

Review: Center Rep breaks hilarious new ground with Shaw's 'Arms and the Man'

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Raina (played by Maggie Mason) comes to have doubts about her betrothed, Sergius (Gabriel Marin) in "Arms and the Man" (Kevin Berne Images 2012)

Theater fans over the years have speculated about what sort of work George Bernard Shaw would be doing if he were writing today.

That's because even though his plays are more than a century old, they have a contemporary ring to them in terms of the social and moral questions raised and the sharpness of Shaw's dialogue.

But as well done as many have been, most productions are presented with the sort of arm's-length reverence one might afford a museum exhibit – until Tuesday, when Center Repertory Company opened "Arms and the Man" at Walnut Creek's Leshner Center.

This watershed production suggests Shaw would be doing pretty much the same stuff he always did, but the inflection and attitude would change. The Nancy Carlin-directed piece, featuring some of the finest actors in the Bay Area, treated the play as all theater should be, as living, breathing works made accessible and companionable to the audience.

So with bits of inspiration from Mel Brooks and even a little bit of "Saturday Night Live," Carlin and her cast, changing not a word from Shaw's script, turned "Arms and the Man" into a rollicking comedy that would stand head-and-shoulders above any comedy you could catch at the multiplex.

As I watched the show, I couldn't stop thinking about the original cast album cover for "My Fair Lady." It featured winged George Bernard Shaw on a cloud perch (supposedly heaven, although the great playwright would probably not have liked that), pulling the puppet strings attached to Henry Higgins who was, in turn, pulling the strings on Eliza Doolittle. That was at least partly in homage to Shaw's "Pygmalion," upon which "MFL" was based.

As "Arms and the Man" hilariously unfolded, I saw the picture of Shaw (probably on rain clouds and wearing devil horns) holding puppet strings attached to director Nancy Carlin, who was pulling the strings on her wonderful cast. I somehow believed that, up there or down there, Shaw would probably have approved of this production.

At its heart, "Arms" is an anti-war play, preaching, with laughter, the idea that war with all its guts, glory and heroism has just as much cowardice and misplaced self-aggrandizement.

Not that you'd notice the message, because the writing is hilarious and the show unfolds like romance beneath the shell bursts and rifle fire as another war wages in the Balkans, the surrogate playing field for larger nations.

As the bullets and bombs explode, we see a shadowy figure sneak into the room of Raina Petkoff (Maggie Mason), daughter of Major and Mrs. Petkoff (Michael Ray Wisely and Lisa Anne Porter) and fiancé of Major Sergius Saranoff (Gabriel Marin).

As fate would have it, the man who broke in was Captain Bluntschli (Craig Marker), who has cast his lot as a soldier of fortune, although he's not all that smitten with the war game. In fact, he tells Raina (who is still basking in the glow of Sergius' heroic and apparently accidental victorious cavalry charge) that he has replaced bullets with chocolate because they are so much more practical in battle.

In other words, it's the inexperienced and stupid soldiers that go gung-ho into battle, like the fool (Sergius) who led that day's cavalry charge that sent Bluntschli almost literally into Raina's arms.

The incident eventually sends everyone to the same place – the Petkoff home – and the comedy, both verbal and physical, flies from there on a set beautifully designed by Kelly James Tighe and in costumes by Victoria Livingston-Hall.