

# The family business and its discontents

## Rutherford and Son, by Githa Sowerby, directed by Jackie Maxwell

By Joanne Laurier  
28 August 2004

*Rutherford and Son*, by Githa Sowerby, directed by Jackie Maxwell, at the Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, until October 9

*Rutherford and Son*, currently playing at the Shaw Festival in Ontario, is in many ways an extraordinary piece of theater, an honest and perceptive work. The play, by British writer Githa Sowerby (1876-1970), premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London and on Broadway in New York in 1912. It disappeared from playing repertory for over 80 years until it was revived by the Royal National Theatre in 1994.

Sowerby's remarkable work revolves around the destructive impact on the Rutherford family of its patriarch's ruthless attempts to sustain a glass-making business in the north of England. The preservation of the firm requires the psychic and moral destruction of everyone involved. The play, whatever the immediate motives of the young playwright, is a devastating indictment of a system organized around the pursuit of profit.

In an article written about the play in 1914, the well-known anarchist leader Emma Goldman—noting that women had already attained prominence in literature, art and science—commented that “until the author of *Rutherford and Son* made her appearance, no country had produced a single woman dramatist of note.”

This statement is all the more remarkable because Sowerby was only in her twenties when she wrote *Rutherford and Son*. States Goldman: “[H]er exceptional maturity is a phenomenon rarely observed. Generally maturity comes only with experience and suffering. No one who has not felt the crushing weight of the Rutherford atmosphere could have painted such a vivid and life-like picture.”

Indeed, Sowerby was born in Northumberland in northeast England, and her father, like the character of Rutherford, was a glass manufacturer who ran Sowerby and Co., a family enterprise handed down by his father and grandfather, from 1879. Sowerby became a Fabian socialist and earned her living writing children's literature. *Rutherford and Son* is her only enduring work. Little is known about her life.

The Shaw production, directed by the festival's artistic director Jackie Maxwell, and brought to life by an exceptional ensemble cast, exhibited an unusual level of commitment and seriousness.

The play is set in the period between 1910 and 1914, known as “the great unrest,” when strike activity increased fourfold over the previous decade and trade union membership doubled. Outmoded British industry was being hard hit by its more technologically advanced competitors, particularly from the United States.

Act I opens in the gloomy living room of the Rutherford house, which “stands on the edge of the moor, far enough from the village to serve its dignity and near enough to admit of the master going to and from the Works [the factory].” At the room's center hangs a heavily framed portrait of the late John Rutherford, overlooking furniture and accessories, “precisely as he had seen them in life.”

The reigning heir, John Rutherford, has been forced of late to borrow from the banks to keep the family's glass manufacturing company afloat. His success as a businessman, attained with a maniacal

single-mindedness, has effectively destroyed the lives of his children and demolished his own humanity. Elder son Richard (Mike Shara), rendered weak and ineffectual, sought the church as an escape, while younger son John (Dylan Trowbridge), also weak but less ineffectual, rebelled by marrying beneath his social class.

That Rutherford has subordinated everything to his business is expressed when he tells John: “I've toiled and sweated to give you a name you'd be proud to own—worked early and late, toiled like a dog when other men were taking their ease—plotted and planned to get my chance, taken it and held it when it come till I could ha' burst with the struggle”

John has invented a manufacturing innovation that is potentially the salvation for the flailing company. However, to the extent he has labored on this mechanism, it was not for the benefit of the business but to gain financial—and emotional—independence from his overbearing father.

Disgusted that John is uninterested in inheriting the factory—seeking instead to sell his invention to the highest bidder—Rutherford complains: “My son's a fool—I don't say that in anger. He's a fool because his mother made him one, bringing him up secret wi' books o' poetry and such like trash—and when he'd grown a man and the time was come for me to take notice of him, he's turned agin me.” Rutherford's aims allow for no deviations, certainly not cultural ones.

Rutherford's daughter Janet has, as she bitterly describes, “turned sour” from spinsterhood, a condition she blames on her father. In a form of protest against the idle life of the wealthy, she has deliberately reduced her own status to that of a servant, organizing meals and taking off her father's boots at the end of the day.

