Theater

FELLOW TRAVELLERS STAGE LEFT THEATRE

Ideas and Men

Finally, a story about art that's also about the people who make it.

By Justin Hayford

A little more than a month ago a Halliburton subsidiary scored a government contract, worth up to $385 million, to build detention centers throughout the United States. The centers are meant to support Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the event of what the company called an immigration "emergency" or "the rapid development of new programs." ICE wouldn't comment on what urgent new programs might require several 5,000-person prisons, but as Daniel Ellsberg suggested, "almost certainly this is preparation for a roundup after the next 9/11 for Mid-Easterners, Muslims and possibly dissenters."

Local playwright Margaret Lewis doesn't need developments like this to give her emotionally complex, morally confounding *Fellow Travellers* urgency, but the timeliness of this Stage Left world premiere does add a certain extra chill. The play, which is about Nazi censorship and its repercussions, focuses on German art students and best friends Karl and Max. Karl is a committed modernist who paints jarring compositions in unnatural colors, a darling of the German avant-garde, while Max is a neoclassical landscape painter dismissed as a brilliant technician out of touch with the times. Then Hitler's aesthetic predilections become state policy. ("Anyone who sees and paints a sky green and fields blue ought to be sterilized," he once said.) In one of the fuhrer's many rapidly developed "new programs," the art department chair—who encourages students to create new, idiosyncratic work—disappears. His replacement, who champions Aryan form and beauty, expels Karl and grooms Max for official success.

TONY V. MARTIN

Fellow Travellers

Lewis manages to transform the usual issues in plays about art—freedom of expression versus censorship, tradition versus innovation, truth versus political reality—into life-and-death human dilemmas. Her nuanced depiction of Max, whom she could have made into a tragic or villainous tool of the Nazi party, is one of the best things about *Fellow Travellers*. Though Max dislikes the ruling party, a brilliant career awaits, and he becomes a Nazi "as a formality" to get his paintings shown. Besides, aren't artists supposed to keep up with the times? Though he sincerely believes in the soul-restoring properties of classical art, he hates the idea of his friend's "ugly modernist" work being censored. In fact, once Karl is officially labeled a degenerate and an enemy of the state, Max secretly provides him with the materials he needs to work—an act of treason. In the play's most provocative moment, Max claims Karl's best painting as his own. But you're not sure whether he's stealing his friend's thunder or trying to save the canvas from Nazi bonfires, risking being classified a degenerate himself.

Max isn't a pawn in an easy ethical scheme but a well-meaning, ineffectual crusader for art buffeted by monstrous forces he doesn't fully comprehend until it's too late. This shaded depiction is aided by John Sanders's unassuming but passionate performance in the role. Surprisingly, the champion of artistic freedom and truth, Karl, is in some ways the play's least sympathetic character: when looming Nazi condemnation forces him to separate from his wife, he seems concerned only about getting paint while in hiding. (And she remains an undeveloped faithful sidekick.)

Lewis intercuts this story with scenes of Karl in Los Angeles in 1973, a paranoid recluse at the end of his renowned artistic career. Karl never explains how he managed to escape Germany, but it's rumored Max sacrificed his life to get him out. When Karl learns that a young East German woman who's come to work for him as a housekeeper was working for the Stasi, his paranoia increases: he feels sure that somehow, somewhere, the Nazis are still out to get him. Still, the LA interludes don't have half the urgency or moral complexity of those in Berlin; too often they feel like a fragmentary tale of improbable friendship awkwardly grafted onto the harrowing historical drama. Only the penultimate scene—set in Germany and involving an ingenious, sobering plot twist that reveals Max's fate—establishes the necessity of the LA scenes.

WHEN Through 4/1: Thu-Sat 8 PM, Sun 3 PM
WHERE Stage Left Theatre, 3408 N. Sheffield
PRICE $18-$22
INFO 773-883-8830

To excavate this latent drama, Lewis needs to condense her half-dozen American scenes to two or three. She could also address a few minor implausibilities: how does a Stasi employee manage to come to the United States on an open-ended visa? But she has a strong ally in director David M. Schmitz, whose attention to detail brings out the story's humanity without diminishing its political scope. She also has an unwitting ally in our current administration, which is creating a better context for the play than any a dramaturge could devise. ■

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Books

EAT, PRAY, LOVE: ONE WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR EVERYTHING ACROSS ITALY, INDIA AND INDONESIA ELIZABETH GILBERT (VIKING)

Are You There God? It's Me, Liz.

A cosmopolitan writer finds inner peace—and she's not embarrassed to talk about it.

By Martha Bayne

Elizabeth Gilbert has got it going on. An accomplished journalist and fiction writer, she has four books and many laurels to her name—her 2002 biography of a rogue Appalachian outdoorsman, *The Last American Man*, a National Book Award finalist, remains one of my favorite recent pieces of nonfiction. She got to spend her 34th year globe-trotting on her publisher's dime, and in the process she not only found true luv (with a sexy, older Brazilian man) but also got a grip on something far more elusive: true peace. Her new memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, is her account of that transformative year, and it's to Gilbert's great credit that by the end of it I didn't totally hate her tall, thin, blond guts.

