



FINE PERFORMANCES IN *GABRIEL*: (left to right) Samantha Soule, Libby Woodbridge, Zach Grenier, Lisa Emery. Photo: Ari Mintz

Theater Review

Zach Grenier, Lisa Emery & Samantha Soule shine in ambitious but uneven WW II drama *Gabriel*

Gabriel

By Moira Buffini

Directed by David Esbjornson

Atlantic Theater Company

Linda Gross Theater

336 West 20th Street

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By David NouNou

The Atlantic Theater Company has become synonymous with quality theater. Although Moira Buffini's *Gabriel* is not among their better productions, it is worth seeing regardless. The interest here lies in the strong subject matter and fine performances from particular cast members. Set on one of Britain's Channel Islands, Guernsey to be exact, in 1943, the story deals with a mother, Jeanne Becquet (Lisa Emery), daughter Estelle (Libby Woodbridge), daughter-in-law, Lilian Becquet (Samantha Soule) and maid, Margaret Lake (the veteran stage actress Patricia Conolly), and their daily survival under German occupation during World War II.

The mother is the provider of the family, and she does it at all costs, even at the expense of prostituting herself to the German officers. The current officer in charge is Von Pfunz (Zach Grenier), and part of the story deals with Jeanne's relationship with him. Jeanne has hardened herself against life, and detests what she has to do to protect her family, and one person in particular, her daughter-in-law Lilian, because the lady happens to be Jewish. Upon meeting Von Pfunz, for the first time, Jeanne unwittingly divulges that her son has married a Jewish woman. Matters are further complicated when Lilian finds a naked soldier (Lee Aaron Rosen) floating on the beach with absolutely no identification or memory. He is restored to health by the family; they think that he is a shot-down British pilot. He is given the name Gabriel. However, in an unexpected moment when Von Pfunz shows up at the Becquet household, Gabriel, to everyone's surprise, can speak fluent German.

The question now is: which side does Gabriel belong to? Is he the angel/savior or the executioner? The first act builds up wonderfully, in large part due to the expert performances of Zach Grenier's commandant, Lisa Emery's mother, and Samantha Soule's Jewish daughter-in-law. The second act loses much of the tension and purpose that the first act built. It is a shame, because there is a definite meaningful story here.

This is the third major theatrical venture I've seen of Mr. Grenier's, and each time his work gets more and more interesting. In 2009 he was Thomas Cromwell in the Roundabout's production of *A Man for All*

Seasons, and *33 Variations* with Jane Fonda, for which he got a well-deserved Tony nomination. His Von Pfunz is commanding and compelling. What could have been an almost buffoonish role (a Nazi) is portrayed as a human and compassionate person. Lisa Emery, as the unfortunate Jeanne (who has the hard task being both unsympathetic and conniving), is quite good indeed, and Samantha Soule as Lilian is believable and wonderful. The rest of the performers, unfortunately, are not as convincing in their parts. Nonetheless, *Gabriel* is a valiant effort by the Atlantic Theater Company.

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