

# ARTS & LITERATURE

## Shotgun Players stage a Shaw shocker

Local actor John Mercer featured in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

Review by Robert Lee Hall

Mothers and daughters. It would be nice if the relationship were always warm and loving, but sometimes it isn't; sometimes it's a trial.

And what if mom is a whore?

That's the central situation in George Bernard Shaw's still-provocative *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, now in a crisp, watchable production at Shotgun Players in Berkeley.

Penned early in Shaw's career, in 1893, it was his third play. Judged too shocking, even immoral, to be performed (there were theater censors in England until surprisingly recently), it wasn't staged until 1925. Nowadays we take its frankness in stride, but if we project ourselves a century back in time, to when Victoria still sat squinty-eyed on the throne, it becomes breathtakingly daring.

Shaw must have chuckled gleefully as he wrote it.

And, of course, it's not the prostitution theme that lifted his contemporaries' brows to their hairlines, it's his attack on the hypocrisy that oiled the machine of Victorian society. Shaw loved tossing monkey wrenches into the gears of that machine, and if, as a consequence, it lurched and burped and changed direction for the better, he'd done his work.

The play begins at a country house, where brisk, confident young Vivie Warren, is just getting to know her mother, Kitty, who has boarded her out most of her life.



bargained for when mom confesses she manages a string of brothels all over Europe. Mrs. Warren is wary of revealing this truth to her daughter but proud of the common-sense grit that has made her a successful businesswoman.

At first taken aback, Vivie, who is also strong-willed and ambitious, comes to admire her mother – but for how long? In order to become her own woman, must she reject her? Two insistent men who want to marry Vivie complicate matters, not least because one of them could be her father and the other might be her brother.

Shocking indeed!

Under director Susannah Martin's confident hand, Shotgun Players gives this simmering subversion a sturdy, well-acted production, on a stage set of ingeniously revolving rooms by Steve Decker, nicely lit by Allen Willner, featuring sound, including birdsong and chugging locomotives, by Sara Huddleston. The handsome costumes are by Rebecca Redmond, though there's one great miscalculation: Mrs. Warren's vulgar purple and red dress might be right for a two-shilling whore, but it's all wrong for a shrewd busi-

nesswoman. Mrs. Warren is wary of revealing this truth to her daughter but proud of the common-sense grit that has made her a successful businesswoman. ers Shaw's entertaining polemics with vigor: Emily Jordan as the spunky Vivie, whose future life is at stake; Trish Mulholland as her hard-charging mom, Mrs. Warren; Joseph O'Malley as Vivie's jack-in-the-box beau, Frank; Nick Sholley as the solid, steady-on friend of the family, Praed; Piedmont resident John Mercer as the bluff, predatory Major Crofts, the play's smarmy spokesman for the delights of hypocrisy; and Rick T. Williams as Frank's flustered clergyman/father, Reverend Gardner.

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John Mercer as the infamous Crofts, and Emily Jordan as the sharp-witted Vivie, in Shotgun Players' current production of George Bernard Shaw's Victorian-era barb, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, playing on Ashby Avenue in Berkeley through April 20.

## Lights out!

Comedy collides with tragedy at Berkeley Rep

Review by Robert Lee Hall

If Samuel Beckett were Woody Allen, he might have written *Tragedy*: a tragedy, now in a world premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theater. But he wasn't and he didn't – though if he were and he had, the result would likely be smarter and funnier.

The responsibility for this oddball play actually lies, for better or



By Ann Davis

Following a legal opinion that the Becker proposal to rebuild Havens School falls within Measure E funding constraints, the Citizens Oversight Committee chose to render no opinion on the plan at their meeting last Thursday.

According to a letter by district bond counsel Jeff Kuhn, Measure E funds may be used for replacing Havens School, but probably not for demolishing and replacing structures that have no seismic problems. Havens' multi-purpose room and perhaps the Schoolmates structures would fall under that category, Kuhn said.

Another Havens building whose status is unclear is the second-grade wing – the original part of the school. It was the focus of discussion at the COC meeting. The second-grade wing was initially thought to have minimal struc-

## Shaw

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Rooting for the New Woman, Shaw takes on the old society that makes it so hard for her to make her way with her head held high, yet, more than a century after he wrote his play, the battle for equal opportunity to achieve self-realization is still to be fully won.

tural seismic problems (it received a "green" ranking by district consultants), but significant non-structural ones. However, in a November 2007 letter, peer reviewer Ted Zsutty pointed to potential problems and recommended more study of the building.

