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## Puppets of the Devil

Co-directors Tom Ross and Muriel Maffre reimagine *The Soldier's Tale* for Aurora Theatre.

By Claudia Bauer

One hallmark of a masterpiece is that while it is complete in itself, it can be interpreted in endless ways. Such is the case with Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, based on a Russian folktale of a soldier who trades his violin to the devil for knowledge of the future, and loses in the bargain.

Pairing Stravinsky's visionary score and a French libretto by C. F. Ramuz, *The Soldier's Tale* is traditionally performed with a seven-piece chamber orchestra, three actors, and a dancer, or in recital. But since the work's 1918 premiere, artists from Frank Zappa to Wynton Marsalis have created adaptations. The latest comes from Aurora Theatre artistic director Tom Ross and former San Francisco Ballet prima ballerina Muriel Maffre; their reimagining premieres at the Aurora Theatre (2081 Addison St., Berkeley) during the venue's twentieth-anniversary season.

Though classically trained at the Paris Opéra Ballet School, Maffre is avant-garde at heart, a quality Ross complements with his own free-spirited creativity. "We like to shake things up every once in a while," Ross said, and their *Soldier's Tale* certainly does, calling on actors L. Peter Callender (the Narrator) and Joan Mankin (the Devil) to dance as well as recite Donald Pippin's translated text with poetic cadence, and casting Maffre as both ballerina (the King's Daughter) and master of the life-size puppet that portrays Joseph, the Soldier.

"The puppet is informing the play with the idea of manipulation," Maffre said. She describes his movement as primitive and even jolly, but Joseph carries a heavy story. "The classic Faust story is always daunting. Even in the 21st century, the idea of the devil haunts us. In this story, the devil is the war machine, industrialism, the yin-yang of the soldier."

Not your typical holiday fare, to be sure. Yet there is joy and beauty in this *Soldier's Tale*: the Chagall-inspired design, the sublime performers, and the score. "People think Stravinsky is difficult music," Ross said, "but this music is evocative of the story and has a lot of references to jazz."

Mary Chun, head of San Francisco chamber ensemble Earplay and the show's musical director, notes that the score also demands virtuosic skill. "Things sound like 4/4 but melodies happen in 7s and 5s and 3s," she said, "so there's an element of surprise."

Alas, there is no happy ending for Joseph, the poor devil. "You walk out questioning yourself. Would I have made that choice?" Maffre said. It's up to each of us to interpret the answer. *The Soldier's Tale* runs November 17 through December 18, with previews Friday through Wednesday, November 11-16. See website for full schedule and show times; \$10-\$55. 510-843-4822 or [AuroraTheatre.org](http://AuroraTheatre.org)

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