



A Saint for All Seasons:

The Shaw Festival's New *Saint Joan*

Tim Carroll, the newly appointed artistic director of the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, chose Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* as his directorial debut and the opening night of the season.

Shaw premiered *Saint Joan* three years after Joan of Arc was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church; the play premiered at New York's Garrick Theatre on December 28, 1923, produced by the Theatre Guild. Its great success in New York, and the following year in London, led to Shaw's award of the 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature.

For a play immersed in ideas, ideologies, and action, Shaw preferred "simple settings, solid but also sparse;" he felt that in the London production, "scenery and costumes have ruined my play."

The playwright would have been delighted with set and costume designer Judith Bowden's modern, minimalist approach, which, one critic noted, "could easily pass for an installation at an art museum." Shaw's themes of women's roles, religion, and the state, as well as the persecution of visionaries, ring out, loud and clear,

without obstruction.

A veteran of 16 Shaw Festival seasons, Bowden emphasized the partnership she had with the production's lighting designer, Kevin Lamotte, and director Carroll in arriving at her design.

The action takes place on a large, black raised platform stage atop the theatre's deck. Metallics and high-gloss glaze in patches give the floor a worn look. A trapdoor serves as both a well and entrance/exit for Joan. A large 8'-square milk Plexiglas cube rises to uncover a dozen courtiers, as they appear to meet with the Dauphin, then floats to the flies and remains suspended. A second, elongated clear Plexiglas cube is sanded on one side, providing a variation in the translucency of the two cubes and giving them different visual weights when lit.

An acrylic rod, scratched on its surface at irregular intervals, rises from the stage, and "is an abstraction of ascension as well as an indication of time," Bowden says.

A remarkable mirror-like effect is created downstage, behind the platform, by a rotating wall of black, high-gloss Alupanel that, on one side,

reflects the action onstage, with black-out cloth on the other. Gray, ledge-like platforms on either side of the stage are topped by louvers that open and close, creating entrances and exits for the play's priests and court scribes.

"Interestingly, we were striving for no particular historic time and that is what makes it feel modern," says Bowden. "The play was written in the 1920s about a woman in the 15th century. The director was interested in the aesthetic of Edward Gordon Craig, who was working at the time the play was written, exploring essential abstract forms in his stage designs. That was our jumping-off point. We all wanted to keep forms in the space stripped to their essential existence—light/form/texture/transparency and how those relate to humans telling this story.

"The use of modern dress was related to the essential way of allowing the story to play out," Bowden says. "There is very little extraneous detail in the clothing and a very limited color scheme, so that the information given by the clothing is only the most essential required, allowing the actors to reveal the complexity of characters in the telling of the story. This design would not have been possible without a very close collaboration with Kevin Lamotte. All the surfaces created or chosen on the scenic pieces were done with an attention to how they would react to light hitting them, embedded in them, or shining through them."

Now the company's lighting design director, Lamotte joined the Shaw Festival in 1987 as assistant to then-head of lighting Robert Thomson. After lighting 75 productions, his designs remain unique and magical. He paints with light, creating and enhancing the desired ambiance for a production's text, actors, and design. He relies on literature, painting, and film as his resources and says his approach to lighting "is more about art and less about gear."

In *Saint Joan*, Lamotte's design marries with Bowden's set seamlessly. He illuminates her Plexiglas cubes



from within, using RGBA LED tape strips controlled by a RC4 Wireless DMXio system.

The acrylic rod, or “vertical line of light” as he calls it, on stage right is lit by a Philips Vari*Lite VL4000 unit from above and an ETC Source Four, tightly shuttered, from the side. It acts as a “time traveler”—appearing in the preset (2017), disappearing for Scene 1 (1429), and reappearing for Joan’s death (1431) and her canonization (1920).

With eight Chroma-Q Color Force II units, Lamotte creates a moving shadow on the downstage black drop that, he says, “represents the wind changing direction”—a key event in one scene—and opens up the space, making it larger for the only exterior

scene. The motion also feels like a river in an abstract way and could be mistaken for a projection.”

A brilliant red flash inside the elongated cube that encloses Joan, signifying her burning at the stake, is lit using only the red circuit in the RGBA LED strip on her upstage side, throwing her shadow onto the downstage side. In addition to those units already mentioned, the rig includes 16 VL1000 Arcs, 16 James Thomas PAR 64s, 30 ETC Source Four Series LED Lustr 2s, 64 ETC Source Fours, and 42 ETC Source Four VNSP PARs. His console is an ETC Gio with an Eos RPU. All rigging and set construction were done in-house.

The triumvirate of Carroll, Bowden,

and Lamotte achieved Shaw’s original vision for *Saint Joan*: a modern, spare production that focuses on content. The “iconic scenography” of Josef Svoboda and his “light to fill space” was discussed by the creative trio, as were spirituality, light imagery, contemporary art, minimalist artists, and the works of the artists Robert Irwin and James Turrell.

Their deliberations and research culminated in a visually stunning production well-matched by a superb cast.

Saint Joan continues its run in repertoire at the Shaw Festival until October 15. —**Julie Rekai Rickard** 📺