

And Noisily Flows the Arno

Brits Off Broadway: *Lingua Franca* | Off Broadway, Play | Closing Date: November 28, 2010 | 59E59

Theaters, 59 E. 59th St. | 212-753-5959

By **BEN BRANTLEY** NOV. 16, 2010

How do you say Angry Young Man in Italian? A classic specimen of that breed — and I do mean the type that warrants capital letters — shows up on the banks of the Arno, teaching English to mid-20th-century Florentines, in Peter Nichols’s “Lingua Franca,” which is receiving its American premiere at 59E59 Theaters.

Portrayed with appropriately abrasive charm by Chris New in Michael Gieleta’s production, which opened on Tuesday, Steven Flowers is close kin to Jimmy Porter, the antihero of “Look Back in Anger,” John Osborne’s watershed drama of British discontent from 1956. Steven, too, is a randy rebel without a religion and a serious stand-up fulminator.

But while Jimmy railed against his motherland to fellow Britons on the home front, Steven has taken his spleen to the Continent, where he meets a spectrum of similarly (if less volubly) disaffected folks from other countries. And unlike Osborne, Mr. Nichols — whose own experiences in post-World War II Italy inspired “Lingua Franca” — views his amoral alter-ego with historical and distinctly judgmental detachment.

Fans of Mr. Nichols, one of the finest and most underrated British dramatists of the second half of the 20th century, will definitely find elements to savor in this tale of tarnished innocents abroad, part of the Brits Off Broadway festival (which also includes the rarely seen “Personal Enemy,” by Osborne and Anthony Creighton). For starters, “Lingua Franca” offers another chapter in the travels of Steven, a character introduced in Mr. Nichols’s “Privates on Parade” (1977), an acerbically playful portrait of a military entertainment troupe in

Singapore and Malaysia in 1948.

The dark, defensive humor that infused Mr. Nichols's "Day in the Death of Joe Egg" (1967), his best-known play, is also in evidence in "Lingua Franca." So is the counterpoint of artistic grandeur and personal pettiness that he used to stunning effect in "Passion Play" (1981), his masterwork. But there's no avoiding the impression that this is a minor, if intriguing, piece from a major playwright, or that its characters, Steven included, are all too conveniently archetypes.

Among the teachers at the Lingua Franca, a seat-of-the-pants school overseen by Gennaro Manetti (Enzo Cilenti), are two other Britons who bring to mind the repressed souls of Terence Rattigan dramas: Jestin Overton (Ian Gelder), a gentlemanly vestige of another era with an affinity for Lewis Carroll, and Peggy Carmichael (Charlotte Randle), a sharp-edged, manic soul desperate for companionship.

The staff is rounded out by Madge Fox (Abigail McKern), a feisty Australian; Heidi Schumann (Natalie Walter), a sexy (and sexually active) German; and Irena Brentano (Anna Carteret), an elderly Jewish widow born in Russia.

Not surprisingly, friction among the teachers is sparked by these differences of nationality, background and generation, and World War II is relived, if not refought, in words. "How shall we ever agree to live together on this planet with only these old animosities to guide us?" asks Peggy, in one of her more reasonable moments.

The characters are given to self-justifying monologues, ostensibly addressed to their students (a device Mr. Nichols used in "Joe Egg"), which define their place in an international hierarchy, newly dominated by the United States. (Students come to Lingua Franca wanting to be taught to speak "American.") And the shadow of the England and Italy that used to be are summoned by discussions of E. M. Forster's "Room With a View," which Steven is reading.

Mr. Nichols is taking on too much here, and his big themes are presented a bit too neatly. Though the cast is lively and engaging, you're aware of the contrivance in these lonely, disputatious characters being pushed toward climactic melodrama.

Steven's developing relationship with Heidi, on the other hand, is steeped in an organically hostile sensuality that leads to this production's high point, a seduction scene in which making love and war are pretty much interchangeable. And in a rousing, sardonic echo of Osborne's "Entertainer," Steven introduces bawdy British music-hall numbers in teaching his classes.

Mr. New is, as he should be, delightful and appalling in these scenes, making good on Steven's assertion that laughter is his release for an anger too dangerous to acknowledge openly. Rancorous, rueful laughter is Mr. Nichols's specialty, and it's what makes his angry men of any age worth listening to.

LINGUA FRANCA

By Peter Nichols; directed by Michael Gieleta; designer, James MacNamara; lighting by James Smith; sound by Will Jackson; costumes by Emily Stuart; stage manager, Sophie Cable; projections by Radoslaw Konopka; accent coaches, Ceclila Gragnani and Christina Hönigs; fight director, Bret Yount; producer, Will Wrightson. A Cherub Company, London, production, presented as part of the Brits Off Broadway series by 59E59 Theaters, Elyzabeth Kleinhans, artistic director; Peter Tear, executive producer. At the 59E59 Theaters, 59 East 59th Street, Manhattan; (212) 279-4200; 59e59.org. Through Nov. 28. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Anna Carteret (Irena Brentano), Enzo Cilenti (Gennaro Manetti), Ian Gelder (Jestin Overton), Abigail McKern (Madge Fox), Chris New (Steven Flowers), Charlotte Randle (Peggy Carmichael) and Natalie Walter (Heidi Schumann).

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59e59.org: <http://www.59e59.org>

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