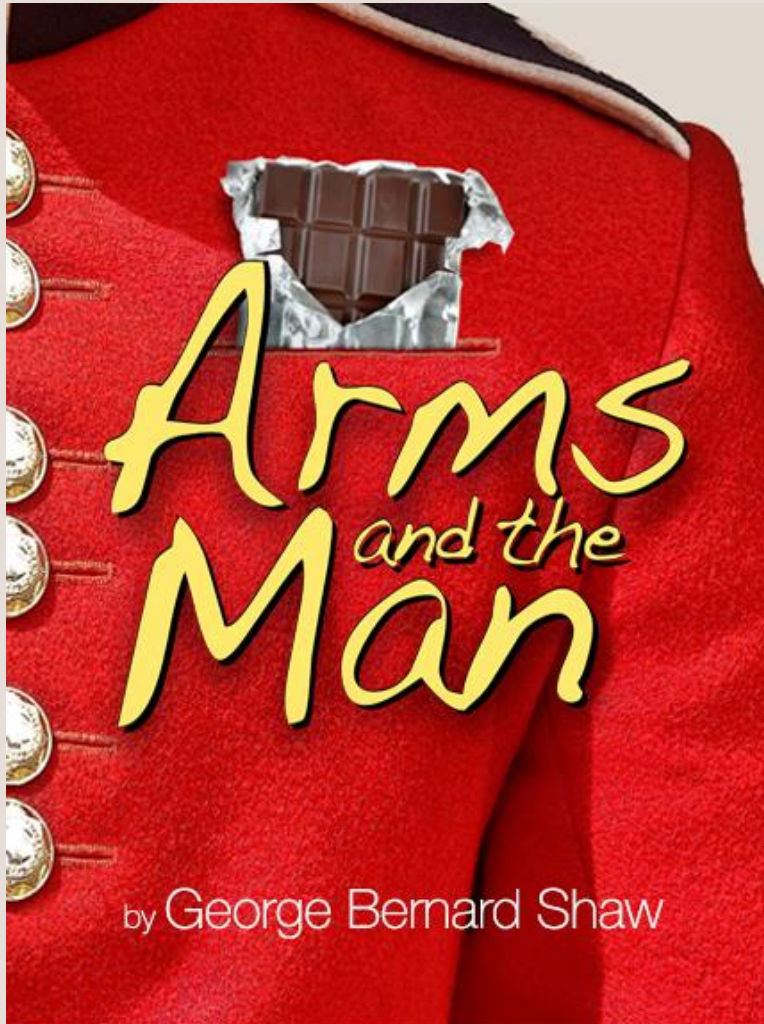


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Nike Doukas

by Susan Myer Silton, Dramaturg
© 2022

“When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.”

– George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Character, Setting and Time Setting descriptions are quoted from the 1958/1986 Samuel French version of the play as directed by Anita Grannis and adapted by Robroy Farquhar's Flat Rock Playhouse, Flat Rock, NC, as well as [The Project Gutenberg eBook of Arms and the Man](#).

RAINA (Elinor Gunn) Shaw opens his play with Raina standing on the balcony outside her bedroom, “gazing at the snowy Balkans” in the bright moonlight, “a young lady, intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her own youth and beauty is a part of it”. She is the daughter of Catherine and Paul Petkoff, the only child in one of the wealthiest families in Bulgaria.

CATHERINE PETKOFF (Marcia Pizzo) The playwright describes Catherine as “a woman over forty, imperiously energetic, with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Viennese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea gown on all occasions”. She is Raina’s mother and the wife of Major Paul Petkoff.

LOUKA (Allie Pratt) The Petkoff’s maid, Louka is described in the text as “a handsome, proud girl in a pretty Bulgarian peasant’s dress with double apron, so defiant that her servility to Raina is almost insolent”, although “she is afraid of Catherine, but even with her goes as far as she dares”. Insubordinate and blatantly smoking, she refuses to conform to the inferior status assigned to her gender and her station, representing the “New Woman,” who emerged in the *fin de siècle*, the latter part of the Victorian Era, a time of tremendous change. (See pp. 23-25 in my [glossary](#) for the play, published on the Jewel Theatre website.)

