



Photo credit: Leslie Hassler

THEATER REVIEW (NYC): 'LENI'S LAST LAMENT' — A LENI RIEFENSTAL HISTORICAL CABARET

👤 Jon Sobel 🕒 March 22, 2024 👁 383 Views

Leni Riefenstahl died in 2003 at age 101, but she lives on in not one but two currents of cul influential film director and producer of the 1930s, she was also Hitler's infamous documen *Last Lament* brings her back to life through the magic of cabaret-theater in an engaging, en intelligent and informative one-woman show starring Obie Award winner Jodie Markell. Ric directs the world premiere Brave New World Repertory Theatre production at The Invisible Brooklyn through March 30.

Playwright Gil Kofman offers us a Leni who has returned from the dead to try to justify her present-day American audience. He laces the narrative with snatches of original songs cleve Weimar-era style. Markell's Leni takes us, cabaret-style, through her career as first a dance

in 1920s movies, and then a director who worked closely with Hitler and made several Nazi notably the propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* in 1935 and *Olympia* documenting the 1936 Olympics.

Markell makes Riefenstahl captivating and sensuous, egotistical but vulnerable. The show reframes the filmmaker as a barrier-smashing female artist in an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry, taking a skeptical attitude toward her contention that she didn't know the evils the Nazis were doing when she made those films. Kofman's script, Markell's charisma and Caliban's atmospheric and intimate production add up to a smart, funny, and chilling experience.



Jodie Markell as Leni
Photo by Leslie Hassler

The show is also an impressive feat for a solo performer. While cabaret shows often sustain this role demands a performance of continuous focus through a dense script, costume change, dance, and direct audience engagement. The only other performer on stage (occasionally) Weigand, who first appears as a frightening physical presence in a prologue. After that he is a sinister shadow, adding live accordion, violin, and percussion to recorded music and sound. Impactful projections behind Markell show historical photos, war footage, clips from Riefenstahl and other materials (*Star Wars* fans take note). Kudos to projection designer Joey Moro for his and magnifying Markell's enactment of Riefenstahl's story without diverting us from it.

But without a compelling star any show like this would fall flat. Markell brings her all and connects with pathos and fire.

The most powerful sequences comes toward the end. Riefenstahl rifles through strips of film footage she can insert into old films in a futile attempt to revise her legacy. Coming up empty attempts to deputize the audience as subjects for revised footage. Assertive but desperate, she encapsulates the split identity of this pioneering artist and consorter with evil.

The creative team seems to have been unsure how to end the show. A couple of moments endings that then weren't, and a surreal closing sequence goes on too long. But that caveat *Last Lament* is a triumph – not of the will, but of theater as a medium for channeling history alive so we remember it, and can try, against all odds, not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Leni's Last Lament is next headed for the Edinburgh Fringe in August. For now, it runs through The Invisible Dog in Brooklyn – not one of Brave New World Repertory's site-specific shows but an appropriately atmospheric venue nonetheless. Tickets are available online.





The best walking shoes are perfect for all-day wear.

