

# THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

*George Bernard Shaw*

MAY God in His infinite wisdom spare him to us for many another year but, since mathematics seem to be inexorable in the scheme of Divine Providence and since he is now within two and one-half years of ninety, the Great Bookkeeper may have other ideas. It is this unhappy thought that prompts, while he is still alive, this reckoning of what George Bernard Shaw has meant, among so many other things, to the world of drama.

When Shaw in his earlier day as a critic looked upon the English stage, what he found, in the plays of Pinero, was simply a romantic servant-girl's view of sex made palatable to her even more romantic employers by identifying it with persons of a somewhat fancier social class. What he found further, in the plays of Henry Arthur Jones, though he deemed him Pinero's superior, was a relationship of men and women predicated merely upon its availability for ready theatrical effect, and a philosophy of that relationship facetiously concocted by placing a sliver of banana peel

under Pinero's moral rectitude. What he found still further, despite the strong wind beginning to blow down from Norway, was a drama still artificialized out of all reality by French influences. What he found in sum and in short was an English stage that interpreted life largely in terms of the powdered mentalities and evening-dressed emotions of high-life puppets or in the even more laughable terms of paper-knife melodrama.

Since critic and crusader are generally one and the same, for all the critic's customary lofty disdain of the impeachment, the disgusted Shaw didn't wait long before exchanging his critical robes for play-writing armor and, his white plume flying behind him, riding forth to battle. With the earlier help of his fellow-critic Archer, he drew first blood, if but a dribble, from the heathen by heaving onto the stage of the Independent Theatre Company of London *Widowers' Houses* which, though paradoxically imitative of the very drama he was tilting against, dared to introduce

sociology and economics into the drawing room. This was the start, modest enough, but the start nonetheless of the putsch that was to revolutionize not only the modern drama of England but to a considerable degree the drama of the rest of the civilized world.

It was not, however, too easy going. The English were still happily swooning over the pretty parlor woes of Mrs. Tanqueray and her sisters when Shaw had at them with the ironic whimsicalities of *Arms and the Man*, which they appreciated only as a stage Russian pretends to appreciate licorice-pellet caviar, and, unforgivably, with *Mrs. Warren's Profession* which, while essentially not altogether dissimilar to Mrs. Tanqueray's, nevertheless so outraged the British morality that its production was forbidden.

Chuckling in his beard, Shaw thereupon said to himself, very well, if the numskulls prefer sentimentality, I shall give it to them, but in such clever and witty wise that they will not recognize the deletion of the *ality*. *Candida*, that most delightful of sentimental comedies, was the result. And slowly, like a tortoise making for a lily pond, the English public began to respond. And slowly its esteem for Pinero's innocent young women

whose reputations had been knavishly stained (*The Benefit of the Doubt*) and less innocent older women who melodramatically burned Bibles by way of justifying their illicit relations with politicians (*The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*) proceeded faintly to fade. Nor did Jones' Michaels and their lost angels or Wilde's ideal husbands bring the color wholly back to its cheeks. For Shaw, not dismounting from his charger for a moment, kept prodding sardonically with lances like *The Devil's Disciple*, which invited audiences to bring with them fewer glands and more brains into the theatre and which pleasantly surprised them by being not at all as painful as they had anticipated but, on the contrary, surprisingly amusing.

## II

From this point on, our hero's crusade was, as the vulgar Yankee expression has it, pretty well in the bag. It was not that the English, who steadfastly worship anything old, whether a philosophy, an actress or a bathroom, deserted the dramatic order of yesterday en masse. Very far from it. The Episcopalian indiscretions of lords and manicurists (*The Gay Lord Quex*), the Lake Como moonlit adven-

turings of elegant strumpets (*Iris*), the spectacles of cross-examined "good" women battling to preserve their honor (*Mrs. Dane's Defence*), the necklaces of Mrs. Gorringer, the amatory maneuvers of Jane, and the various princesses and butterflies still exercised their perfumed influence. But that influence was not exactly the puissant thing it once was. And gradually and surely it was to become less and less under the Shavian pressure. And where in several other and more progressive countries it had not been earlier recognized, it was now not long before St. George was hailed as the voice in the dramatic wilderness and the prophet of the new dramatic order.