CAPTAIN BLUNTSCHLI (Charles Pasternak) Shaw describes Captain Bluntschli as “A man of about 35” of “middling stature,” who has climbed onto Raina’s balcony to escape pursuit by the Bulgarian Army. He is “in a deplorable plight, bespattered with mud and blood and snow, his belt and the strap of his revolver case keeping together the torn ruins of the blue coat of a Servian artillery officer”.

RUSSIAN SOLDIER (Shaun Carroll) “A young Russian officer, in Bulgarian uniform,” Shaw describes his combination of “soft, feline politeness and stiff military carriage”.

Discussed on p. 6 of the [Glossary](#) in the entry for the Serbo-Bulgarian War, Serbia declared war on Bulgaria with the financial and military backing of Austria-Hungary. Russia had also been interfering in Bulgarian internal affairs by trying to form a liaison with the new principality. They fortified Bulgaria's army with their own soldiers, officers, supplies, arms, and horses.

NICOLA (Andrew Davids) Introduced in Act II, Nicola, the Petkoff's "man-servant," is described as "a middle-aged man of cool temperament and low but clear and keen intelligence, with the complacency of the servant who values himself on his rank in servility, and the imperturbability of the accurate calculator who has no illusions". He is also, for the time being, Louka's fiancé.

MAJOR PAUL PETKOFF (Bo Foxworth) The patriarch of the Petkoff family, Shaw calls him "a cheerful, excitable, insignificant, unpolished man of about 50, naturally unambitious except as to his income and his importance in local society, but just now greatly pleased with the military rank which the war has thrust on him as a man of consequence in his town". As explained on p. 21 of the [Glossary](#), Petkoff's rank as Major would have been the highest attainable within the Bulgarian army at the time.

MAJOR SERGIUS SARANOFF (Kyle Hester) Shaw reserves his lengthiest and most extravagant character description for Sergius, who is Raina's fiancé and her "ideal hero". He is described as "tall, romantically handsome man, with the physical hardihood, the high spirit, and the susceptible imagination of an untamed mountaineer chieftain. But his remarkable personal distinction is of a characteristically civilized type ... In short, the clever, imaginative barbarian has an acute critical faculty which has been thrown into intense activity by the arrival of western civilization in the Balkans; and the result is precisely what the advent of nineteenth century thought first produced in England: to-wit, Byronism. By his brooding on the perpetual failure, not only of others, but of himself, to live up to his imaginative ideals, his consequent cynical scorn for humanity, the jejune credulity as to the absolute validity of his ideals and the unworthiness of the world in disregarding them, his wincings and mockeries under the sting of the petty disillusion which every hour spent among men brings to his infallibly quick observation, he has acquired the half tragic, half ironic air, the mysterious moodiness, the suggestion of a strange and terrible history that has left him nothing but undying remorse, by which Childe Harold fascinated the grandmothers of his English contemporaries".

According to William-Alan Landes, in the "Explanatory Notes" from the Oxford World Classics' compilation, [Arms and the Man, The Devil's Disciple, and Caesar and Cleopatra](#), Sergius was named after Shaw's friend Sergius Stepniak (1851-95), a Russian artillery officer turned revolutionary. While writing his play, Shaw consulted Stepniak for details about Bulgarian life. (p. 18 of the [Glossary](#)).

Byronism is addressed on pp. 27-28 of the [Glossary](#).

SETTING

The action takes place at Major Petkoff's house, in a small town in Bulgaria near the Dragoman Pass.

