

The Shaw Festival's 50th Season: George Bernard Shaw's Heartbreak House

By Joanne Laurier
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"The enormity of it [World War I] was quite beyond most of us," writes George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) in the preface to his extraordinary *Heartbreak House*, one of the playwright's most important pieces. The play is the featured work this year at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2011.

Written and set immediately prior to the First World War, *Heartbreak House* is a quasi-Chekhovian dark comedy about a society on the edge of a precipice. Shaw delayed the production until the war's end, out of a concern that it might demoralize the British population. "Truth telling is not compatible with defence of the realm," the playwright wrote. "Comedy, though sorely tempted, had to be loyally silent; for the art of the dramatic poet knows no patriotism...and thus becomes in time of war a greater military danger than poison, steel, or trinitrotoluene [TNT]. That is why I had to withhold *Heartbreak House* from the footlights during the war; for the Germans might on any night have turned the last act [an air raid] from play into earnest, and even then might not have waited for their cues."

Staged by veteran director Christopher Newton (formerly the artistic director of the festival) (See "An interview with Christopher Newton, director of the Shaw Festival's Heartbreak House."), the current production conscientiously brings to life Shaw's thoughts and intentions. The set of *Heartbreak House* is built like a ship. Its inhabitants and visitors are "cultured leisured Europe before the war" (in Shaw's own words), now bottled up in an agitated drawing room locale. The House is both cradle and grave. (In his program notes, Newton refers to the play's setting as being "a skeleton of some unknown beast.") The elaborate set by Leslie Frankish is as complex and animated as the characters themselves, able to physically transform itself in order to drive home the reality that "Heartbreak House," a house without foundations, is irrevocably unmoored.

Newton, also in his notes, acknowledges that even as the characters are breaking out "of the constricting atmosphere of the house, they nevertheless sleepwalk into destruction." (In fact, Shaw's detailed stage directions inform us that the character who inhabits the stage when the play begins is reading a volume of Shakespeare. "Presently the book sinks to her lap; her eyes close; and she dozes into a slumber." Is the entire work a "dream play"?)

At the helm of "Heartbreak House," an estate in southeast England, is the octogenarian Captain Shotover (Michael Ball), both a drunk and a sage. A young woman, Ellie Dunn (Robin Evan Willis), has been invited to visit by the Captain's daughter, Hesione Hushabye (Deborah Hay), whose intention is to terminate Ellie's engagement to the dreadful businessman, Boss Mangan (Benedict Campbell).

Ellie is willing to marry for wealth, because every "woman who hasn't any money is a matrimonial adventurer." The desire to escape poverty trumps the fact that Mangan has financially destroyed her beloved father, Mazzini Dunn (Patrick McManus)—named after a leading figure of the aborted Italian national revolution. She accepts Mangan's reasoning that

"business is business; and I ruined him [Ellie's father] as a matter of business."

On the other hand, Hesione hates this "captain of industry." She says: "Think of poor weak innocent Ellie in the clutches of this slavedriver," a man who fights "with women and girls over a halfpenny an hour ruthlessly."

Ellie's true love at the beginning of the play, she tells Hesione, is a man she's recently met named Marcus, a "Socialist...[who] despises rank, and has been in three revolutions fighting on the barricades."

The only difficulty is that Ellie's ideal paramour turns out to be, in actuality, Hector Hushabye (Blair Williams), Hesione's husband, whose real exploits (at womanizing) are less exotic, though, says his wife, no less heroic. Hesione is also a charmer of the opposite sex. The couple relentlessly chase phantom cures for real ills. Meanwhile the Shotover-Hushabye household is nearly destitute, but financial matters are largely beneath the notice of Hesione and Hector.

Shotover's long-estranged daughter Lady Ariadne Utterword (Laurie Paton), an upper-class type who rejects the bohemianism of her sister and father, also shows up. Married to a colonial governor, she believes England belongs to the equestrian class—backed by the military.

Heartbreak House gives all its characters their due, but certainly comes down against Boss Mangan and the capitalists. At one point, Captain Shotover says to Hector: "We must win powers of life and death over them.... There is enmity between our seed and their seed. They know it and act on it, strangling our souls. They believe in themselves. When we believe in ourselves, we shall kill them.... We kill the better half of ourselves every day to propitiate them."

Just in case, however, the old captain keeps a store of dynamite "to blow up the human race when it goes too far." Meanwhile, when asked what an Englishman's business might be at this point in history, Shotover replies, "Navigation. Learn it and live; or leave it and be damned." In other words, presumably, ordinary people have the responsibility of consciously guiding society and not leaving it in the hands of the Mangans of the world.

Some of Shaw's own frustration with the effort to change society are perhaps identified by Mazzini in one of the play's pivotal moments: "I joined societies and made speeches and wrote pamphlets. That was all I could do. But, you know, though the people in the societies thought they knew more than Mangan, most of them wouldn't have joined if they had known as much. You see they had never had any money to handle or any men to manage. Every year I expected a revolution, or some frightful smash-up: it seemed impossible that we could blunder and muddle on any longer. But nothing happened, except, of course, the usual poverty and crime and drink that we are used to. Nothing ever does happen." Of course, things were about to happen, with a vengeance.

In the spirit of English fair play, Shaw makes sure that every character is permitted in turn to claim the audience's attention. This allows for the development of multifaceted personalities, not one-dimensional social

specimens. It is a challenge to follow and grasp the characters' density and subterranean mysteries.

Christopher Newton and the cast have done a remarkable job with *Heartbreak House*. Their production is striking, riveting and disturbing. It is a mammoth undertaking that continually stirs up a theme set out by Shaw in his preface: "Heartbreak House, in short, did not know how to live, at which point all that was left to it was the boast that at least it knew how to die: a melancholy accomplishment which the outbreak of war presently gave it practically unlimited opportunities of displaying."

