Musical ‘Heart of Spain’ commemorates untold stories of Americans during Spanish Civil War

BY MIYAKO SINGER | SENIOR STAFF

In “Heart of Spain: A Musical of the Spanish Civil War,” a forgotten piece of history is not just uncovered, it is rewritten into the American story.

The department of theater, dance and performance studies’ revival of Peter Glazer’s sweeping war musical comes just in time for the 80th anniversary of the war – an ambitious, passionate work making a worthy commemoration of this ill-remembered conflict.

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936 when General Franco and his fascist allies (Germany and Italy) attempted to overthrow the democratically elected government. The country was soon split in two factions — the Republicans, loyal to the government and the Franco-backed Nationalist rebels. The cause called upon thousands of leftist American volunteers to cross the ocean and put their lives on the line to protect political freedom. With that, “Heart of Spain” shows another American history — one with a legacy of idealism and radical activism, which has been “unremembered because of its politics,” as Glazer puts it, tainted by decades of anti-Communist panic.

The war is little remembered by American history books, yet better remembered by American folk music. “Heart of Spain” details an unfamiliar history through its familiar songs. If the dates and names of the Spanish Civil War are unrecognizable, it’s likely that the mournful, strummy tune of a song such as “Jarana Valley” isn’t — the traditional soldiers’ song is included in “Heart of Spain” but was famously recorded by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. It’s the kind of classic most people have heard somewhere, though they may not be able to name it. The Spanish Civil War is commemorated each year by a passionate nationwide community.

The last American veteran of the war died six months ago, but the relatives, friends and political comrades of these soldiers continue the practice. For Glazer, these commemorative events practice a progressive sentimentality. Nostalgia is often a euphemism for missing good old-fashioned oppression, but Glazer makes the case for a “radical nostalgia,” a notion
he’s expanded on in a full-length book. The people who remember and honor this war are interested in protecting a marginalized history and practicing their ideals through activism.

“It felt like a nostalgia that was about not looking back and using that as an excuse to do nothing, it was a looking back as an excuse to do something,” Glazer said.

For Glazer, the music came before the history. “When I was growing up in the 60s, (my father) sang these songs,” he said. Glazer’s father was a folk musician who sang on one of two records of Spanish Civil War music, which were released in the United States. Progressive folk singers latched onto these songs and popularized them into the mainstream, when history books overlooked the war.

The war’s rich musical history made a work of musical theater feel like a natural step forward. “Heart of Spain” combines this traditional music with poems, letters from the period and original songs written by Peter Glazer and his co-creator Eric Peltoniemi to tell the story of this war through the eyes of American volunteers.

The musical begins in New York, where the band of volunteers assembles, a ragtag group of idealists swimming against the glum isolationist tide of Depression-era American politics. There’s swayed pacifist Alice (Claire Noelle Pearson), nurses Mildred Brustein (Ali Toia) and Dorothy Johnson (Bri’unia Stock) and eager but scared Arthur (Harry Fahn), among many others. It’s almost impossible to keep up with all the names, especially because several cast members play multiple characters throughout. The vastness of the cast and historical scope of “Heart of Spain” makes clear that the musical is interested in punctuating history with human moments rather than telling a more specific, individual story of the war. It makes it hard to become emotionally involved in individual characters — though Arthur in particular manages to wring tragedy from a handful of scenes — but the broad story of the war is gripping enough to get past that.

This broader focus is manifested in the vignette structure of “Heart of Spain,” its direct addresses to the audience to fill in historical context and the incredible density of information thrown at the audience. While the first act tells a fairly straight-forward story of the international brigade’s journey from New York to the shores of Europe and over the Pyrenees mountains to Spain to the front lines of battle, the second act makes some detours to include a eulogy to the enemy and a brief recounting of the long, bloody history of the Spanish monarchy.

Amid this verbosity, Kate Edmunds’ lovely, spare scenic design is an appropriate blank canvas on which to tell this genuinely epic tale. A waterfall of wrinkled white material takes up most of the Zellerbach Playhouse stage and splits open to act as the peak of the Pyrenees mountain range. An assortment of boxes make up the scenery, acting as seats on a train or letter-writing tables depending on the scene. The plainness of the background leaves the viewer free to soak up the rich, heavy history of the Spanish Civil War.

“Heart of Spain” is a fairly monumental endeavour and, for the most part, it is beautifully executed. The crowd-pleasingly triumphant song “Arriba, Mis Companeros!” is a particular highlight, as are some of the musical’s stunning visuals. At times, though, “Heart of Spain” suffers from shaky vocals and relies on exposition that feels more like an entertaining history lesson than a work of theater. Yet the vitality of the subject matter trumps its faults. “Heart of Spain” is a loving act of remembrance, mourning and historical recovery — a necessary recuperation of an important moment for America and the world.

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Clarification(s):
A previous version of this article incorrectly referred to Glynn Bartlett as the scenic designer. In fact, she is the scenic artist and Kate Edmunds is the designer.
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