Act One: Raina's bedchamber

Act Two: The garden

Act Three: The library

TIME SETTING

Act One: "Night. It is late in November in the year 1885," during the time of the Serbo-Bulgarian War. The Bulgarian Army has just won the Battle of Slivnitza, which was fought from November 17 to 19, 1885.

Act Two: "The sixth of March 1886," on a fine spring morning.

Act Three: The same day, after lunch.

“If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.”

– George Bernard Shaw

SYNOPSIS

***Warning.** The following synopsis contains spoilers. We recommend that you not read it until after you’ve seen the play.*

ACT I

The play begins in Raina Petkoff’s bedchamber in the grandest manor to be found in a small town in Bulgaria near the Dragoman Pass. It’s late November 1885, and Raina is standing out on her balcony enjoying the crisp, cold, night air and the view of the snow-capped Balkans. She is swathed in furs “worth, on a moderate estimate, about three times the furniture of her room,” which is “half rich Bulgarian, half cheap Viennese”. Catherine, her mother, enters and recounts the glories of a great battle that her husband and Raina’s father, Major Petkoff, has sent word about. The war between Bulgaria and Serbia, which started only days before, may have been decided for Bulgaria by this victory. Even more exciting: Raina’s fiancée, Major Sergius Saranoff, led the calvary charge.

Their maidservant, Louka, interrupts the women’s rapturous celebration to inform them that they have been ordered to shutter and bar the windows because the routed Serbian forces are escaping the Bulgarian army, who are shooting at them while they hunt for them in the streets of the city. Raina’s window does not bolt, so she closes the shutter and hides under her covers from the increasing sounds of gunfire. Soon a Servian officer “of about 35, in a deplorable plight, bespattered with mud and blood and snow” climbs in her window.

Raina, unfazed by his threats to shoot her if she doesn’t hide him, talks to him for quite a while. Meanwhile, townspeople have reported seeing a man climb her balcony, which sends a Bulgarian officer to the Petkoff home. He asks to search the room, but Raina has hidden the Serbian officer and informs him that the reports are erroneous. Louka, witnessing all of this, deduces that Raina is indeed harboring a Serbian soldier, and files the secret away for leverage later.

Relieved and grateful, the soldier reveals that he couldn’t have defended himself, or for that matter, shot Raina because there aren’t any cartridges in his gun. Instead, he reveals that he and other professional soldiers like himself generally carry chocolates in the pocket where their cartridges would be. Raina, who has been listening to him belittle and degrade war, which she idealizes, as well as military men like her fiancé, whom she idolizes, disdainfully gives him the last three of the chocolate creams she keeps in her room. He eats them ravenously, eliciting Raina’s compassion and prompting her to affectionately dub him her “chocolate cream soldier”. As she softens

towards him, she decides that instead of allowing him to be captured and executed, she will enable his escape. Had he “simply thrown [him]self as a fugitive” on her and her mother’s “hospitality”, she tells him, he “would have been as safe as in [his] father’s house”. Raina leaves her bedroom to enlist her mother’s help, and when they return, the Officer has collapsed in deep sleep on her bed. Catherine and Raina wake him, dress him in an old coat of Paul’s, and sneak him out safely.

ACT II

Act II opens with Nicola, the Petkoff’s long-suffering but savvy manservant, lecturing Louka in the courtyard of the Petkoff house. Louka, whom we learn is his fiancée, is rebelliously smoking a cigarette with her back to Nicola, who chastises her for her insolence towards her employers. She mocks Nicola for his servility, ignoring his advice to emulate how he makes the most of his position while still maintaining his dignity.

Major Petkoff arrives, having just returned from the war, which ended only three days before. The Treaty of Bucharest has been signed (see pp. 25-26 of the *Glossary*), and the Serbians and Bulgarians have begun diplomatic relations again. Catherine runs out to greet her husband, who expresses his happiness to be home. The couple discuss the war, the Austrian and Russian interference on the Serbian and Bulgarian sides, respectively, Prince Alexander, Bulgaria’s ruler, and (pretentiously) their own social status.

