

## Shaw, ripped from the headlines

### Arms and the Man

By George Bernard Shaw

Directed by Katie Schmidt

The Boomerang Theatre Company

Theater 22, 54 West 22nd Street (501-4069)

Equity showcase (closes Sept.19 - call for times)

Review by Steve Gold OFF OFF BROADWAY.COM

This early, excellent Shavian lark has acquired a bittersweet relevance of late: the story takes place during, and immediately following, a bloody war in the Balkans. *Arms and the Man* marks the inaugural production of the Boomerang Theatre Company. On the whole, it's an auspicious occasion: well-paced, energetic, and purposeful.

It is autumn, 1885, a day on which Bulgaria has won a major victory against Serbia. Bluntshli (**Tory Schaefer**), a Serbian army officer of Swiss descent, has taken refuge in the bedroom of Raina (**Ola Creston**), a Bulgarian aristocrat. Initially appalled, Raina warms to Bluntshli and helps him escape. A subsequent romantic tryst is implied. Four months ensue, the war having just ended. Sergius (**Patrick Melville**), a Bulgarian officer and battlefield hero, has arrived to marry Raina. Sergius learns from Louka (**Nikki Wooster**), an impudent servant who catches his fancy, that Raina had a fling with another man. Infuriated, Sergius vows to learn the blackguard's identity. He does not have to look far: Bluntshli, who is involved in armistice negotiations, has accompanied Sergius and is currently on the premises. The plot's resolution, which is both daffy and terrifically comic, involves an elderly brown coat that was lent to Bluntshli during his initial stay with Raina.

This play constitutes one of Shaw's most successful efforts at blending farce and drawing-room comedy. Despite a few isolated moments of mugging, Katie Schmidt's ingratiating, well-prepared cast was adept at handling both elements. Tory Schaefer's Bluntshli was goofily amusing as a relentlessly unheroic soldier who fills his cartridges with chocolate cream, though one would like to have seen more of the character's reflective, almost ambivalent nature. Ola Creston, as Raina, was a model of petite, dreamy-eyed unworldliness. But it was a bit of a stretch to believe that the statuesque **Dianne Zumbro** could be her mother Catherine; when they stood next to each other, it gave the impression that Ms. Creston was too young for her role (Ms. Zumbro was otherwise effective as an imperious nosybody). Nikki Wooster supplied a refreshing pungency to Louka, an ambitious, sometimes spiteful maid who is desperate to rise above her station. As Nicola, her fiance and fellow servant - as well as a world champion snob - Danny Coughlin was appropriately fussy; and with his handlebar moustache and a voice vaguely reminiscent of Nigel Bruce, **Victor Trevino** collected laughs as Paul Petroff, Raina's Colonel Blimpish father (he's a Major here). Perhaps the least sympathetic, most complex character is Sergius, described by Shaw as "Byronic"; Patrick Melville did in fact give the part a dark, morose quality. Finally, there was **Michael Healey** in a brief, well-played role as a Russian officer. He spoke with what appeared to be an Irish accent. It seemed slightly out of place since the rest of the cast used a standard American dialect.

The minimalist sets (Ms. Schmidt and **Kristin Costa**) were sufficient to evoke 19th-century Europe. **Wendy Range**'s lighting, and Ms. Schmidt's sound, were likewise helpful. The period costumes were beautifully executed by Ms. Schmidt and Ms. Zumbro. Indeed, they might consider opening a small boutique as a means of raising funds for the fledgling company. If this production is any guide, it'll be worth the effort. [Playing in rotating rep. with *As You Like It* and *The Three Sisters*.]