

PLAYBILL®

American Theater Group Presents

World Premiere!

CANNED GOODS

A NEW PLAY BY
ERIK KAHN

DIRECTED BY
CHARLOTTE COHN

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“Each and every scene in the show is captivating and compelling.”

M. Kennedy, Broadwayworld.com



“The script has a mature brilliance that is not often found when combining fictional characters along with real ones.... *Canned Goods* is a slow-burning eerie emotional earthquake that buries you in rubble. Falling somewhere between an amazing episode of *The Twilight Zone* and Jean Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, the 80-minute show is claustrophobic and chilling.”

A. Zeitlin, The Algemeiner



“A taut, one-act play which, like most good thrillers, increases the discomfort quotient up until the very end....Outstanding performances.”

A. Neuner, Out in Jersey



“CHILLING...BOLD”

**Keeps you hanging on
every word.”**

J. Lustig, NJArts.net



“As a holocaust survivor who lost nearly all my family to the Nazi regime in Poland, I found this play incredibly important and timely for today's audiences to experience. *Canned Goods* brought to mind many feelings and emotions that I had as a child - spending each day trying to survive the violence of anti-semitism in Poland. Although painful at times, I recommend strongly that this play should be seen today more than ever.”

audience member G. Norrily



Photography by: Lianne Schoenwiesner

AMERICAN THEATER GROUP

American Theater Group (ATG) was proud to present the world premiere of Erik Kahn's riveting *Canned Goods*.

Canned Goods is not for the faint of heart. It is upsetting and may even offend some sensibilities. In this time of heightened exploitation of people's differences, when lies are told by people in power with little consequence, Erik has written a play that exposes where such exploitation and lies can lead. We believed strongly that this is a work that needed to be experienced, and we are immensely proud of our production, which was not only critically-acclaimed, but elicited powerful audience reaction:

"Everyone needs to see this."

"Incredibly, incredibly powerful."

"Shattering" "Terrifyingly Good"

Word-of-mouth and positive reviews resulted in larger-than-expected ticket sales and a successful production by all measures.

Jim Vagias

Producing Artistic Director

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Play About Nazi False Flag Operation That Launched World War II Is Stunning

by Alan Zeitlin



Ken King and Richard Hollis in "Canned Goods" presented by the American Theater Group. Photo: Lianne Schoenwiesner, Spotlights Photography.

The three innocent men held in jail have a feeling they're going to be killed.

They don't know how or when, and it's not easy to get answers from the SS Major, who toys with their minds and their souls. In their own way, they try to battle back.

That's the setup for the unforgettable play *Canned Goods* presented by the American Theater Group.

The show gets its name from “Operation Grandmother Died,” in which Hitler needed the world to see some reason for invading Poland – so a false flag operation was launched to make it appear that Poles attacked Germans in a radio station in the German border town of Gleiwitz. Those who would be sacrificed were called “canned goods” by Germans, and at least one corpse was used to make it look more legit, as if the person was killed in the attack.

SS Major Alfred Naujocks was in charge of the plot, which was a success. Ken King delivers an out of this world performance as Naujocks, who has boxed before and enjoys verbally jousting with the three prisoners – Birnbaum, Kruger, and Honiok.

Birnbaum, a Jew who has been taken from Dachau, is played magnificently by Simon Feil, who displays wit and humor. His character is the first to realize they are going to be killed, and has the nerve to ask Naujocks why he was starved in one camp but is now being fed well.

Feil has a cryptic chemistry with Steven Rattazzi, who plays Kruger, a naïve man who thinks kissing up to the SS major and complimenting his hat may save his life. Rattazzi has an uncanny intensity and displays excellent comedic timing and an ability to nail the heavy moments, like when he asks the SS major if they will be killed.

Birnbaum is clever, and his boisterous banter is his rebellion. Kruger is antisemitic and explains why he felt he had a right to steal from his Jewish boss, who withheld a bonus. As Honiok, Richard Hollis is impressive, giving the role the feel of a deer in the headlights. Dalton Gordon is also convincing as a menacing prison guard.

It’s hard to believe that this is Erik Kahn’s debut play, because the script has a mature brilliance that is not often found when combining fictional characters along with real ones. Paired with Charlotte Cohn’s direction, *Canned Goods* is a slow-burning eerie emotional earthquake that buries you in rubble. Falling somewhere between an amazing episode of *The Twilight Zone* and Jean Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, the 80-minute show is claustrophobic and chilling. Kudos to Kahn and Cohn for one of the most controversial and provocative endings to a play I’ve ever seen.



CANNED GOODS by ATG at Hamilton Stage and Sieminski Theater—Sneak Preview

CANNED GOODS by ATG

By: Marina Kennedy May, 10, 2024

American Theater Group (ATG), the highly acclaimed professional theatre, continues their successful season with performances of *Canned Goods*. This world premiere play will run May 9-11 at Hamilton Stage in Rahway and May 16-19 at the Sieminski Theater in Basking Ridge. Both of the venues are state-of-the-art theaters with generous free parking available.

