

STAGE REVIEW: Shakespeare '70 presents 'The Doctor's Dilemma'

By Anthony Stoeckert

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Mariel Rosati and Olivier LeRoux in "The Doctor's Dilemma."

Photo by Richard Kowalski

Anyone who thinks the affordability of health care is an issue that is exclusive to our times is in for an eye-opening experience while seeing George Bernard Shaw's "The Doctor's Dilemma."

The play's premise is that Dr. Colenso Ridgeon has discovered a cure for tuberculosis. Being a private doctor with a small staff, he can treat people in groups of 10, and selects patients based on who he deems most worthy of living.

A young woman Jennifer Dubedat comes to Ridgeon begging her to treat her husband, Louis, a brilliant artist whose drawings leave viewers breathless.

The problem is that Louis is a scoundrel. He married Jennifer while still married to someone else, scams people out of money, and is even willing to expose his wife to blackmail as a way to pay his debts. Should Ridgeon save this brilliant artist or Dr. Blenkinsop, a none-too-special doctor who is broke, but a decent, honorable man?

It's a compelling story and well handled in Shakespeare '70s production of "The Doctor's Dilemma," running at the Open Arts PAC in Bordentown through Oct. 8. Director Janet Quartarone doesn't make it easy to come down on one side or the other. Neither does Michael Krahel, who plays Louis. Louis says and does horrible things, but Mr. Krahel brings a charming personality, a genuine love for his wife, and a true appreciation for life to the character.

Olivier LeRoux is quite good as Dr. Ridgeon, a man of science who may not be as honorable as he seems. He develops feelings for the much younger Jennifer, and those feelings become a factor as he decides who lives and who dies. At least he admits it and is troubled by it — but does being a man of conscience make him a good man?

"The Doctor's Dilemma," first performed in 1906, also has plenty of laughs. Mr. Krahel is quite funny as he borrows money from one doctor in order to pay back another. George Hartpence plays Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonington and is a riot as Bonington enthusiastically claims the key to medicine is to "stimulate the phagocytes!" Meanwhile, the younger Dr. Walpole (Andrew Timmes) chalks up 95 percent of illness to blood poisoning — arguments reach a point that every dramatic cry of "blood poisoning" and "phagocytes" gets a laugh.

The play also has some clever lines, such as Bonington saying surgeon Walpole has no intellect and that he's "A mere surgeon. Wonderful operator, but after all, what is operating? Manual labor."

The night's biggest laughs come from Patrick Rounds who plays a dim newspaper man who's overly enthusiastic over a character's impending death. (When will we newspaper folk get a fair shake?)

Mr. Rounds pushes the humor to its limits while barely avoiding going over the top. Other fine performances come from Mariel Rosati as Jennifer, Teresa Welby as Emmie, the maid who bosses Ridgeon around, and John Devennie who brings a touch of James Mason to the role of Patrick Cullen. Shaw reportedly called "The Doctor's Dilemma" a tragedy as opposed to a comedy, and that would come from the plot, which if described doesn't seem the least bit funny. As compelling and funny as this play is, Shaw is also bound to test our patience.

Characters can go on and on, repeating points endlessly. No matter how fine the language is (and these actors handle the language deftly), it can get exhausting.

But that doesn't come close to chipping away at the power of this production. The cast and crew deserve credit for finding just the right balance, and the intimate setting of the Open Arts PAC makes for a powerful experience.

"The Doctor's Dilemma" continues at Open Arts PAC, 146 Route 130, Bordentown, Oct. 7-8, 8 p.m., Oct. 9, 3 p.m. For tickets and information, go to shakespeare70.org.