

A New Shaw Musical to Sing About

By Terry Teachout



Liz Baltes as Proserpine Garnett and Alan Schmuckler as Eugene Marchbanks in 'A Minister's Wife.'

Music was George Bernard Shaw's first love, and he claimed that his plays were operas in disguise. Yet few composers have found inspiration in the chilly glitter of his dialogue, and only one musical version of a Shaw play, "My Fair Lady," has hit the bull's-eye—until now. Austin Pendleton, Josh Schmidt and Jan Tranen have turned "Candida" into a chamber musical called "A Minister's Wife" that is the talk of Chicagoland. No doubt it will find its way to New York in time, though I wouldn't wait for that to happen if I were you. Not only is "A Minister's Wife" the most fully realized piece of musical theater to come along since "The Light in the Piazza," but I can't imagine anyone improving on the quiet delicacy of Writers' Theatre's premiere production.

Written in 1894, "Candida" is one of those works of art that tells more about its creator than he meant to reveal. The central character, James Morell, is a man after Shaw's own closely guarded heart, a charismatic, energetic Socialist clergyman who is immensely pleased with his lot in life. Adored by his secretary, his curate and his parishioners, he spends his days writing sermons and his evenings giving political lectures to which the public flocks. On occasion he pauses to dote on his wife, Candida, whom he regards as the perfect woman, even though their marriage appears to be less than ardent (as Shaw's own would later be). Enter Marchbanks, an idealistic young poet who falls in love with Candida and resolves to take her away from her unwitting husband.

Out of this promising situation, Shaw spins an exceedingly well-made play full of the sharp-witted talk that was his speciality—but devoid of the passionate physicality that he feared in his own life. Instead of making love, his characters talk circles around it, and even Candida, who clearly longs for something more, decides at last to cleave to the emotionally dependent husband who describes her at play's end as "my wife, my mother, my sisters . . . the sum of all loving care to me."

What the makers of "A Minister's Wife" have added to "Candida" is the warmth that its author left out—yet they have accomplished this transformation without doing violence to the letter of Shaw's play. Mr. Pendleton, the author of "Orson's Shadow," has done a remarkable job of compressing a tightly written three-act play into an even tighter one-act libretto that runs for roughly 90 intermission-free minutes. No less striking are Ms. Tranen's plain-spoken yet poignant lyrics, which heighten the emotions concealed in Shaw's neatly turned prose: *When love is spoken, love is returned/Love unspoken is love unearned.*

Mr. Schmidt first came to the attention of New York audiences two seasons ago with his score for "Adding Machine," a musical so glitteringly crafted that I initially took its self-assurance for glibness. No one will make that mistake about the music that Mr. Schmidt has written for "A Minister's Wife." Atop a crisply chattering minimalist-style instrumental accompaniment that evokes the typewriter used by Morell's secretary to transcribe his sermons, Mr.

Schmidt flings long, tender arcs of melody that cling to the ear like phrases from old love letters. The results are at once strongly contemporary and immediately engaging.

Though Mr. Schmidt's score has a definite operatic flavor, "A Minister's Wife" is a school-of-Sondheim show written for musical-comedy voices and full of extended spoken scenes that require first-class acting in order to make their effect. They get it in this production. Kevin Gudahl, one of Chicago's very best actors, outdoes himself as Shaw's complacent clergyman—it's outrageously unfair that he should be able to sing as well as he acts—while Kate Fry gives us a Candida whose powers of attraction need not be taken on faith. While Alan Schmuckler doesn't have the kind of sweetly lyrical tenor voice that would have allowed him to make the most of Marchbanks's music, his acting is more than good enough to compensate, and Liz Baltes and John Sanders are excellent in their supporting roles.

Michael Halberstam, the artistic director of Writers' Theatre, has staged "A Minister's Wife" so sensitively that you'd never guess it was the first time the company had ever put on a musical. Performed on a three-quarter-round stage in the same 108-seat theater where I saw David Cromer's revelatory version of "Picnic" last fall, this production, beautifully lit by Keith Parham, is heartfelt, clean-lined and wholly to the point.

With its single set, five-person cast and four-piece orchestra, "A Minister's Wife" is made to order for small troupes that can't muster the performing forces needed to produce traditional Broadway musicals. For this reason alone, I expect that it will be taken up in short order by theater companies looking for a more adventurous alternative to "The Fantasticks." Yet its practicality is the least of its virtues: "A Minister's Wife" is that rarity of rarities, an adaptation of a major play that improves decisively on its source material. I long to see it again—and again.

A Minister's Wife

**Writers' Theatre, 325 Tudor Court,
Glencoe, Ill. (\$40-\$65),
847-242-6000,
extended through Aug. 2**