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## Goose-Stepping on History: “Leni’s Last Lament”

By Duane Scott Cerny

I recently attended a Paradise Factory performance and talkback of *Leni’s Last Lament*,

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a riveting one-woman show that explored the controversial life of Hitler’s favorite filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl. This uniquely crafted production was the trifecta star of Edinburgh’s



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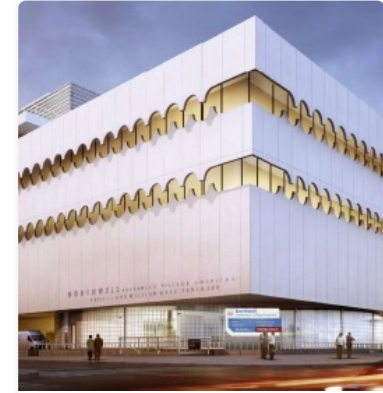
# Northwell Greenwich Village Hospital

United Solo Fest, winning Best Actor, Best Script and Best Director.

With the stage as her editing room and vintage German cinema posters surrounding the walls of the theater, long strips of film hang like discarded garments from a tall rack. On a rear screen are projected images of happy pre-war Germans, Jesse Owen's athletic physique from the 1939 Olympics, and clips from Riefenstahl's most famous film, *Triumph of the Will*.

Obie-winner Jodie Markell brilliantly consumes the unenviable task of bringing Riefenstahl not only to life but into the 21st century. (Leni lived to be 101.) Whether she's pouting her "lament" or seducing you with familiar German songs, Markell normalizes a figure most abnormal, a character obsessed with her search for success, even if found on the wrong side of history.

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Please join Northwell for an Open House celebration at the new Northwell Greenwich Village Hospital Cardiac Cath Lab and Inpatient Unit. Tuesday, July 22, 2025 | 4pm – 6pm Wednesday, July 30, 2025 | 4pm – 6pm. RSVP is required.

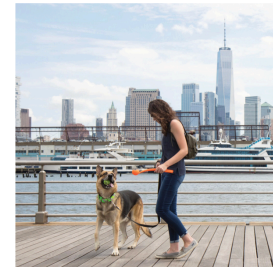
This startling true story name-drops celebrities like empty film canisters: Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, Marlene Dietrich, Mick Jagger, Jody Foster, even Albert Einstein (but only theoretically). Yes, with her questionable notoriety came a certain fascination by many notables wishing to meet the infamous Ms. Riefenstahl. Her long legs beckoned fans and lovers alike, one handsome fellow being some 40 years her junior. Or as we now say: Cher and share alike.

In a work that's comically dark, psychotically smart, yet still intimately personal, playwright Gil Kofman is creating a creepy cabaret act wherein Riefenstahl attempts to sanitize her disturbing path to fame, not only to the audience and the world, but seemingly to herself.

Accordionist Spiff Wiegand musically segues each of Riefenstahl's songs, thoughts and memories through scenes revisited both before

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Park time is an important part of your routine with your furry best friend, and dog families like yours are a vital part of our Hudson River Park community. When you're in the Park

and after the war. What unfolds is a multi-media extravaganza in a simple black box staging.

Riefenstahl was unquestionably a cinematic genius, and with *Triumph of the Will* regarded as one of the top 100 films of all time, her influence can be seen in works as dissimilar as *Citizen Kane* and the *Star Wars* franchise. (The latter is shown in a shot-by-shot comparison, a fact that once visualized is difficult to contradict.)

Still, I single out one scene from *Leni's Last Lament* and it is not a spoiler alert: Riefenstahl stands atop a ladder, facing the audience, camera in steady hand. She requires one final shot of average people, plain faces of no one in particular, to complete the editing of her film. (Her use of peasants and prisoner inmates to capture a similar shot is a prickly sticking point in her Nazi-funded past.)

with your pup, we ask that you follow certain rules and guidelines so that everyone—on two legs and four—can enjoy the Park safely.



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It is then, shockingly, that Riefenstahl begins to toss red armbands emblazoned with swastikas into the audience. Some land at people's feet and remain on the floor; others catch the armbands, then toss them behind to another audience member, each cringing as if a tarantula had been catapulted at their face. It is a clever if not terrifying moment, these armbands connecting Riefenstahl's life directly into one's squirming lap. It is in that moment when fascism morphs from an historical blip into something you must confront.

At the talkback, an audience member asked about this scene: "Do all audiences react the same?" Director Richard Caliban responded that at one Edinburgh performance a few audience members slipped the armbands on. After the show, an elderly gentleman was asked why he had donned the armband. His answer was chilling: "I saw others do it, so I followed."

**2023****2022**

To the credit of New York audiences, this act of “following” has not re-occurred. However, playwright Kofman noted the Edinburgh production occasionally needed to re-order armbands because audience members thought they were theater swag.

Comically, as he related this issue, a woman seated directly to my front began frantically digging in her purse, finally finding her purloined armband and nonchalantly placing it on the seat beside her, as if nothing had happened. I say comically as everyone, both the talkback cast to her front and an entire audience behind, had watched her actions.

Riefenstahl would have you believe she is both victim and misunderstood artist, her filmmaking and editing being her art, her life inescapable from the times she lived. Her 600-plus-page autobiography echoes this explanation to the exhaustion of the reader.

Was she as integral a propagandist to the Nazi party as Joseph Goebbels? That question Riefenstahl never asks, even to herself. Instead, she paints an ever-changing cinematic personal portrait, explaining away what is often inexplicable at best and genocide-supported evil at its worst.

Even Riefenstahl's grandiose ego and sociopathic hunger for artistic fame could not excuse the result: following Hitler not only with a camera but with the captured images, catapulting the 1930s into the present.

Today, Riefenstahl could be Stephen Miller's far right-hand lens. It takes little imagination to see her climb the ranks of propagandistic Fox News only to be fast tracked into a cabinet post like some 20 Fox personalities before her. For those of us so woke, it would be witnessed as the Triumph of the Unwell.

*Leni's Last Lament* played thru June 14th. Our lament and/or victory plays until the end of the Trump regime.

Speaking of the future, playwright Kofman and director Caliban are developing *Trump: The Musical*. And as uncomfortable as the idea may sound, I am certain this duo will skewer the man and the MAGA movement with same grit if not gusto. Perhaps, if we're lucky, it will be a musical autopsy of these historic times.

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*Duane Scott Cerny takes the blame for most everything in his monthly satirical column, It's All My Fault. Best-selling author of "Selling Dead People's Things" and "Vintage Confidential," he is the co-owner of Chicago's Broadway Antique Market and is a guest favorite among fearless podcasters. Contact him at [E-ThanklessGreetings@yahoo.com](mailto:E-ThanklessGreetings@yahoo.com).*

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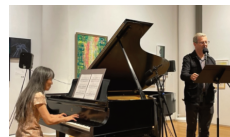
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**78 West 12th Street**  
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