A sense of urgency underscores the festival's *Heartbreak House*, derived in part no doubt from contemporary considerations. Newton writes: "This is England and Europe in 1914. For the modern audience the disquietude provoked by the play is the certain knowledge that the First World War obliterated part of our Western civilization, and that, on a human level, patterns of love and desire are always vulnerable.

"*Heartbreak House* is one of the greatest plays in our language and its meaning will, of course, change with every generation. But for our time it is, I think, a warning of possible things to come."

Almost a century

George Bernard Shaw was a remarkable figure, as a playwright, social commentator and music and theater critic. He was born only months after the conclusion of the Crimean War—a mid-nineteenth century conflict fought between Tsarist Russia, on the one hand, and Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire, on the other—and died a few months after the Korean War had broken out. The American Civil War, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, two world wars, the rise of Stalinism and fascism...those are only a few of the immense events that played themselves out during his lifetime.

Shaw belonged politically to the Fabian socialist trend of the British middle class, the ultimate champions of gradualism. Not a revolutionary, with "a certain amount of social snobbery mixed up with his intellectual snobbery" (Edmund Wilson, "Bernard Shaw at Eighty"), the Anglo-Irish playwright was never able to reconcile himself to the notion of the working class freeing itself by its own mass action. The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche was no doubt harmful, and the latter's theory of the "superman" perhaps helps explain Shaw's unsavory infatuation at different times with Mussolini and Stalin.

And, while the playwright fiercely and courageously rejected the noxious propaganda of the jingoists and chauvinists during World War I, one should point out that Shaw defended Britain's role in the war, as mentioned above, and even did official propaganda work on behalf of the military effort.

It would be highly misleading, however, to leave the matter there. After all, this was an individual who credited a reading of Marx's *Capital* in 1883 with making him "a man." "That was the turning point in my career," he later wrote. "Marx was a revelation.... He opened my eyes to the facts of history and civilization, gave me an entirely fresh conception of the universe, provided me with a purpose and a mission in life."

Shaw was capable of extraordinary feats of both poetic and social insight under the right conditions. Lenin famously called him "a good man fallen among Fabians." The Dublin-born playwright recognized at times a reality that conflicted with his reformist views, noting, for example, in the preface to *Heartbreak House*, dated June 1919: "Revolution, lately only a sensational chapter in history or a demagogic claptrap, is now a possibility so imminent that hardly by trying to suppress it in other countries by arms and defamation, and calling the process anti-Bolshevism, can our Government stave it off at home."

Socio-economic circumstances in Britain unfavorable to the development of revolutionary thought and action have to take a major share of the blame for some of Shaw's weaknesses and inconsistencies. Writing in 1906, the German Marxist Karl Kautsky noted the

extraordinary wealth that had poured into the coffers of the British ruling class and also benefited its hangers-on.

Kautsky continued, "To a disproportionately large number of capitalists [in Britain] there also corresponds a disproportionately large number of servants as well as members of the so-called liberal professions.... If the members of these social strata are especially numerous in England, they are also dependent on capital to the highest degree. Leaving aside the domestic servants, the English artists, scholars and writers are more than anywhere else within the sphere of influence of capitalism." It is to Shaw's great credit that he treated this "sphere of influence," along with fellow Anglo-Irish writer, Oscar Wilde, perhaps more critically than any other major figure of his time.

The reader or spectator is nearly always aware of the Fabian dramatist's intimate familiarity with the world he portrayed and criticized in art, a familiarity rooted, however, in an inextricable attachment.

Shaw's comedy, writes Edmund Wilson, is dependent on "a cultivated and stable society." His frequent inveighing against poverty as the evil most resolutely to be avoided has one meaning as a criticism of the general conditions of capitalism, it has another when it applies to the choice facing the intellectual or artist. Shaw seems to assume, paraphrasing Ellie Dunn, that everyone "who hasn't any money" is necessarily (and even legitimately) something of an "adventurer," but why should *we*? Facing a degree of hardship would not necessarily have hurt the circles Shaw traveled in, for example. Kautsky favorably contrasted the Russian intellectuals of the time, renowned for their self-sacrifice and commitment, with their more complacent and comfortable English and American counterparts.

Shaw's witty, urbane theater, unfortunately, nearly always carries with it traces of drawing room comedy, with many of that genre's complacent connotations. In *Heartbreak House*, he is fascinated by characters who, in Wilson's phrase, "give out thunder and lightning like storm clouds." Yet, the creator remains insufficiently alienated from his creations, along with various theatrical conventions. Even a world war did not prevent Shaw from resorting to certain clichés in *Heartbreak House*'s, particularly the antics of the maid and the burglar.

And even as one takes into account the objective pressures bearing down on Shaw, one also feels strongly the truth of Trotsky's wish that the "Fabian fluid that ran in [Shaw's] veins might have been strengthened by even so much as five percent of the blood of Jonathan Swift," the scathing Anglo-Irish satirist (1667-1745).

This comment speaks to the play's major contradiction: all the combustion in the play and all the friction between the characters still fall short of conveying the dimensions of the cataclysm that loomed not far off in the distance in 1913. Shaw's comedy-drama treats social strata, who "when they could...lived without scruple on incomes which they did nothing to earn" (the preface), but to a certain extent exhibits some of the self-involved and frivolous features of these same strata, which feel as present in *Heartbreak House* as the reality, hovering like a specter, of an impending social catastrophe.

All that being said, *Heartbreak House* remains one of the most important pieces of the English-language theater in the modern era and the current production at the Shaw Festival is well worth an excursion.

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