

Dec. 29, 2003. 01:00 AM

Toronto Operetta Theatre takes a bite out of *Chocolate Soldier*

WILLIAM LITTLER



Poor George Bernard Shaw! When reluctantly prevailed upon to allow his Balkan comedy *Arms And The Man* to be turned into a Viennese operetta, the usually canny Irishman insisted upon two conditions: that his dialogue not be used and that he receive no royalties.

What an expensive mistake the second condition turned out to be, as anyone must have realized who turned up at the St. Lawrence Centre's Jane Mallett Theatre Saturday evening to witness Toronto Operetta Theatre's first major production of the season.

To Shaw's eventual horror, *The Chocolate Soldier* turned out to be one of the greatest hits of the silver age of operetta.

It might have been as big a hit on film, had Louis B. Mayer agreed to the playwright's attempt to play catch-up in the royalties department by demanding an exorbitant fee for its transfer to the silver screen.

But Mayer balked and anyone who arrived at the Jane Mallett Theatre with memories of MGM's *The Chocolate Soldier*, starring Risë Stevens and Nelson Eddy, could only have been thoroughly confused by the tale told on its cramped stage.

The film wound up keeping the title but using an entirely different tale, borrowed from Molnar's *The Guardsman*.

So much for the ways of Hollywood. Typically, Toronto Operetta Theatre preferred the ways of Vienna, offering an ultra-traditional production of Oscar Straus's 1908 operetta, appropriately costumed, framed within functionally simple sets and accompanied by a 16-piece orchestra wrapped thinly around the lip of the pit-less theatre's curved stage.

Given the lack of a real pit, conductor Wayne Strongman wasn't always able to maintain an ideal balance between instruments and voices but he led a generally spirited account of Straus's score (as the spelling of his surname suggests, Oscar was not related to Johann), which, contrary to the general operetta rule, actually seemed to improve as the evening progressed.

The great hit of the score, the Bulgarian maiden Nadina's love-sick "My Hero," comes early in the first act (Toronto Operetta presented the three acts as two) but as an experienced operetta composer, Straus knew well enough



to bring it back again and again, to the eventual advantage of the full-throated Toronto Operetta Theatre Chorus.



Shannon Mercer sang it quite handsomely the first time around and made an attractive Nadina throughout her encounters with the (Swiss) Chocolate Soldier himself, in the person of baritone Robert Longo. Elizabeth Beeler as her cousin Mascha and Margaret Maye as her mother Aurelia joined her in a particularly well-executed rendition of the first act trio, with Giles Tomkins's Captain Massakroff, Keith Klassen's Alexius and Curtis Sullivan's Col. Popoff rounding out the list of principal characters.

The traditional English version of the operetta sounds rather stilted today, so director Guillermo Silva-Marin was probably wise to substitute a newer and wittier book by Agnes Burnelle, with lyrics by Adam Carstairs, the latter offering as one of his happier inspirations the following expression of military bravado: "There are few humanitarians in the ranks of the Bulgarians."

Silva-Marin's direction may have lacked subtlety and imagination but it respected the character of the work, which is more than can be said of some European operetta productions these days.

Romance and sentimentality resist renovation and *The Chocolate Soldier* is liberally outfitted with both.

A work of the same calibre as Franz Lehar's contemporaneous *The Merry Widow*?

The British operetta scholar Gervase Hughes thinks so. Although I disagree with him, I'm grateful for a production that reminds us what a gently charming evening *The Chocolate Soldier* affords.

Performances continue through Saturday.

Photos by Gary Beechey