

Reviews Gate

FARFETCHED FABLES

by George Bernard Shaw.

Pentameters Theatre 28 Heath Street (entrance on Oriel Place) Hampstead NW3 6TE
To 3 May 2015.

Tue-Sat 8pm Sun 5pm.

Runs 1hr 5min No interval.

TICKETS: 020 7435 3648.

www.pentameters.co.uk

Review: Timothy Ramsden 19 April.

Far Fetched but often clear-sighted in a rare, intelligent staging.

In his nineties George Bernard Shaw looked both backward and forward. These six short plays from the late 1940s summarise his long-held notions, travelling from the early nuclear years into a distant future. They form a brief, rough equivalent to the five plays of his 'metabiological pentateuch' *Back to Methuselah*, written just after the First World War.

The shadow of atomic war hangs over the first, showing Shaw aware of the human impulse to destruction, especially when there's profit to be made. After World War I, in *Heartbreak House*, Captain Shotover reflects that his peaceful invention could never be as profitable as his new weapon. Here, the nuclear horrors addressed by the new United Nations are undermined as an eager scientist starts secretly scribbling a formula for poison gas.

In the enthusiasm for a weapon that could kill but not destroy property, there's a foreshadowing of the neutron bomb. The playwright might not have had the technology but he clear-sightedly saw where human nature could lead. In Fable Two, the gas has been manufactured and sold overseas, whence it wafts back, aimed at the Isle of Wight.

Two deaths occur onstage, before the *Fables* move to the future, and discussion takes over from action. There's a glimpse of a stratified society where reason rules and disruptive elements are liquidated, somewhat like an approving *Brave New World*.

Then comes the Fable as straightforward lecture on an evergreen Shaw obsession, vegetarianism, and a discussion on another Shavian staple, the avoidance of sex in reproduction. For Shaw, a rational species could hardly emerge from irrational processes of conception and it's hard for the future folk not to seem complacent as they confine passion to matters of the mind.

In the last, longest, scene the didactic author aptly has a teacher explaining the world as GBS would have it, to a class who ask suitable questions. By this time, the audience might feel as if in a classroom, though director Michael Friend clearly appreciates Shaw's provocative qualities and his cast play cleanly and clearly on a stage backed by designer John Dalton's cosmic panorama.

First Fable A London Park:
Young Woman: Bethany Blake.
Young Man: Karl Niklas.
An Excitable Man: Albert Clack.

Second Fable The War Office:
Secretary: Janna Fox.
Commander-in-Chief: Albert Clack.
Lord Oldhand: Jesse Cooper.

Third Fable Anthropometric Lab Isle of Wight:
Girl: Bethany Blake.
Matron: Janna Fox.
Gentleman: Albert Clack.
Tourist: Karl Niklas.
Tramp: Jesse Cooper.

Fourth Fable Diet Commissioners Isle of Wight:
Commissioner: Karl Niklas.

Fifth Fable The Genetic Institute Isle of Wight:
Shamrock: Jesse Cooper.
Rose: Janna Fox.
Herm: Bethany Blake.
Thistle: Albert Clack.

Sixth Fable Sixth Form School Isle of Wight:
Teacher: Albert Clack.
Youth 1: Karl Niklas.
Youth 2: Jesse Cooper.
Maiden 4: Bethany Blake.
Maiden 5: Janna Fox.
Voice of Raphael: Stephen-Martin Bradley.

Director: Michael Friend.
Designer: John Dalton.
Lighting: Oliver Edwards, John Dunne.