

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Things You Can Tell & Things You Can't

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 27th, 2016

When you sit through the many delights proffered by Stephanie Shroyer's staging of *You Never Can Tell* at A Noise Within, you have to wonder why we don't see George Bernard Shaw's plays more frequently on our stages. The wit, charm and fun of intelligent argument — and Shaw is all about intelligent argument — is a refreshing way to spend a couple of hours and emerge revived by such a superior display of mental fireworks.

Written exactly 120 years ago, *You Never Can Tell* beats many another comedy for sheer entertainment value (including others by Shaw) even though — or perhaps *because* — it deals with topical matters that still nag us today, such as women's lib, marriage equality and the one that never goes away: love.

Performed on elegant sets by Don Llewellyn in a smashing array of Victorian costumes by Angela Balogh Calin, the action moves along with spirit and dispatch on a simple if unusual premise: The decorous Mrs. Clandon (the excellent Deborah Strang) has a demure eldest daughter Gloria (Jill Renner) and a playful set of 18-year-old twins — Dolly (Erika Soto) and Philip (Richy Storrs) — from whom she has successfully managed to keep the identity, if not the existence, of their father secret.



l-r, Erika Soto, Deborah Strang and Richy Storrs in *You Never Can Tell*.

Since Mrs. Clandon feels nothing but distaste for marriage and for the husband she has not seen in 18 years — a certain cranky Fergus Crampton (Apollo Dukakis) — Mrs. Clandon is inordinately proud of this achievement and would prefer to believe she had conceived these children on her own. But the grown children have been restless and, in a jovial mood at the seaside resort they are visiting, are clamoring for her to break her silence.

Thanks to a toothache and a handy young dentist, Dr. Valentine (the irrepressible Kasey Mahaffy), the play takes off in several circuitous directions that — surprise! — set about correcting Mrs. Clandon's miscalculations, debunking most of her theories and upsetting everyone's idea of what love is or isn't, including hers.

With the reluctant mediation of a long lost family friend, the solicitor Finch McComas (Jeremy Rabb), the wise observations of a decorous waiter named Boon (the unflappable Wesley Mann) and Boon's no-nonsense son, a lawyer (Freddy Douglas) from whom Boon is estranged, the comedy takes a few semi-serious turns resulting in a couple of unplanned unions and reunions.

The essence of the fun lies in the gleeful picking apart, one by one, of all the smug convictions so pridefully crafted along unconventional lines by these lovely people — and what a perfectly wonderful time the play has doing it. To reveal more would spoil too much, but rest assured that the production is delicious, the acting impeccable, the timing exquisite and some of Shroyer's

directorial touches absolutely priceless.



Kasey Mahaffy and Jill Renner in *You Never Can Tell*.

We have come to expect such well-executed productions of the classics from this company, especially the lighter ones. They are its bread and butter. What we did not expect is a modern *Romeo and Juliet* that, in its effort to include social commentary, misses by a mile.



The cast of *Romeo and Juliet* at A Noise Within.

Director Damaso Rodriguez's program note that a recent performance he witnessed in a depressed area of Cuba, inspired him to stage this Shakespeare classic as if performed "by a poor company in an economically repressed urban center," doesn't cut it. What we get on stage is a trash-littered slum with graffiti, two dumpsters and no logic anywhere. What we hear is tortured Shakespeare, with slovenly, sometimes improvised exchanges yearning to sound hip. There is not a shred of lyricism left, although lyricism is the strongest single reason to mount any production of this very familiar play. A pot-smoking Mercutio, a female Benvolio (why?), a Romeo in dark glasses and a hoodie trying to drum up some chemistry with an unkempt Juliet shuffling aimlessly around the stage are not the answers to anyone's prayers.

West Side Story this is not.



Donnla Hughes and Will Bradley in *Romeo and Juliet*.

A truly "poor company" mounting such a production in a really economically depressed area might elicit admiration; an ersatz-"poor company" doing the same just misfires. It is axiomatic that no one sets out to do a bad production and a good number of seriously talented people are involved in this one, but not one of them can save it. Into the dumpster with it and let's move on. This company and this director are a lot better than this.

And yet, the reinventions keep coming. In his "This Stage" column of April 22, Julio Martinez announced a production from the iconoclastic British writer and poet, Ryan J-W Smith, who, Martinez writes and I quote, "garnered two awards (including the International Award) at Hollywood Fringe 2015," and returns to the Fringe this year with... "two new Bard-esque farces... *MacDeth*, a comedy in iambic verse... at Ruby Theatre (June 2-25) and *Sweet Love Adieu—Romeo and Juliet* meets Monty Python... at McCadden Theatre (June 4-25)."

In addition, Theatricum Botanicum has just announced a modern *Romeo and Juliet* reset in today's East Jerusalem for this summer. That actually could make some sense.

Faites Vos Jeux.

Top image: Kasey Mahaffy (background) and Erika Soto in You Never Can Tell.

Photos by Craig Schwartz,

WHAT: *You Never Can Tell* and *Romeo and Juliet*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

WHEN: For the repertory schedule call 626.356.3200 ext. 1 or go online at www.anoisewithin.com

HOW: Single tickets from \$44; Rush w/ID an hour before performance, \$20; groups (10 up) from \$30/ticket; students w/ID from \$18/ticket.

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