Now at age 36 she has embarked on a taboo love affair with Martin, a 25-year employee, a sort of foreman, for Rutherford's. When Rutherford discovers the relationship, he fires Martin—but not until he pries the secret of John's modernizing device from him. The ensuing altercation between father and daughter is one of the play's most emotionally charged moments.

Rutherford: “Martin's my servant, that I pay wages to. I've made a name for my children—a name respected in all the countryside—and you go with a working-man. Tomorrow you leave my house. D'ye understand. I'll have no light ways under my roof.”

Janet: “Me a lady? What do ladies think about, sitting the day long with their hands before them? What have they in their idle hearts? ... The women down there [in the village] know what I wanted ... I've envied them their pain, their poorness—the very times they hadn't bread. Theirs isn't the empty house, the blank o' the moors; they got something to fight, something to be feared of. They got life, those women we send cans o' soup to out o' pity when their bairns are born. Me a lady! With work for a man in my hands, passion for a man in my heart! I'm common—common ... I've loved in wretchedness, all the joy I ever had made wicked by the fear o' you ... Who are you? A man—a man that's taken power to himself, power to gather people to him and use them as he

wills—a man that'd take the blood of life itself and put it into the Works—into Rutherford's."

Her hatred and frustration bursts and she tells her father that when "you got me—me to take your boots off at night—to well-nigh wish you dead when I had to touch you."

Despite all the love and passion that Janet is literally dying to offer, Martin chooses serfdom: "Twenty five years ago he took me from nothing. Set me where I could work my way up—woke the lad's love in me till I would ha' died for him—willing. It's too long too change ... I'll never do his work no more; but it's like as if he'd be my master just the same—till I die."

In a last-ditch, heart-rending effort to break her lover's psychological shackles, Janet moans: "He had you, Martin—like he's had me, and all of us ... we couldn't see the years passing because of the days. And all the time it was our lives he was taking bit by bit—our lives that we'll never get back."

Martin stoically offers to marry Janet, perceiving this as the fulfillment of his last duty to Rutherford. Janet is not willing to settle for this fate, which would amount to another form of bondage to her father. She is astute enough to realize that with her out of the picture, Martin has a shot at obtaining her father's absolution. She departs for good, trying to comfort Martin with the notion, "he needs you for the Works."

Ironically, it is John's wife Mary, a former office worker looked down upon by Rutherford for her working class origins, who strikes a bargain that will ensure the continuity of the family enterprise. She turns out to be the sufficiently ruthless match for the cold-blooded Rutherford.

The performances of Michael Ball as the patriarch Rutherford and Kelli Fox as his daughter Janet form the core of the show's dramatic power. All cast members are memorable in their intense struggle for life and breath against the oppressive environment.

In her notes, director Maxwell exhibits a sensitivity to an important aspect of the play's dramatic weight and the source of its visceral tensions: "Change is afoot, and what begins as small cracks in his world become cavernous fissures by the end of the play." Maxwell makes the point, so crucial to the drama's successful staging, that "this play presents a habitat where conversation is *not* the natural mode of communication. Indeed, it seems almost alien. It *costs* to talk in *Rutherford and Son*. Attempts to engage Rutherford himself in conversation result in either sneering dismissal or a frontal attack."

Maxwell reveals that this fact made "the details of all the actions in the play vitally important," imparting to the production an ever-churning urgency.

The play's emotional clout is derived from the bitter harshness of family interactions, so painfully reflective of the brutal and inhuman social relations. On this score, *Rutherford and Son* feels immensely relevant.

The autocratic Rutherford is not a monster but the embodiment of what is objectively required to be a manufacturer. In that sense, he is the psychic creation of the social relations. There is something lawful and necessary about his iron heart and soul. Everything he sees as the fulfillment of his fatherly duty is connected with building up the Works.

Cries Rutherford: "Life! I've had nigh on sixty years of it, and I'll tell you. Life's work—keeping your head up and your heels down. Sleep, begetting children, rearing them up to work when you're gone—that's life. And when you know better than the God that made you, you can begin to ask what you're going to get by it. And you'll get more work and six foot of earth at the end of it." This is a joyless summation of the price of being one of society's achievers.

