

British Theatre Guide

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G and I: Going into Battle with Gertrude Lawrence

Anton Burge
New End Theatre
(2009)

This is an amusing and extremely tuneful show that is primarily a vehicle for Anita Harris to sing a selection of Coward, Gershwin, Weil and Porter numbers that were associated with the West End and Broadway star of the 20s, 30s and 40s, Gertrude Lawrence - but it sets out to be much more than that. Its attempts to provide a potted biography of the singer-actress for whom Coward wrote so much are a little too obviously contrived (nothing that a few careful rewrites couldn't fix), but for an audience of whom few probably know a great deal about her beyond her association with *The Master*, they sketch in just enough to give us some idea of her personality and career.

Lawrence was the creator of the role of Amanda in Coward's *Private Lives* (we get 'I'll See You Again') and co-star with him in *Tonight at 8.30* (we get a lively version of the Red Peppers' sailor duo "Has Anybody Seen our Ship?"). "The Sage of Jenny," from Weill's *Lady in the Dark*, a role which kept her in America for much of World War II, becomes a parallel for her own life - though we have to wait until a recreation of one of the concerts she gave for Allied troops in 1944 to hear it.

Her Clapham childhood, early stage career, her marriages, her daughter, her forced separation from last husband, producer Richard Aldrich, who was serving in the US Navy, her love of luxury, her financial problems and even her swearing are all fitted into the conversations that she has with a young GI who is to be accompanist for the concerts which she is about to undertake for ENSA in Britain and post-D Day Europe entertaining war workers and fighting men newly on a tour that will take her closer to the front line than had previously been allowed.

On opening night Anita Harris was more secure in her numbers than in some of her dialogue but she cleverly suggests that not quite perfect voice of Lawrence matched with charismatic personality and theatricality. Once over first night nerves, and enjoying herself, this could be a very stylish performance.

As the GI Ben Stock is more than just support. His feelings about his distant fiancée, his worries about his mother and his fears for his Jewish relatives in Europe are only lightly touched on, but his growing closeness to Lawrence is warmly demonstrated and he matches sensitivity with vigour. It is a pity that the script does not explore the deeper worries of its characters further, it would have made for a much stronger play: too often we feel that the dramatic text is subservient to the music. This show does not often successfully incorporate the songs as an illumination of the story. Almost every scene is presented as a rehearsal of relatively arbitrary numbers - a convenient ploy but not a very subtle one.

Brenda Longman plays an officious ENSA administrator, Mary Barrett, armed with a swear-box, who clearly disapproves of *louche* theatricals. She gives a stunning performance - complete with

spirited dance routine. Her posh puritan is a comic gem. It has the quality of the best kind of drag which gives a real personality to what could easily be a just a cunning caricature while squeezing every ounce of humour out of it.

Whoever has designed the set (no one is credited) has used careful signage to establish location in a rehearsal room at Drury Lane but why, when in an air raid someone refers to being safe underground, does it have such well lit windows? My only memories of rehearsing there were distinctly basement. Sound design's air raid effects are more like a heavy bombardment rather than those menacing V2s but, with Stock and Harris both playing the piano themselves, there is no problem with the music and it is the songs that form the heart of this show in all their expressiveness and it also tells us just enough about this legendary star to make one want to know more about her. At one point we see Mary moving arrows on a map of Europe to mark the advance into German territory. It seemed unexplained and suggested that there had been last minute cuts in an attempt to tighten up the script. Personally I would rather it had been more discursive.

The disapproval of Longman's Mary in some ways prefigures the lack of interest many showed in her when she returned to play in Britain five years later in *September Tide* and it would have been interesting to have had a wider picture of her life which ended during the successful run of *The King and I*, in which she created the role of Anna. Not long before she died of a cancer which had caused her to miss performances, she suggest that Yul Brunner, playing opposite her as the King, should be added to the marquee of the theatre where the show was playing where only she had previously been given billing. There is scope here for a much richer biographical drama.

At the New End theatre until 3rd May 2009

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)