Canned Goods, by Erik Kahn, brings to life Hitler's staging of a fake attack on Germany to justify his invasion of Poland in 1939. This tense historical drama tells the story of the human beings forced to play leading roles in a drama they want no part of, and one that launched World War II. While it depicts events that occurred over nine decades ago, the messages in the show will surely resonate with modern audiences.

The play features the acting talents of [Simon Feil](#), Ken King, Dalton Gorden, [Steven Rattazzi](#), [Richard Hollis](#), and [Jason Williams](#). Broadwayworld got a sneak preview of this poignant, important show and we also had the opportunity to talk with director, [Charlotte Cohn](#) and the Producing Artistic Director, [Jim Vagias](#).

Director, [Charlotte Cohn](#) is directing for American Theater Group for the first time. We asked her how she likes working with the company. She commented, "It's been one of the most incredible experiences in my career. ATG is supportive creatively and has supported my vision for the show. It has been a dream job."

Producing Artistic Director, [Jim Vagias](#) spoke about presenting *Canned Goods* to metro area audiences. "This theatre piece is completely fascinating especially in this day and age when we need to realize the consequences of exploiting people's differences and must recognize the lies that are being told by those in power."

By attending a dress rehearsal, we were able to get a sneak preview of *Canned Goods* for our readers. As the play unfolds, it reveals a little known project engineered by the Third Reich. We get to know three men who have been jailed by the Nazis. While they do not understand why they have been imprisoned, they will be used to execute a hateful and devious plot. Each and every scene in the show is captivating and compelling.

Metro area audiences have an excellent opportunity to see a show that will definitely provoke essential conversations. Check out the venues and get your tickets!

Built by the City of Rahway Redevelopment Agency, the Hamilton Stage is located at 360 Hamilton Street in Rahway and is independently operated under the governance of Union County Performing Arts Center. The 199-seat theater was recently renovated. *Canned Goods* will run from Thursday, 5/9 through Saturday, 5/11. The Saturday shows will include a matinee and evening performance. Tickets are available through the box office by calling 732-499-8226 or online at: <https://www.ucpac.org/events>.

The Sieminski Theater is located on the scenic campus of Fellowship Village at 8000 Fellowship Road in Basking Ridge, NJ. Performances of the play will be Thursday, 5/16 to Sunday, 5/19. Tickets are available at www.sieminskitheater.org.

THEATER

Chilling WWII drama 'Canned Goods' premieres in Rahway; more shows planned for Basking Ridge

Written By JAY LUSTIG • May 14, 2024

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LIANNE SCHOENWIESNER, SPOTLIGHTS PHOTOGRAPHY

From left, Simon Feil, Steven Rattazzi, Ken King and Richard Hollis co-star in The American Theater Group's production of "Canned Goods."

Erik Kahn's new play "Canned Goods" takes its title from the code name that Nazi soldiers used for prisoners under their control during an operation that took place in the time directly before the start of World War II, in 1939. And what an appropriately dehumanizing code name it is.

Based on historical events, "Canned Goods" — which The American Theater Group premiered last weekend at The Hamilton Stage at The Union County Performing Arts Center in Rahway, and will present at The Sieminski Theater in Basking Ridge, May 16-19 — is a chilling depiction of unthinkable evil in action, and a reminder that cunningly crafted fake news is nothing new to the present era. And with anti-Semitism and fascism on the rise in many countries around the world, it couldn't be more necessary. Director Charlotte Cohn helps give the production a bold, direct feel that keeps you hanging on every word.

The 85-minute, one-act play is set mostly in a jail to which Franciszek Honiok (Richard Hollis) — who was born in Poland but is now living in Germany and working as a farmer there — has been sent, for reasons that are a mystery to him. At first, his primary concern is that his farm animals will be cared for, in his absence.

Two other prisoners are being kept in the jail, in an adjacent cell: Szymon Birnbaum (Simon Feil), a Jewish professor of religion who had been moved to the jail from the Dachau concentration camp; and Walter Kruger (Steven Rattazzi), a non-Jewish German who was also at Dachau, after being arrested for theft. They don't know why they are there, either, or why they are being treated surprisingly well — the food is much better than it was at Dachau. But they do know that they will play a part in some kind of operation with the code name Grandmother Died.

Birnbaum and Honiok suspect the worst, and assume their lives will soon come to an end; "We're being toyed with, like three mice held for the moment under the paw of a cat," says Honiok. Kruger, a Hitler loyalist and Jew hater, holds out hope that his life could be spared, after the operation is over. The play's unforgettable villain is Alfred Naujocks (Ken King), a major in Hitler's SS organization. He is mostly polite, and even charming at times, to the prisoners. But when he shows his dark side, as he does when Honiok annoys him by repeatedly asking to see a priest, it stings. Honiok is the play's central character, but Naujocks rules over this little corner of the world with calm cruelty, and an imperious snap of his fingers.