To be fair, as the book opens, three years before her sabbatical, things aren't going well. Married and miserable, she realizes she doesn't want her husband, doesn't want her comfortable suburban New York home, doesn't want her high-flying career, and adamantly doesn't want a baby. After months of emotional turmoil and many nights spent crying in the bathroom, she completely breaks down, sobbing on the floor one night, desperate and afraid, and she begins to pray. More precisely, she strikes up a chat with God: "Hello God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you."

It's a less-than-inspirational moment, pleading for help alone in the middle of a "lake of tears and snot," but it sets in motion a chain of life-changing events. She leaves her husband, falls in love again, gets way into yoga, struggles through an ugly divorce, has her heart broken by her new love, and loses 30 pounds from the stress. September 11 happens in there as well, and with both her emotional and physical landscapes thoroughly gutted, Gilbert sinks into a depression marked by several believably scary dark nights of the soul.

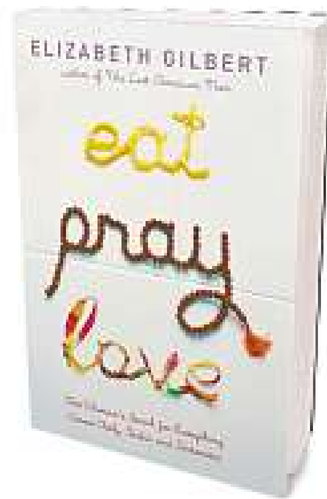
But then a ray of light, in the form of an advance from her publisher, pierces her gloom. The money allows Gilbert, who by her account lost almost everything to her ex, the luxury of a year of travel, which she divides into three parts, each with its own mandate. In Rome she vows to relearn the "art of pleasure," tossing back gelato for breakfast and lots of wine for supper. At an Indian yoga retreat she dedicates herself to prayer and meditation. And in tranquil Bali, under the tutelage of a gnomic medicine man, she tries to learn to balance the two.

Elizabeth Gilbert
WHEN Mon 3/6, 7 PM
WHERE Book Stall at Chestnut Court, 811 Elm, Winnetka
INFO 847-446-8880

It's a familiar journey of self-discovery, one that's impelled many to church, ashram, and temple—not to mention Prague, Phuket, and Patagonia. It's also, by definition, a selfish project. Is there anything more boring than hearing about someone else's spiritual quest?

But Gilbert is, for the most part, a funny, frank, self-deprecating narrator. Though she describes herself as a hapless traveler who's forever turning up in strange places without a map, she also knows the value of research and peppers her travelogue with all sorts of discursive information on matters like the origins of the Italian language or the pitfalls of Balinese real estate. And despite the heavy material, she uses a light touch to balance the anecdotes with moments of serious insight. (Musing on the possible roots of her depression, she notes, "Melancholy, called by many names, has run through my family for generations, along with its sad bride, Alcoholism.") She acknowledges her astonishing good fortune—her all-expenses-paid year of personal growth, complete with a ridiculous fairy-tale ending in which she sails off to yet another island idyll with her Brazilian lover. But, she insists, "I was not rescued by a prince. I was the administrator of my own rescue."

She doesn't do quite so well with the backstory. Whatever horrors she and her ex-husband visited upon each other over the course of their three-year battle remain safely tucked away, and



without them her anguish at times seems diffuse, if genuine. And while many of the friends she makes along the way are affable enough, several flirt with cliche, like the reformed junkie/drunk from Texas who befriends her at the ashram. He's gruff yet wise, of course, and gives her the unfortunate nickname of "Groceries," which is supposed to be endearing (it refers to Gilbert's newfound appetite) but really just makes him sound like Sawyer on *Lost*.

But *Eat, Pray, Love* threatens to fail completely when Gilbert tries to articulate her spiritual awakening. Because, face it, talking to God is corny. Most people who grapple with fundamentals of faith and identity don't sound like Thomas Merton or the Dalai Lama or even Joseph Campbell, and Gilbert is no exception. Her wry descriptions of her ongoing battle with meditation are terrific. At one point she acknowledges, "What I'm alarmed to find in meditation is that my mind is actually not that interesting a place, after all." Later, as she tries yet again, her mind wanders off: "If I lived somewhere cheaper than New York, maybe I could afford an extra bedroom and then I could have a special meditation room! That'd be nice. I could paint it gold. Or maybe a rich blue. No, gold. No, blue . . ." But when she finally breaks through, finds her bliss, and for a few moments sits "upon God's palm," the reader doesn't get the same payoff Gilbert does. At best, in moments of ecstasy, she sounds like she's got hold of some good acid. Elsewhere, in her most anguished moments, crying for help on the bathroom floor, she's more like an earnest eight-year-old saying her prayers at the side of the bed. In fact, when God answers her initial shout-out, it's with a classic piece of parental advice: "Go back to bed, Liz."

Weirdly, though, it's this fundamental failure of language to capture her communion with divinity—a failure she's well aware of—that gives the book power. There's no shortage of writers who've twisted themselves into knots over the existence of God—Mark Twain and Graham Greene spring to mind. But Gilbert, open and trusting, is the antithesis of someone like the dark, ironic Greene. Her happiness is so dorky and sincere that you almost can't help but believe.

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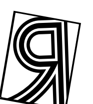
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