

Science, truth, and consequences in ‘Operation Epsilon’

By Don Aucoin | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 19, 2013



Ken Baltin, Kendall Hodder, Will Lyman, Dan Whelton, and John Kooi in Nora Theatre's "Operation Epsilon."

CAMBRIDGE — Held captive at a British country house at the end of World War II, the 10 German scientists in “Operation Epsilon” are all too aware that history is written by the winners — and desperate to soften posterity’s verdict by telling their side of the story.

What makes Alan Brody’s “Operation Epsilon” so engrossing is the fact that even they can’t agree on the real truth of their motives. Were they merely disinterested scientists, conducting research for a “uranium machine” that would produce energy, or did they know all along that their work was aimed at developing an atomic bomb for Adolf Hitler?

In the satisfyingly taut and well-acted “Operation Epsilon,” now receiving its world premiere at the Nora Theatre Company under the direction of Andy Sandberg, the scientists thrash out that issue amid a welter of clashing personalities, agendas, egos, and memories. The line between self-justification and self-delusion proves to be a blurry one; men accustomed to the certitude of the laboratory find the question of moral complicity much harder to answer.

They are mostly middle-aged, attired in jackets, vests, and ties, and initially they project the confidence of men accustomed to success and the esteem that comes with it. But Sandberg builds an atmosphere of such steadily escalating claustrophobia that eventually their jittery movements and gestures seem like those of scorpions in a bottle.

In a uniformly fine cast, there are standout performances by Will Lyman as the conscience-stricken Otto Hahn, who discovered nuclear fission; Ken Baltin as Max von Laue, baffled that he is being kept prisoner, since he opposed the Nazis and was not involved in research into uranium; Diego Arciniegas as Werner Heisenberg, whose transparent concern for his reputation makes him a lightning rod for the others' disdain; and Robert D. Murphy as Walther Gerlach, former head of nuclear research.

Brody, a professor of theater at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, based his play on real events: the 1945 internment of German scientists at Farm Hall, near Cambridge, England, by British and American authorities. The scientists were under constant surveillance, their words recorded; Brody has blended parts of their transcribed conversations with imagined scenes and dialogue.

The result is equal parts history lesson, ethical inquiry, and character study, smoothly integrated into an overall sense of dramatic momentum. The debate among the scientists has the outward appearance of an arcane seminar-room quarrel among a group of academics, but none of the sluggishness.

Their surroundings are certainly more comfortable than those endured by most POWs. Janie E. Howland's two-tiered set includes a book-lined wall, a commodious sofa, and a baby grand piano to which Heisenberg is drawn time and again, playing pieces by Beethoven and Satie. He is at that piano when the scientists boisterously sing a beer-hall-style salute to Hahn after he's won the Nobel Prize.

It's not the only time they display a jarring moral obtuseness. One of the scientists, Erich Bagge (Kendall Hodder), complains to Major Rittner (Barlow Adamson), the British officer overseeing them: "This place is a concentration camp." "I would be very careful about your choice of words," the major replies.

Yet semantic distinctions matter greatly to them when it's a case of saving their own skin. "We were working on a machine," Heisenberg says. "We can't have the world believing we were working on a bomb." Toward that end, they decide to collectively draft a memorandum to chronicle the history of their work, hoping that Major Rittner will help them get it published. There is general agreement on the facts, but there are facts and there is truth, and "Operation Epsilon" is intent on exploring the distance and the difference between the two.

One truth is brought vividly home when the major informs Hahn that the United States has dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Lyman's reaction is a portrait in quiet devastation. When the other scientists hear the news, there is a moment of stunned silence, but then, tellingly, their talk turns clinical and competitive. Earlier, they had been

full of swagger about the superiority of German science; now, most of them see the detonation of a nuclear bomb by the Americans not as a human tragedy but as a professional defeat.

This fine play transpires entirely inside the house, from July 1945 to January 1946. As the scientists speak of Germany, it's impossible not to think of the way their fellow citizens back home were confronting, or not, their own responsibility. When one scientist protests that publishing the memorandum would tell the world they had worked on uranium for Hitler, Gerlach replies instantly: "Not for Hitler. Never for Hitler." In that moment, he seems to be speaking not just for a group of scientists in denial, but for a defeated nation.