

Arms and the Man

by George Bernard Shaw

In Repertory March 17 - May 20, 2006



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About this Study Guide

Thank you for your commitment to sharing great literature with your students. It is a commitment that A Noise Within has shared with you since its founding in 1991, with the staging of its first play, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Classical works are an important part of our collective culture and history, and unless students are given the opportunity to read historical texts and to experience them live, as they were meant to be experienced, many will think of those written treasures as outdated words in a textbook anthology. With the goal of increasing students' lifelong understanding and enjoyment of classic works and of theatre going, A Noise Within is honored to partner with you in the effort to preserve our literary heritage.

This study guide has been prepared as a prelude to A Noise Within's production of *Arms and the Man*. Please use it as a reference or as a teaching aid as you prepare your students to enter the classical world.

If your high school students are attending A Noise Within's performance of *Arms and the Man* and are participating in the post-performance discussion, they are fulfilling the following of California's Theatre Standards, as set forth by the State Board of Education:

- Theatre Standards grades 9-12
- Artistic Perception - 1.1 and 1.2
- Creative Expression - 2.1
- Historical and Cultural Content - 3.2
- Aesthetic Valuing - 4.1 and 4.2

All of the information and activities outlined in this guide were designed to meet the 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts standards set forth by the state of California. Together, the activities fulfill the content standards as follows:

- English Language Arts
- Reading - 1.1, 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 3.10, 3.11, and 3.12
- Writing - 1.4 and 2.2
- Listening and Speaking - 1.1, 1.2, 1.10, 1.11, and 1.14

Although these activities are designed specifically with the 9th and 10th grade standards in mind, they can be adapted to serve students in other grades, as well.



About the Play

MAIN CHARACTERS

Petkoff – A major in the Bulgarian army, a cheerful, insignificant, unpolished man of about 50, naturally unambitious except as to his income and his importance in local society

Catherine – his wife, a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer who is determined to be a Viennese lady, and who, to that end, wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions

Raina – their daughter, a young woman intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night and of the fact that her own youth and beauty are part of it

Sergius – a young major in the Bulgarian army, romantically handsome, characteristically civilized, with a jealously observant eye and an acute critical faculty that has been thrown into intense activity by the arrival of western civilization in the Balkans

Louka – a prideful servant, so defiant that her servility is almost insolent

Nicola – a servant of cool temperament and low but clear and clean intelligence, who values himself on his rank in servitude

Bluntschli – a Swiss mercenary in the Serbian army with a strong neck and shoulders, clear, quick eyes, and all his wits about him

PLOT SUMMARY

At the height of war and while the man of the house is away, a bourgeois wife and daughter harbor a mysterious enemy soldier who climbs through their balcony window in the cover of night. Before sending him on his way, the young Raina Petkoff furnishes him with chocolate crèmes, charming conversation, and her father's coat as a disguise. The soldier steals away safely and comes to return the coat several months later at the war's end. His return to the Petkoff home reunites him with former Bulgarian enemies Major Petkoff and Sergius Saranoff, the men who sought his life those months ago when Raina secretly saved him—and Raina's father and fiancé, respectively. The declaration of peace brings a business partnership between the three men. However, Sergius' suspicious nature is soon fueled by ill-gotten secrets from Louka, Raina's servant, and reality casts a shadow on the richest and best-known family in Bulgaria.

