

AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE NEW DRAMA WITH BERNARD SHAW AND GRANVILLE BARKER

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At the turn-of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, London's theatrical tradition had for decades an intimate connection with musical comedies, opera, operettas, and general types of light performances. Affected romances were also very successful as the public at that time was not used to intellectual drama. So, it was natural that a preference remained still for the sentimental comedies. W.L. Courtney elaborated the ideal recipe for the popular theatre of those days:

...There must be a little psychological analysis, but not too much; a little girding at social conventions, but social conventions must ultimately prevail: there must not be too much logic, but there must be romance and sentiment.¹

In short, the great majority of the audiences went to the theatre to live emotions and not to think. The theatre was a place of light, sound, magic and mysticism; the melodrama and the spectacular performances were considered the most popular forms of drama. It was not surprising to expect this "visual" public to come to the theatre to see the stars. However, two playwrights who had the courage to withdraw from the conventional and commercial theatre of the time abhorred this practice. So, circumstance brought together George Bernard Shaw and Harley Granville Barker.

It was the year of 1904, and Shaw who was 48 years old, was as yet an un-acted playwright in London. Due to the conditions described above, his plays were regarded as untheatrical and financially unreasonable. Shaw's criticism is self-explanatory:

...There were no murders, no adulteries, no sexual intrigues in them. The heroines were not like heroines: they were like women. Although the rule of the stage was that any speech longer than twenty words was too long, and that politics and religion must never be mentioned and their places taken by romance and fictitious police and divorce cases, my characters had to declaim long speeches on religion and politics in the Shakespearean or "ham" technique.²

Shaw met Harley Granville Barker when he was 23 years old. At the time he was looking about for an actor suitable for the part of the poet in *Candida* at a Stage Society performance. He found his man in the person of Barker whom Shaw described as remarkable, "...His performance of this part - a very difficult one to cast - was, humanly speaking, perfect."³

Barker started his acting career at the age of 13 and when he was 18 he was already writing plays. In addition to their individual talents which drew a reciprocal admiration, there were basic affinities between the two artists that drove them closer together. For example, Barker's early plays always focalised the woman question - a theme that was most dear to Shaw. The turn-of-the century was the "Time of the New Woman" and both playwrights wanted more than social and political equality between the sexes. They wanted to stress their interest in woman's achievement, in her human maturity and in the liberation of her natural qualities and powers. They believed that if women had the opportunity to fulfil their total humanity, they would be making way for a new and richer association of the sexes. In fact, Shaw and Barker continued to exalt in their drama the feminine figure, accentuating her courage, intelligence and determination in the various circumstances of life. They shared interests in thematic views and integrated in the ideas and everyday living of their time. Their common concern with the social texture also interested them in the decadent bourgeois society of the end of the century. This led the two playwrights to make a strict enquiry in their plays of the disconnected degrees and forms of human chaos; a seed-bed of fine soil that initiated a social crusade of considerable importance. Shaw and Barker also adhered to socialist ideals in the Fabian Society believing that through art and culture people would be able to improve their living conditions. Thus, the theatre being a generator of social development, was panting for a new era and ready to "remold old forms which no longer expressed the new spirit."⁴

The Stage Society, an organisation that was essentially concerned with the New Drama, was the place where they first met and where Barker became known for his performances of Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Marlowe's *Edward II*. By 1904, Barker had produced several plays at the Stage Society and was asked to superintend the production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. He undertook to do this on condition that John Eugene Vedrenne, the manager of the Court Theatre, would join with him in giving six matinée performances of *Candida*. The proposal was readily accepted, and out of it grew an alliance between them which had important results. The success of *Candida*, joined Shaw and Barker in an artistic relationship at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907. It was not only a remarkable association, but one that was in some ways of a paternal-filial kind which lasted until Barker's second marriage in 1918. At the Court Theatre Barker directed a famous "repertory

season" continuing with Vedrenne as business manager. Barker directed all the plays excepting those of Shaw which the older playwright directed himself but of which Barker was almost invariably one of the cast.

The Stage Society also provided the opportunity for Barker's meeting with Gilbert Murray, a famous scholar who contributed to theatrical literature by translating Greek plays, mainly those of Euripides, which later Barker himself produced. Undoubtedly, Shaw's influence was significant as to the inception of the Barker-Vedrenne season at the Court, mainly due to the production in April 1904 of *Candida*, but Gilbert Murray's translations of Euripides sprang the beginnings of the scheme. Thus, it was a happy coincidence to have *Hippolytus* with the Court productions of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Candida* which gave the enterprise its practical substance.

