

'Major Barbara' - Actors' NET of Bucks County presents Shaw's comedy about money and love

By Anthony Stoeckert
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Christopher Neuman and Mariel Rosati in *Major Barbara*.

In his 1905 comedy *Major Barbara*, George Bernard Shaw explores what it takes for rich people to be rich, for working people to survive, and just how difficult it can be for people with pure intentions to stick with their convictions in a world that's a safe distance from purity.

He also writes about war profiteering and the challenges a powerful nation faces as it enters a new century. It's tempting to say Shaw was prescient but more realistically, he was observing what was going on in his time, and in doing so captured human nature. We should be less amazed by the timeliness of this old play and more bummed out by humanity's ability to evolve.

Still, this is a play from more than a century ago (it's older than the Cubs' last World Series title) that at times is funny and relevant. It's filled with characters we're sure to recognize — the controlling mother, the son at risk of going adrift, the driven millionaire, a daughter inspired by faith, and her suitor who is not driven by God but by his love for her — and it's both quite funny and thought-provoking.

Actors' NET of Bucks County is currently presenting *Major Barbara* at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through Nov. 8. It's an impressive production, with some top-notch acting, fine direction and impressive sets. But this play makes for a long night.

Lady Britomart (Carol Thompson) is concerned for the future of her children. Her son, Stephen Undershaft (Evan O'Rourke) has little experience outside of an education that's taken him around the world. Her daughters are engaged to men whose financial prospects aren't thrilling: Sarah (Joy Woffindin) is set to marry Charles Lomax (Tom Smith), nice enough but something of a goofball. Meanwhile, Barbara (Mariel Rosati) has joined the Salvation Army, earning the rank of Major, and also winning the heart of Adolphus Cusins (Christopher Neuman), a Greek scholar who's happy to bang the Army's drum in order to be near Barbara. As willing as he is to do God's work, Adolphus doesn't hear the calling. Barbara doesn't just want good acts, she wants those acts to be pure, and for all the efforts and money that go into the Salvation Army raises to be clean.

That throws a wrench into her mother's plan to call her estranged husband Andrew (George Hartpence) and ask for his financial help. Andrew's arrival makes for a very funny scene; when he notices five young people instead of three, he assumes he had two more sons than he thought — "I recollect only one son, but so many things have happened..." he says in his confusion.

Mr. Hartpence does fine work as Andrew, playing him a bit sheepish about confronting his family after all this time, but steadfast in his pride in his work and wealth. He is biting with some of Andrew's most pointed observations such as "I'd rather be a murderer than a slave," and "there is only one true morality for every man; but every man has not the same true morality," and also delivers some of the play's funniest lines. During a discussion of Stephen's career prospects, Andrew realizes, "He knows nothing and thinks he knows everything, that clearly points to a political career."

Ms. Thompson shines as Lady Britomart, perfectly capturing a sense of proper class. She's also steadfast in her conviction that she knows what's right for her children. Lady Britomart's opening scene with Stephen (well played by Mr. O'Rourke) is wonderfully funny. Britomart scolds her son endlessly — for reading when she's about to talk, for fiddling with his tie, and for repeating her words. She is calling on him to take his knowledge of the world and help her, but her real goal is to get him, as the man of the house, to agree with her; it's delightful stuff.

The night's best performance belongs to Ms. Rosati as Barbara. She's confident in her beliefs, but that doesn't make Barbara a one-note character. When the Army accepts a large gift from Andrew, Barbara is offended, saying money made from war, and the bloodshed of men, can't be pure, but she clearly understands her superior's decision to accept that money. Her decision to stick by her convictions is a painful, complicated one.

It also plays into Andrew's hand, who sees in Barbara the person he believes should inherit his business, not his son as would be tradition.

And if you think this is some one-sided play, think again. Andrew is a powerful man, but all evidence points to him running a clean company and treating his employees fairly. Yes, there is a

hierarchy with pleasantries and boundaries, but Andrew, for all his riches, relates to his employees far better than his family does, especially Charles, who is chided by an employee (played by James Cordingley) for lighting matches where he shouldn't.

This is a smart, well-acted production with fine direction from Cheryl Doyle and Mr. Hartpence. Mr. Hartpence also designed the set, with interchangeable pieces that create three locations, with Andrew's munitions factory being the most impressive.

But this play tested my patience, and my attention span. As I said before, this is a long night, and not because *Major Barbara* runs more than three hours. I've seen plenty of three-hour plays that hold my interest throughout. Indeed, Actors' NET's season-opening *Raisin in the Sun* approached three hours, and was compelling throughout.

That's just not the case with *Major Barbara*. It has four scenes (actually four acts, but there's just one intermission here), and the two that take places in Lady Britomart's house are near-perfect. It's in those moments where we meet the characters and learn about their challenges and where the drama unfolds effortlessly. A scene at the Salvation Army shelter where Barbara works has some terrific moments between Barbara and Andrew, and an interesting character in Peter (Mort Paterson) a man who's worked all his life, and is heartbroken over needing help. But the scene is bogged down by the character of Bill Walker, a violent man who's angry that his girlfriend has joined the Salvation Army. Ernie Albanesi is effective in the roll, but this is a secondary story that goes on too long, and gets in the way of the business at hand.

The last scene takes places at Andrew's factory, the very location where he gets rich off war, and it has problems as well. The plot wraps up tidily, with some fine back-and-forth between Andrew and Adolphus as both men are confident they're playing the other during a negotiations.

But Shaw repeats himself to the point that things get tiresome. I felt like I was constantly being reminded that Barbara is pure in her devotion of God and that Andrew unashamedly pursues wealth and is convinced he's doing well for himself, his family and the people who work for him. If Shaw had been sitting next me, I would have been tempted to turn to him and say, "All right, all right, I got your point."

Major Barbara continues at The Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through Nov. 8. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors, \$15 students, \$10 children 12 and younger; www.actorsnetbucks.org; 215-295-3694.