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Tamara Straus
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The Narrator (l, L. Peter Callender) advises the Soldier (c, puppeteered by Muriel Maffre) during a card game with the Devil (r, Joan Mankin) in *The Soldier's Tale* at Aurora Theatre Photo: David Allen, David Allen Studio



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Ballerina takes a spin as puppeteer

Muriel Maffre did not slide into becoming a prima ballerina. The former **San Francisco Ballet** star stands 6 feet on pointe - a height "problem" that she overcame through virtuosity and perseverance.

So when she picked up a 4-foot wooden puppet that is central to her latest production, "**The Soldier's Tale**," and found, as she says, "I couldn't make it work at all," she considered the problem a challenge. That was 2006, a year before Maffre retired as a principal dancer at the Ballet. Five years later, she says she has figured out the puppeteer puzzle: "You have to transfer

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your kinetic sense of movement into the puppet, so that it's indirect but still alive."

Maffre, 41, is also figuring the puzzle of transitioning out of ballet, a career that began when she was 4 in the small town of Enghien-les Bains, France, and that led to a gold medal from the [Paris First International Ballet Competition](#) and two [Isadora Duncan Awards](#) for outstanding achievement in individual performance.

Friday night, her interpretation of "The Soldier's Tale," based on [Igor Stravinsky's](#) 1918 musical work, will open at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley. Co-directed by Maffre with Aurora Artistic Director [Tom Ross](#), the piece is utterly multidisciplinary: It is read, played and danced, and it features four musicians, two actors, a life-size puppet, and Maffre dancing in her Aurora stage debut.

Maffre says she was attracted to the story because it is an antiwar Faustian fable. "It is a story about manipulation. The devil manipulates the soldier at a time of war and industrialization. In some ways, we are all manipulated by those forces."

After it was performed at the 2006 [Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival](#), Maffre contacted Ross about mounting the show at the Aurora because its stage equally can accommodate drama, music and dance.

The collaboration with Ross has enabled other collaborations. [Earplay](#), the chamber music collective, will perform Stravinsky's score under the direction of [Mary Chun](#). Stage veteran [L. Peter Callender](#), artistic director of [African-American Shakespeare Company](#) and associate director at [California Shakespeare Theater](#), will play the soldier. Bay Area luminary [Joan Mankin](#) will play the devil. And Maffre will set aside her puppet to play a dancing daughter of the king.

Maffre says the transition to theater has been "exciting and very humbling. I am very lucky to be surrounded by people with great expertise. I am learning from them every day, and I also am bringing my experience - of space and the body - to the cast."

In the end, she credits her chutzpah to a love of risk taking and "reinventing myself. That is what motivated me to leave the San Francisco Ballet. It was to grow, to develop myself, to leave my comfort zone." She also credits her upbringing.

"I come from a family of very independent-minded French Protestants. I never felt I fit in anywhere. I have had to find my own place and my own identity."

"The Soldier's Tale" plays through Dec. 18. Tickets are \$10-\$55; www.auroratheatre.org, (510) 843-4822.

Something "Wild"

Also on the multidisciplinary front this weekend is the 8 p.m. Saturday concert "[Wild Women of Song: Great Gal Composers of the Jazz Era](#)" at San Francisco's [Herbst Theatre](#), presented by [Pamela Rose](#). The jazz concert will feature Rose's electrifying voice along with guest vocalist [Denise Perrier](#), New York drummer [Allison Miller](#), and [Tammy Hall](#), [John Schiflet](#), [Kristen Strom](#) and [Jeff Massanari](#). The show provides a cultural retrospective on the women songwriters of Tin Pan Alley through archival photos, storytelling and of course jazz and blues.

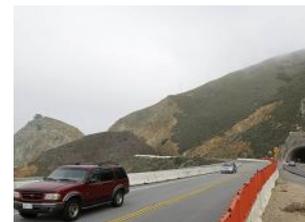
The concert is also a book party. Rose has published an illustrated book about her favorite gal composers, which contains a CD with tracks of the original album. As she explains in the book's introduction, "When I recorded my 'Wild Women of Song: Great Gal Composers of the Jazz Era' album in 2009, I thought it would be an interesting angle to arrange and interpret songs written by women from the Golden Age of Jazz (1920 through 1950).

"But a funny thing started to happen. I realized that although the songs I was choosing were fairly well-known standards, the songwriters' names (except for those who were

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singers) were often new to me. Any yet some of these women composers and lyricists were quite prolific, with strings of hits to their names. Why aren't the names of **Doris Fisher** and **Dorothy Fields** as familiar to us as **Harold Arlen** or **Johnny Mercer**?"

Dog daze

It's amazing it's taken this long. San Francisco's **Roxie Theater** unveils Saturday the first San Francisco BowWow Doggie Film Festival. The 10-hour event includes a variety of dog films ("**Sniff the Movie**" about the concierges of a high-end San Francisco dog hotel, 12:30 p.m.; "**Pound**," directed by **Robert Downey Sr.**, 8 p.m.), a dog show competition (with celebrity judge **Jane Wiedlin** from the **Go-Go's**, 3 p.m.), as well as an online movie short competition.

Proceeds from ticket sales go to Muttville, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of senior dogs, since "the Roxie (at 102 years of age) understands what it is like to be the oldest dog in the business." For more information: www.roxie.com.

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