



# Adelaide Theatre Guide

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## A GERMAN LIFE

### Adelaide Festival

Dunstan Playhouse

Until 14 March

Review by John Wells

An old woman sits in a nursing home bedroom in Germany. She is Brunhilde Pomsel. She was born just before the First World War, endured the Great Depression, and then, as a young woman enjoying the freedoms of the Weimar period, worked as a secretary for an insurance company, and then for the German Broadcasting Corporation.

And then she worked for Goebbels: Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister for Propaganda, committed acolyte of Hitler, resolute antisemite, and prescient manipulator of the media.

"A German Life" is Pomsel's story: told in a wavering chronology, with snatches of memory, some vague and some stinging with precise focus. Christopher Hampton's expertly constructed monologue draws on an Austrian documentary film in which Pomsel (then aged 103!) recounted her life at the heart of the Nazi propaganda machine. Hampton's script is polished theatrical storytelling. Pomsel's life story flows with disarming ease; but underneath the gentle, conversational exposition, there are unanswered questions and ambiguities.

What did she know? Can we believe her when she claims to be naive and ignorant of her country's developing politics? (In a chilling anecdote, she takes her Jewish friend along with her when she joins the Nazi Party, apparently unaware of the dangerous hatred on the march.) Was she wilfully blind to the escalating horrors, or was she genuinely unaware, working and consumed with life's everyday stresses and pre-occupations?

At the heart of this production's success is Nevin's beguiling, complex and enthralling performance. She combines great technical skill with astute emotional choices. Shuffling with age, wringing a handkerchief, sighing and creaking with physical effort, Nevin completely inhabits the character. Nevin skilfully reveals both Pomsel's almost-convincing belief in her own blamelessness and her subsequent distress when she learns the truth of the Nazi atrocities. There is a fierce immediacy to her performance; there is no sense that Nevin - or director Neil Armfield - is reflecting on Pomsel's experience, or passing judgement on her decisions. There are no conclusions aided by historical distance: this is Pomsel's life, told from her perspective only.

The tension between a warm old woman and the horrors she recounts is unsettling. Equally disconcerting are the nagging inconsistencies in her account: she claims ignorance but reveals she and her colleagues shut their eyes to the clues of holocaust; she denies feeling guilt for things she has not done, but searches for her lost Jewish friend after the war has ended. These grating, buffeting conflicts gives great dramatic force to this wonderful production.

This clever, jarring and brilliantly executed production is ultimately a warning. Pomsel ponders, as the play end, whether people could be so stupid as to again follow a leader like Hitler. Surely not, she asks. We leave, exhilarated by the production, but with furrowed brows. Surely not?