Dark mood of Shaw's black comedy is well played

HEARTBREAK HOUSE
Written by George Bernard Shaw.
Directed by Edward Gilbert.
At the Huntington Theatre, through Dec. 21.

By BARBARA MASI

"I built a house for my daughters, and opened the doors thereof. That men might come for their choosing, and their betters spring from their love; but one of them married a numskull; the other a liar wed. . . ."

So laments old, retired Capt. Shotover in George Bernard Shaw's "Heartbreak House," modeled after works of Chekov about cultured, leisureed Europe before World War I.

Shotover, thinking he could protect his children from the degradation of proper English society, built his house in the shape of a ship, like Noah's Ark. Unfortunately, not only were his daughters the worst of the breed, his house was also constantly filled with tuxedoed guests looking for entertainment.

The only character who has ever accomplished anything is Shotover, "a crazy, old sea captain" who has failed in his efforts to save the world. He now drinks rum to stay sober. At 88, he continues to work in order to support his daughter Hestione, "a slumslut female trying to save off a double chin." Her husband, whose chief occupation is to be married to Hestione, lies to young females about false adventures. The poor young singer, Ellie, plans to "save my gruff seafarer tone, bandy legged, stooped white beard and pea coat."

Jonathan Farwell as Captain Shotover and Jack Ryland as Hector Hushabye

"Heartbreak" took Shaw a long time to write. Having begun it in 1913, Shaw dropped it with the onset of World War I to turn to writing pamphlets opposing the war. Depressed and frustrated, he stopped writing completely after the son of his dearest friend, the actress Mrs. Campbell, was killed in France. More than any other work, the play has moments of darkness, of bitter cynicism, unsoftened as Shaw usually allows — by his fantastic wit.

"Heartbreak House" is Shaw's black comedy.

In his preface to the play, Shaw wrote, "They took the only part of our society in which there was leisure for high culture, and make it an economic, political, and as far as practicable, a moral vacuum, immediately filled it up with sex and with all sorts of refined pleasures. It was a very delightful place at its best. . . . In other moments it was disastrous."

The Huntington Theatre Company often played the dark mood splendidly. I say often, since some of the cast fell at times into the dry, wry grin, and stooping ways of a bad 1930s movie. This style, along with the accents of the British upper class employed placed a deadly drag on scenes, especially in Act I.

There were exceptions. With no exaggeration, Jonathan Farwell's portrayal of Shotover was sublime. His thorough enjoyment of his role was apparent in the careful timing and delivery of every phrase, in the physical invention of character from perfectly chosen bits — the set of his face as the ancient mariner, the gruff, silver tongue, heftily logged, stooped over, with white beard and pea coat.

The set was the house's drawing room, but the expected contents of the room were replaced by what the Captain thought should be there: his drawing table, books on the floor, dynamite on the bookshelves. By employing every object available, Farwell transformed the static set into his ship.

(To turn to page 17)

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