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Review: Timothy Near directs 'Mrs. Warren's Profession' at Cal Shakes

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A prostitute could earn 25 pounds a night in Victorian England while a skilled worker might scratch and claw for an entire year for a meager 62 pounds. Those are the mathematics of class and gender in George Bernard Shaw's too-seldom-staged 1894 gem, "Mrs. Warren's Profession."

One of the master dramatist's "plays unpleasant," "Warren" also marks Shaw's first full-length play. It's dominated by two formidable female characters. On top of that, it's a robustly witty comedy that disdains the trappings of conventional society and champions the merits of the oldest profession. Indeed, Shaw not only defended prostitution, he also saw it as essentially the same trade as marriage, only at a different rate of exchange. He loathed a world where women were reduced to their value as sexual objects, a world where they were overworked and undervalued, a world not unlike today.

Naturally the play, which runs through Aug. 1 at the California Shakespeare Theater in Orinda, was considered so scandalous it was banned in its day.

Here, it's directed by Timothy Near, former longtime head of San Jose Repertory Theatre. She gives the play a juicy revival that fuels Shaw's political discourse with sharp emotional resonance. While

some of the production's vivacious musical interludes, which include instrumental treatments of "Time After Time" and "All Along the Watchtower," seem a little self-conscious, the tug-of-war between the two central female characters is

riveting from start to finish. Near's lusty production captures both the play's boldness and its timelessness.

In the opening tableau, the rough-and-tumble Mrs. Warren (the estimable Stacy Ross) gets strapped into a whalebone corset as rigid as her smile while her high-minded daughter Vivie (an exuberant Anna Bullard) casts off her oppressive undergarments forever. Mrs. Warren built her considerable fortune as a prostitute and she makes no apology about it. After all, her only other choice was toiling away at the lead factory that poisoned her sister. But she takes pains to keep the truth away from her daughter, whom she raises in polite society and who goes on to take high honors in mathematics at Cambridge. They are women of substance, too alike for their own good, doomed to a battle of wills that will scar them both.

Certainly resemblance between the two actresses, both of whom have piercing eyes, heightens the play's sense of tragedy and depth.

Their good looks are not wasted on Frank (Richard Thieriot), a feckless dandy with a way with women and poker. He wastes no time putting the moves on both mother and daughter. The seduction scene between him and Mrs. Warren is an artfully choreographed exercise in the carnal.

Meanwhile, his rival, the money-grubbing blowhard Sir George Croft (Andy Murray), tries to woo Vivie with tales of his capitalist prowess. It turns out he bankrolled her mother in setting up her chain of

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high-class bordellos all over Europe. Sadly for him, the self-righteous Vivie has no qualms about her mother's life as a madam, born as it was of desperate circumstances, but she loathes rich people who profit off the misery of the poor.

If some revivals hit the play's political notes too stridently, and Shaw himself left the male characters a tad under drawn, Near makes sure to ground the economic discourse in deeply moving human conflict. After all, the fashions may have changed a lot since Shaw's day. The bustles and corsets that once constrained women (lavish period costumes by Meg Neville) are long gone. But Shaw's analysis of the relationship between freedom and finance is as keen today as it ever was.

Still, the truly stirring aspect of this revival is its tenderness. The passionate showdown between Ross (who also starred in Near's sublime "Major Barbara" at San Jose Rep) and Bullard in the play's final scene is unexpectedly heartbreaking. The rift between mother and daughter is wider than any ideological quarrel. And it's rare thing indeed to leave a Shaw with a lump in your throat.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza.

"Mrs. Warren's Profession"

by **George Bernard Shaw**

The upshot: A lusty revival of Shaw's classic examination of the world's oldest profession.

Through: Aug. 1

Where: California Shakespeare Theater, Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way, Orinda

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: \$34-\$70. (510) 548-9666. www.calshakes.org.

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