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ARTS & CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

Review: Blacklist play 'Finks' underscores the importance of resisting the forces of despotism

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY
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French Stewart and the cast of "Finks"

In “Finks” — a play about the McCarthy-era blacklist, now in its Los Angeles premiere at Rogue Machine — a character tells an old friend who “named names” to save his career, “You’re not evil because you finked ... you finked because you’re evil.”

That quote is lifted almost directly from Arthur Laurents’ mid-’90s play, “Jolson Sings Again,” another drama that dealt with the blacklist. In one respect, Joe Gilford’s Drama Desk-nominated play is a retread — a journey over territory well-trampled by previous playwrights and screenwriters. In another sense, it’s a timely tribute to those who had the intestinal fortitude to stand up to the sweeping forces of evil at the cost of their livelihoods. As the son of blacklisted actors Jack and Madeline Lee Gilford, he knows exactly whereof he speaks.

WWII vet Mickey Dobbs (French Stewart) is a New York nightclub comic working his way up the biz when he’s seduced — perhaps “ambushed” — by Natalie Meltzer (Vanessa Claire Stewart), a working actor who is also an impassioned political activist. Natalie regularly gathers with like-minded artists such as closeted Broadway choreographer Bobby Gerard (Adam Lebowitz-Lockard), her longtime friend and occasional lover, to discuss pressing social issues of the day.

Natalie and Mickey fall hard for each other and marry, but the fact that Mickey has performed his act at some of Natalie’s left-leaning meetings is enough to place him on the witch hunters’ radar. When he’s offered a chance to star in his own network TV show, he must either rat out his associates or forgo the biggest career break he’ll ever have.

There are tales of bravery in “Finks,” but there are no ticker tape parades for these heroes. The courageous face bleak, jobless futures: Mickey’s actor pal Fred (Bruce Nozick), sent to prison by the congressional committee, bitterly regrets his quixotic defiance. Mickey’s own fate remains ambiguous. As Gilford trenchantly points out, other “finks,” such as Elia Kazan, went on to deathless fame; others — more resolute and courageous — lapsed into undeserved obscurity.

That’s not to say that “Finks” is a bleak recapitulation. Gilford has a knack for epigrams, and Mickey’s nightclub sets, buoyed by Richard Levinson’s live piano music, sound convincingly comedic — no mean feat. Yet it’s the intensely personal quality of this show that is so striking. It’s no coincidence that director Michael Pressman is also the son of a blacklisted artist — television director David Pressman.

Along with his excellent cast, which includes Thomas Fiscella, Matt Gottlieb, Stephen Tyler Howell and Daniel Dorr, Pressman invests the production with a carefully calibrated specificity that keeps both demons and heroes delicately underplayed — a tack that underscores the characters' respective cravenness or courage.

That personal flair extends right down to the sweetly combustible onstage chemistry between real-life husband and wife, French and Claire Stewart, who richly render Mickey and Natalie as well-meaning artists trapped in the fast-congealing amber of a terrible time.

Although Gilford may not break any new ground with his well-crafted play, it remains a heartfelt and timely reminder of the fundamental importance of resisting the forces of despotism, whatever the cost.

"Finks," Rogue Machine in Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave., Venice. Check website for performance times. Ends Dec. 30. \$40. (855) 585-5185. Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes. roquemachinetheatre.com



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