The idea of making the Court, that little theatre a headquarter for a new kind of play and a new approach had been in Granville Barker's mind many times. Most symptomatic were his letters to William Archer in which he expressed his anguish as to the future of the theatre in England. Archer was then recognised not only as one of the principal dramatic critics but also as a distinguished man of letters in several literary fields connected with the theatre. The contents of one of Barker's letters to Archer may be considered a historical declaration of a man who truly loved the theatre:

...It seems to me that we may wait a very long time for our National Theatre, and that when it comes we may have no modern National Drama to put in it. We must get vital drama from somewhere, and if we can't create it we must import it first.

I think there is a class of intellectual would-be playgoers who are profoundly bored by the theatre as it is. Matinée productions don't touch these people (who are all workers) and Sunday evening is expensive and incapable of expansion.

Our actors - and worse still our actresses - are becoming demoralised by lack of intellectual work - the continual demand for nothing but smartness and prettiness.

I think the Independent Theatre - the New Century - The Stage Society - have prepared the ground, and the time is ripe for starting a theatre upon these lines, upon a regular - however unpretending - basis.

And above all unless some effective pioneer work is done very soon, some play will be produced with two penn'orth of idea and three penn'orth of technique, will be acclaimed as a masterpiece and all real progress will be set back for another ten or fifteen years.

... - but this idea has been with me very strongly lately. If I am right and the time is ripe and passes unnoticed it will be a thousand pities...⁵

The Barker-Vedrenne management became a reality and went on to become a legend. Shaw was extremely fond of Barker who was responsible for the choosing and casting of all plays, for directing all of them except those by Shaw (who at that time always directed the first production of his plays himself) and for playing in some of them. In the three years during which the venture lasted, Barker played eleven different parts, of which seven were leading parts in Shaw plays: this in a total of thirty-two different productions, some of which were brought back into the repertory three and four times - more particularly the Shaw plays. By May, 1905 one or two of the most successful and most popular plays (almost always Shaw) were brought back for runs of three weeks in the evenings, while the new productions still occupied the matinée slots. The success in achieving an enormous range of plays was indeed remarkable. From *Votes for Women*, by Elizabeth Robins to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, from two new comedies by St. John Hankin (*The Return of the Prodigal* and *The Charity that Began at Home*) to three translations of Euripides by Gilbert Murray (*Hippolytus*, *Electra* and *Troades*), as well as eleven Shaw plays (six of them for the first time on any stage) and first plays by Galsworthy and Masfield. The importance of the Court Theatre and its influence upon modern drama cannot be underestimated:

As well as giving a sturdy and important voice to the "serious" theatre and placing a new and welcome emphasis on the playwright, Barker's work at the Court introduced the repertory system to ordinary British theatrical life and demonstrated the efficacy and desirability of it, indeed the imperative necessity of it for theatre's survival as a serious art form.... but it is no exaggeration to say that the system on which Britain's two major theatres, the National and the Royal Shakespeare, are now run, is founded wholly on the work that Barker did and the principles he enunciated at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907.⁶

Needless to say, Shaw's plays were the most important dramatic contributions to the Court Theatre. Desmond MacCarthy gives a detailed account of each Shaw play discussing its performance.⁷ His commentaries are not only most interesting but are a historical reference as well. He tells that the most striking feature in the Court performance was Granville Barker's acting of the poet, Eugene Marchbanks in *Candida* on April 26, 1904. He affirms "it's among the best Mr. Shaw has written." Probably, the success of the play was in part due to the fact that it reflected the socialist principles that were so dear to both men. The play suggested that social and moral conventions must be broken up and changed because they do not lead to human happiness. A delicate chord was touched in the heart of the public as the play itself was a tribute to art which is supreme...the artist may crave for love in his weaker moments but he will always be fortified by the ideals that direct his life. No wonder that Barker "succeeded

in playing Eugene Marchbanks where almost every other actor would have failed.”⁸

Very curiously, John Bull's Other Island, performed on May 1st, 1905, was equally successful as *Candida* but for entirely different reasons. According to MacCarthy's account, it did not have any of the qualities of the "well-constructed" play but its success lay mainly in the presentation of character and in the contrast between temperaments achieved in a masterly fashion. Contemporary criticism⁹ analysed how the characters were developed in this play by means of a perfectly natural sequence of events; there was no appearance of circumstances being created for the sake of exhibiting them; everything that happened had the air of happening by chance. MacCarthy ends his criticism by analysing Granville Barker's role as Father Keegan who was able to transmit a sense of remote dignity peculiar to the character.

