

Cultural Daily

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World War I Explored at the Shaw Fest

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 29th, 2018

The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario commemorates the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I with a variety of moving productions examining the horrific impact of that cataclysmic event. Trench warfare and slaughter on a global scale obliterated the notions of the gentlemanly art of conflict as well as hastened the dismantling of the European social order. This theme is brought to the forefront in *Henry V*, the Festival's first Shakespearean staging. Founded in 1962, the venue's mission statement was to promote the works of George Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries. They basically left the Bard to their neighbors to the west, the Stratford Festival. But this version of the classic rousing warhorse is placed by directors Kevin Bennett and Tim Carroll (the Shaw's artistic director) right in the trenches, imagining a platoon of Canadian soldiers rehearsing the play for a performance before their fellows. Several of the patriotic calls to arms ring hollow as the doughboys trade cigarettes, scrape mud off their ragged uniforms, duck as bombs explode, and prepare for an attack.



The cast of Shakespeare's *Henry V* at the Shaw Festival.

Credit: David Cooper

The conceit wears a tad thin after an hour. But right after the French Princess Katharine's famous English lesson when the first act ends, Camellia Koo's grimy foxhole set in the intimate Jackie Maxwell Studio Theatre is transformed into a hospital ward. All seven players have been severely injured and four nurses augment their cast. The second act begins with a repeat of the last played scene by two of the nurses and the action continues with occasional interruptions for dressing wounds, emptying bedpans, and calming the traumatized patients. Shakespeare's glorious language celebrating King Hal's victory takes on ironic tones as the men deal with the effects of mustard gas, battle fatigue, broken limbs, and shattered spirits. Bennett and Carroll manage to create enough drama and diverse stage business to overcome the static nature of confined recoverees stuck in a row of beds. The unspoken sexual dynamic of women amidst the male military adds to the tension and gives a poignancy to the final scene when a broken-legged Henry (a stalwart and valiant Gray Powell) woos Katharine (charming Natasha Mumba) and the matron (authoritative Yanna McIntosh) permits a kiss.

The entire company captures the agony of warfare without setting foot on a battlefield. With subtle subtext, they convey the mind-shredding sensations of this horrific clash of countries (particularly Graeme Somerville as a shell-shock victim reliving his torments). Shakespeare's huge imagined canvas becomes a tiny pit dug in the fields of France and a confined room where ordinary men must pay the price of regal ambition. Most significant is the final speech of the Chorus, stating the

hard-won prize of France is later lost by Henry's son, echoing the futility of the 1918 conflict.



Marla McLean, Kristi Frank, James Daly and Allan Louis in *Oh What a Lovely War*. Photo by David Cooper.

The war rages on in musical format with Peter Hinton's staging of Joan Littlewood's 1963 revue *Oh! What a Lovely War* at the Royal George Theatre. Based on a radio play by Charles Cilton and developed for the stage by Littlewood's Theater Workshop, *War* is a hybrid of music hall and documentary theater with popular songs of the period interspersed with sketches and scenes satirically depicting the relentless progress of the combat. It played London and Broadway, and was made into a bizarre 1969 film by first-time director Richard Attenborough. There is no plot or continuing characters with whom to identify, so it's difficult to maintain interest in this dark tuner. There is additional material relating to Canada's part in the conflict with attention to the struggles of black and Native troops. The cast is proficient and professional, but arch and removed from the slaughter of battle. Hinton's production lacks *Henry V*'s humanity; it's historically interesting but dry.



James Daly and Michael Therriault with the cast of *Grand Hotel, The Musical*. Photo by David Cooper.

For personal storylines, *Grand Hotel the Musical* goes in the opposite direction, loading the Festival Theatre with so many characters, it's hard to keep up with them. Based on Vicki Baum's novel and the Oscar-winning 1932 star-studded MGM feature about intersecting lives at a ritzy Berlin venue, this ravishing musical was a hit on Broadway in 1989, thanks largely to Tommy Tune's direction and choreography. Luther Davis' patchwork book and the sweet but shallow score by Robert Wright and George Forrest, with additional musical material by Maury Yeston, do not really hold up without Tune's brilliance. Eda Holmes' staging and Parker Esse's dances do not quite reach the zenith of Tune's dazzlingly imaginative use of minimal props and sets, but the Shaw production does clearly delineate the numerous plot arcs and provide a satisfying evening of arresting intrigue.

Holmes makes inventive use of designer Judith Bowden's elegant sets, especially a revolving circular bar which turns the joyous Charleston number "We'll Take a Glass Together" into a stunning merry-go-round. The theme of war is brought out as Esse's symbolic tango becomes a dance of dance as chorus members dressed as casualties are entangled in the killing embrace of a seductive figure.

The ensemble provides moments of flash and fizz, but they fail to reach the depths of passion or connection seen in either the Broadway version or the famous film.

Though an able singer and dancer, James Daly is too boyish in the John Barrymore role of a dashing but downtrodden baron. Yes, in Davis' version, he is meant to be in his late 20s, but Daly comes across as a fresh-faced chorus kid, not a young man who has seen the ravages of misfortune. Vanessa Sears has the sparkle and spunk of Flaemmchen (played by Joan Crawford in the movie), but not the desperation that drives her to near prostitution. Deborah Hay does make us forget the immortal Garbo's interpretation with a wistful, bittersweet take on the declining Russian ballerina. Steve Sutcliffe has the right cynical edge for the gloomy doctor who serves as an omniscient narrator and Michael Therriault captures the dignity and pathos of Kringelein, the dying clerk

yearning for a bit of glamour.



Ben Sanders and Patrick McManus in *O'Flaherty, V.C.*

Credit: Emily Cooper

Shaw directly addressed the war in his devastatingly funny one-act *O'Flaherty V.C.* in which the title character, a decorated Irish veteran, explodes the patriotic twaddle he is forced to spout as a recruiting spokesman. In 45 hilarious minutes, O'Flaherty (a sharp Ben Sanders) shatters the conventional classist positions of his commander (properly fussy Patrick McManus) and the domestic prejudices of his tough-as-nails mother (formidable Tara Rosling) and pragmatic fiancée (perky Gabriella Sundar Singh). Presented as a lunchtime one-act at the Royal George, Kimberley Rampersad's acid-laced staging is a hand-grenade in shape of a snack, a perfect weapon in Shaw's arsenal of anti-war wit.

Henry V: Aug. 8—Oct. 28. Jackie Maxwell Studio Theatre, 10 Queen's Parade, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission.

Oh! What a Lovely War: Aug. 3—Oct. 13. Royal George Theatre, 85 Queen St., Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission.

Grand Hotel the Musical: May 24—Oct. 14. Festival Theatre, 10 Queen's Parade, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission.

O'Flaherty V.C.: June 21—Oct. 4. Royal George Theatre, 85 Queen St., Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Running time: 45 mins. with no intermission.

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

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