Nicola announces the arrival of Major Sergius Saranoff, Raina’s fiancé. Before he is brought around to Catherine and Paul, Catherine entreats her husband to promote him to a higher rank, but Petkoff explains that it likely won’t happen. Sergius’ charge may have been brave, but it was foolhardy and succeeded only because of a malfunction of the Serbians’ machine guns. Giving Sergius a higher rank would mean he’d be leading a larger battalion, therefore risking even more soldiers’ lives.

Sergius calls his charge “the cradle and the grave of my military reputation,” admitting that he “won the battle the wrong way” and “only waited for the peace to send in my resignation”. Raina, whose habit is to hold her entrance until the most attention-getting dramatic moment, arrives as Sergius announces his resolve to retire.

Sergius reminds Paul of a Swiss soldier they met while exchanging prisoners with the Serbs. The men amusedly recount for Catherine and Raina the story of the man’s escape from the Bulgarian forces by taking advantage of a naïve young Bulgarian lady and her mother. After crawling in the window of the young woman’s bedroom, he convinces her to hide him from the forces hunting him, and escapes with her help and that of her mother, disguised in an old housecoat. Raina and Catherine, appalled and embarrassed but hiding it well, recognize the tale as their own.

Paul and Catherine retire to the library, leaving Sergius to woo Raina. They bill and coo and gush over one another’s superior attributes. Raina leaves Sergius to get her hat so they can go on a walk together.

While she is gone, Sergius finds Louka, and they flirt with one another. Conflicted about his deceit, he confesses that he is overwhelmed by Raina's idealized notions of a "higher love". He attempts to find respite in Louka's embrace, and they alternately pull each other close and push themselves from one another. After Louka teases Sergius that he has a rival for Raina's affections – information she garnered while eavesdropping when Raina hid the Serbian soldier – he angrily grabs her, leaving a large bruise on her arm.

Louka slyly offers forgiveness if he will kiss the injury he caused. As Sergius refuses, feigning disdain, Raina enters to take him for their walk. She teases him about flirting with Louka, although she doesn't really think he is. Before they can leave, Catherine enters to send Sergius to the library so he may assist the Major with plans for upcoming troop movements. After he departs, Raina admits to her mother that her affection for Sergius is mostly pretense and she's not that crazy about him.

Raina leaves and Louka reenters to announce that a Serbian officer has come for a visit, carrying a carpetbag, and asking to see "the lady of the house". He provides a calling card that identifies him as "Captain Bluntschli". It is the first time we hear Bluntschli's last name; we never hear his first. Catherine quickly discerns that their caller is Raina's chocolate cream soldier, and that he is returning Paul's old housecoat. She orders Louka to sneak him past the men in the library and bring him to her. Catherine tells Louka to have Nicola fetch and hide the carpetbag. Bluntschli meets Catherine in the courtyard, and she implores him to leave as quickly as possible.

As Bluntschli starts to comply, Paul and Sergius enter. Recognizing him as the soldier who told them the story of the two Bulgarian women who aided his escape, they greet him warmly. Over his objections, they invite him to stay, insisting they need his help with their troop maneuvers. Intrigued, he agrees, and encounters Raina as he enters the house. Shocked to see him, she blurts out, "Oh, the chocolate cream soldier!" She and Catherine quickly cover her gaffe, and they both beseech him to prolong his visit for a few days – Catherine reluctantly and Raina with enthusiasm. Bluntschli readily agrees.

ACT III

Act III opens in the library shortly after lunch. Captain Bluntschli is quickly and efficiently writing the orders for troop movements that had confounded Paul and Sergius. He hands each completed order to Sergius, who is simultaneously impressed and envious of Bluntschli's military knowledge, for his signature. Major Petkoff sits reading a newspaper; Catherine works on her needlepoint and Raina positions herself prettily while gazing out the window.