The part of Valentine in *You Never Can Tell* was played on different occasions by Barker and, according to the same critic, he was able to express well the joy and violence which are part of the character. His performance excelled precisely in the brisk leaps of the heart, which were so characteristic of Shaw's lovers and reflected his general treatment of the theme of love. As to *Man and Superman*, the critic qualifies this play as a tragi-comic love-chase of a man by a woman and the most brilliant piece of work that Shaw had done. Barker played Jack Tanner which is said to have been one of his best parts as he delighted the public with his explosions of nervous energy and exasperated eloquence. However, the play which is based on Shaw's philosophy of sex does not partake entirely of Barker's view on the subject.

However, notwithstanding their differences, they became closer due to the mutual respect and admiration for the artistic talents each one displayed. It was in part due to their intensive theatrical cooperation and stubborn idealism that the poetic and realistic drama had come to stay. As a playwright, Barker's interest was one of intellectual conflict which focalised his characters' emotions. However, he shared with Shaw the same social-political concerns and also condemned pure sentimentality and sexual exploration. As the majority of their plays were indictments against society, they coherently denounced social injustices by expressing them through divergent aesthetical approaches.

Noteworthy is the poetical transcendence which pervades all of Barker's work, in spite of his using an enfolding technique that includes denoting elements of realistic aesthetic similar to Shaw's. Whereas he did not discard social-political themes, he enriched his work with poetic images of great lyrical content. He believed that the theatre needed poets in order to be lasting: "...The theatre, if it is to survive, needs poets. And plays only defy mortality when they deal - as poetry in its essence does - with the things that are immortal."¹⁰ He conceived drama and poetry as being interdependent so drama could only be poetical when it dealt with inner conflicts and emotions. In order to attain this poetical magnitude, Barker used a language that was above rational in its subtle devices: he made use of melody itself, of the rhythm of words, of associations, of suggestions and stimulus to the imagination.

As it may be observed, Barker and Shaw shared similar visualisation of ideas but differed in their aesthetical methods as well as in individual temperaments. Barker was more self-contained in spite of his strong strain of Italian blood. Shaw was quite impressed by Barker's personality:

...He had a wide literary culture and a fastidiously delicate taste in every branch of art. He could write in a difficult and too precious but exquisitely fine style. He was self-willed, restlessly industrious, sober, and quite sane. He had Shakespeare and Dickens at his finger ends. Altogether the most distinguished and incomparably the most cultivated person whom circumstances had driven into the theatre at that time.¹¹

On the other hand, Shaw was a man of many contradictions who went through life at once exposing himself and wearing a mask. He was spiritually pure; incapable of a lower action, but delighted at baffling people about his real personality. At bottom he was a moralist – but professing to be amoral, unscrupulous, callous and insensitive. We might apply to him Lady's Britomart's words about her husband Undershaft: "I cannot forgive Andrew for preaching immorality while he practised morality."¹²

Another scholar, Martin Meisel, in *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre*^{xiii}, knowingly affirms that Barker's method of directing and acting were quite independent and different from Shaw who demanded more direct effects and a more extravagant acting than the ones Barker desired. Shaw himself witnessed his friend's performance when he said: "...His taste for low tones which made his productions of Galsworthy plays and of his own exquisite, did not suit mine:..."

Camillo Pellizzi describes Shaw's characteristics as one of the rebellious type:

...He wanted the artist to have a clear, impassive intellect, and to represent human reality with the aim of improving it. For him the true and the only works of art were really Nature and man: the sole aim of every spiritual activity should be the service of Nature and the improvement of man,... He believed, therefore, in the inward virtue of human nature and in the boundless possibilities of reason, which humanity is given to make use of; he believed in progress, in this rationalistic sense, and he saw the

obstacle to progress in the muddles and conventionalism of sentiment in all its forms, including the mystical and religious. For this reason he was a sworn enemy of sentiment and mysticism,...

