

# The Chocolate Soldier

by Oscar Straus, directed by Guillermo Silva-Marín  
Toronto Operetta Theatre, Jane Mallett Theatre, Toronto  
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by Christopher Hoile, Principal Reviewer for Stage Door

## A Delicious Confection



What a delicious confection "The Chocolate Soldier" is! Though not as well known as Franz Lehár or Emmerich Kálmán, Oscar Straus (1870-1954) created one of the finest Silver Age Viennese operettas by looking for inspiration, of all people, George Bernard Shaw. "The Chocolate Soldier" ("Der tapfere Soldat",

literally "The Brave Soldier") is based on Shaw's 1894 comedy "Arms and the Man". Shaw stipulated that none of his dialogue be used and, foolishly, asked for none of the royalties from what was to become a major hit. The work was last seen in Ontario at the Shaw Festival in 1997. Toronto Operetta Theatre production, the work's first professional production in Toronto, is superior in every way.

Young Bulgarian Nadina idolizes her hero and fiancé Alexius, who was once betrothed to her cousin Mascha, more from her innately romantic nature than from any insight into his character. This all changes when a handsome Swiss soldier named Bummerli, fighting on the side of the enemy Serbians, seeks shelter in Nadina's house from Bulgarian pursuers. Such is his charm that Nadina, Mascha and Nadina's mother all fall for him and, overcoming their patriotism, help hide and protect him.

By using Shaw's play as the basis for his plot, Straus was able to create an operetta that avoids the devices of disguise, mistaken identity and unequal birth that would later become clichés of the genre. Instead the operetta is satire of machismo and the idealization of war as well as a clever comedy of character. This is even more evident in Agnes Burnelle's new English book and Adam Carstairs' witty lyrics. The show's biggest hit is "My Hero", but the work is not so much a series of show-stopping arias as a delightful concatenation of ensemble pieces from trios like the lovely "Three Ladies Sat" that closes Act 1 to quartets and sextets. The Jane Mallett Theatre is the perfect venue for such an intimate work.

The show is anchored by four performers—Elizabeth Beeler, Robert Longo, Shannon Mercer and Curtis Sullivan—who are not only excellent singers but also fine comic actors thoroughly at home on stage. Longo, with a naturalness and wry humour perfect for the title character, sings a rich



baritone that is also bright and agile. He brings out such beauty in Bummerli's Act 2 song "If We Could Do What We've a Mind To" one wonders why it is not excerpted more often. It would be hard to imagine a more ideal Nadina than Shannon Mercer. With her pure, shining soprano she sings "My Hero" with just the right combination of fervor and innocence, and expertly details Nadina's inner conflict between unfounded adoration for her idol Alexius and her growing attraction for the down to earth Bummerli.

Beeler is a pleasure throughout as Nadina's cousin Mascha, precisely capturing the comedy of a woman desperate for a boyfriend but who also seeks to maintain some sense of dignity. Sullivan is a bit young for Nadina's father Colonel Popoff but catches his satirical nature so well his every comic remark hits home. As Alexius, Keith Klassen is fairly stiff, which suits the character, but he could have played up this popinjay's pomposity even more. Margaret Maye as Aurelia and Giles Tomkins as Massakroff are both effective.



Conductor Wayne Strongman, best known for his work in contemporary opera with Tapestry New Opera Works, shows a real flair for the Viennese repertoire. Leading the 15-member orchestra he consistently relates the songs back to their dance origins, proving himself a master of the rubato that gives operetta its lilt and lightness. As chorus master he draws a beautifully blended sound from the chorus, particularly in the reprise of "My Hero" in Act 2.

With his set design of large, hinged panels, scenic artist

David Rayfield has found an elegant solution for presenting the work's two contrasting settings. Stage director Guillermo Silva-Marin has focussed closely on the work as a comedy of character and as a result has led the TOT to a new level of subtlety in performance. This "Chocolate Soldier" is an ideal treat for the holidays, a warm, delectable entertainment you will savour long after the final chords have sounded.

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