Paul gripes to Catherine that his favorite old housecoat is missing. Reacting quickly, Catherine presses the library's new electric bell, dispatching Nicola to fetch it from "the blue closet" that Major Petkoff has already scoured. While Nicola is gone, Paul bets Catherine it isn't there. She takes him up on the wager, as does Raina. They win the bet when Nicola returns bearing the coat, leaving Paul dumfounded, a feeling rather familiar to him.

Bluntschli sends the men to deliver the orders. Paul asks his wife to come along, telling her “They’ll be far more frightened of you than of me”. Raina, now alone with Bluntschli, compliments him on his cleaned-up and polished good looks, then immediately segues into chiding him, with exaggerated offense, for making a mockery of her mother’s and her efforts to save his life. She tries to chasten him for making her tell lies for him, which she insists she has only ever done twice, and on his behalf. Bluntschli laughs at her “noble attitude” and Raina, incredulous, tells him that he is the first person to ever see through her pretensions. She asks him if he dug into the pockets of her father’s housecoat and found the photo of herself, which she had placed there for him. When he tells her he never checked, she is irate and humiliated, telling him she wishes she had never met him, and “flounces away and sits at the window fuming”.

Louka enters to deliver a telegram to Bluntschli that relays the news of his father’s death. He must return home to make immediate arrangements for the hotel empire that he has inherited. Bluntschli leaves the library in a rush, with Raina on his heels, fighting back tears of shock and disappointment at the coldness of his seeming lack of grief for his father.

Sergius enters the library to find Louka there. She has pinned her sleeve up in an ostentatious display of the bruise he gave her earlier that day. He offers the palliative kiss he had shunned before, but Louka challenges his bravery, declaring that he doesn’t have the courage to marry a woman who is socially beneath him, even if he loved her. Sergius tells her she is wrong, and that it’s out of the question anyway, as he loves another woman, “a woman as high above you as heaven is above earth”.

Louka then reveals that Bluntschli is his rival and, furthermore, that Raina will marry him, “A man worth ten of you”. As she turns to go, Sergius tells her that she belongs to him, that she loves him, and that he “will not be a coward and a trifler”: if he chooses to love her, he will marry her. He vows, “If these hands ever touch you again, they shall touch my affianced bride”.

Bluntschli, “much preoccupied, with his papers still in his hand, enters, leaving the door open for Louka to go out”. Sergius immediately challenges him to a duel. He is shocked – he has no idea why, but responds that if Sergius is determined, he will accept the challenge. When Raina enters, Sergius accuses her of carrying on with Bluntschli. Both protest; neither one has done anything untoward. The three quarrel over who compromised whom. Bluntschli tries to help Sergius repair things with Raina, but she responds by telling him that Sergius “set [Louka] as a spy on us; and her reward is that he makes love to her”. As they are arguing, Sergius drags in Louka, who has been eavesdropping at the door. Both Louka and Raina join forces in berating Sergius, who hasn’t a leg to stand on, for his indiscretions.

Paul enters and soon all is revealed. He finds Raina’s portrait addressed to “the chocolate cream soldier” in his coat pocket, prompting Sergius to break off his engagement with Raina. He then takes Louka’s hand. She quickly reminds him “That