Having already produced the beautifully witty *Caesar and Cleopatra* on a stage chronologically identified with the prettily cologned *The Gay Lord Quex*, Shaw forthwith pitched in in earnest. *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, after a lapse in *The Admirable Bashville*, was followed by *John Bull's Other Island* and that by *Major Barbara*, *The Philanderer* and *Man and Superman*, the three last produced in a single year. Scarcely had audiences recaptured their wind than *The Doctor's Dilemma* was heaved at them. And then in quick succession *Getting Married* (*The Shewing-Up*

of *Blanco Posnet* suffered a deferred production), *Misalliance* and *Fanny's First Play*. And, not so very long afterward, *You Never Can Tell* and *Pygmalion* and *Androcles and the Lion* and, to the bewilderment of any possible remaining doubters, that most remarkable of modern historical fancies, *Saint Joan*.

Shaw's position as the greatest dramatist in the English-speaking theatre of his time was now secure. Nor could that security be minimized by his later and enfeebled work. Although his *The Apple Cart*, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, *Too True To Be Good*, *Back To Methuselah*, *Geneva*, *In Good King Charles' Golden Days*, etc., marked a clearly visible and here and there sorry decline, there were still traces of the real Shaw detectable in them. And at their worst, save in the case of *Geneva*, they were better than the great majority of plays that emanated in the same period from the English theatre.

It was not, throughout his theatrical career, that Shaw was the revolutionary dramatic thinker he was esteemed to be by critics and audiences given to a confounding of impudent intelligence with a quietly reasoned and profound philosophy. Much of what was accepted as daring had already been long tried and tested when

Shaw offered it. It was rather that he had the great ability to restate platitudes in such a manner that their weariness left them and that they took on again the color of youth. He brought with him many of the old stage toys but he painted them up in such brilliant and dashing colors that they seemed new. He laughed at the old conventions of the drama, nevertheless kept them and, by playing his wit over them, gayly deceived his willing customers that they were right out of the bandbox. And, above all, he had the enormous theatrical skill to make cynicism a merry thing.

Gratuitously to analyze his plays too closely is to look the gift horse in the mouth, for they have given their recipients some of the happiest hours the stage has afforded since their earliest birthdays. *Caesar and Cleopatra* overdoes the business of criticizing the British? All right, but it nonetheless remains the best play of its kind written in Shaw's time. The epilogue of *Saint Joan* is greasepaint humbug? True. But the play remains the best play of its kind in that same time. *Fanny's First Play* is on the trivial side? Sure enough, but where a better and more hilarious trivial one? The Life Force business of *Man and Superman* and the pursuit of man by woman is out of Schopenhauer,

with a bow to Nietzsche for the Superman business? So what? Maybe the play as a whole isn't plentifully superior to it?

### III

I am not writing definitive criticism; I am writing definitive appreciation of dramatic and theatrical favors. Writing thus, I may possibly deplore with the more definitively critical and worthy P. P. Howe Shaw's admiration for confusing such a character's name as Mr. Redbrook with Mr. Kidbrook or Ftatateeta with Teetatota and, with Howe, condemn it equally with Wilde's having named a character Kelvil in order to be able later on to call him Kettle (or even equally with Shakespeare's bequeathal of the name Elbow for subsequent punning purposes), but since it occupies only eight seconds out of two otherwise amusing hours I shall not complain too loudly. I may also make a wry critical face over the old vaudeville funny business of a woman getting drunk, but *Candida* is *Candida* all the same. I may professionally yelp a little when the great Catherine rolls around on the floor like a couple of 1890 German and Irish comedians, but the short play is pretty entertaining in spite of it, I may groan a

bit over such undergraduate pleasantries, so Howe terms them, as "No man is a match for a woman except with a poker and a pair of hobnailed boots," but there are a hundred such compensating lines as "Captain Bluntschli, I am very glad to see you; but you must leave this house at once" or as "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh." And I may, as a critic who gets paid for it, frown gravely over any number of other obvious shortcomings in the great old boy's plays but, as a man who doesn't get paid for it, I smile and laugh and moisten at so much that is otherwise in them that I nevertheless kiss him on both cheeks.

