



Randi Foster as Raina Petkoff with Sinjin Jones as Bulgarian Major Sergius Saranoff in A Theatre Group's production of "Arms and the Man" by George Bernard Shaw.

Photos by David Emory/Silverton Standard & the Miner

A Theatre Group production offers 'a special pleasure'

By Ted Pope

REVIEW

I was delighted this past Friday, July 1, to step into the Grand Imperial Hotel and feel the historical ambience, so appropriate for the staging by A Theatre Group of G.B. Shaw's "Arms and the Man."

Having seen this play several times in the past, I was looking forward to seeing how the ATG players would handle the balance between comedy, drama and romance. The play tells about a somewhat aristocratic Bulgarian family who variously become involved with the consequences of a soldier having hidden in their house while fleeing a battle during the Serbo-Bulgarian war in the late 19th century.

Its focus though is on the conflict, ambivalence, and confusion of social conventions, heroic ideals, and hearts' desires. This ATG performance engaged me most when the characters, action and dialogue emphasized the comedic aspect and Shaw's wit.

For me "Arms and the Man," particularly with the limited resources of a small community theatre, is most vital as a comedy; its more serious social and moral messages, the darker world of class and character, are too heavily contextualized by time, popular culture, art, science and technology to be directly forceful. So I recommend this play for the insightful humor, the spontaneous and thoughtful laughs it provides.

Too I recommend it as history. "Arms and the Man" has certainly stood the test of time, having first opened with much success in England in April 1894; only five months later it appeared on Broadway. The play had major revivals in London and the U.S. during the 1940s-1960s. John Malkovich's production in 1985, starring Kevin Kline as Capt. Bluntschli

ran for 109 performances.

The first time I saw this play performed was while a student at the University of Texas in Austin, sometime in 1964 and just a few weeks after having seen the newly released film "Dr. Strangelove," and a few months before being moved by thoughts on war and peace at a Bob Dylan concert in Austin.

Protest songs were of the moment, the military draft was in place, beatniks and hippies were prying open social conventions, oral contraceptives ("the pill") had just received FDA approval, and Dr. Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Context is important. Here, in 2011, Shaw's moral and social critique comes through, but as if looking through the large end of binoculars.

There is such a distance from the British class structures, Victorian society, and the beginnings of modernity that the balance between seriousness and comedy surely requires adjustment for the intervening 100 years since the play was written.

The ATG performance is faithful to Shaw's script, which helps one appreciate the play as an enduring example of our cultural history. To me it seems worthwhile to revisit such classics to see how their meaning and expression and relevance are molded by contemporary developments and one's own life experiences.

Particular instances in the ATG performance of "Arms and the Man" deserve some attention, as they point to where subject matter, content, and technique work together for a compelling expression of the playwright's intent. For exam-



Louka, played by Desiree Henderson, and Major Sergius Saranoff, played by Sinjin Jones.

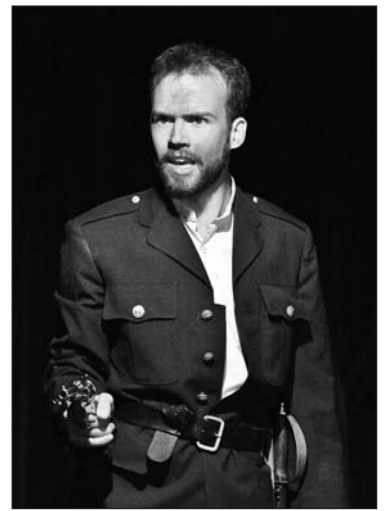
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ple, Major Petkoff, played so well by Mark Garvin, comes across as a good humored, down-to-earth man, obviously pleased with his military rank but not so carried away by his own importance.

He's at the core a homebody who enjoys his modest comforts, and with good nature tries to deflect his wife's assertiveness and pretension. Garvin provides an authentic characterization, and his timing is right on, for instance, when he says "I don't mind a good wash once a week to keep up my position ..." during a match of words and wit with his wife Catherine in Act II.

Mary Morris, as the major's wife, Catherine Petkoff, is a force to contend with. Talkative, busy, hardly distinguishing sense from nonsense, Morris convinces us of the empty social codes and ideals that were so often the playwright's targets. She favors manners over meaning, appearances more than truth.

'ARMS AND THE MAN'



TOP: Matthew Casey as Captain Bluntschli
MIDDLE: Mark Garvin as Major Petkoff and Mary Morris as Catherine Petkoff
BOTTOM: Randi Foster as Raina Petkoff.

