the material that I wanted to explore. I've found out those issues weren't just limited to that

Operation Epsilon

By Alan Brody

Directed by Andy Sandberg

March 7 – April 28, 2013

The Nora Theatre Company

Central Square Theater

time. They're still very much with us."

Brody worked from the transcripts published in Jeremy Bernstein's book *Hitler's Uranium Club*, using his imagination to conjure scenes. "Since the transcripts included primarily scientific or political material, I felt I had a free hand to imagine the human interactions."

Brody hopes the audience will take away "a lot of questions" from the play, talk about it, and feel "a deepened sense of everyone's humanity, and responsibility, without feeling they are being preached at."

The play certainly does that. A week has passed since I saw the preview and I'm still thinking about the ramifications of scientific research when it is closely tied to nationalism, as it was in the play, and the dramatic consequences of scientific breakthroughs that are often neither anticipated nor intended by the researchers.

The author saw a preview performance on March 14, before it was officially released to the press or public.

ALBUM REVIEW

Songs to welcome the spring

L.A.-based duo showcase gender-ambiguous, playful music

By Denis Bozic

We might not want to admit it, but there is certainly a gender bias when it comes to music tastes. It is quite rare to hear someone label music as "too manly," but it is not so uncommon to hear it called "too girly" in one way or another. For example, the singer might be too showy, the video's choreography might be too bombastic, the song might be too cheesy, or it might just have "too much pop" to handle.

In the last several decades, many artists have confronted these opinions by switching gender roles, creating on-stage alter-egos and changing the lyrical and instrumental content of their music to the point where gen-

der labels don't make sense anymore. From Grace Jones and David Bowie's androgyny and flamboyancy, to Freddie Mercury's eccentric performances and Michael Jackson's philanthropic lyrics, new qualities have been introduced into popular culture, which serve to show that music exists not to classify people, but entertain and unite them.

In the last couple of years, musical groups such as Planningtorock, The Knife and Fever Ray started using vocal distortions to amplify a feeling of gender fluctuation. This year, a new Danish-Canadian duo, Rhye, released their debut album *Woman*, which builds on these concepts and incorporates some innovative features.

Rhye is a collaboration between Danish Robin Braun (a.k.a. Robin Hannibal) and Canadian Mike Milosh (a.k.a. Milosh). Both of them were already established in the music industry before making this album. Milosh had already released three solo albums, and Hannibal was involved in various music projects — his best-known collaboration is probably Quadron with Coco O. Hannibal and Milosh originally met up to work on a remix, but the one-time collaboration flourished into an entire stage persona and a full album.

Woman is a 10-track album that is only about 35 minutes long, but is an intriguing and entertaining collection. The album name itself is somewhat of an oxymoron, since both people in the duo are male. The gender game does not stop there — once the album opens with the first two tracks, "Open" and "The Fall," the most notable features that envelop

listeners' ears are the softness and vulnerability of Milosh's voice. These add a distinct touch of sensuality to the album and create a very playful and soothing atmosphere. The catchy melodies complement his voice but they never overshadow it — in fact, they never become particularly loud. Instead, the music flows subtly from one song to another, with different instruments coming and leaving like in some sort of child's game.

The catchy melodies complement his voice but they never overshadow it — in fact, they never become particularly loud.

However, this does not mean the arrangements lack quality. Some songs, such as "The Fall" and "Last Dance," have such exquisite instrumental parts that it's almost impossible not to smile and swing along. Other tracks, like "Hunger," take a step further by combining brass instruments with light disco beats, which makes for phenomenal sing- and hum-along jams. The lyrics are not groundbreaking, but the gender-ambiguous emotionality expressed in lines such as "Tell me lies and lullabies, but don't tell me to

★★★★☆

Woman

Rhye

Polydor / Republic Records / Innovative Leisure

Released March 5, 2013



COURTESY OF POLYDOR RECORDS

The cover of L.A.-based Canadian/Danish duo Rhye's new album "Woman."

change" and "Don't call me love unless you mean it" certainly gives listeners a spoken expression of the album's sensibility.

The only downside to this album is that it loses some of its liveliness towards the end, but the shortness of the songs successfully compensates for this.

Woman does a good job of escaping the chains of gender labeling, but it is not a jaw-dropping or revolutionary album — which is fine because it doesn't try to be. The music on this album comes naturally, gives you enough to hear but always leaves you wanting for more. So, if you are looking for an easy, yet rich and entertaining, listening experience, then this gem might well be the right album to lighten up the first days of spring for you.

Highlight tracks: "The Fall," "Last Dance," "3 Days," and "Hunger." Check out the music video for "The Fall" at <http://youtu.be/F6yffWvuygY>. If you like The xx or Quadron, you might like this!