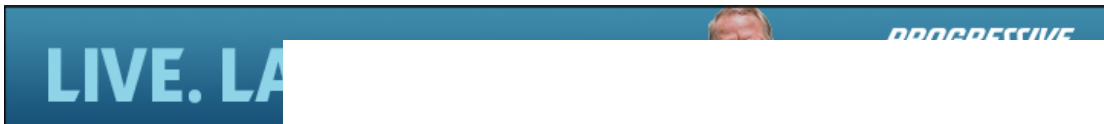


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Los Angeles Times



# THEATER REVIEW : Passionate Portrayal of Judeo-Christian Controversy

BY NANCY CHURNIN

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

NATIONAL CITY — Lamb’s Players Theatre has struck a blow for the theater of the mind with its riveting San Diego County premiere of “Edith Stein,” Arthur Giron’s provoking and disturbing look at the life of an enigmatic and controversial woman.

Giron’s tale was inspired by Edith Stein, a brilliant Jewish doctor of philosophy who converted to Roman Catholicism at 30, became a Carmelite nun (with the name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) at 41 and was killed at Auschwitz when she was 50 for having been born a Jew.

The Pope beatified her in 1987 and, as recently as 1991, her memory was at the center of an angry controversy. That erupted when a Carmelite convent erected in her honor at the Auschwitz death camp in Poland was closed under pressure from Jewish groups that were deeply offended that a convent should preside over the site where millions of Jews died agonizing deaths.

And now, the play itself will undoubtedly polarize people on the question of religion, as did Stein herself. The sad part of that is Stein always saw herself as Jewish and Christian. All she ever really seemed to want was for everyone to get along.

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What has troubled most critics--particularly the New York critics in response to a production in January at the Jewish Repertory Theater--is that Giron never explains why Stein converted. What is even more disturbing to this critic is why that should matter: Shouldn't everyone's religious choice--as Stein herself suggested--be an issue between the individual and God?

Still, although Giron does not favor us with answers, he does throw out several tantalizing possibilities. In the Jewish holiday of Purim, which Stein celebrates early in the play, the tale is told of a Jewish woman named Esther who marries a king. The king, unaware that his beloved wife is Jewish, is persuaded by an evil man, Haman, to kill all the Jews in his kingdom. Esther reveals herself, and the king saves the Jews.

Could Stein have seen herself as an Esther married to Christ (as nuns are), trying to win the favor of God, or at least that of the Pope, in sparing her people from the Holocaust? She entreated Pope Pius XI in writing to issue an encyclical condemning Nazism. But he never did.

Or was the church the avenue for continuing her work--as she was banned from all professorial posts in Germany because she was Jewish (she did much of her important work after her conversion). Or, given the restrictions of her Orthodox heritage--a tradition in which women are gated away from the altar where the Torah is read--was the church the only place she felt she could get close to God?

Or should one simply take her at her word: That she was inspired by reading the story of Saint Teresa of Avila, whose name she took?

Giron begins his story at the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz in 1987, where the prioress (Sandra Ellis-Troy) meets with a Jewish Holocaust survivor (Daniel Mann) who is angry about the presence of the convent.

She tells him the story of Stein. We flash back, following Stein, played with stunning, luminous passion by Deborah Gilmour Smyth, from her girlhood to her relationship with her mother (Ann Richardson, radiating dignity and fierce intelligence), from the colleagues and nuns who influenced her to the dialogue with a Nazi, Karl-Heinz, that leads to her painful self-discovery.

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The real flaw in the story is the dialogue with the Nazi, which is totally Giron's creation. It's clever as a dramatic way to drive the second act to its deadly conclusion, but it's also a device that wears its gears on its sleeve.

Karl-Heinz, played with chilling suggestiveness by Doug Reger, keeps telling us he's obsessed with marrying the purity that is Sister Teresa, but doesn't show us why he singles her out over the other nuns.

Under the sensitive hand of director Robert Smyth, the theater's artistic director, all the performances meld seamlessly, from Cynthia Peters' as Edith's confused and troubled friend to Donal Pugh's as Franzy, the cool Nazi who recruits Karl-Heinz for the party--fresh out of prison.

But it is Deborah Gilmour Smyth's radiant presence that captures the complex, difficult nature of Stein. The music Gilmour Smyth composed and performed for the piece deepens the show's haunting mood.

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Mike Buckley's spare lighting and bare, suggestive set--metal trees, barbed wire overhead, a circle surrounded by splashes of red suggesting blood and fire--serve this imaginative production well. Jeanne Reith's costumes move from period perfection to the dreamily suggestive as in the coarsely woven flesh-colored garments for the death camp.

Giron, who was raised Catholic but has a Jewish heritage on his mother's side, seems to have been intensely involved in this particular story since an early version of "Edith Stein" was mounted at the Arena Stage in Washington in 1969, 15 years before the convent was erected that inspired the current framework of the play.

This work has the passion and heart to go the distance. If the playwright can solve his character problems, particularly in the exchange between Stein and the Nazi, it might also have legs.

\* *"Edith Stein," Lamb's Players Theatre, 500 Plaza Blvd., National City. Wednesdays-Thursdays, 7:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends April 2. \$17-\$21. (619) 474-4542. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes. Sandra Ellis-Troy The Prioress*

Daniel Mann: Saul Weisman

Deborah Gilmour: Smyth Edith Stein

Ann Richardson: Frau Stein

Michelle Napolitano: Clara, Sister Ruth

Donal Pugh: Franzy

Cynthia Peters: Hannah Reinach

Doug Reger: Karl-Heinz

Pat DiMeo: Sister Prudence

A Lamb's Players Theatre production of the play by Arthur Giron. Directed by Robert Smyth. Sets and lights: Mike Buckley. Costumes: Jeanne Reith. Original music: Deborah Gilmour Smyth. Stage manager: Brendan Schaefer.

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