About the Play

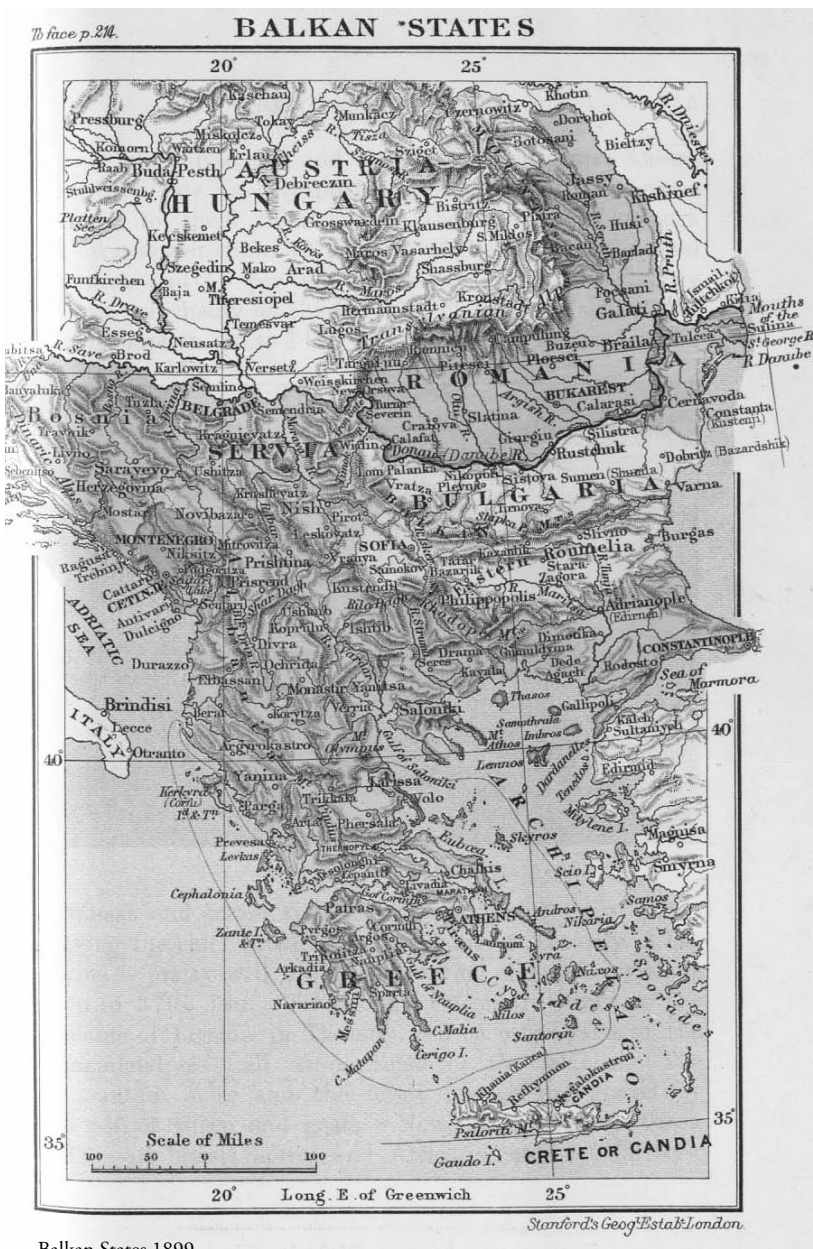
ARMS AND THE MAN, PAST AND PRESENT

George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* premiered at the Royal Avenue Theatre in London (now the Playhouse Theatre) in 1894 as his first major commercial success. Like most of Shaw's works, *Arms and the Man* was a commentary

on "the state of things" as he saw it. The playwright's desire to use his writing as a catalyst for political discussion was natural; his stark leanings toward socialism drove his art.

Audiences adored his sarcastic and timely story of the absurdities of love and war, particularly as the play's action occurs during and just after the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885, which had occurred just nine years earlier. In November of that year, Serbia's King Milan, who was loyal to Austria-Hungary and the West, declared war on Bulgaria in an effort to gain compensation for Bulgaria's recently having expanded its territory. The expansion was in breach of the western-initiated Treaty of Berlin, which was designed to disunify the Balkans and thereby preempt an even greater Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

At the play's debut, conflict between East and West was escalating, yet it would be twenty years before tensions reached the fever pitch of the First World War. Warfare itself was different—still conducted largely via man-to-man combat, a technological necessity that lent itself easily to heroism and formality. It is for that reason that Michael Murray, director of *A Noise Within's* production of *Arms*, notes, "In the early 20th century, audiences were shocked that Shaw would ridicule the glories of war." At the same time, the success of the plays shows that what Murray calls Shaw's "wild and witty comic package" likely provided some needed relief from the realities of global politics. The director goes on to observe, "Shaw always made fun of the pieties and hypocrisies of his time—in *Arms and the Man* he went after the idea that war and patriotism are always glorious and heroic, pitting the gritty,



Balkan States 1899

realistic, professional soldier, Bluntschli, against the puffed-up and romantic Sergius (who became a hero completely by accident).”



MARK DEAKINS,
“SERGIUS”

Portraying the accidental hero proved to be “one of the most challenging, often frustrating roles I have ever played,” says actor Mark Deakins of his turn as Sergius. “My fear was that he would become a cartoon or a character not grounded in truth,” he explains,

“however, once I embraced him on his terms, discovered his truths, things started to fall into place. But it’s a razor’s edge: on one side caricature, on the other a bold type of humanity, big but believable.”

