Shaw's Epic Theater

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Directing is often defined as a process of solving problems. Rehearsals must address issues from the mundane, such as crowd control and the movement of sets and props, to the more abstract, such as the playwright's references and themes. Choosing to direct new productions of classic plays presents its own set of challenges or problems to be solved: What fresh insights can this specific director and company bring to this play? What in the play speaks to audiences across periods? At what point do interpretive choices allow the play to be seen anew or obscure the play with the director's desire to provide an original concept? In his 2003 production of *Misalliance* at the Shaw Festival, director boldly chose to use antirealistic Brechtian techniques. The use of these techniques raised a new possibility in staging. In the past, many theater professionals have based their staging of Shaw on a mistaken belief that his plays are inherently realistic, leaving productions mired in fourth-wall realism. Here was a new option: to take Shaw at his antirealistic word in production choice and, in fact, to present a discussion.

Misalliance, although it closed after only eleven performances in 1910 and was not revived again until the 1930s, has recently enjoyed a very busy and popular life in production. This revival of interest is not surprising considering the play's focus on parents and children, gender roles, and marital choices and its heightened theatricality: characters parachute out of the sky, engage in a *La Ronde*–like dance of relationships, and find themselves entangled in a sensationalist subplot featuring revenge and a decades-old secret.

From a directing point of view, *Misalliance* presents several staging issues. The play is approximately 100 pages with no act or scene breaks. Each familiar conflict and plot line is undermined at its inception, disrupting audience expectations. Shaw's own descriptions of the setting are extremely realistic, seeming to discourage experimental or avant-garde approaches. His stage designs, sent for the first New York production, called for a hat stand, writing table, worktable, sideboard, rhododendrons, and "a distant landscape of fir clad hills."[1] Tarleton repeatedly advises the other characters to read authors

with whom an audience, particularly a twenty-first-century audience, might be unfamiliar. The most difficult matter of all is how to find a style for a play that, when it was first produced, was called "a debating society of a lunatic asylum" and which boasts a subtitle declaring it to be "a debate in one sitting."[2] Recent reviews continue to condemn the play as "garrulous," with "a script that exhausts patience and a plot that surpasses belief"—not so far off from the *Times* reviewer of 1910 who said that "characters do not keep to the point because there is no point to keep to."[3] As Stanley Weintraub points out, contemporary directors have largely solved these problems by presenting the play as a French farce, with its multiple entrances, exits, and hidden spaces.[4] While the farcical model may accurately embody the play's chaotic tone, its adoption diminishes the impact of the discussion.

The problem with these productions has been, perhaps, that they try to fit the play into a style for which it was not intended, reflecting a dullness of approach rather than of material. Shaw decried the nineteenth-century practices of both melodrama and the well-made plays churned out by Sardou and Scribe, even coining the term *Sardoodledom* to describe their well-oiled but trivial machinations. He called such works "cats' cradles, clockwork mice, mechanical rabbits" with plots like "jig-saw puzzle[s]."[5] In 1894 he wrote that "stage realism is a contradiction in terms," and thirty years later, in a letter to Alexander Bashky, he asked, "[H]ave I ever been what you call a representationist or a realist?"[6] Martin Meisel points out that Shaw objected to the well-made formula, in that "any serious play whose ultimate dramatic values lay in an intriguing situation and its circumstantial plausibility was likely to depend upon conventional moral and social values in its characters and its audience."[7] In other words, realistic plots support status quo attitudes. Philosophically, the comfort of realism—the way in which realism echoes the lives and experiences of the audience—anesthetizes rather than provokes.

Shaw considered himself more old-fashioned or classical than avant-garde. He listed as his influences "Shakespear . . . the Bible, Bunyan, Walter Scott, Dickens and Dumas père, Mozart, and Verdi."[8] He wished to return to a prerealistic style, when actors were trained in the art of rhetoric and unafraid of "heroic acting"; Shaw sought "drunken, stagey, brassboweled barnstormers" who could break through the fourth wall.[9] His works are not particularly radical in terms of structure; instead, they subvert familiar contemporary forms—melodrama, the drama of adultery, romantic drama—even in some cases taking plots directly from the popular plays of Boucicault and Byron in order to lure the audience into the theater.[10] Within the play, he would reverse plot or characters and thus upset expectations. In *Misalliance,* for example, inverting the expectations of romantic comedy, the women are in pursuit of the men: the young woman tries to seduce the older man; the same woman later in the play proposes to her intended; and the aviatrix, Tarzan-style, slings Bentley over her shoulder and carries him off.

