

THEATRE REVIEW / A controversial play featuring a character named James Keegstra has made a triumphant return to the boards. Behind the B-movie title and the campy performances lies a sophisticated and entertaining musical

Ilsa's back and she's a hit

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IT'S remarkable what a little controversy can do.

In March, 1992, Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit theatre company was forced to cancel a run of artistic director Blake Brooker's 1987 play, *Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp*, when an Alberta judge ruled that the play fell under the publication ban he had imposed on the trial on hate propaganda charges of James Keegstra, who is one of the three characters in Brooker's play. When the company applied for an exemption from the ban, Brooker took the stand and was cross-examined by Keegstra (who acted as his own counsel at trial). The judge threatened Brooker with a contempt charge because he thought the playwright was being less than forthright in his claim that the Keegstra of the play was a creation of the imagination.

Now, a little more than a year later, One Yellow Rabbit finally has the chance to remount *Ilsa* in Calgary. The show, which opened Monday, has played to sold-out houses at the 350-seat Uptown Stage. Not bad for a company that usually performs in the tiny, 80-seat Secret Theatre in the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts.

It's gratifying to report that, for once, the attention born of controversy is deserved. Behind the B-movie title and the campy performances lies a sophisticated and entertaining musical that attacks intolerance from an unusual angle.

The play cuts between the story of Keegstra (Andy Curtis), fired from his job as a teacher and now trying to support himself as a mechanic, and the stories of the Colonel (Michael Green), the commandant of a concentration camp, and Ilsa (Denise Clarke), a prostitute in the camp's Joy Division.

Curtis's Keegstra is anything but a monster. Friendly and apparently civic-minded, he speaks of conspiracies in terms so broad and wide-ranging — he covers everything from planned obsolescence to media manipulation — that he might be found anywhere on the political spectrum. Even when he starts comparing society to an engine — noting that, unlike society, every part in an engine serves a purpose, he asks the audience, "Now ask yourself, 'Am I a spark plug or am I a hose?'" — he seems no more dangerous than any small-town politician or crackerjack tabloid newspaper columnist.

By comparison, Ilsa and the Colonel seem to have wandered in from the stage of wartime cabaret, an impression Brooker emphasizes by lighting some of their scenes with



Denise Clarke as Ilsa and Michael Green as the Colonel: wonderfully drawn caricatures.

ILSA, QUEEN OF THE NAZI LOVE CAMP

WRITTEN BY BLAKE BROOKER WITH
CLEM MARTINI AND KIRK MILES

Directed by Blake Brooker

Starring Denise Clarke,
Michael Green and Andy Curtis

At the Uptown Stage, Calgary

Rating: ★★★★★

footlights and setting others in stark pools of white light. By turns self-consciously cute and unnervingly callous, cuddly and dangerous, they're wonderfully drawn caricatures. As the play follows them through time — he ends up in Uruguay, living off the money he made selling the belongings of those he sent to their deaths in the gas chambers; she ends up in Hamburg, making a meagre living servicing old Nazis — it becomes clear they considered their days in the camps as the best of their lives. As Ilsa says, "Until we imagined we might lose, it was a holiday."

Brooker brings the two parts together with a twist borrowed from *The Boys from Brazil*. During the war, Ilsa and the Colonel were part of a project to guarantee the survival of the Reich by collecting test-tubes of Hitler's sperm to be used to create the next Führer. Their search for the last sample brings them to Eckville, where they confront Keegstra and his denial of the Holocaust.

The confrontation is one of the few times in the play that the Holocaust is mentioned by name. Instead, Brooker has planted reminders of the event in the text, reminders that go off like irony bombs, funny but unsettling. Keegstra, for example, tells his class that he must have told them "six million times" that the so-called concentration camps were factories and potato farms. And when, Laszlo, an enlisted man in the camp, is caught cavorting with Ilsa, he tells the Colonel he was only following orders. "Don't give me that lame excuse," replies the Colonel.

Brooker isn't afraid of going for the broad laugh, but while the play is rich in humour, he never loses touch with the underlying seriousness of

the subject. All of which makes the play's sombre final scene seem a little unnecessary. Still, that scene works better in this production than when I saw the play in Edmonton last year, just before the judge pulled the plug. This is the third time the play has been mounted with this cast — interestingly, Ilsa was played by a man in the original 1987 production — and you can sense the increased confidence and polish of the production. Brooker's staging is often ingenious and the actors handle the shifts in tone with aplomb. The songs, by Brooker and pianist David Rimmer, bring a sad undercurrent to even the most comic moments, as does the incidental music performed by Rimmer and violinist Karl Roth.

Keegstra may beg to differ — he may even try to deny it — but *Ilsa* is a hit. And it deserves to be.

Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp runs at the Uptown Stage in Calgary through Saturday; at the Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver May 11-22; and at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria May 25-30.