

Heartbreak House

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American Airlines Theatre New York

In New York, first-rate productions of George Bernard Shaw are rare. Actors tend to overplay the wit, making it too Wildean, or punch up the moralising, as if theatre were supposed to be good for us.

- ▶ The brilliant success here of David Staller's Project Shaw - a concert reading, once a month, of each of the writer's plays at Manhattan's Players Club - derives in large part from its stripped-down approach. Fancy furniture tends to encourage actors to pose more than to perform.

Over-polished sheen is part of the problem with Roundabout Theatre's new *Heartbreak House*. John Lee Beatty's set suggests a country home from a World of Interiors photo shoot rather than a bohemian redoubt for the ancient sea salt Captain Shotover and his elder daughter, Hesione Hushabye.

The costumes of Jane Greenwood are similarly toff: lovely but with a questionable crispness.

The casting, by New York thespian standards, is also luxe. Philip Bosco's captain is Olde England incarnate, Laila Robins' Ariadne Utterword - the captain's other daughter - is plummy and Byron Jennings' Hector Hushabye, Hesione's spouse, has never cut as dashing a figure as he does in his grey pinstriped suit.

Only Swoosie Kurtz, making her professional debut in Shaw as Hesione, is slightly rudderless. She seems confused, rather than full of the quality her husband assigns to the household: "confounded madness".

As so often, Shaw here traffics in armaments. Shotover dreams up inventions useful for battle, and an apocalyptic air raid concludes the drama, or, I should say, completes it. But the story doesn't quite come out, nor do the military parallels to our own time (Shaw wrote the play during the first world war) emerge as resonantly as they could.

Robin Lefevre's direction is professional. The staging excels at exposing the contradictions that corrode Shaw's characters. And its occasional briskness, in addition to the peppery performance of Bosco, the dapper turn of Jennings, and the poised Ellie Dunn of Lily Rabe, give pleasure.

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