The play’s comedy comes largely from that “big but believable” balance within each character and within the ensemble as a whole. Sergius and the entire Petkoff family provide the story’s “big,” while Swiss mercenary Bluntschli weighs in heavily with the “believable.” Karen Tarleton, who plays Catherine Petkoff describes the tipping of the scales.

“Captain Bluntschli [is] a very different kind of soldier indeed—a real one—who upsets every facet of [the] household, bringing with him a very different set of values and a down-to-earth, practical approach to life. This non-dramatic personality has a great impact on...each member of the family. It is altogether upsetting...” Especially for the lady of the house, who, as Tarleton sees it “doesn’t

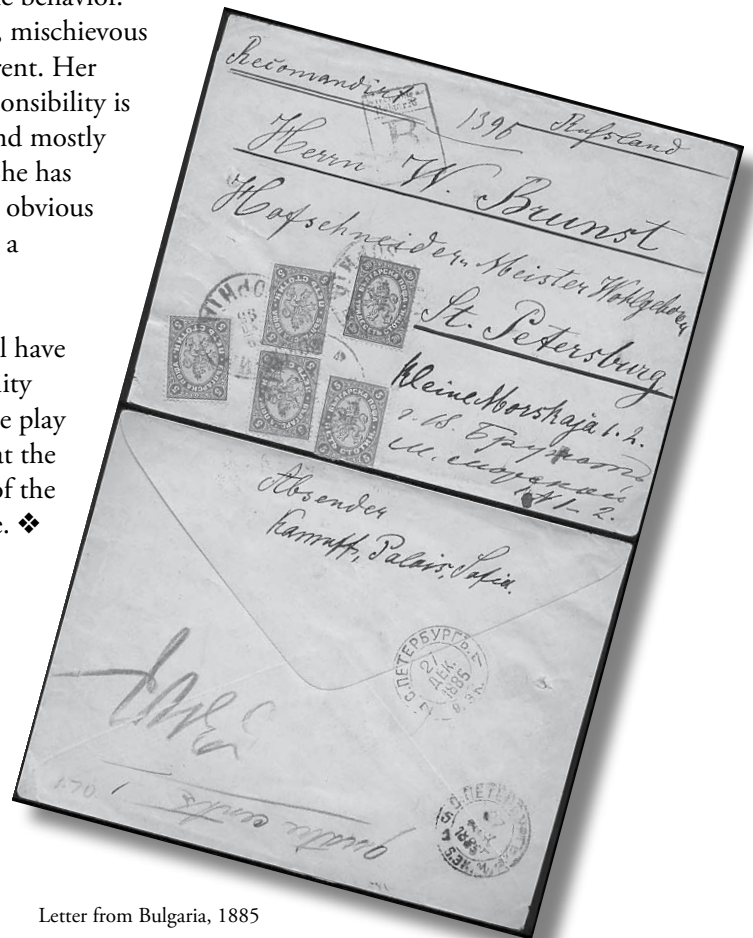


KAREN TARLETON,
“CATHERINE”

know how tiny her perspective is.” Not that Catherine’s limited perspective doesn’t give Tarleton plenty to work with. On the contrary, “I had a great deal of fun discovering her,” the actor says. “I love her indomitable determination to

handle every kind of situation, her shallowness and limited perspective, her impracticalities, and her opportunistic behavior. She is quick, mischievous and transparent. Her sense of responsibility is enormous and mostly misplaced. She has no idea how obvious she is. What a character!”

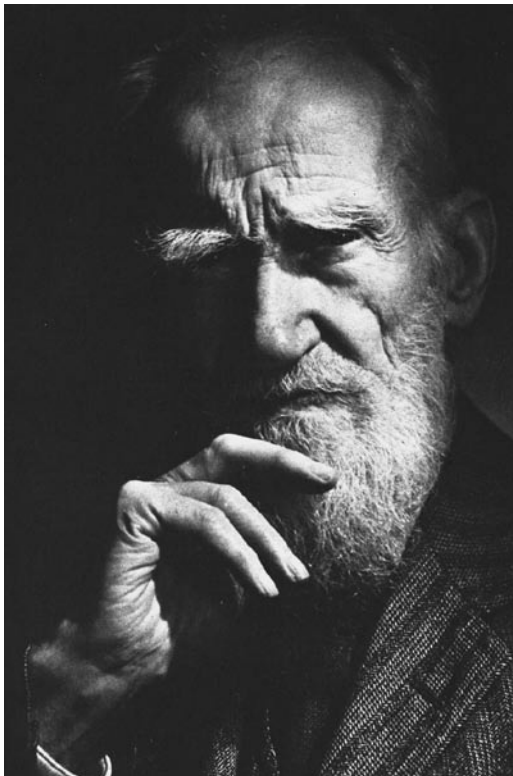
Students will have an opportunity to discuss the play with actors at the conclusion of the performance. ❖



