

## Stravinsky's vision realized in poignant 'The Soldier's Tale'

By Georgia Rowe

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COURTESY PHOTO

Star turn: Dancer Muriel Maffre — who also co-directed — performs in the extraordinarily collaborative production of "The Soldier's Tale."

Nearly a century after its first performance, "The Soldier's Tale" remains a one-of-a-kind hybrid. Composer Igor Stravinsky intended the work to be "read, played and danced," and the new Aurora Theatre Company production delivers a beguiling 80-minute fusion of acting, music and movement.

Co-directed by Aurora artistic director Tom Ross and dancer/choreographer Muriel Maffre, the production features a rare assemblage of musicians and theater artists. And, in an unusual bit of casting, it makes the title character of Stravinsky's 1918 musical fable a 4-foot-tall, endearingly lifelike puppet.

Stravinsky and librettist C.F. Ramuz, adapting the work from a Russian folk tale, crafted a universal story of a soldier returning from war.

Joseph, whose backpack holds little more than two weeks pay and his beloved violin, is on a

cross-country trek toward home when he encounters a stranger. It's the Devil, offering a deal — in exchange for the violin, Joseph will receive a book that predicts the future.

Call it an early version of insider trading. Joseph takes the deal, and quickly uses the book to become a rich man. Of course, as his wealth grows, he finds himself increasingly “cold and numb.” And then he meets a king with a beautiful daughter.

It's a poignant, gritty and often incisively funny tale, and Stravinsky's score punctuates the scenes with an acerbic mix of folk tunes, military marches, bits of tango and ragtime.

Ross and Maffre, using an English translation by Donald Pippin, stage the action on a split-level set by Benjamin Pierce. The actors, clad in rustic costumes by Fumiko Bielefeldt, make entrances and exits down a central ramp. Lighting by Jim Cave draws the eye to various playing spaces.

Stravinsky's score, arranged by Jonathan Khuner, is performed by members of The City's own chamber group Earplay, led by music director Mary Chun on piano.

Bay Area theater veterans L. Peter Callender and Joan Mankin make essential contributions. Callender is particularly deft and eloquent in his double role as Narrator and the Voice of the Soldier; Mankin makes a crafty, insinuating Devil. Maffre, operating the white-faced puppet Joseph (created by David Densmore), makes the soldier eerily lifelike.

It all comes together splendidly, but the highlight is Maffre's enchanting solo turn as the King's Daughter. On opening night, the former San Francisco Ballet principal ballerina was simply radiant. Here, the production melded music, form and feeling — just as Stravinsky envisioned it would.

## THEATER REVIEW

### The Soldier's Tale

*Presented by Aurora Theatre Company*

- **Where:** 2081 Addison St., Berkeley

- **When:** 7 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. most Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays; closes Dec. 18

- **Tickets:** \$30 to \$48

- **Contact:** (510) 843-4822, [www.auroratheatre.org](http://www.auroratheatre.org)

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