The cultured, philosophical Birnbaum and the obsequious Kruger are fictional, but Naujocks and Honiok are based on real people. Near the end of the play, King reads from Naujocks' testimony at the Nuremberg trials.

Donning a swastika armband and changing his voice into a menacing growl, Honiok also plays Hitler, in brief excerpts from his speeches. A fifth actor, Dalton Gorden, plays the prisoners' guard (fictional) as well as two SS officials (based on real people).

Scenic designer Ant Ma hangs a number of soldier's uniforms above the actors. They remain there, ominously, as Honiok, Birnbaum and Kruger wonder what is in store for them.

Using The Ink Spots' sentimental 1939 hit "If I Didn't Care" to underscore the play's darkest moment, and Vera Lynn's longing, lushly romantic 1939 ballad "We'll Meet Again" as closing music, seemed a little heavy-handed to me. This kind of ironic twist has been done too many times to really be effective.

I don't think I am giving too much away by adding that Naujocks never receives sufficient punishment for his actions. "After a few years in a Danish prison, I was allowed to live out my life, after the war, in peace," he tells us. "Why? Well, you see, there were too many of us. They couldn't hang us all. ...

"Some might say I am still right here among you, never to leave."



LIANNE SCHOENWIESNER, SPOTLIGHTS PHOTOGRAPHY

Ken King in "Canned Goods."



LIANNE SCHOENWIESNER, SPOTLIGHTS PHOTOGRAPHY

Richard Hollis in "Canned Goods."

“Canned Goods” turns a spotlight on the start of World War II

By **Allen Neuner** - 05/18/2024

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Canned Goods (Photo by Lianne Schoenwiesner, Spotlights Photography)

It is generally accepted that World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939. What is not generally known is the incident the Germans used to justify the invasion. *Canned Goods*, a play by Erik Kahn making its world premiere with New Jersey’s American Theater Group, examines that incident. It is a taut one-act play which, like most good thrillers, increases the discomfort quotient up until the very end.

It is August 31st, 1939. We are introduced to Franciszek Honiok (Richard Hollis), a farmer of German and Polish background living in Silesia, a region mostly in Poland with a small part in Germany. Honiok finds himself under arrest by German forces under SS Major Alfred Naujocks (Ken King). Honiok has been given no reasons for his arrest and no idea how long he will be held. Jailed with him are two prisoners from Dachau: Kruger, a German thief (Steven Rattazzi), and Birnbaum (Simon Feil), a Jewish professor of religion.

The actors make a fine ensemble under the direction of Charlotte Cohn. Outstanding performances come from Richard Hollis and Simon Feil as Honiok and Birnbaum, two characters who find the inner strength to face their uncertain futures. Ken King is a devilish rogue as Major Naujocks, a smiling, deviously evil, charming man, even though his motives are so hateful.

Steven Rattazzi’s Kruger is that type of German of the time who went along with the Nazis as “the thing to do” rather than out of any deep allegiance. He has no strong belief system (unlike Birnbaum’s scholarly Judaism or Honiok’s devout Catholicism) in which he can take refuge as his fears and tensions mount. He is a pitiable character whose wheedling and whining to gain any advantage prevents the audience from truly pitying him.

Naujocks keeps his three prisoners off-balance with erratic mood swings and unsettling semi-answers to their questions. His is a particular style of cruelty delivered with a smile that is sinister in its insincerity. He keeps speaking of an upcoming mission, code named "Grandmother Died", in which the prisoners will have a role. In speaking with his underling Muller (Dalton Gorden), the prisoners are referred to as "canned goods".

The play starts out slowly, with the befuddled Honiok not understanding why he, a simple farmer, is in prison. Birnbaum knows the reason for his own imprisonment: his religion. As for Kruger, he sees himself as a loyal German and thus above Birnbaum, and feels his jail term is unjust. As the mission looms closer and tensions build, the three prisoners begin to think they may not survive "Grandmother Died".

Scenic designer Yi-Hsuan "Ant" Ma has come up with a prison that, while filling the stage, still gives a feeling of claustrophobia. In this she is helped by the subtle lighting design of Douglas Macur and Robert A.K. Gonyo's sound design is spot-on..

It's one thing to look up Honiok and Naujocks and read the account of "Grandmother Died" online. It is quite another to see these people portrayed on stage, their emotional story underscoring the historical facts, and in this *Canned Goods* succeeds. I have two wishes for this show: one, to see it performed on a smaller stage, where the sense of being trapped in a small space would be heightened; and two, that its run could be extended.

**FOR MORE
INFORMATION**

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