Letter from Bulgaria, 1885

About the Author

George Bernard Shaw was born in Ireland in 1856. He was an idealist who enveloped himself in the arts, and though he began writing critically about music and drama at age 20, he didn't experience success until he reached his early 40s. When his plays were finally recognized, Shaw was writing largely out of his passion for politics, and, due to their high levels of social commentary and issues-debating characters, his works were just as often chided for being "preachy" as they were praised for being witty and sensitive. The playwright's high profile association with socialist societies lent some weight to critics' claims, but audiences appreciated his perspective. The author married an intellectual woman and continued to write until his death in 1950.



QUOTES BY GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the conditions that surround him...The unreasonable man adapts surrounding conditions to himself...All progress depends on the unreasonable man."

"People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them."

—*Mrs. Warren's Profession*, 1893

"There are two tragedies in life: one is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."

"A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing."

"He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches. "

"Lack of money is the root of all evil."

"Martyrdom is the only way a person can become famous without ability."

"Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it."

"Peace is not only better than war, but infinitely more arduous."

"You see things; and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?" "

"Virtue is insufficient temptation."

Discussion Questions for Before the Performance

How do we know from the start that Raina is not in love with Sergius?

Why is “the chocolate crème soldier” an effective descriptor for Bluntschli as a fighter?
What do the crèmes show audiences about Bluntschli’s character as a civilian?

What is the soul of a servant? Does Louka have the soul of a servant?

Discuss the validity of Louka’s definition of bravery.

Who holds the most power in the Petkoff household? Explain.

Which of Shaw’s characters is the most interesting to you? Which is most like you?

Discussion Questions for After the Performance

What does Raina want? What is her conflict?

Why does Raina save Bluntschli?

Raina confidently tells Sergius that he will never disappoint her. Does he? Explain.

How is Raina's beauty natural and how is it calculated?
How do these two types of beauty appeal to the people in Raina's life?

Which has a stronger pull, fantasy or reality? Why?

There are many types of war and many types of love in *Arms and the Man*.
Identify a few and discuss their importance in the play.

Student Activities

PERFORMING ACT III

The final act of *Arms and the Man* makes for a rousing reading. In order to engage every student in the reading, you may want to divide the act into logical sections and to divide the class into multiple groups, so that you end up casting several Rainas, Bluntschlis, Catherines, etc. Then, when one group is finished with their portion, the next group of players can take over, until the entire act has been performed by the entire class, seamlessly.

A few carefully-chosen props will create a controlled, comedic edge, and carefully-chosen music will set a fantastic scene. Consider inviting a neighboring class to share in the fun (and focus the rehearsal time for students who need the pressure of an audience).

PLOTTING THE PLAY IN PICTURES

This activity has been adapted from the website of Dr. Cathy Grimaldi of Old Bridge High School in Matawan, New Jersey.

At the end of *Arms and the Man*, break the students into three groups (one for each act). Their assignment is, with large sheets of art paper and crayons, to break down the act and quickly illustrate important events in that act. This is not an art project—talent is not a requirement. In fact, it's more enjoyable if some of the art is a tad silly.

Most groups will need half a class period to break down the acts and assign events on the first day. The second day will see the drawing and the hanging of the pictures in proper sequence around the room. On day three, each person is responsible for standing and explaining his or her picture and what happens between it and the next picture. Start with Act I, and work around the room to the end of the play.

This activity reinforces the play's content and allows you to see errors in plot understanding. Encourage students to express as much of the characters' emotions and motives as possible in their drawings' faces and postures, but assure them that stick figures are okay.

WRITING POETRY INSPIRED BY THE PLAY

Test for understanding of the characters' relationships, motives and behaviors by having students write poems to and from the play's characters. Set forth guidelines for length and for use of poetic devices (rhyme scheme, simile and metaphor, alliteration, etc.), and encourage students to write in the style of Shaw and/or to use era-appropriate language and syntax.

