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"Mata Hari" ---a mixed success [A review of the play  
*Ballad For a Firing Squad* at Alverno College,  
Milwaukee]

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# "Mata Hari" --- a mixed success

By Curtis L. Carter and Mike Neville.

If Theater Alverno's director Robert Pitman makes up his mind between Flo Ziegfeld and Bertolt Brecht, perhaps he'll still be able to do what Broadway couldn't: make a critical and financial success of *Ballad For a Firing Squad*. (Once known as *Mata Hari*.)

With more than a touch of pizzazz, Pitman has mounted this Jerome Coppersmith/Edward Thomas/Martin Charnin tale of woe-be set *Mata Hari*. Occasionally the life Pitman breathes into the characters of *Ballad For a Firing Squad* is all bounce and flounce and little dimension.

Pitman attempted to pack too many conventions into the production. Some of them worked while others failed miserably. The point of using face masks was unclear. He is more successful with the ironic commentary he makes through the use of background slides. And one of his most successful conventions is the contrasting simultaneous action of two characters, one downstage center and the other upstage, silhouetted behind the screen.

Much of what was connected by a kind of hindsight view in the play,

however, could have been eliminated. The meaning of the first 20 minutes of the play is understood completely only at the end, when a full circle of sorts is made back to those opening scenes. It's as though the authors want the audience to walk out beaming with elation, saying "I get it!"

Things pick up considerably after an excruciatingly slow start. And when this happens, high moments arise out of both the action and character conflict.

The basic conflict and plot action revolves around the battle, romance, and eventual undoings of *Mata Hari* and Captain LaFarge. LaFarge, played a bit stiffly but convincingly by Harry Zummach, unmasks *Mata Hari* as a German spy. He is soon overcome by the feminine appeal of *Mata Hari*, played with sometime vigor by Mary Wagner.

Side actions satirize the plight of those involved in the "war effort" but at a safe distance from the battle front. This is contrasted nicely with the bitterness of the soldiers on the front lines. One of the play's most emotionally effective moments comes when adolescent soldier (played by Mike Weiser) sings a letter he is writing to "Mama."

His words, "I am safe"... "Can

I kill?" Presented a chilling view of the soldier's feelings.

The acting is uneven. The best performances are turned in by the more experienced actors. Dale Gutzman, doing the expansive kind of acting with which he is most comfortable, provides some of the show's more humorous moments. Other male actors, familiar faces on the Milwaukee community theater scene, achieved successful performances.

Zumach's characterization of LaFarge is the most consistent. He builds his character carefully and methodically, imbuing his emotional peaks with credibility. His singing voice leaves something to be desired. But he talk-sings the lyrics with interest and verve and conveys a certain warmth of feeling while doing so.

Miss Wagner as *Mata Hari* is less consistent. Her singing voice is pleasant enough but lacking in distinctive style. Moments of effective dramatic portrayal show promise for Miss Wagner's future development.

Structural defects in the script of "Ballad" probably account for an earlier failure in its pre-broadway trial. The slow moving scenes in the beginning create a positively dead "theatre space." This section needs serious revision, as does the the last half where events are not given time to "jell" dramatically.

This production which brought to Alverno on opening night lyricist Charnin, oibrettist Coppersmith, and composer Thomas, is certainly worth seeing. While being moderately entertaining, it effectively portrays the inhumanity of war.

More importantly, it is interesting for its theatrical successes and failures. It is a good idea to test a commercial failure in a college setting to see if it has significance missed by the commercial focus of Broadway. In this case the results of the experiment are inconclusive.

The reader can go and make up his own mind at one of the remaining performances March 19, 20, 8:30 pm, Alverno College.