At the COC meeting, Assistant Superintendent Michael Brady said he has committed funds for a second Tier II analysis of that building. Such a study was not performed earlier because the second-grade wing was not included in any previous designs for retrofitting Havens school.

"The COC has now had a couple of opportunities to discuss the legal standards for use of Measure E funds," said Yvonne Gonzalez-Rogers, COC chair. "Currently, the COC has no reason to believe that the School Board intends to use Measure E funds for a non-Measure E purpose," she stated.

*Mrs. Warren's Profession* plays at the Ashby Stage, at Ashby and Martin Luther King, Jr., until April 20, followed by *Beowulf*, which promises to be, "Opera versus criticism in mead-soaked Scandinavia." (It's a safe bet Angelina Jolie won't star in this one.)

For tickets and information call 841-6500 or visit [www.shotgun-players.org](http://www.shotgun-players.org).

By Ann Davis

Parents, teachers and administrators huddled two and three deep around the school district conference table at last Tuesday's Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) meeting, peering under stones and behind bushes to find hidden treasure for Piedmont schools.

Local foundations, businesses, SCRIP, a collection of old paintings stored in a school basement – all were held up briefly like bright Easter eggs that together might fill the \$1.3 million hole in the district budget.

To veterans of the state's last fiscal crisis in 2003, the exercise felt sadly familiar. But this time, it seemed even more dire.

Faced with a \$14.5 billion budget shortfall, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed kicking the crutches out from under public education by suspending Proposition 98, the state measure passed in 1988 to ensure a basic level of support for state-funded schools. Prop. 98 funding constitutes over 70 percent of total K-12 funding and about two-thirds of total community college funding. Prop 98 monies represent about 45 percent of state general fund revenues.

"In the past, people felt more certain what cuts would be, at least the range of cuts," said Superintendent Connie Hubbard. But with the threatened suspension of Prop 98 and the very real state fiscal crisis, nothing is certain any longer.

"It's not, 'Are we choosing to spend a dollar here or there?' Hubbard said. "There's not a dol-

reductions and stretching of staff to earning interest on reserve funds. From the TRANS fund, for example – a borrowed sum used to cover monthly payroll checks -- the district can earn \$20,000-\$30,000 in a good year by paying less interest than it receives.

But scrimping only goes so far, and federally-mandated programs, like No Child Left Behind, must be paid for even if the state reneges on its share. The remaining BAC discussion focused on how best to staunch the wounds from the draconian cuts coming down from Sacramento.

### Counting pennies

A number of parents asked whether private funding could substitute for public in meeting the district's needs over the next few years. Local banks, real estate firms, family foundations and obliging grandparents were all raised as possibilities.

Hubbard responded that discussions are taking place on private funding sources, but she seemed to warn against pinning too many hopes on such a solution.

"There's a very limited business community to call on," Hubbard said. She added that local businesses already participate as partners with the Piedmont Educational Foundation. They donate toward auctions, various fundraisers, and corporate sponsorships, she said.

Julia Burke, the district's newly hired fundraiser, suggested the slow and steady approach of the SCRIP program. SCRIP donates

fort, *Every 15 Minutes*.

After a suggestion to endow a few teaching positions, participants were left with little more than a collection of old NODA paintings gathering dust in an undisclosed school basement. Seizing on this dubious fundraising idea, they discussed its pros (local value) and cons (local value only) and quickly formed a committee to investigate auctioning the *objets d'art*.

Eventually, Beach resource specialist Hedi Gerken spoke up.

"It's probably hopeless," she mused, "but is there any way to force the federal government to fund federal mandates?"

District officials reluctantly shook their heads no.

### Saying the Unmentionable

At the end of the meeting, school board members spoke more philosophically about the budget process. Board president June Monach explained the Governor's standpoint of wanting to have a "smoother" revenue flow so that the budget is not vulnerable to large fluctuations.

School board member Ray Gadbois put the California budget experience in a broader context. Many states have a much more stable financing mechanism for schools because the bulk of school funding comes through property taxes, he said. Piedmont's parcel tax also uses property values as a basis for education support, Gadbois noted.

The passage of Proposition 13 moved California away from a

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