The festival's production notes point out that 1912 reviews of the play describe him "as an admirable upholder of the 'idea' of Rutherford's—that is, of the individual success of the self-made man as advocated by Samuel Smiles in *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Character*

*and* (1859). This hugely successful book argued *Conduct* spirit individualism (it opens with 'Heaven helps them who help themselves') and an ethos of self-reliance being the way forward for working- and middle-class people."

In fact, author Sowerby wrote in a letter in 1952: "Up to now so many producers have missed or underemphasized the point that R [Rutherford] is not only a domestic bully but a man of what he believes is a big idea."

The play's main weakness is Sowerby's treatment of the working class, whose presence is felt, but largely as an offstage entity. Rutherford views the village of Grantley as a "raw hell," whose inhabitants are "humanity in the rough." And the rougher they are the more useful they are as laborers. John claims his father's success in operating his "money-making machine" and impeding workers from striking is due to the fact that he "catches hold of the brute in them."

The only delineated working class character is the backward, manipulative mother of a worker who has been fired by Martin for stealing from the company. The author has essentially stripped her of positive qualities and for the most part she is an irritant. In general, the play would give one the impression that unwashed masses are to be pitied for their misery, feared for their potential brutishness or chastised for their slavishness (in the form of Martin). Such types as Sowerby presents do exist and did exist in 1912, but so did other, more rebellious types.

The character of Martin, who has dragged and pulled himself out of the working class, is the play's weak point. Although a former worker might undoubtedly be pro-employer, Martin's body and soul commitment to someone like Rutherford, who uses and discards his own offspring at will, is somewhat unbelievable. Martin's world and that of the factory are seamless, as if he were physically part of "the clatter and bang of the machinery, the sickening hot smell of the furnaces." He represents for Rutherford, Sr., all the things, personally and professionally, that John does not. He is exactly what Rutherford demands in an employee and in a son.

But neither the deep, gut-gripping love of Janet nor Rutherford's traumatic and unfair rejection alters Martin's acceptance of his suffocating reality. The character, programmed like a robot to serve without mind or reason, was obviously created by Sowerby as a protest against what she saw as working class submission to the vagaries of capitalism. Unfortunately, he is her most undialectical, and therefore inaccurate, creation—more akin to a medieval serf than a wage-laborer/supervisor.

The one-sidedness of this characterization can perhaps be traced in part to Sowerby's politics as a member of the Fabian Society. Founded in 1884 and named after the Roman general famous for his delaying tactics, this organization propagated a reformist and gradualist brand of socialism. Leading members included Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw. The Fabians exerted a strong ideological influence on the Labour Party as the chief alternative to revolutionary Marxism.

Sowerby argues that the exploiter is gutted of humanity and the exploited gutted of will. Both extremes must be rejected, leaving the high ground to the enlightened, cultured liberal leading the way from within society.

This reformist possibility is most suggested by the play's ending. Emma Goldman initially saw the bargain between Mary and Rutherford as being "unreal and incongruous. It seemed impossible to me that a mother who really loves her child should want it to be in any way connected with the Rutherfords." She reversed her opinion, concluding, "The Rutherfords are bound by time, by the eternal forces of change. Their influence on human life is indeed terrible. Notwithstanding it all, however, they are fighting a losing game." The mechanism for change, however, is not as gradualist or automatic as envisioned by Sowerby and Goldman.

It may very well be that Sowerby intended the final terrible deal struck

between Mary and her father-in-law about the fate of her son to represent the manner in which, against its will, the capitalist would have to give way to a new reality. To the modern spectator, it seems like the most searing condemnation of all. A play like this raises the question: what sort of society is it that depends for its existence on the suppression of every human instinct in its members?

Despite its shortcomings, *Rutherford and Son* is a bold and earnest work, openly speaking about and exploring—with considerable insight—the great ills of society. Grouping Sowerby with other “social iconoclasts” of her time—such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Tolstoy and Shaw—Goldman speaks about modern dramatic art as being a great “menace to our social fabric and a more powerful inspiration than the wildest harangue of the soapbox orator.”

The Shaw players have done an outstanding job interpreting Sowerby’s extraordinary work. They have succeeded in their effort—articulated by director Maxwell—to find “the truth that lies behind every glance, each fold of a tablecloth, each hesitation on a stair.”

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**<http://www.wsws.org>**