



Balancing Shaw

TUE MAR 19, 2013 - [Anthony Byrnes](#)

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain* on LA Theater for KCRW.

George Bernard Shaw is a tricky playwright.

On the one hand, he's Chekhov's contemporary and a devout socialist whose writing rings of the ethics of work and the plight of the poor. On the other hand, he's Oscar Wilde's countryman and contemporary given to writing those English countryside foppish scenes of manners. Then there's the polemicist, critic and cofounder of the London School of Economics - who knew?

The challenge with any Shaw production is: how do you reconcile these worlds?

The [Antaeus Company](#) makes a valiant effort with their production of [Mrs. Warren's Profession](#) revealing both the charms and challenges of Shavian style.

Despite what you may have thought in high school, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is a pretty racy play for 1893, at least intellectually. The profession in question is, of course, prostitution. At the play's opening the younger Ms. Warren has just completed a respectable degree, courtesy of her mother's mysterious fortune. The young Viv is planning her business career in the city - a life of work that would make any Bolshevik proud. But first, she must meet her somewhat estranged mother for an English country weekend complete with a morally corrupt Reverend, his dandy of a son, and two of her mother's acquaintances to fill in the historical details and complete the archetypal chorus. Over the course of two acts and two hours, the family secret is revealed and the daughter must decide her course. The dueling questions: 'Do the ends justify the means?' and 'What's a working woman's role in society?'

It would be tempting to think these questions are fodder for history. But we live in a country where women are now being coaxed by a Facebook exec to "Lean In" and you're sitting in a theater in the Valley - home to the porn industry, strip clubs, and massage parlors - so it's clear that prostitution, artistic and otherwise, is alive and well. So what does George Bernard Shaw have to say to us?

Like so many Antaeus productions, the answer lies a little too safely between the past and the present. This isn't some radical updating of the text to have it speak to our time. And it's also not a deadly period piece. It's a fiercely competent production with predictably wonderful Antaeus actors. It takes the middle ground: neither getting caught up in the philosophy nor distracted by social comedy. It's a bit like going to a classical play laboratory to see how the text really works. You have the freedom to interrogate and imagine the play itself, undistracted by shoddy accents or weak character choices.

The drive of the play is really two confrontational conversations between mother and daughter that close the two acts. In one, the daughter is won over. In the other, she's repelled. While I was seduced by Shaw 'the political thinker', I found myself unconvinced, and oddly unmoved, by Shaw 'the dramatist' in these scenes.

The result is a well acted production of a play that feels more like a historical artifact than a classic.

Mrs. Warren's Profession plays at The Antaeus Company in Noho through April 21.

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