

The Pearl Theatre Company revives a neglected early Shaw comedy and gives it fresh, spicy meaning.

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The Philanderer

By Deirdre Donovan



Bradford Cover and Karron Graves in a scene from *The Philanderer*
(Photo credit: Jacob J. Goldberg)

Can anything good come out of Shaw's *The Philanderer*? If it's being revived by the Pearl Theatre Company, the answer is definitely so. This frothy production at New York City Center's Stage II isn't just fun, it's a poignant romp through marriage and family relationships.

The play's quaintness, which is partly due to its age (written in 1893, produced in 1905) is enhanced by this production's lambent lighting (Stephen Petrilli), old-fashioned set (Jo Winiarski), and Victorian-style costumes (Sam Fleming). Theatergoers who admired the regal-looking set for the company's recent production of *Richard II* (Fall 2011) will be astonished at how the same performing space can be morphed into such an intimate setting. The creative team uses each square inch of available space, creating cozy alcoves that fluidly recede from the main playing area. Depending on the scene, one sees a meticulous rendering of a flat in the Victoria District of London, the posh library of a fictive Ibsen Club, or the sterile sitting room in Dr. Paramore's office in Savile Row. Without detracting from any of the action, the intricately contoured sets give the production remarkable depth and dimension.

To be sure, the play introduces themes in which Shaw was to show lasting interest: marriage, family, and vivisection. And his characters here are a colorful crew. For starters, the philanderer Leonard

Charteris (Bradford Cover) is an extremely likeable rogue, and the two women he's romantically involved with—Grace Tranfield (Rachel Botchan) and Julia Craven (Karron Graves)--possess many redeeming qualities. And Dr. Percy Paramore (Chris Mixon), with his fondness for vivisection, is the prototype for all Shavian doctors.

But the play's earmark is that it reveals Shaw's intellectual love affair with Ibsen. Shaw, who penned the influential essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891, felt that everybody should be a student of Ibsen and that his most important dramas should be performed, like Wagner's *Ring*, in a cycle. Shaw comically sends-up Ibsen in *The Philanderer*. But scratch beneath the social satire, and you'll find Shaw genuflecting to the master.

The Philanderer is intellectual vaudeville. You see a collision between the Old Order (embodied by Colonel Craven and Joseph Cuthbertson) and the New Age (embodied by Grace Tranfield and Sylvia) here. During the evening, you watch these young women holding their own as they infiltrate the ranks of men at the Ibsen Club, which serves as a beehive of New Age thinking. To contrast this feminism, there's the office of Dr. Paramore in Act 3, which serves as a fitting backdrop for the Old Guard's way of life and manners. In one of the play's funnier moments, Cuthbertson, Craven, and Paramore enthusiastically join hands around a human skeleton to confirm the Old Order. And it hilariously points up the futility of holding on to the past, and ignoring the present moment.

The acting is good, with a few standouts in the cast. Bradford Cover removes the stuffiness from the character of Charteris. So what you get here is an honest cad, who can't help it if women fall head over heels for him. Karron Graves infuses the character of Julia Craven with a pouty femininity. Her Julia aspires to being an "unwomanly woman" but, alas, becomes more of a spoiled child who needs constant attention. Dominic Cuskern is well-cast as the dramatic critic and Grace Tranfield's father. Shalita Grant brings a fitting tomboyish manner to her Sylvia. And Chris Richards, who does double duty as page and butler, deserves special mention. His physical comedy shines through the evening, and is capable of making the most mundane set change highly entertaining.

The evening runs long! Not only do Shaw's characters keep trying to out-talk each other, but they all have their pet philosophies on society and life. Beyond the speaking characters, there's a real dog that materializes in Act 3, upstaging everybody. This tiny canine is absent from some published versions of *The Philanderer*. But Director Gus Kaikkonen has tossed the pet into this production. And it adds to the domestic warmth.

Granted, *The Philanderer* is lightweight Shaw. But, under the firm grip of director Kaikkonen, this lesser play of Shaw gains more meaning and reveals why Ibsen still matters.

The Philanderer (through February 19)

The Pearl Theatre Company at New York City Center Stage II, 131 West 55th Street (between 6th and 7th Avenues), in Manhattan

For tickets, phone CityTix at 212-581-1212 or visit online www.NYCityCenter.org