I was seeing Madame Petkoff, not the actor Mary Morris, in Act II when she announces her acquisition of an electric bell — "Civilized people never shout for their servants," and later, with her gasping "Oh, heavens!" Then trying to explain away the awkward appearance of Capt. Bluntschli. Here Morris expressed so well someone who just for a moment wonders if her social mask really covers deeper thoughts and ambitions, a theme important in several of Shaw's works.

Captain Bluntschli — pragmatic, efficient, and sincere — is the character for the essential contrasts that drive this play. He represents a better society, one not dominated by rigid class conventions and romantic fantasies of love and war. Where an individual is valued for what he contributes rather than for birthrights and titles.

Matthew Casey conveys this important character consistently and clearly, and so naturally in Act III, wherein he reveals his capacity for growing as he declares his interest in Raina and acknowledges that he is somewhat of a "romantic idiot." Casey's timing, voice, and demeanor develop a believable

and likable Bluntschli, such that his exclaiming near the end "My rank is the highest in Switzerland; I am a free citizen" left me with a sense of triumph and of hope, and of agreeing fully with Sergius's observation that Bluntschli is quite the man.

All of the cast had moments where things clicked — where the expression of their character in the play became believable and integrated with the setting, interactions, and dialogue.

Briefly I should mention the naivete, frivolity, compassion, and hint of some capacity for transformation that Randi Foster gave the character of Raina Petkoff. Foster made clear that Raina was both a beneficiary and victim of her class and romantic idealism, and delivered the conversation with Capt. Bluntschli in Act III with the sincerity and introspection ("Ah, well: what does it matter? I suppose, now you've found me out, you despise me.") that made Raina a more complex and interesting character.

I much appreciated the naturalness with which Don Doane represented the obsequious servant Nickola, loyal, yet calculat-

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ing how to please his employers while advancing his own fortunes. The softness of his actions, his sense of confidentiality worked quite well to point out how one's social standing may not indicate intelligence or competence, an idea reinforced by the maid, Louka, played by Desiree Henderson.

Henderson brings the independence, willfulness, and ambition of this character to

bear, yet her iciness and manifest resentment created an emotional distance such that I could not empathize with her justifiable presumption of individual worth or her triumph over Sergius at the end. This Bulgarian Major Sergius Saranoff, played by Sinjin Jones, comes across as part fanciful hero, part fool which does work with the play's themes of ridiculous idealism and class pretensions.

Jones represents this charac-

ter best when he seems really to accept Major Saranoff's deluded notions of his nobility and importance and thus behaves coolly, unflappably, and without demonstrativeness unbecoming of a real, or fancied, gentleman. At the beginning of Act III, Henderson does play Sergius in this manner, providing a comic edge so that in the end the audience can more easily accept his coming to terms with "reality," imagine his union with the disdainful maid-servant Louka, and believe his deferral to Bluntschi at the end, "What a man! What a man!"

The stage and set design conveyed the social pretense represented by the Petkoff family — a sort of worn aristocratic dream — and works well for the interaction of the characters and the dialogue in the bedroom, garden and library. The lighting design works best from the third row back. I was in the second row, in front of a stage spotlight, where I felt at times uncomfortably included in the actors' space. I did enjoy the very effective lighting cues for the candles used in the set.

The reference to laundry, which is important to emphasize the superficiality of Madame Petkoff's efforts to be "modern," might be staged more naturally.

The fictional Chinese detective Charlie Chan in his film adventures often said "Questions are keys to door of truth." A question is raised in "Arms and the Man" with the character of "the Officer." Julian Roberts plays well this brief role with an effective balance between the polite Russian official and a soldier used to commanding.

But why would Shaw include a character so brief, singular, and undeveloped? Certainly this officer intimates a world outside of the Petkoff's house, and provides the token of authority and immediacy of threat that underscores Raina's deception. And, there is the puzzlement and comical tension created by the officer's ignoring or failing to see the pistol lying in plain sight. But are these sufficient explanations, given the demands on casting, rehearsing, and production that each role creates? Does

the answer have to do more with the art of stagecraft, the creative process, or possibly some historical or personal circumstance that motivated Shaw's imagining this role?

One of the joys of live theatre is that performances vary. One night a scene may be executed astoundingly well. The next night it may not seem quite so extraordinary. The audience may be energized one evening and the next quietly disengaged. Live performance is a two-way thing, the actors and audience taking cues from each other.

A special pleasure comes from reflecting on a performance just seen; it helps me see with what I know and to be alert for the many possibilities when I again join the audience. That's entertainment!

Interested?

A Theatre Group's production of "Arms and the Man" continues July 6-10 (Tuesday through Saturday at 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 4 p.m.) at the Grand Imperial Hotel, 1219 Greene St. Box Office: (970) 387-5337, online: www.atheatregroup.org.