Ibsen's skillful manipulation of the gears and cogs of the well-made play evoked Shaw's admiration:

> Formerly you had in what was called a well made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and an unraveling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation and discussion; and the discussion is the test of the playwright. . . . The discussion conquered Europe in Ibsen's Doll House; and now the serious playwright recognizes in the discussion not only the main test of his higher powers, but also the real centre of his play's interest.[11]

Shaw then echoed Ibsen's style in certain of his own plays, *Misalliance* among them, categorized by scholars as "discussion plays" in which "discussion is primary, plot is sometimes of little importance, sometimes of none; the two are loosely connected, sometimes not at all."[12]

The first production of *Misalliance* was directed by Shaw himself. He was, presumably, able to choose his style. Bernard Dukore argues that Shaw emphasized the realistic over the histrionic but still focused on the rhetorical moments of *Misalliance,* showing that "reality is different from stagey behavior."[13] Fourth-wall realism is problematic in that it attempts to suggest that "stagey behavior" is real. Calling attention to the theatricality of the play—any play—helps the audience discern the delusionary quality of idealized appearances presented as reality. Shaw's contemporaries did not always appreciate his antirealistic approach or his interest in emphasizing discussion over plot, perhaps because of his early championing of Ibsen or his emphasis on quotidian concerns and middle-class characters. Max Beerbohm, for example, took back his early criticisms of *Man and Superman* as not being a play, saying that he himself had had a failure of theatrical imagination.[14] What if this has been true with other plays, condemned not for their inherent flaws but for being placed in the wrong frame?

Shaw, like Ibsen, embraced several different styles of playwriting. Over the long course of his career, his dramas encompassed social realism, absurdism, and symbolism—sometimes within the same play. *Man and Superman, John Bull's Other Island, The Apple Cart, Too True to be Good,* and *Heartbreak House* have long been considered plays that presaged Beckett, Brecht, and Ionesco's avant-garde techniques of absurdism and alienation. Stanley Weintraub in "The Avant-Garde Shaw" notes the playwright's declaration in 1926 "that the sort of theatre his new plays needed was one that had to 'combine' the optics and acoustics of a first-rate lecture theater and a first-rate circus."[15] He describes how Shaw anticipated several later and more commonly acknowledged "experimental" playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Brecht, asserting that "after his first decade as a dramatist Shaw had already outgrown even Ibsenite realism." Weintraub remarks on

Shaw's insistence that "the more scenery you have, the less illusion you produce," concluding, "[H]e wanted his characters to be able to step out of their roles now and then to become bigger than life."[16] Shaw, John Gassner notes, was always "ready to stop the overt action for a good discussion or good lecture, or even step out of the proscenium frame to harangue the audience in behalf of a relevant philosophy or sociology which is beyond, if not indeed antithetical to, the illusion achieved by plodding realists and the designers who provide scenic realism."[17]

Several scholars have suggested nonrealistic approaches to *Misalliance*. Miriam Handley examines the presence—albeit at times satiric—of the deus ex machina in Shaw's plays, identifying the plane carrying Lina and the aviators as an early-arrived machine.[18] The original production of *Misalliance* was presented in the same season as Gilbert Murray's new translations of Euripides, suggesting a shared interest in what Shaw, writing in 1908, saw as key features of classical plays: "Not . . . a plot or a story but an argument . . . lasting three hours, and carried on with unflagging cerebration by twelve people and a beadle."[19] This idea of plays as arguments would come full circle in the twentieth century in the theories of Brecht.

On the other stylistic extreme, Rodelle Weintraub has suggested a surrealistic interpretation in which the entire play is Johnny Tarleton's "wish-fulfillment dream"—in other words, a subconscious rather than hyperconscious approach.[20] In this psychoanalytic examination, she sees the characters of Percival, Gunner, and Bentley as alter egos or aspects of the immature Johnny's psyche. As in a dream, there are "characters splitting, doubling, multiplying; themes being introduced, repeated, varied, and interwoven; problems being analyzed and desires being satisfied."[21] Certainly the dance of strange characters—aviators running off with one's sister, an aviatrix who juggles oranges, a gun-brandishing stranger who races through the house—all suggest such a dreamscape. One can imagine the play directed in the style of Strindberg or Dalí.

