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Shaw Festival Celebrates Kushner and Hart as Well as GBS

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 16th, 2015

The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, celebrates the dense and witty plays of George Bernard Shaw, but also presents modern authors who follow in his intellectual tradition. The contemporary playwright who probably comes to the closest to following Shaw's intellectual dramas of ideas is Tony Kushner. After *Angels in America*, his mammoth two-part exploration of the AIDS crisis and its impact on our political, social, and religious life, his most challenging work is the ponderously titled, rarely-produced *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures.* This massive drama runs a staggering three hours and 45 minutes and covers labor relations, faith, love, money, suicide, and sexual and family issues. (The lengthly monicker is a reference to a Shaw pamphlet and a treatise by Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy.) Eda Holmes' intimate production in the Shaw Fest's 194-seat Studio Theatre makes us feel as if we were in set designer Peter Hartwell's lived-in living room along with the Marcantonios as they clash over the family Brooklyn brownstone and the fate of patriarch Gus (a solid Jim Mezon), a retired union organizer contemplating suicide as he struggles with Alzheimer's.

Kelli Fox and Jim Mezon in *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* at the Shaw Festival
Credit: David Cooper

Each of his three grown children, their former and current partners, and Gus' sister Clio have issues of their own, paralleling the conflicted crises of America in the first decade of the new century. Though he takes on multiple themes, Kushner's complex script never feels scattered and none of the characters or their concerns is shortchanged (unlike another Shaw Fest production, *The Divine: A Play for Sarah Bernhardt* which fails to sufficiently develop its myriad plotlines.) Mezon gives a shattering performance as a disillusioned radical whose ideals have been crushed by a materialistic society. Amazingly, the actor is on double duty as a director.

Gray Powell and Patrick McManus in *You Never Can Tell.*
Credit: David Powell

Down the street at the more traditional Royal George Theatre, the Festival is offering Shaw in a lighthearted vein with Mezon's merry staging of the playwright's *You Never Can Tell*. Given that it's Shaw's version of a romantic comedy, the usual boy-meets-girl conventions are turned on their heads and though the play was written in 1897, it's as fresh and funny as if it was turned out today.

In a quaint seaside town (charmingly designed like a checkerboard by Leslie Frankish), Valentine, a penniless dentist falls in love with the independent Gloria Clandon, who spurns traditional marriage, while Gloria's eccentric, progressive family is uneasily reunited with their estranged father, the crochety, hidebound Fergus Crampton. Marital mix-ups and intrigues proliferate while the unflappable hotel waiter William acts as a sort of nonplussed master of ceremonies. That is until his son, a blustering lawyer, barrels in and resolves all complications.

Gray Powell, admirably volatile as Vito, the construction-worker youngest son in *Guide*, is equally energetic as the bubbly but more expressive Valentine. Peter Millard is a cool and composed William while Peter Krantz bulldozes with vigor as his take-charge son.

Thom Marriott, Claire Jullien and Steven Sutcliffe in *Light Up the Sky*.
Credit: David Cooper

My visit to the Festival was capped off with director Blair Williams' delightful rendering of Moss Hart's 1948 backstage tribute to a vanished Broadway, *Light Up the Sky*. Caricatures of then-famous theatre folk such as Gertrude Lawrence, Guthrie McClintic, and Billy Rose (Claire Jullien, Steven Sutcliffe and Thom Marriott, all delightfully over the top) carry on extravagantly in a Boston hotel suite during a disastrous out-of-town try-out. The first act is a bit slow with lots of exposition being laid down. We get introduced to the earnest young playwright, an older dramatist standing in for Hart himself, the producer's ice-skater wife, the star's brassy mother, a squawking parrot named Orson (after Welles, one presumes) and a truckload of partying Shriners. But once the groundwork is established, comic fireworks explode after the intermission. Hart's loving valentine to the crazy world of 1940s show-biz has long been a staple of the community and summer stock circuit and shows its age. The hoary jokes creak at times, but Williams and his cast give it a shot of much-needed adrenaline.

From the heavy lifting of Tony Kushner to the frothy wit of Moss Hart and one of Shaw's lighter works, the Shaw Festival offers up comedy and drama with equal aplomb.

The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures: July 26—Oct. 10. Studio Theatre, 10 Queen's Parade, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: three hours and 45 mins. including two intermissions.

You Never Can Tell: May 14—Oct. 25. Royal George Theatre, 85 Queen St., Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 35 mins. including intermission.

Light Up the Sky: July 25—Oct. 11. Festival Theatre, 10 Queen's Parade, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission.

All plays: repertory schedule; $25—$116 (Canadian); 800-511-SHAW or www.shawfest.com.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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