

THEATER NOTEBOOK

Rock the Cradle? Let's Rock the World

By NEIL GENZLINGER

On West 44th Street in Manhattan Golda Meir has been holding court in relatively conventional fashion for months. But if you prefer your prominent 20th-century women deconstructed, fractured, filtered and re-invented, walk a few blocks south. There, in two shows, are glimpses of Madame Mao, Eva Perón, Imelda Marcos, Elena Ceausescu, Eva Braun and Clara Petacci, along with a torrent of fragmentary thoughts about power, sex, second-class citizenship and whale vomit.

"Summit Conference," at Urban Stages on West 30th Street through March 13, brings together Braun and Petacci, mistresses, respectively, of Hitler and Mussolini, for an imaginary tea that starts out benignly but makes the full circle, from weird to dark to repellent and back to benign.

At the start the women are played as the stereotypes of their countries. Braun (Sarah Megan Thomas) is chilly and rigid, Petacci (Rita Pietropinto) gregarious and a bit flighty. There is some obligatory moaning about the status of mistresses. "The whole world knows I am here, and nobody knows who I am," Braun laments, and Petacci complains of being "delivered to the back door like the bread."

But Robert David MacDonald, the playwright, soon replaces the tea with alcohol, and the women turn increasingly vicious. They turn all the way into their men, excoriating Jews and others and clashing over military tactics. A young Nazi guard (Eric Altheide), who may have some Jewish blood, absorbs the worst of their vitriol in a macabre, degrading seduction scene. And then it's abruptly back to tea and pleasant-ries, as if the ugliness never happened, a shift suggestive of how, even today, some people prefer to regard the Holocaust.

"Summit Conference" is a long way from "Golda's Balcony," the fairly straightforward biographical treatment of Golda Meir running on Broadway. But it seems downright conventional compared with another play, on West 42nd Street, called "The Ladies." It is a rollicking take on four first ladies who exercised power far more openly than did the "Summit Conference" mistresses.

In "The Ladies" Nora of "A Doll's House" turns up briefly, her declaration of independence sounding positively quaint juxtaposed against the words of these female giants. Ibsen's rudimentary cry for empowerment now rings naive because underlying "The Ladies" and "Summit Conference," both well-acted, is our knowledge of how four of these six powerful lives ended: violently, in executions or suicides. Watch out, Nora; it's not easy being queen.