Christopher Newton, the artistic director of the Shaw Festival from 1980 to 2002, directed the play twice, emphasizing and refining his own surrealistic approach to Shaw, seeing in all of the plays "leaps" that defy realistic staging. When interviewed by Keith Garebian, Newton asserted that "things that seem crazy intrude upon the world that he creates. . . . He sees that what on the surface could be regarded as ordinary life is, in fact, magical—that what seems to be one thing can often turn out to be another."[22] The "reasoning" behind the plays, he continued, is "not at all linear." His 1990 production of *Misalliance* (considered the more successful of the two productions) highlighted the nonlinear aspects in its stage design with "mist, darkness" and "a scene luxuriant with sub-tropical or tropical vegetation . . . a hothouse of ferns, vines and immense flowering shrubs," showing the

incongruities between Victorian colonialism and "the mechanical innovations of the modern century."[23] For Newton, the surrealism of the play arises from the play's dreamlike atmosphere, "the long afternoon of Edwardian England."[24]

Of all of the avant-garde directorial approaches, Shaw's anti-illusionist ideas connect most specifically with twentieth-century epic theater—the theater of Bertolt Brecht. In a 1926 article titled "Three Cheers for Shaw," Brecht observes that Shaw realized that "the mere reproduction of reality does not give an impression of truth."[25] Both saw theater as an instrument of debate leading to social change rather than a trivial display of either "Sardoodledom" or the emotional excesses of melodrama. Brecht, in fact, refers to Shaw as a "terrorist" who "creates a play by inventing a series of complications that give his characters a chance to develop their opinions as fully as possible and to oppose them to our own."[26] The dilemma in staging is that directors can become entranced with the complications that are Shaw's "bait" without allowing opportunities to bring forth the opinions. Brecht took specific steps in his dramaturgy of epic theater to ensure an aesthetic distance from the plays of the era—specifically their heavy reliance on linear plot. His plays are organized around episodes, avoiding the artificiality of causal and/or climactic plotting. He decried the use of realistic settings, asking that the theater be purged of "magical" and thus "hypnotic tensions": "[I]t is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience."[27] He hoped to separate the audience from emotionally identifying with the characters or conflicts through a series of alienation techniques, including projected titles, gestic music, and actors stepping out of character to address the audience.

It was exciting, then, to see Neil Munro apply these alienation effects in the Shaw Festival's 2003 production of *Misalliance*. The audience was continually reminded that this was a play written by a specific individual. Each of the production's two acts was introduced by film clips of Shaw, including one in which the BBC had requested a profile of the author and he obliged, first turning to the right and then to the left. Caricatures of Shaw were projected on the sidewalls. Two busts, one of Shaw and one of Ibsen, flanked the podiums. The bust of Shaw—a fixed monument—was toppled and broken during the play.

The "wordiness" of *Misalliance* was also emphasized through the production's design. Stage directions from the play were written on the floor and walls. Projections on the sidewalls created titles for each of the scenes or episodes as Munro compartmentalized them, breaking up the emotional momentum of the play. (In a similar vein, Baltimore's Center Stage production in fall 2003 solved the problem of audiences not knowing the sources

to which Tarleton refers by writing significant quotations on the walls). The setting, while including the Turkish bath and windows described in the stage directions, was a library dominated by two podiums that characters would move to from time to time, reading from, or, one could say, lecturing from scripts of the play. These podiums created the atmosphere of the debating society Bentley calls for when, in the opening moments of the play, he says, "[L]et's argue about something intellectual."[28] A swing appeared out of nowhere to disrupt the belief that viewers were in a realistic interior space, a choice that collapsed Shaw's two settings into one and anticipated the later disruption of the space by the airplane's crash from above and Gunner's emergence from the Turkish bath trap below.

The characters of *Misalliance,* while compelling, are not particularly empathetic, supporting Brecht's ideas of alienation. In Brecht's theater "it is necessary to attack the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience" through the actors using "a definite gest of showing."[29] In Munro's production, the characters emerged from the bookshelves, pointing up their existence as literary types. Each character can be seen as emblematic of an idea, a class, a gender—similar to characters in expressionistic drama. Bentley may represent the Brain; Johnny, the Natural Man; Lina, the Exotic Woman; Lord Summerhays, the Aristocrat; Hypatia, the Ingenue; and Tarleton, the Nouveau Riche. Shaw described Lina, the aviatrix, as a type: "the St. Joan of Misalliance . . . a religious force."[30] Relationships are instantaneous; motivations and conflicts are superficial and quickly resolved. Hypatia, for example, ricochets from Bentley, to Summerhays, to Percival. Both Gunner's socialist revenge plot and the potential lost child revelation (a staple of melodrama) dissolve. What remains then? An opportunity to raise questions and discuss opposing views through thesis and antithesis.

