

The Ice Front

Norwegian Nazi Resistance has lessons for modern times

BY ERIC SAMUELSEN

In April, 1940, my father was seven years old, a child living in Moss, Norway, when German troops invaded his country. I grew up with stories of the Norwegian Resistance, and tales of the heroism of ordinary Norwegians. My great-uncles Henry, Fridtjoff and Ellef were part of it; all engaged in acts of sabotage. My father's stories inspired me, and years later, when doing research for my dissertation, I spent hours in the Norwegian Resistance Museum, located in the ancient fortress of Akershus, the site of the grim Grini prison, where so many prisoners of conscience spent the war.

As a playwright, I felt an obligation to write about this great legacy. The title of my play, *The Ice Front*, is based on instructions from the Norwegian government-in-exile regarding how loyal citizens were to conduct themselves under Nazi occupation. Of particular concern were interactions with collaborators.

Vidkun Quisling, the treasonous puppet Prime Minister, became the focus of resistance efforts, even as his name became synonymous with "traitor." No loyal Norwegians were to shop in quisling stores, or interact socially with quisling neighbors. Norwegians who were forced to work for or with Germans or quislings were instructed to be bad at their jobs, to work slowly and ineffectively.

I focused on the actors of the Norwegian National Theatre and the various ways they found to implement those instructions. When forced to perform in an anti-Semitic nightmare of a play, at gunpoint, they acted badly—in-audible dialogue, confusing block-



Oslo National Theater

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ing, overt defiance in every acting choice. They were very nearly shot for it, and some of them ended up at Grini.

I was also driven by my own sense of personal history. My father is Norwegian, and I speak the language with some fluency. I have

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Although the story is based on fact, I did invent the characters. I wanted to capture the specific dangers faced by those people who were particular targets of Nazi aggression and race-hatred. One actor is Jewish, though one who has managed to hide his ethnicity. Another is gay, and again, in hiding. I also included a character linked to the Roma people—known then and now by the demeaning term 'gypsies.'

The play is based on actual events, and I went to some lengths to get the history right. Of course,

been to Norway several times, for research purposes, and also as director of a Study Abroad program. I love the country and its culture, and I can't pretend that my personal connection to this story didn't drive me to write it.

But I write the play now, in 2017, as an American. And

25 years ago, when I was researching this material, I never imagined even the possibility that it would become as real to me as it has become. I never thought that at least some of my fellow Americans would, once again, embrace Nazism. Those calling themselves 'alt-right' may well insist that their stance is at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek; that they are more troll than storm trooper. But we Norwegians know all about trolls.

My favorite playwright, Henrik Ibsen, nailed trolls in *Peer Gynt*. Trolls are cowards, driven by expediency; relativists whose only values are domination and intimidation.

But even Ibsen could not have intuited the race-baiting, violence promoting, murderous extremes that have come to define them. And difficult as it is to admit this, our nation's leader relies on them for his support.

The actor characters of the National ultimately had to choose. They could protect themselves, stay safe (relatively), and acquiesce to Nazi demands. Or they could choose rebellion and civil disobedience. Their lives were at stake. The choice was never easy. But it was necessary. I pray that it never becomes quite so necessary for us. ♦

Eric Samuelson has previously premiered *Miasma*, *Amerigo*, *Borderlands*, *Nothing Personal*, *Radio Hour Episode 8: Fairyana*, *Clearing Bombs*, *3* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* at Plan-B Theatre. His latest, *The Ice Front*, premieres November 9-19. Tickets and information at PLANBTHEATRE.ORG

