

Life in LAMORINDA

Cal Shakes Talks *Candida*

By Lou Fancher



Cal Shakes Resident Dramaturg Philippa Kelly and Associate Artist Julie Eccles at Cal Shakes Inside Scoop about the upcoming production of *Candida*
Photo Jay Yamada

Even before opening night, Cal Shake's third production, *Candida*, was stirring up a hornet's nest of reaction. Despite running out of cups, coffee, ice cream, but not energy, Artistic Director John Moscone and his cohorts drew a packed house of theater lovers to the Orinda Library Auditorium for their August 1st Inside Scoop.

The ensuing conversation, spiced with debate over George Bernard Shaw's prop list (the title character's contemplation of a fireplace poker was a focal point,) extended the free community event beyond its traditional one-hour length.

Candida, written during Shaw's early, idealizing phase, according to resident dramaturg Philippa Kelly, is a comedy about a morally pompous clergyman, his shady Madonna-like spouse, and Marchbanks, the poetic young man who comes between them.

"Every time I hear Shaw, I just can't stop listening to it. There's nothing more thrilling, energizing, provocative—still. It's so juicy for an actor," Moscone said.

His 18 readings of the play, completed in preparation for directing the production, left him awed by the complexity of the work.

"There's so much that's been written about this woman [*Candida*] and it just kills it," he began. "It's about marriage, and I'm not married, so we figure it out together."

Relying on actor Julie Eccles, who takes on the title role, for in-

sights into married life, has been essential for unraveling the physical and emotional connections within Shaw's play, Moscone admitted.

"*Candida*'s husband is a religious superstar who preaches Christianity and Socialism. There are all the things she thinks she's done to keep him happy and all the things he thinks he has done—and neither of them are happy," he said.

Entering the marital mix is Marchbanks, who speaks words like daggers and brings *Candida* to a decision: choose the constricted husband, or the shrewd messed-up kid?

Nick Gabriel, cast as Marchbanks, told the Inside Scoop audience he was "desperate" to be in the production and certain of his interest in the role. Even so, his first reading of the play was inaccurate.

"There was something that hadn't really dropped in when I read the page. I thought it was domestic and quaint. When I got into rehearsal it did surprise me how much was in there to be mined," Gabriel said.

Alexandra Henrikson, who provides comic agitation as a secretary-in-love character, agreed that rehearsals are intense.

"At the end of a rehearsal day, I feel like my mind is going to explode," she exclaimed. "But it's a joyful cotton candy kind of explosion. It feels like you've been to the gym. A gym of the heart."

To understand her character, Henrikson wore a bright pink corset in rehearsals.

"I wanted to feel the world

was a couple of inches away from me," she said, adding that the restrictive garment kept her from being "too 2011."

Eccles avoided the corset until dress rehearsals, allowing herself to pursue a lounging, loose physicality.

"It's taken a while to find that path," she said, but speaking her lines without restraint has left the actor free to explore her character's mental state.

"What can you afford in your life? Can you afford your morals? Is morality different when you are unencumbered? Can [Marchbanks] be idealistic because he is rich and unattached?" Eccles asked.

Shaw's three act play runs one hour and 45 minutes. An audience member asked if Moscone was planning to "embellish" the play or change any of the words.

"No, the language is fierce," Moscone answered. "It's a tight little three-acter and a different experience to grab things in 30 minute bites."

Kelly mentioned the massive stage directions Shaw included in the play.

"Eventually, we started crossing them out," Eccles confessed. "Because it can lead you to follow something that doesn't mean anything, just because it was written in the script."

Instead, the cast worked to reinvest the classic work with meaning.

"You definitely are hearing with an interpretive ear," Moscone said, about directing a play written in the late 1800's. "But if you interpret counter to the text, the text is going to smack you. You can feel the two rubbing against each other and one of them has to give way."

The set, designed by Annie Smart and filled with furniture, is the touché on Moscone's parry with *Candida*.

"The ideas are just pushing through these walls," he said, holding up a model of the set. "It thrills me to have that tension on-stage. The trick in outdoor theater is creating this house and then getting it to sing out into nature." Cal Shakes' *Candida* runs August 10 - September 4 at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda. For more information go to www.calshakes.org.



(L to R) Jarion Monroe (Mr. Burgess) and Anthony Fusco (Reverend James Morell)
Photo Kevin Berne



California Shakespeare Theater's production of *Candida*
Photo Kevin Berne

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