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Critic's Choice

Review: Genuine feeling flows through 'Mrs. Warren's Profession'



Unapologetic brothel proprietress Kitty (Anne Gee Byrd) confronts social hypocrisies in George Bernard Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession." (Karianne Flaathen)

By Philip Brandes

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Nowadays the very nature of “Mrs. Warren’s Profession” might have gotten her a reality show, but in 1893 censors banned [George Bernard Shaw](#)’s play about a brothel proprietress — not for salacious content (it has none), but because of the even more dangerous social hypocrisies it exposed. Among its many strengths the Antaeus Company’s superb revival illuminates what continues to shock most about the piece, namely, how little has really changed.

In the title role, Anne Gee Byrd anchors the otherwise double-cast production with a steely portrayal that is every inch Shaw’s envisioned “genial and fairly presentable old blackguard of a woman.” Her present wealth and success notwithstanding, Kitty Warren’s inflections and bearing betray the dead-end lower class origins she’s risen above.

When her college-graduate daughter Vivie (Rebecca Mozo, alternating with Linda Park) discovers the carefully hidden source of income that paid for her education and genteel upbringing, Byrd’s Kitty lays out the economic realities that limit women’s survival options in a mercilessly incisive monologue.

With admirable precision, clarity and comic timing director Robin Larsen and her entire cast honor Shaw’s meticulous balancing of opposing ideas and philosophies; the arguments are cogent and the jokes are funny.

Just as importantly, Larsen’s staging relishes Shaw’s genius for the unexpected but entirely logical conclusions and choices to which the characters’ perspectives lead them — without allowing us easy judgments.

The decadent baronet (Tony Amendola or Kurtwood Smith) may have sleazy designs on Vivie, but his rationale based on how society works isn’t wrong; Vivie’s boyfriend (Ramón de Ocampo or Daniel Bess) may be a social climber, but he genuinely cares for her. And while she shares her mother’s pragmatic nature, independent-minded Vivie’s own life ambitions put her on an irreparable collision course.

Larsen’s decision to incorporate the emotional consequences of Vivie’s choice is a departure that may give purists pause, but it effectively engages with authentic feeling rather than false sentiment — a distinction that Shaw, for all his formidable intellect, never seemed to appreciate.

“Mrs. Warren’s Profession,” The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends April 21. \$30-\$34. (818) 506-1983 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

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