What are the questions raised in the play *Misalliance*? In other words, what is it that Munro interpreting Shaw would want us to be thinking about through these alienation techniques? Metatheatrical critiques of melodrama are unquestionably present in the play; witness the lost child, the stage machinery, the gun that in fact does not go off at the end of the play, the received ideas about the call of the blood, and the intense "natural" emotional connections between parent and child. Shaw even has his characters draw attention to the dramaturgy of the play they are in. Johnny says to Tarleton: "I like a book with a plot in it, you like a book with nothing in it but some idea that the chap that writes it keeps worrying. You look on an author as a type of god. I look on him as a man . . . I pay . . . to amuse me and take me out of myself and make me forget" (28). Shaw pokes fun at his own plot as the one readers are most interested in, a plot that labors over "which particular young man some young woman will mate with," to which

Percival replies, "[A]s if it mattered" (93). But Shaw's greatest questions come in his satirical treatment of any unexamined ideals, seen in the attempt at a duel over Hypatia's "honor," Gunner's fervent espousals of socialism (resulting in a headache), and, finally, what Tarleton sadly refers to as the lack of "paternal sentimentality" (98) when he calls for a future in which "no man should know his own child! No child should know its own father. Let the family be rooted out of civilization!" (100). In a realistic production, these statements would carry inappropriate emotional heft. In epic theater, we see them as ideas to be questioned and considered.

The greatest danger in using Brecht's alienation techniques in any production is that the audience may be alienated beyond intellectual engagement. Surely, though, Shaw's ideas, characters, and language are resilient enough to survive and disclose new insights through new lenses of production. Shaw and Ibsen embraced the democracy of realism, the opportunity to place middle- and working-class characters onstage, to talk about unspoken social realities, particularly how money controls our relationships. But fourth-wall realism—as though we were peeking into someone's house—is not the essential vehicle for portraying social problems drawn from everyday situations.

Our experience of Shaw's plays in the theater can only be enhanced through production choices influenced by scholarship analyzing the playwright's avant-garde tendencies. Neil Munro has presented a Brechtian *Misalliance*. Why not frankly symbolist depictions of *Candida,* expressionist mask work to highlight the layered characters in *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Major Barbara,* and surrealist dreamscapes for *Arms and the Man* or *You Never Can Tell*? Shaw warned that what he was planning was nothing less than "a siege laid to the theatre of the XIXth Century by an author who had to cut his way into it at the point of a pen."[31] His works merit such a siege to nineteenth-century realism, which must needs be superseded by twentieth- and twenty-first-century directorial approaches.

Notes

1. Bernard Dukore, *Shaw's Theater* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), p. 115.

2. Qtd. in Cary M. Mazer, "Shaw, *Misalliance* and the Theatre," accessed 27 February 2004 <www.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/mis3.html>.

3. Stefan Kanfer, "Misalliance," *The New Leader* 80.14 (8 September 1997): 23; Mazer, "Shaw, *Misalliance* and the Theatre."

4. Stanley Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw: Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982), p. 230.

5. Qtd. in E. H. West, ed., *Shaw on Theater* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 268.

6. Qtd. in Margery Morgan, *File on Shaw* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 112.
7. Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater* (New York: Limelight Publishers, 1989), p. 80.
8. West, *Shaw on Theater,* p. 268.
9. Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater,* p. 94.
10. Ibid., p. 309.
11. Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Hill and Wang, 1891), p. 135.
12. Dukore, *Shaw's Theater,* p. 190.
13. Ibid., p. 192.
14. Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw,* p. 230.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., pp. 224–25.
17. John Gassner, *Dramatic Soundings* (New York: Crown, 1968), p. 368, qtd. in Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw,* p. 229.
18. Miriam Handley, "Shaw's Response to the Deus Ex Machina: From *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* to *Heartbreak House*" (1999), accessed 27 February 2004 <www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Conf99>.
19. Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw,* p. 230.
20. Rodelle Weintraub, "Johnny's Dream: *Misalliance,*" *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 7 (1987): 175.
21. Ibid., p. 177.
22. Keith Garebian, *George Bernard Shaw and Christopher Newton: Explorations of Shavian Theatre* (New York: Mosaic Press, 1996), p. 31.
23. Ibid., p. 129.
24. Ibid., p. 130.
25. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater,* ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 11.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 136.
28. Bernard Shaw, *Misalliance,* in *Misalliance, Fanny's First Play and The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (New York: Brentano's, 1910), p. 5. Further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
29. Brecht, *Brecht on Theater,* p. 136.
30. Bernard Shaw, letter to Irene Vanbrugh, 26 March 1930, in *Shaw: Collected Letters,* vol. 4, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking Books, 1988), pp. 180–81.
31. Qtd. in Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater,* p. 66.