

THEATRICAL REVIEW

UA not too serious with comedy

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

The only way to take a Shaw comedy seriously is not to, and that's what Edmond Williams, directing "Misalliance" for the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance, has done.

Or not done.

This production of the century-old play, expounding on marriage, sex, socialism and the "new woman" — who still seems pretty hip — rips along at screwball pace, bouncing from riff to riff as if there were doors to be slammed somewhere.

Like Shakespeare, with whom he's often compared, Shaw has a lot to say, and though he says it smartly, the speechifyin' can get tedious at full length. But this is close-shave Shaw, with deep cuts in the text so it clocks in at a tidy, belly-laugh-filled two hours. Most high points of arguments still get hit, without any one notion being hammered home. Like the physical setting, it manages to be both grounded and somewhat loose.

"Misalliance" is set in one afternoon in one location, a lovely solarium-like construction by Brad Lee that paradoxically suggests the mental and meta-physical clutter of the nouveau-riche Tarleton family, whose patriarch John (Seth Panitch) bounces with a lust for life, ideas and, sometimes, women who are not his wife. His daughter Hypatia (Bridget Winder), although a free spirit ostensibly engaged to Bentley (John Paul

"MISALLIANCE"

■ **What:** George Bernard Shaw comedy performed by the UA Department of Theatre and Dance.

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. today through Friday, with a closing 2 p.m. matinee Sunday; no performance Saturday.

■ **Where:** Marian Galloway Theatre in Rowand-Johnson Hall.

■ **Cost:** \$18 general, \$15 for seniors and UA faculty and staff, \$12 for students and children.

■ **More:** 205-348-3400.
www.theatre.ua.edu.

Snead), considered a mental giant though a physical weakling, is driven by wanderlust. Grounded, humorless son Johnny (William Rowland) serves up indignation and threats of violence to Bentley, and the more practical, loving matriarch known only as Mrs. Tarleton (Rebecca Kling) avoids being simply the straight woman by virtue of Kling's warmth and wit. Lord Summerhays (Jeff Horger), droll father of wimp Bentley, although apparently Tarleton's contemporary, shows that an added generation of wealth, privilege and life can't dim a man's predilections, only perhaps temper modes of expression.

Hypatia believes, in a bit of meta-commentary, there's too much talk, talk, talk, showing nothing new under the sun, at least in the past century, when it comes to affairs of the heart and lower down: sexual dalliance, shifting allegiances, wan-

dering eyes, older men lusting for their — and others' — youth. It's served with a side order of classism and ridicule for the moneyed elite, though with this sharp cut and high-energy delivery, the effect is more Marx Brothers than Marxist.

Change falls from the sky, courtesy of a perhaps inadvertent yet still hilarious prop bit, in the form of dashing pilot Joseph Percival (Michael Witherell) and engaging passenger Lina Szczepanowska (Amber Gibson), bringing romantic intrigue, betrayal, sexual freedom, liberation and more; quite a lot considering the plane spared no room for luggage.

And when the skirt-chasing runs out and even charming Lina threatens to yak men out of loving her, Shaw hews Raymond Chandler's admonition (as yet unwritten in 1909): "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand."

So Julius "Gunner" Baker (Samuel Hardy) arrives as a second, less risible *deus ex machina*, or plot contrivance No. 2, however you'd like to view it. Baker craves justice for a perceived slight to his recently deceased mother. Hypatia wants Percival to shut up and kiss her. Percival needs more cash to pursue adventures. Johnny hopes to punch someone, Bentley cries for pity, Lina strives to continue to live independently, and pretty much every man wants to have Lina. Who winds up with whom isn't satisfying in the romantic-comedy sense so much as it is in the Shakespearean, again, recog-

nizing the futility of applying logic and reason to human activity.

"Misalliance" is famous for its suggestion that marriages would work just as well if men and women were thrown together via lottery — someone should probably do a study of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's application of that principle — and there isn't a solid conclusion in sight, only, as Mr. Sondheim said, more questions, different kinds.

What you will discover is absolutely hilarious work by Panitch and Snead, physically and verbally ever-present in the smallest of moments, at the pinnacle of a team of actors working at peak comedic efficiency.

It's only a mild slam on Shaw, or perhaps on previous productions, to say, surprisingly, there's not a dull or wasted moment. That it ties together, without falling to the temptation of easy answers, with many constituent parts flying off at different energies — Horger's stolid character absorption gives away deeper feelings with a look, while Panitch's effusive portrayal punctuates reversals with silence, stopped motion — is tribute to both Williams' hand and the cast's cohesion.

It's yet another display of UA's depth of talent at all levels, from faculty (Panitch) to master's students (Kling, Horger, Witherell and Rowland) to undergrads (Winder, Gibson, Hardy and Snead), and yet another mark of how the upper class doesn't necessarily rule the lower.