

TRAVEL

Shaw Festival features mystery and clash of ideas

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The good news at this year's Shaw Festival is a well-played staging of Daphne Du Maurier's "Rebecca" and the return of two superb productions from last year, the Moss Hart-George Kaufman comedy romp "You Can't Take It With You" and the Gershwin musical "Foggy Day."

The Shaw Festival in scenic Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, celebrates theater that ushered in our modern world as defined by the long lifetime of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

Shaw's idea plays are the core, but it is often the many side trips that make for the most interesting theater.

The plays are presented in three very different venues. The large, modern festival theater, the intimate Court House Theater, and the Royal George, a small former vaudeville and movie house.

Because the town setting more than lives up to its billing as "The Most Beautiful Town in Canada," the Shaw Festival is a vacation destination that has much to offer for the eye, mind and spirit.

Here's a sampling of some of this year's productions:

Rebecca It is hard for any production of Daphne Du Maurier's "Rebecca" to compete with memories of Alfred Hitchcock's classic film with Laurence Olivier, Joan Fontaine and Judith Anderson.

But director Christopher Newton has created the proper gothic setting and tone for a superb group of actors.

The play takes a cue from the movie with the famous voice-over opening, "Last night, I dreamed I went to Manderley again."

It is to Manderley that the second Mrs. deWinter comes with her husband, Max, an older man who moves in the circles of the rich and sophisticated. She wants to be a "good wife" and a good mistress to the elegant estate. But the shadow of the late Mrs. deWinter, Rebecca, hangs over everything.

Most unnerving of all is Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper who was devoted to Rebecca.

From these elements Du Maurier created a suspenseful tale that offers some interesting commentary on class, women's self esteem and the dangers of keeping secrets.

Severn Thompson is a fragile Mrs. deWinter, at first just happy to be married and away from her previous situation (which is better explained in the film version). She captures the nervous anxiety perfectly.

Peter Krantz is a dashing Max, just the sort of man who could win a younger woman's heart. Krantz bears a strong resemblance to a young Orson Welles and suggests that style.

The villain of this piece is Mrs. Danvers, a spooky servant from hell if ever there was one and played with menacing quiet and frightful gazes by Sharry Flett. Flett has the most showy scene and she plays it for all its worth.

Brigitte Robinson is Max's witty, sometimes nasty sister Beatrice. Robinson snags off her hon mots with authority and a look of self assurance that's perfect.

Simon Bradbury's interpretation of Jack as a brash loudmouth is the biggest departure from the film, which cast the always elegant if somewhat sinister George Sanders in the role.

William Schmueck's minutely detailed English manor set is eye-enticing.

Getting Married Shaw wrote plays about ideas. Often, his characters don't talk,

Table with columns for DESTINATION, 1999, and 1998. Lists various international destinations and their corresponding prices for 1999 and 1998.

Shaw Festival
At the Festival Theatre
Bernard Shaw's "Heartbreak House," through Oct. 31
Kaufman and Hart's "You Can't Take It With You," through July 24
Noel Coward's "Easy Virtue," through Oct. 30
Arthur Miller's "All My Sons," through Oct. 31
At the Court House Theatre
Bernard Shaw's "Getting Married," through Sept. 26
Harley Granville Barker's "The Madras House," through Sept. 26
Charles Wildrac's "S.S. Tencacity," through Sept. 25
Anton Chekov's "Uncle Vanya," through Sept. 25
At the Royal George Theatre
Daphne DuMaurier's "Rebecca," through Nov. 28
The Gershwin's "A Foggy Day," through Oct. 31
For ticket information, call 1-800-511-SHAW.

they debate, they make speeches. The dialogue is quite often rudely witty and the playwright gives each side its due before bringing down the hammer to his point of view.

Sometimes this battle of wit and ideas makes for interesting theater. At other times, it makes for overlong, tedious evenings. Of course, Shaw wrote a lot of plays and some are less didactic than others. His most popular

hits, "Pygmalion" and "The Devil's Disciple," are prime examples of a romantic comedy and rousing melodrama, respectively.

