



'The Soldier's Tale' review: Devil's in the details

Robert Hurwitz, Chronicle Theater Critic
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The Devil (Joan Mankin, front) dances as the Soldier (puppeteered by Muriel Maffre) plays his fiddle in Aurora Theatre's new version of Igor Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale" Photo: David Allen



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The Soldier's Tale: Musical drama. By C.F. Ramuz. Music by Igor Stravinsky. Directed by Muriel Maffre and Tom Ross. Through Dec. 18. Aurora Theatre, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley. 80 minutes. \$10-\$48. (510) 843-4822. www.auroratheatre.org.

Igor Stravinsky's music is endlessly beguiling and the actors deliver their parts with captivating conviction, but the Aurora Theatre's at times puzzling "The Soldier's Tale" doesn't really take off until Muriel Maffre puts down her puppet and dances. That doesn't happen until late in the short show, but when it does, an otherwise nobly flawed

experiment soars into ethereal realms.

It's an ambitious, at times baffling but intriguing, undertaking for the Aurora. Created and co-directed by Maffre, former longtime principal with the [San Francisco Ballet](#), and Aurora Artistic Director Tom Ross, this chamber version of Stravinsky and librettist C.F. Ramuz's "L'Histoire du Soldat" required collaboration with several companies.

The fine onstage quartet is made up of members of the chamber group Earplay, under the musical direction of pianist [Mary Chun](#). The captivating arrangements (Stravinsky's score is for seven musicians) are by Jonathan Khuner, musical director for West Edge Opera. The bouncy rhymed-couplet English text is the work of Pocket Opera founder [Donald Pippin](#). Even [David Densmore's](#) 4-foot puppet of the titular soldier Joseph is on loan from the Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival.

"Soldier's Tale" has been a mix of music, theater and dance from its creation, but this version tends to alternate among those genres. The Russian folk tale-based story, narrated with easy authority by [L. Peter Callender](#), follows the roller-coaster fortunes of a young man who mistakenly makes a deal with the Devil.

On his way home on leave, weary young soldier Joseph - the puppet, manipulated by Maffre and voiced by Callender - meets the Devil ([Joan Mankin](#)), disguised as a kindly old man who offers him riches in exchange for his fiddle. Even after he gets home and realizes years have passed in his three-day sojourn with his benefactor, Joseph doesn't seem to understand that he's traded away his musical soul.

Advised by the Devil in various disguises, he gets rich but longs for human connection. He goes wandering, learns of a fatally ill Daughter of a King (Maffre) and outsmarts the Devil to get his fiddle back, cure her - and marry her. But it's not nice to trick the Devil, as Joseph finds out in the end.

Mankin inhabits each of the Devil's disguises, and Old Nick himself, with delicious malicious glee. [Fumiko Bielefeldt's](#) imaginative costumes and [Benjamin Pierce's](#) set draw on Chagall-influenced folk motifs to nice effect. The text is only moderately engaging, but Stravinsky's blithe and somber, jazz-tinged score is seductive in its subtle samplings of folk, march, tango and even a familiar hymn.

But the music stops for too long while the story is told, and vice versa. Ross and Maffre haven't succeeded in blending the various elements as well as they've realized each one.

It's only when Maffre's Daughter rises from her sick bed, tentatively stretches her limbs and takes flight in balletic wonder that story, dance and music become one. And, again, in Mankin's Devil-dances of loss and triumph (choreography by Maffre). Much of this "Tale" is disjointed, but when everything comes together, it's a delight.

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