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Words in their manyfold forms.

Breaking The Leg – “Misalliance” By UATD

November 13, 2012 //

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Did you ever watch “The Three Stooges” or “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” when you were young? Do you recall people being slapped in the face by fish, hammered by wrenches, poked in the eyes? Shows like those were a parade of physical slapstick humor that brought laughter and molded a brand of comedy.

Well, in George Bernard Shaw’s “Misalliance,” you’ll find none of that. What you do end up with, however, is what I like to call intellectual slapstick: A series of conversations each having their own punches, hair tugs and pratfalls brought about solely through words and expressions.

Directed by Ed Williams, The University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance’s production of “Misalliance” – with shows at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and a show at 2 p.m. on Sunday – is one that may not appeal to everyone’s sense of humor. After all, the subtler art of wit and pointed social commentary has been lost amid today’s comedy deluge of laugh tracks and the severe and extreme exploitation of physical comedy that would likely make Larry, Curly and Moe cringe. Beyond that, the set up is perhaps a bit slow. However, I like to think of it like a roller coaster coming to its first major hill. First, everyone must get into the cars, then the climb must upward go at an anticipatory pace until the apex is conquered and the thrills commence through natural forces like momentum and gravity.

“Misalliance” is a show about class, style and propriety, and the tendency to have a lack thereof in private company. Set in England, the play is centered on the house of the middle class businessman who rose to wealth by selling eponymous underwear, John Tarleton (Seth Panitch). His son Johnny (William Rowland) is a somewhat uneducated and dull man, believing everything must be proper, physicality is the epitome of manliness and books are really just not his style. His daughter Hypatia (Bridget Winder) is the proper daughter until alone with a man that holds her interest. While she is engaged to the brainy and completely spineless son of the aristocratic Lord Summerhays (Jeff Horger), one Bentley (John Paul Snead) by name, she still finds time to toy with the emotions and waning sexuality of Bentley’s father. Mrs. Tarleton (Rebecca Kling) is left trying to be the voice of propriety and order in her own household while Mr. Tarleton bandies about quotes from random literature and long winded, pseudo-philosophical rants.

And then, excitement and adventure drop in in the form of a crashed airplane carrying Bentley’s school friend Joseph Percival (Michael Witherell) and the intriguing, atypical and quite abnormal

female Polish trapeze artist, Lina Szczepanowska (Amber Gibson). As the families are still reacting to their sudden visitors, the unseen arrival of a man with a revolver in hand (Samuel Hardy) sends the roller coaster over the hill.

There is much to be said about the commentary available in the script of "Misalliance." I think that much of the meatier commentary, much like the meatier comedy, comes into play in the second act. While America may have fallen out of having an aristocracy, a rich working class and a lower class, we still have a distinguishable class system of the affluent and extravagant, the working class striving to reach affluence and the poor. Shaw delivers some rather pointed needles of wit at some of the issues of class and societal standards, and they are brought to light quite ably by a formidable cast.

The first act, slow though it may be, is stolen almost entirely by Panitch's Tarleton. He reminded me often of Scrooge McDuck, were Scrooge's interest not in gold coins but rather in libraries, knowledge and suggested reading material. He creates a youthful, frenetic energy trapped in an older man's body, desperate to truly live. That energy is constantly leaking in jerky, haphazard motions and perhaps even more haphazard speech, making one wonder if he's entirely sober or sane at times. Snead's Bentley delivered some excellent laughs as the closest thing to slapstick in the play. The wimp that curls up in a ball and yelps in pain when people clasp his shoulder, Snead's facial expressions were perhaps the most pitch-perfect part of the comedy. Hardy's gunman brings some great laughs, particularly intellectual, as the lower class man with enough education to ramble on about socialism and revolution, but perhaps not quite enough education to really know what he's talking about, and certainly not enough courage to do anything about it. Perhaps the most appropriate casting, though, was found with Gibson. Her character was meant to truly lob a grenade into the societal normalcy and decorum of the show, and it did. She played the confident, self-assured woman very naturally, to no surprise. As her character says, "I am strong; I am skillful; I am brave; I am independent; I am unbought; I am all that a woman ought to be," so too is Gibson in real life.

The costumes, designed by the immensely talented Tiffany Harris, were wonderful, very authentic-looking and appropriate. I particularly enjoyed Tarleton's suit and, to be weirdly specific, Lina's boots which looked to be custom-made for the show. The scenery was masterfully designed. I have a certain fondness for the traditional invisible fourth wall style of show, and the set designer, Brad Lee, created an elegant, believable and sensible scenery.

With only four shows remaining, I would say that "Misalliance" is one you should see if you like witty, intelligent humor and solid acting. If you don't, well, maybe the show and you would be a bit of a misalliance.

Eh? Eh? See, it's funny because- Oh, never mind. The show's much funnier than I am.

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