In some ways, however, Barker was influenced by Shaw: they identified in intellectual quality as we have already commented and also in the use of expanded stage-directions. Barker's remarks are skilful and in tune with the play and include information which cannot be directly conveyed on the stage. They are not polemic as Shaw's are at times, but they are consistent with Barker's belief as a producer that the actors should know in detail the characters they are portraying. No doubt they help the reader feel the warmth, movement and the total emotional and intellectual effect of the performance. Their practice of writing expanded stage directions and the high literary quality of their plays are significantly related to the passing in 1891 of the American Copyright Bill which insured protection to printed works in America and in England.

The affectionate and professional link between Shaw and Barker was no doubt the result of the complementation of their personalities, and therefore reinforced the basis for making the Court experiment go through with flying colours. Barker continued to act in many of Shaw's plays and several critics xiv declared how exceptionally good he was in *How He Lied to Her Husband* and that in *The Doctor's Dilemma* he played Dubedat as well as the drawing of the character allowed. In *Major Barbara*, Barker played Adolphus Cusins, the professor of Greek who fell in love with Barbara and proposed under the impression that she was an ordinary Salvation Army lass. But *Candida* was the starting point of this remarkable partnership that placed Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker at the threshold of a new era in drama. As already mentioned, many of Shaw's plays followed with Barker as leading actor. Barker with Vedrenne were able to take the Court on a full-blown management and led Shaw to cease writing plays "for anybody who asked him, and to become a playwright in ordinary to the new enterprise."¹⁵

After Barker's death in 1946, Shaw paid him a tribute in a touching article entitled: *Granville Barker: Some Particulars*,¹⁶ he comments that Barker worked furiously as he had not only to act, but to produce all plays except Shaw's. He had to find and inspire all the artists whom he drew into the theatre to carry out his ideas. In the end he had to give up acting and devote himself entirely to producing, or, under Shaw's pressure, who admired his plays intensely, to write plays. But the Court was abandoned for larger and more central theatres; in spite of the immense prestige the theatre had to put up the shutters as no theatre in London devoted to excellence could bear the burden of London rents and rates.

This was the reason why Barker struggled to the end of his life for a National Theatre - a dream that would only become true after his death. Nevertheless, the Court paved the way for the art of the theatre at its best. When Barker consulted William Archer about taking the Court Theatre and run there a stock season of the uncommercial drama, he had in mind the oncoming of the National Theatre.

Without doubt the National Theatre will come, but as Ibsen has leavened the whole English theatre during the past fifteen years, so we ought to be getting some more leaven ready for the National Theatre when it comes.¹⁷

In 1908, Barker accepted an invitation to go to New York to direct a theatrical season sponsored by a group of prominent citizens. He started by presenting Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* which was a great success mainly due to the originality of the scenery. There was very good receptivity to productions of other Shaw plays and of several other famous playwrights such as Anatole France, George Meredith, Arthur Schitzler and John Galsworthy. When he returned to England, Barker was already known as the most important man in the theatrical world. John Gielgud wrote in his *mémoires* that Barker had been one of his greatest heroes. However, due to the intimate relationship between Shaw and Barker, many critics have placed the latter as a mere Shaw follower.

The artistic work Shaw and Barker produced was remarkable and challenged the highest standards showing the pitch of excellence the new drama could attain. In spite of not having met again since 1918, their mutual sympathy remained unaltered. When Shaw learned about Barker's death he dedicated a vehement tribute to the late friend recalling their service in the theatre's vanguard.

...I hope his widow has come to see that the wild oats he sowed with me have produced a better harvest than she foresaw, and that his original contributions to our dramatic literature are treasures to be preserved, not compromising documents to be destroyed.

Notwithstanding their professional and affectionate partnership and their mutual respectful intellectual cooperation, it is most necessary to emphasise the differences in their respective talents and artistic perception as has been mentioned throughout this paper. Their essential unity remains in the fact that they saw in the drama of ideas a doorway to a new theatrical era, a new way to carry on thought and passion. They struggled to break the chains of the commercial theatre and to build an expressive drama that would reach the public's soul. Shaw and Barker meant to reveal essential truths because they understood that spiritual truths must harmonise with ethical virtues to be able to contribute to effective society. So, the new drama aspired to show guiding principles for the lives of contemporary men. The two playwrights, like Ibsen, Strindberg, Galsworthy and

others, discovered that the scenic art of the realistic theatre may be transformed into a metaphor of modern man's condition. At the threshold of the new drama, their courageous introspection awakened the world to a magnificent new start.

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