

Shaw Festival 2009 becomes Noel Coward coup

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Traveling from theater-rich Dayton for more theater could be an exercise in overkill. Daytonian are blessed with outstanding venues producing an excellent panoply of dramatic choices.

The Shaw Festival, situated in picturesque Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, has a special lure. Not a summer festival, the plays are staged from April through November, it is, nevertheless, a summer holiday for us. We find ourselves returning year after year to enjoy the flower-filled quaintness of the little town and its wonderful theater.

George Bernard Shaw's plays serve as the anchor for the season's choices. The four venues are brimming with many other choices, as well. This year, English playwright and icon of sophistication, Noel Coward, literally invaded the schedule. Coward's urbane works are regularly featured at the Shaw. This year his wit and debonair elegance was inescapable.

His ten one-act play collection, *Tonight at Eight*, enveloped us. We attended six of them in doses of three each. In retrospect, I would gladly have traded the six for one more Shaw masterpiece.

Let's begin with a scorecard. We regularly attend six plays in three days. The math is simple, matinee and evening performances dominate. Fortunately, there seems to be plenty of time for morning walks, visits to the plethora of fudge and ice cream shops and, of course, shopping and very fine dining.

The results were two great plays, two good ones and a definite overdose of Noel Coward for the remainder. Responsibility is entirely with us. We chose the

plays from nearly a dozen choices. These decisions become a mid-winter activity as tickets are at a premium. In our many previous visits, the scorecard was definitely weighted toward more greats and rarely duds.

The two great plays were Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* and Eugene O'Neill's searing *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. *The Devil's Disciple* is the perfect exercise in appreciating Shaw's boundless wit.

The setting is the American Revolution in 1777. The war is canonized in our minds as the emergence of our great country from a callous monarchy across the sea. Synthesized through Shaw's interminable satire and irony, it becomes a series of blunders by well-meaning but clumsy patriots and their British opponents.

The patriots were an odd lot. Willing to be hanged as an example of rebellion but unwilling to actually rebel, Dick Dudgeon is the axis on which the melodrama turns. Shaw's arrows of irony are as unerring as cupid's love missiles.

The bad guys, British generals and officers, who are more concerned with good form than actual fighting, turn out to be merry fools. The patriots, well they are just lucky that the right people were in the wrong places at inconvenient times.

While the result was the birth of a great nation, to Shaw, it is a canvas for his wit. For the audience, it is a captivating experience of being literally drowned in Shaw's exquisite language.

The O'Neill play, *Moon for the Misbegotten*, is nearly the exact opposite. Instead of farcical melodrama, we are immersed in the tragedy of real life. The Hogans are an impoverished farm family; O'Neill literally is the poster boy for dysfunctional families. They live through their poverty buoyed up with drink and invective for each other and for every aspect

of life.

The protagonist, Josie Hogan, played by Jenny Young, shouts her defiance of life at a fever pitch throughout the entire play. Her theater mastery is remarkable, both from character development and sheer endurance. As her alcoholic but rich love-object, David Jansen showed the same acting strength in developing his character.

In the true Shaw Festival tradition, these two amazing actors, and most of their colleagues, play several roles in repertory for all of these months. Both Young and Jansen appeared in several of Coward's polite and cerebral plays and evinced the same appeal.

The two good plays were *Born Yesterday* and *Sunday in the Park with George*. Like all of the plays we have ever seen at the Shaw, they were acted superbly and magnificently set and directed.

Born Yesterday was appealing. The role of Billie Dawn, immortalized by Judy Holliday in the film, was acted perfectly and without apology by Deborah Hay. All of the remembered machinations were there, well played and fun to see. It was a good play.

Sunday in the Park with George is a play I have resisted since it came to Broadway in 1984. Based on the post-Impressionist painting by Georges Seurat, I felt it would be a contrived mechanistic plot capitalizing on the famous painting and its appeal. Unfortunately, I was right. The play was interesting but never overcame its obvious dramatic artificiality. Very well acted with excellent stage effects, the painting was really the most interesting character.

Now for the two, or rather six, more or less misses. The Coward plays, *Still Life*, *We Were Dancing*, *Hands across the Sea*, *The Astonished Heart*, *Family Album* and *Ways and Means* were lumped into two trilogy evenings.

Again, very well acted and

set, the polite and highly cerebral dialogue made character and plot seem secondary. Sorry, I had enough polite gibberish. I was entertained when I was not uncomfortably bored. The ratio was about 70/30 in favor of bored.

Nevertheless, we have our reservations for next year. We will just be more careful in play selection.

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Opening Reception: First Friday, Oct. 2, 5 to 10 p.m., Gallery 510, Hours: Wednesday, Thursday & Saturday 12 to 5 p.m.; Friday 3-8 p.m. and by appointment.