

EYO season opener shows good potential for First Orchestra

Edmonton Youth Orchestra
Convocation Hall
Sunday November 6

review by Mike Spindloe

The Edmonton Youth Orchestra opened its 37th season in impressive style Sunday afternoon at Convocation Hall with a varied and challenging program, supported by what conductor Michael Massey described as an "unusually large crowd for a first concert."

The EYO's First Orchestra, including players 14 to 24 years of age, looked slightly cramped up on Con Hall's stage, but managed to appear and sound thoroughly professional for the most part. To be sure, there were a few lapses, both musical and logistical, including the beginning of the second part of the concert, when three players were locked out of their dressing rooms. This could have been managed into a lightening, humorous episode, but rather it was just a slight delay to the afternoon's main attraction, Anton Dvorak's "New World" Symphony.

Dvorak's most popular work was given an enthusiastic reading by the EYO. Its rich melodic themes contrast with frequent transitions in tempo, mixed with startling dynamic contrasts. All of these were handled well by the orchestra, especially during the tricky allegro passages in the fourth movement, and the tempo changes

of the first. Oddly enough, it was in the second movement, the emotional Largo, that the EYO seemed less confident, making several hesitant entries. Overall, however, the work was well-performed and made a perfect ending for the program, begun with Mozart's Overture to *The Magic Flute*.

On this piece they seemed slightly nervous at first but settled in to give the epic-sounding work a spirited reading. The violins, while occasionally sounding a tad shrill, negotiated the prominent runs admirably, while the overall balance of sound was good.

The second selection of the first half was the best played of the show, though. Kodaly's "Harry Janos Suite", an early 20th century programmatic work with its origins in opera, is perhaps, as Massey described it, "the only piece of music in the world that starts with a sneeze," but the EYO ended it with a bang. Actually, the sneeze wasn't too shabby either.

From the beginning of the first movement, Prelude, the orchestra was more relaxed than it had been. The ending fortissimo of that movement literally shook the hall, while its interior cauldron of colours was clearly displayed. The second movement, Viennese Musical Clock, has a march feel which was set well by the percussion, beginning with a figure on the chimes. The turbulent fourth movement featured the wind section to good effect; this gave way to the flowing Intermezzo, which restored a sense of balance after the Battle and Defeat of Napoleon. The finale was an example of spirited ensemble playing that made it easy to forget one was listening to an amateur orchestra.

This calibre of opener bodes well for the EYO's current season. With barely two months of once-a-week rehearsals behind them, the orchestra is gelling as a musical unit; we can look forward to future presentations with an eager ear.

Shaw play at Citadel has momentum

Major Barbara
Citadel Shochtor Theatre
through November 27

review by Kevin Law

The Undershafts are not your average English Edwardian family. Andrew Undershaft is a munitions maker and the wealthiest man in the world. His wife, Lady Britomart, is a Victorian prig from whom he is separated. His son Stephen, is an ineffectual fop, and his daughter Barbara, the closest to him in strength of personality, is a major in the Salvation Army. Included in this eccentric family is another daughter, Sarah, and her prudish fiance Charles, as well as Barbara's fiance, Adolphus Cusins, a perceptive and intelligent professor of Greek.

Strangely, the Undershaft fortune cannot be left to anyone in the immediate family, for traditionally, an orphan must be awarded the role of heir and proprietor of Undershaft industries, just as the senior Undershaft himself was so cast.

This odd assortment of character and plot is the basis for the George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, currently being staged at the Citadel. It is a sharply pointed production contrasting altruism with selfishness, poverty with riches, and capitalism against socialism in a parable about war, poverty, and religion.

...all moral problems have their source in economics...

concepts of social ills with much wit and irony, and the Citadel's production does not fail in fully realizing the barbed Shavian humor inherent in the play.

The exposition of Act 1 is fine as the humorous interplay between family members provides an introduction to the characters. Judy Cooke, as the stereotypical shrill, prim, and unsatisfied post-Victorian matriarch, delivers her many capricious lines with just the right amount of pretentiousness, and Craig Eldridge is laudable as the stiff, obtuse Stephen. Particularly good, too, is Richard McMillan as the uptight Charles Lomax, sputtering "I say" in disbelieving tones of proper English.

The wit really starts to fly when the rest of the familial cast appears, including Undershaft Sr., Adolphus Cusins and Barbara. The introductions of who's who and general small talk are Shavian parody at its finest, while the regal and statuesque drawing room heightens the sense of place.

Perhaps the finest scenes of the play however, occur in the dramatically powerful situation at the Salvation Army mission in Act 2. Here is where Shaw presents his darkest image of conflict of ideals. The assimilation of scathing wit and angry confrontation is superbly staged on a grimy warehouse-like set. There are brilliant paradoxes regarding the true cause of social ills.

Shaw maintains the cold-sober argument that all moral problems have their source in economics, as we witness Major Barbara lose the nearly saved soul of the antagonistic and poverty stricken Bill Walker. Walker, played with frightening ferocity by Bruce McFee, slides back into cynical anger after witnessing the Salvation Army hypocritically accepting money from Undershaft the arms maker and Bodger the distiller. When Walker sneers "What price salvation now?" at Barbara, it sends chills down the spine. As well, Greg Campbell as Snobby Price, the rummy pretending to be saved, makes the audience feel his insincerity, adding to Shaw's unconventional imagery in the scene.

Shaw boldly knocks the Salvation Army as ineffective and self-righteous. Their soul saving is more successful as a vehicle for good feelings and back patting amongst the soldiers themselves, instead of being a realistic and material means for improving the lot of the destitute people of slum London.

It is not enough to simply save souls, Shaw seems to be saying during the confrontation of ideals that Undershaft and Cusins argue about. Donal Donnelly is relaxed as Undershaft and Jeremy Henson full of youthful energy as they play off each other in an argument that Undershaft clearly wins. He saves the souls of the workers at his munitions factory because of the prosperity he provides for them. Poverty, in Shaw's eyes, is the true crime of society, and Undershaft claims he is perfectly willing to sell his dynamite for peaceful purposes, or for the eradication of injustice, if humanity only had sense enough to make proper use of his product.

Unfortunately, in Act 3, the play begins to waver during the discussion at the munitions factory. This last act is long on dialogue and socialist didacticism, and sadly, it offsets the enjoyment of the comedy and wit of Act 1 and the melodrama of Act 2. This is partly a problem with the play itself, and Director Leslie Yeo strives hard to make it work, but the strain of effort is evident. The actors are nicely staged in formal arrangements, and the set is appropriately metaphorical, all heavenly white and pure with a huge cannon pointing skyward (a sword of righteousness), but the actors cannot sustain any dramatic intensity from Shaw's wordy resolution.

As Undershaft and Cusins hammer out a deal for Cusins to become heir, Shaw seems to be trying to make a case for responsible intellect controlling power, lest it become fanaticism, but Donnelly and Henson fire off their lines so rapidly at one another, their timing doesn't allow believability of emotion in the words they speak. Alison Macleod, as Barbara, speaks her lines with more emphasis and dramatic flair in her mannerisms, but it is hard to be fully convinced that such a quick, secular, capitalist conversion can take place through the wordiness of her soliloquy.

Although somewhat anti-climactic, Act 3 really is more a problem of scripting than acting or staging. On the whole, this is a well done production of a play that is likely not easy to produce. Leslie Yeo proves a fine first time director. His stage arrangements are exact and the play rarely lapses in momentum, displaying an ease of snappy direction that never slows down or misses a beat. The sets are impressive and the acting is professional, so that all in all, *Major Barbara* is a worthwhile production of major Shaw.

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