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Shaw and Stratford Round-up: Classics Old and New in Canada

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 5th, 2018

Transposing classic works to modern settings can often produce brilliant stagings and provide insights into contemporary issues. And sometimes such ventures feel forced and unnatural. The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, recently presented *The Orchard (After Chekhov),* a game effort in this genre by actress-playwright Sarena Parma, in its intimate Jam Maxwell Studio Theatre. As indicated by the title, the play is derived from Anton Chekhov's 1903 *The Cherry Orchard*, his elegy to a vanishing upper class unable to cope with shifting social mores and economic realities. Parmar transforms the feckless Gayevs in pre-Revolutionary Russia to a family of South Asian immigrants in the Okanagan region of 1975. Like the Russian original, Parma's family is about to be dispossessed of their land and means of income through mismanagement and neglect. The glamorous, scatterbrained matriarch returns after many years abroad (in this case India rather than Paris) only to find her home and former way of life about to be ripped away. Also in the mixed are friends and servants of Canadian, Japanese and Native backgrounds.

Krysta; Kiran and Andrew Lawrie in *The Orchard (After Chekhov)* at the Shaw Festival.
Credit: David Cooper

The resultant play is a mixed bag. When she slavishly replicates Chekhov, the proceedings have a hollow ring despite intelligent direction by Ravi Jain and naturalistic acting by a fine cast including Parma herself as the spoiled youngest daughter and Pamela Sinha as the narcissistic, confused mother. But when she allows her characters to have a life of their own rather than following their source material, they are affecting and revelatory of the immigrant experience. When Barminder, the self-sacrificing elder sister justifies her conversion to Christianity by expressing her fervent desire to fit in with her Canadian friends, it's simply heartbreaking, especially as performed with subtle resignation by Krystal Kiran. Chekhov's family are entitled aristocrats losing their positions, Parmar's are struggling with their cultural identity. When she acknowledges that, *Orchard* blooms.

Krystal Kiran, David Adams, and Shawn Ahmed in *How He Lied to Her Husband*, part of *Of Marriage and Men* at the Shaw Festival.
Credit: Emily Cooper

Meanwhile, at the Royal George, the Shaw Festival celebrates its namesake with a pair of GBS one-acts, collectively titled *Of Marriage and Men*. These works are staged with straightforward zip by Philip Akin, illuminating Shaw's witty war of the sexes. In the curtain-raiser *How He Lied to*

Her Husband, a young lover is thwarted by the devotion of his older mistress's understanding husband. The hour-long *Man of Destiny* pits a wily Napoleon Bonaparte against an even wilier female spy known only as the Strange Lady. Both pieces sparkle, but the shorter work shines more brightly proving brevity is indeed the soul of wit. Shawn Adams, the nerdy eternal student in *Orchard* captures the impetuous energy of the lover while Krystal Kiran, the repressed older sister of *Orchard*, is a captivating beauty as his paramour. David Adams is unruffled and smooth as the unflappable husband. In *Destiny*, Kelly Wong, who played the goofball estate manager in *Orchard*, is the soul of masculine command as the imperious Napoleon. Andrew Lawrie, the lady killing servant in the Chekhov adaptation, is comically pompous as a tin-soldier lieutenant. Martin Happer scores laughs as the philosophical innkeeper and Fiona Byrne is delightfully seductive as the mysterious femme fatale.

Scott Wentworth and Seana McKenna in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* at the Stratford Festival.
Credit: Emily Cooper

To the west in Ontario at the nearby Stratford Festival, two American classics are given traditional and slightly non-traditional stagings. The tortured Tyrones make their *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Eugene O'Neill's massive drama, in the intimate Studio Theater while Christopher Sergel's 1990 adaptation of Harper Lee's beloved *To Kill a Mockingbird* fills the Festival Theater. Miles Potter's staging of *Long Day's Journey* puts O'Neill's autobiographical anguished family practically in the audience's laps (Peter Hartwell's cosy set makes us feel as if we were eavesdropping on their front porch). The acting of the five-member ensemble is appropriately scaled back, but that makes the aching story of drug addiction and alcoholism all the more poignant. Scott Wentworth's narcissistic father, Sean McKenna's weary mother, Charlie Gallant's subtle younger son (O'Neill's stand-in), and Gordon S. Miller's self-hating elder son are so low-key and naturalistic, their pain is almost palpable. Even Amy Keating's Irish maid does not go over the top with her comic relief moments, but presents a believable young woman in a tragic household.

To Kill a Mockingbird at the Stratford Festival.
Credit: David Hou

Nigel Shawn Williams' staging of *To Kill a Mockingbird* attempts to address the African-American perspective of the original Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. As most lovers of great film and literature know, the popular book and its Oscar-Winning movie version depicts the coming of age of Scout, a young girl in Depression-era Alabama and how her lawyer-father Atticus Finch defies racist attitudes to defend Tom Robinson, a wrongfully accused black man against a charge of rape. But the Harper Lee estate did not grant the Festival to rights to alter Christopher Sergel's sanctioned adaptation (The upcoming Broadway production by Aaron Sorkin will reportedly give a new slant to his theatricalization.) So Williams' adjustments are small but telling. The play opens with video footage of Martin Luther King's assassination and civil rights demonstrations. Later in the play, black characters utter a horrifying silent scream and a white mob out to lynch the defendant is dressed in KKK attire. These touches give the production a startlingly immediate and relevant feel. The nostalgia evoked by Scout's summer adventures with her brother Gem and friend Dill (based on the young Truman Capote) and their mysterious neighbor Boo Radley are overshadowed by racial injustice, an undercurrent in Lee's book. Williams' sprawling production does its best to balance these two main themes, but comes across as slightly unbalanced, as if it

couldn’t make up its mind which story to tell. However, there are several gripping sequences, particularly the trial scenes and there are sharp portraits by Irene Poole as the grown-up Scout who serves as a narrator, Jonathan Goad as the modest compassionate Atticus, and Matthew G. Brown as Tom Robinson who must carefully declare his innocent without stating that white people are lying. It will interesting to see how Sorkin adapts this beloved work when it opens on Broadway in December.

The Orchard (After Chekhov): June 21—Sept. 1. Shaw Festival at Jackie Maxwell Studio Theatre, 10 Queen’s Parade, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission.

Of Marriage and Men: May 24—Sept. 9. Shaw Festival at Royal George Theatre, 85 Queen St., Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission.

Shaw Festival plays: repertory schedule; $25—$171 (Canadian); 800-511-SHAW or www.shawfest.com.

Long Day’s Journey Into Night: May 30—Oct. 13. Stratford Festival at the Studio Theatre, 34 George St. East, Stratford, Ontario. Running time: three hours and 20 mins. with two intermissions.

To Kill a Mockingbird: June 2—Nov. 8. Stratford Festival at Festival Theatre, 55 Queen St., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including one intermission.

Stratford Festival plays: repertory schedule; $133—$24.50 (Canadian); (800) 567-1600 or www.stratfordfestival.ca.

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