There is that word moisten. It would take a pretty tough character, or a *Viola tricolor*, to resist Shaw at his sentimental best, for in that best there is a world of tender wisdom distilled into some of the most beautiful prose that the modern stage has known. Caesar's speech to Cleopatra . . . Candida's gentle philosophy . . . Dabadat's bequest to Jennifer — these and a dozen, two dozen, others confound the criticism that once, and then seemingly not without merit, held Shaw to have a heart compounded half of second-hand

Butler and half, in Wells' phrase, of parthenogenetic eggs.

And so when it comes to sex. The Shaw who once said, "There is never any real sex in romance; what is more, there is very little, and that of a very crude kind, in ninety-nine hundredths of our married life"; the Shaw who observed "One man's poetry is another man's pruriency"; the Shaw who asked, "Is any treatment of sex in the interest of public morals?"; the Shaw who remarked, "The novel which says no more about sex than may be said in a lecture on the facts to a class of school girls of fifteen can be enormously more entertaining than a novel wholly preoccupied with sexual symptoms" — the Shaw who has uttered such beliefs has trouble explaining himself to the Shaw who, albeit perhaps unwittingly, has created some of the most desirable heroines that the modern stage has revealed. It is his paradox that his own passivity has created warmth in other men. Although he often hopes to write brilliantly of women as if they were so many lamps without shades, the softening shades are nonetheless born of his prose. And of his own irrepressible, natural sentiment no less.

Dick Dudgeon in *The Devil's Disciple* pronounces the word *love*

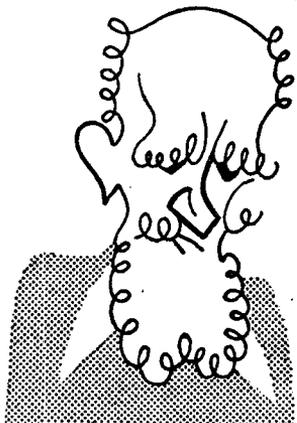
“with true Puritan scorn,” Mrs. Bridgenorth in *Getting Married* comments on the “everyday vulgarities of earthly love,” and so with many another of his mouth-pieces. But, as Stevenson hinted long ago to William Archer, Shaw was nevertheless born a romantic and continues to be one to this day. And, as I myself observed years ago, his romanticism is no more clearly to be detected than through such of his animadversions on love and sex. He pretends not to see the latter for what they are and for what, deep inside him, he knows them to be. But all the fine irony and humor which he has visited upon them cannot conceal the romanticist hiding behind that irony and humor and slyly seeking to protect himself from the charge through them. If the author of the rare and beautiful letters to Ellen Terry isn't one of the most deeply romantic natures of his time and if he was not then, psychologically speaking, one who cunningly dis-

missed sex only and simply because he wished to safeguard his pride and disappointment in the presence of his successful rival, Irving — if Shaw was not and is not all of that, these observations are those of a two-year-old, and a backward one.

## IV

The great man is nearing the threshold of the hereafter. The theatre has not seen his like before, and may not see it soon again. He has brought to it a merry courage, a glorious wit, a musical tenderness, and a world of needed vitality. He has laughed at the old gods and, to give them their due, the old gods have enjoyed it. And outside and

beyond the theatre he has let a wholesome breeze into more assorted kinds of national, international, private and public buncombe than has any other writer of his period. Therefore, hail, Shaw, hail and — I hope I shall wait long before saying it — farewell!



Eric Peters



# DOWN TO EARTH

By ALAN DEVOR

## *Kingfishers and Conceit*

To ask a man whether he has a love of nature is very like asking him whether he has a sense of humor. The answer is nearly sure to be affirmative. We have the belief that a human being, confronted by grotesqueries and incongruities, ought readily to laugh at them; and we have a belief that

human taste should esteem and reverence the great garden of birds and beasts and growing vegetations that lies all around us. These being parts of our general credo, it is rare to find a man who does not take pride in mentioning the readiness with which he is amused. It is rare to find a man who, asked his atti-



*Kingfisher*

*Frank Utpatel*