"Getting Married" is an argument play. It was written in one of Shaw's white heats about England's restrictive divorce laws, circa 1908.

It's wedding day and a young couple are having second thoughts about marriage and their potential legal and financial liabilities. Meanwhile, the members of the young woman's family represent various conditions and attitudes about marriage. As the play proceeds, the characters debate marriage from every possible angle.

A few examples of Shaw on marriage will suffice: "Love is a gross exaggeration of the difference between one person and everybody else." "The sole and sufficient reason why people should be granted a divorce is that they want one."

The cast is very adept at this repartee and even give life to their characters beyond serving as mouthpieces. Especially good are Guy Bannerman as the jovial grocer William Colline, Sarah Orenstein as the determined not to marry Lesbian Grantham, Anthony Bokenn as the wise bishop-father and Simon Bradbury as the severe Soames (in a decade switch from his "Rebecca" performance).

The first half of the play is funny even if it never develops dramatically. The second act

becomes tedious, especially with the introduction of the free-thinking Mrs. George Collins, who goes into an unconvincing trance so she can give a speech on women's rights.

This isn't so much theater as debate.

Heartbreak House
This is one of the major plays in the Shaw canon but also one of the hardest to decipher. Though first performed in 1920, the play was written to comment on some of the forces which drew Europe into World War I. But except for the final scene, during which bombs can be seen in the distance from a terrace, there is little direct discussion of politics or war.

A number of people gather at the country house of the eccentric Captain Shotover, his daughter, Hesione Hushabye, and her dashing husband, Hector. A young friend of Hesione, Ellie Dunn, arrives, followed by her good-natured father and the older businessman she is planning to marry. Rounding out the house guests is the captain's other daughter and her brother-in-law and paramour.

The basic action revolves around the young Ellie Dunn and her decision to marry for financial reasons, but there is endless discussion about love and relationships and boredom. The love entanglements seem extremely juvenile.

Director Tadeusz Bradecki gives us an intriguing opening as



PHOTO BY DAVID COOPER

Ellie pushes open the curtain to the stylized set, suggesting ship sails, upon which silent movies play like shadows. This is a promise never fulfilled.

At more than three hours long, this is often hard going. Some of the arguments and witty phrases are riveting but they are not drama. Attempts at physical comedy only look ridiculous and out of sync.

Most of the actors are quite expert at playing these "veddy, veddy British" characters. But Jim Mezon, who was

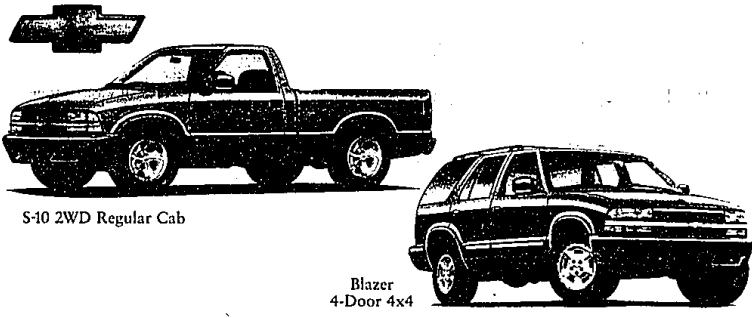
Dangerous encounter: Severn Thompson as Mrs. deWinter has a talk with the chilling Mrs. Danvers, played by Sharry Flett.

excellent in last year's "Major Barbara," overplays the businessman Boss Mangan to such an extent that his character loses all sense.

Gordon Rand has some high comic moments as the rascal Hector. Best of all is Sarah Orenstein, who invests the free-spirited and disenchanted Hesione with a naturalness that plays against the calculated dialogue.

The great Douglas Rain gets to crack wise as Captain Shotover, a stand-in for Shaw, himself.

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