

Mrs. Warren's Profession Is a Class Act at Antaeus

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Anne Gee Byrd and Linda Park Photo by Karoline Feather

Mrs. Warren's Profession/by George Bernard Shaw/directed by Robin Larsen/Antaeus Co/through April 21/double cast

Let's go back to 1893 England and examine the position of women and society's take on prostitution. Have attitudes toward it changed much? Hardly! Women are more independent in today's world, but a whore is still a whore, not highly regarded any where, any time as an intelligent, valuable creature. Shaw takes offense and presents a fresh perspective, for its time.

Women like Kitty Warren (Anne Gee Byrd) were forced as early as their teens into unsanitary, abusive conditions of factory labor. Warren and her sister Liz somehow managed to defeat the system at its game and work discreetly as ladies of the evening. But that was hardly a bed of roses; it included its own humiliations, as women were still at the hands of men and their overpowering abuse. Warren, with her eventual money and power, was able to see that daughter Vivie (Linda Park) receive some education, rare for women of those days. Vivie represents the modern, liberated woman, who does not tolerate said abuse from anyone, including what would come within the bonds of matrimony. So, she rejects her mother's money...and her suitor Frank Gardner's (Daniel Bess) hand in marriage. She works in a demeaning, secretarial office job, while her mother works as a madame, overseeing brothels all across Europe. Vivie's mother is very rich, whereas Vivie is poor, but by choice. She gives up the money and her rights as Mrs. Warren's daughter by censoring Kitty's profession.

The Antaeus Company, who are the primary source of resurrected classics for the stage in LA, are currently mounting George Bernard Shaw's splendidly amusing and enlightening play with very specific, detailed direction from Robin Larsen and a stellar ensemble of actors. What is extra special about this Shaw play was that it was indeed censored and continues to raise eyebrows when performed. It has a delicious sense of humor as it portrays women as strongly intelligent and independent, hardly worthy of the low esteem that prostitutes must tolerate, while showing the men as blooming idiots, literally. Reverend Gardner (Robert Machray) is a pompous ass whose own 'secret' affair with Kitty Warren, if completely revealed, would not only scandalize him but ruin many lives around him including that of Frank and Vivie. Frank is a lazy oaf, consistently berated by his father for not doing anything but gambling away his money; Mr. Praed (Arye Gross), although a gentle unassuming soul, is, in spite of his appreciation for art and beauty, rather dull, innocent...no, let's be bold and say, stupid in the affairs of people. Sir George Crofts (Tony Amendola), a friend of Kitty Warren, turns out to be much more detrimental than friendly, a lascivious lech who will stop at nothing to destroy anyone who gets in his way of success. Although not innocent like the other males, he leaves himself open to be berated and despised even more.

The entire cast is electric. Anne Gee Byrd, a dream actress in just about every role she plays, makes Kitty instantaneously charming and stealthily shrewd and conniving, caring, but indifferent to society's appraisal of her. Although of the old school, Kitty can still play her hand and beat almost anyone. Another stunning portrayal by Byrd! There is never a doubt about who she is, where she's coming from ...or where she's headed. Linda Park makes Vivie her rival, the strong independent woman of the new school, who will suffer for the right cause. Park is beautifully convincing especially in her scenes of revelation and deep feeling. Robert Machray makes the bumbling fool Rev. Gardner extremely funny, in a delicious, almost Oliver Hardy way. At one moment he commands the stage with his domineering presence and in the next, he disintegrates into a whimpering fool, as he portrays Gardner's helplessness in concealing his checkered past. Arye Gross is wonderful in giving Praed a specific sense of genuine innocence, Amendola brilliant as the horrifying brute Crofts, and Bess

terrifically flippant as he skirts Frank's on again off again attempt to be taken seriously. Nicole Fabbri looks lovely as the Young Woman behind the scrim who represents the young Mrs. Warren or one of her successors. Francois-Pierre Couture has designed a simple functioning set that serves both indoors and outdoors and A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes are elegant and period perfect.

I had not seen ***Mrs. Warren's Profession*** for many years. I remembered it as stuffy, like most Shaw, but upon seeing this production, I was highly amused and entertained by both Shaw's delightful irreverence and the Anateaus Company's ultra-sophisticated execution.

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