



MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION

STAGESCENELA
WOW!

Daughter Discovers Mom To Be Millionaire Madam

No, this isn't a headline story in *The National Inquirer* or on TMZ, nor is it the latest reality TV show or nighttime soap. In fact, the mother and daughter in question are from over a century back (when you only needed \$40,000 to be a millionaire) and the two lead characters in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Can you say "ahead of its time?"

Shaw's 1893 ground-breaker makes an exciting return to Los Angeles as The Antaeus Company premieres another of its couldn't-be-better revivals starring the incomparable Anne Gee Byrd in the title role. Who could ask for anything more?

Like *Pygmalion* and its musical adaptation *My Fair Lady*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* deals with social issues in the years surrounding the advent of the 20th century, though for Kitty Warren, it wasn't simply learning "proper" English that elevated her from lower class to so-called decent society. No, indeed, the road up was a good deal more scandalous for the never-wed "Mrs." Warren, who went from prostitute to high-class madam and owner of a chain of brothels—two in Brussels, one in Ostend, one in Vienna, and two in Budapest.

Mrs. Warren's 22-year-old daughter, Vivie (Rebecca Mozo*), knows nothing of her mother's past, and has in fact had little contact with her, having been educated in a series of boarding schools.

As *Mrs. Warren's Profession* opens, the two women are about to have their first meeting as adults, and as one might expect, the news of Mum's profession will not sit well with the highly educated and highly moralistic Vivie.



Warren.

Mother and Daughter's entourage includes Frank Gardner (Ramón de Ocampo*), a charming young scamp more interested in Vivie's fortune than in true love; Rev. Samuel Gardner (John-David Keller*), Frank's fuddy-duddy of a father (and possibly Vivie's as well); Sir George Croft (Tony Amendola*), a nattily dressed yet potentially vicious gentleman with designs on Vivie; and Mr. Praed (Bill Brochtrup*), a rather dapper aficionado of what he calls "the Gospel of Art" and friend of Mrs.



Besides Shaw's witty, incisive dialog, what makes Mrs. Warren's Profession hold up so well more than 110 years after its first London production in 1902 is how very contemporary its themes remain today. Yes, London audiences were probably more outraged by its focus on prostitution and the possibility of an incestuous relationship between Vivie and Frank than today's might be. Still, these topics remain meaty staples of talk shows, soaps, reality TV, and tabloid rags well into the 21st

Century.

Yes, Mrs. Warren's Profession is wordier than a contemporary version might be, and yes, Mrs.



Warren's defense of the world's oldest profession is about as close to a twenty-minute monolog as a two-person scene can be. Still, for this reviewer at least, Mrs. Warren's Profession turns out to be one of Shaw's least talky plays, and much of its dialog might just as easily come from a modern-day drama as a Shavian classic.

To helm Mrs. Warren's Profession this time round, Antaeus has made the savvy decision of bringing on board four-time Scenie-winning director Robin Larsen (for Tryst, Pursued By Happiness, Blackbird, and The Fall To Earth), whose mostly contemporary list of credits makes her an ideal choice to give Shaw's 120-year-old classic a modern sensibility.

As for the production's undisputed star, it's no wonder the brilliant Ms. Byrd is playing Mrs. Warren at all performances, almost unheard of at Antaeus, where roles are customarily "partner-cast." After all, who could possibly match her command of this most complex of women? (The question is rhetorical.) In her bouffant period wig (unfortunately not shown in production stills), leg o' mutton sleeves, and tightly-corseted full-length skirts, Byrd vanishes into Mrs. Warren more than any previous role I've seen her in. From her pitch-perfect accent (upper class vowels not completely obliterating their Cockney roots) to the grit, humor, vulnerability, and depth she gives Mrs. Warren, this is one sensational piece of work, a performance that any student of fine acting owes it to him or herself to see.

Supporting Byrd at the performance reviewed was a proverbial "dream cast," beginning with the always marvelous Mozo (Byrd's costar in a pair of night-and-day different roles in The Savannah Disputation) as Vivie, Mrs. Warren's budding feminist of a daughter, whose embrace of her mother's pluck turns "hard as nails" (Frank's description of her) the second she learns that her mum is still in the biz.

De Ocampo once again proves himself versatility personified; his Frank is good-natured, self-centered, a bit smart-alecky, undeniably appealing, and about the farthest cry imaginable from the Filipino drag queen he played in The Girl Most Likely To. A terrific Amendola gives us a Sir

George who may seem at times to be under Mrs. Warren's thumb, but let her daughter reject him, and see how cold-blooded he can become. Brochtrup is simply splendid as the always amiable, easily embarrassed confirmed bachelor and *connaissanceur de beauté* Mr. Praed. And Keller is excellent too as the pretentious yet well-meaning Reverend Gardner.

As always, Antaeus has assembled a dream team of designers, beginning with scenic designer François-Pierre Couture, whose set is both simple and elegant, easily transforms into the play's four different locales, and features a slatted upstage backdrop through which director Larsen gives us brief glimpses into Mrs. Warren's Profession past and present (with the help of Fiona Lakeland* as Young Woman). A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's period costumes are so authentic looking, they could have been transported directly from 1893 to 2013 via time machine, with special snaps for Mrs. Warren's two gorgeous outfits, including feathered hats. Jeremy Pivnick's expert lighting not only signals time of day and indoor/outdoor setting to perfection, it makes Couture's set and Schoenberg's costumes look all the more fabulous. Adam Meyer's topnotch properties design features plenty of well-worn books, an antique shotgun, and other assorted late 19th Century accouterments. Finally, there's John Zalewski's sensational sound design with its pulsating musical soundtrack and that trademark Zalewski underscoring to up the dramatic suspense.



Deirdre Murphy is stage manager and Meyer production manager. Zach Kaufer is assistant director, Jessica Olson assistant costume designer, Christopher Breyer dramaturg, and Richelle Buchmiller assistant stage manager and wardrobe. Antaeus offers additional special thanks to Chuck Olson and Tesshi Nakagawa. Brochtrup, Rob Nagle, and John Sloan are The Antaeus Company's co-artistic directors.

Nearly a century and a quarter after he wrote it, George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* remains one of the playwright's best and most accessible works. You don't have to be a die-hard Shavian to find yourself as compelled by its story and characters as you'd be while watching a TV or movie drama unfold. And the writing's a heck of a lot better.

The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Through April 21.
Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00, except Sunday March 24 at 8:00.
See website for cast lists for each performance. Reservations: 818 506-1983
www.Antaeus.org

–Steven Stanley
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Photos: Geoffrey Wade

* At the performance reviewed. All roles but Mrs. Warren are double-cast.