From Sergius to Raina
From Sergius to Louka
From Raina to Sergius
From Raina to Bluntschli
From Bluntschli to Raina
From Louka to Sergius
From Louka to Nicloa
From Nicola to Louka
From Catherine to Petkoff
From Petkoff to Catherine

About Theatre Arts

BEING AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of entertainment: going to the theatre. But attending a live performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of spending time. In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd. Although in the past playhouses could sometimes be rowdy, today participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance. Shouting out or even whispering can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within*'s performance of *Arms and the Man*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

THEATRE VOCABULARY

These terms will be included in pre- and post-performance discussions at *A Noise Within*.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

THEATRE LORE

Why do actors say “break a leg”?

Perhaps the saying comes—in a complicated way—from the use of “leg.” In theatre, a “leg” is a part of the mechanics that open and close the curtain. To break a leg is to earn so many curtain calls that opening and closing the curtain over and over during final applause causes the curtain mechanics to break. At the outset of theatre tradition, players acted outdoors, where there were no stages or curtains. Applause came in the form of foot stomping, which could indicate another origin of this phrase.



Why is it bad luck to say “Macbeth” inside the theatre?

There are many origins for this superstition. Old actors believe the witches’ song in *Macbeth* to possess the uncanny power of casting evil spells. The reasons for this fear usually bring tales of accidents and ill-fortunes that have plagued productions of the play throughout the world.

An alternative is that the superstition began in the days of stock companies, which would struggle to remain in business. Frequently, near the end of a season, a company would realize it was not going to break even, and, in an attempt to boost ticket sales, would announce the production of a crowd favorite: *Macbeth*. If times were particularly bad, the play would frequently be a portent of the company’s demise.

What is a ghost light?

There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. In other versions of the same superstition the ghosts of past performances return to the stage to live out their glory moments. To prevent this, a single light called a ghost light is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone.

Now, those in the world of theatre know that a “dark” theatre is one without a play. There is nothing sadder to a dramatic artist than an empty house and a playless stage. Therefore, a light is left burning center stage so that the theatre is never “dark;” it is simply awaiting the next production.

What is a raked stage? Where do the terms upstage and downstage originate?

Historically, stages were built on inclines, with the backs of the stages slightly higher than the fronts. The incline was called a rake and helped those in the back of the audience see the action onstage. Eventually, theatres started placing seats on inclines instead of stages, but the terminology stuck. Downstage is the front of the stage, closest to the audience, and upstage is the back of the stage. Some theatres, like A Noise Within, still participate in the tradition of using raked stages.

Why are actors called thespians?

In the sixth century B.C., a Greek chorus performer named Thespis was the first person in history to step away from the chorus and speak by himself, exchanging dialogue with the group and impersonating a character instead of simply reciting a story as the chorus had done before then.

About *A Noise Within*

A Noise Within's mission is to produce the great works of world drama in rotating repertory, with a company of professional, classically-trained actors. *A Noise Within* educates the public through comprehensive outreach efforts and conservatory training programs that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights.

As the only company in southern California working in the repertory tradition (rotating productions using a resident ensemble of professional, trained artists), *A Noise Within* is dedicated solely to producing classical literature from authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Shaw, and Euripedes.

The company was formed in 1991 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They envisioned *A Noise Within* after recognizing a lack of professional, classical productions and education in Southern California and sought out and assembled their own company of actors to meet the need. All of *A Noise Within's* resident artists have been classically trained, and many

hold Master of Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions, such as Juilliard, Yale, and the American Conservatory Theatre.

In its fourteen-year history, *A Noise Within* has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence. In 2004, *A Noise Within* accepted an invitation to collaborate with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a tandem performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl.

More than 25,000 individuals attend productions at *A Noise Within*, annually, and between performances at the theatre and touring productions, the company draws 13,000 student participants to its arts education programs every year. Students benefit from in-school workshops, conservatory training, and an internship program, as well as subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, discussions with artists, and state standards-compliant study guides. ❖

A Noise Within Study Guide

Written by Autumn Hilden
Edited by Dawn Kellogg
Production Photography by Craig Schwartz
Graphic Design by Christopher Komuro

**A Noise Within**
California's Classical Theatre Company

Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez Elliott, Artistic Directors
Administrative Office: 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale, CA 91204
Administration: Tel (818) 240-0910 / FAX (818) 240-0826
Website: www.anoisewithin.org
Box Office: (818) 240-0910 ext.1