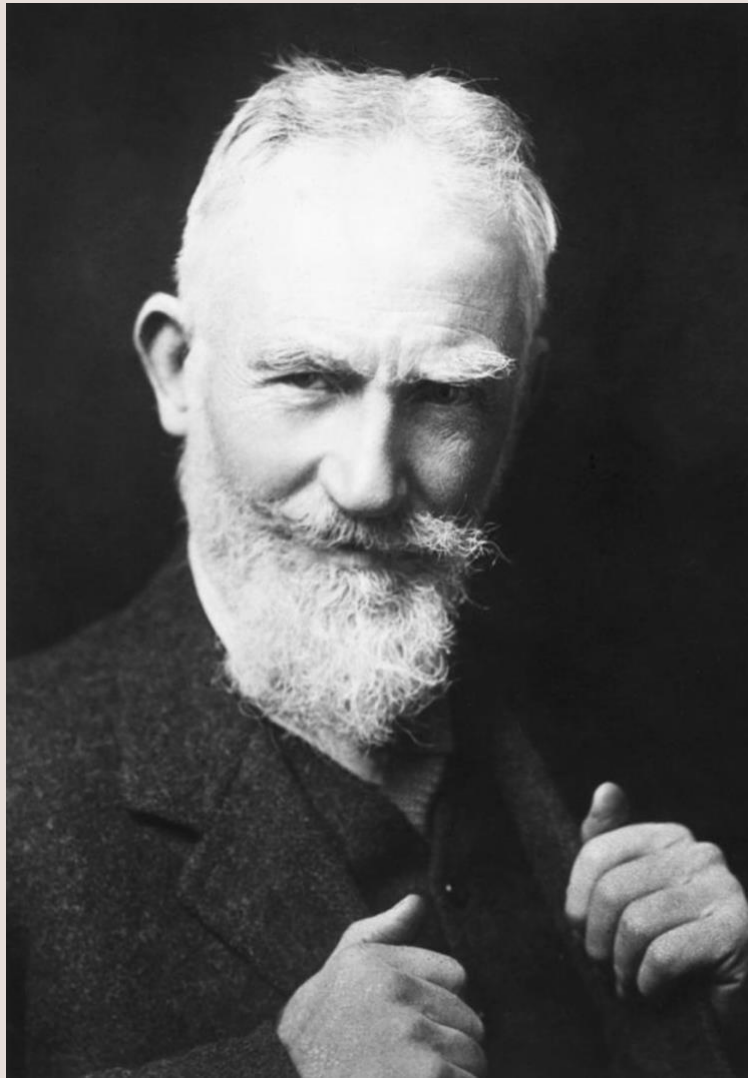
touch makes me your affianced wife” and he swears he will marry her. Nicola quietly gives up his claim on her, whereupon Bluntschli, recognizing Nicola's intelligence and dedication, hires him on the spot to run his hotels for him.

Bluntschli prepares to depart, but Sergius has inferred his real reason for coming to the Petkoff home: he is in love with Raina. Unable to deny it, Bluntschli asks Petkoff for permission to court his daughter. When Catherine puts her foot down – she won't have Raina marrying a poor officer in the Swiss Army – Bluntschli makes it clear that he is an extremely wealthy man. He establishes his inheritance by listing his possessions, which include 200 horses, 9,600 sets of bedsheets, and 10,000 knives and forks. Raina tells him she won't have him because the poor officer who forced his way into her bedchamber is the man she loves. Bluntschli convinces her that he is still that same man, regardless of his wealth. He takes her hand and asks her to look him in the eyes and tell her who he is. She replies that he is her "chocolate cream soldier". Permission for the marriage is granted, with Bluntschli vowing to return in two weeks to marry Raina.

If we were really using our own senses and not gazing through the glasses of convention and romance and make-believe, should we see things as Shaw does?

— W. J. McCormack, Introduction, *Plays Pleasant*

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



George Bernard Shaw

Bernard Shaw – he did not like the name “George” and asked to be addressed by his middle name – started out a reluctant playwright. His first play, *Widowers Houses*, about slum landlords in London, had a private debut on December 9, 1892, at the Royalty Theatre in London. It was sponsored by the Independent Theatre Society, a subscription club formed to override the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Office.

He was 36 years old, and by the time he died at the age of 94, he had written 60 more, with a light comedy, *Why She Would Not*, left uncompleted.

In his [presentation speech](#) awarding Shaw the 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature, Per Hallström, the Chairman of the Nobel Committee, gave an insightful overview of his plays. Shaw initially declined the award until his wife convinced him that its acceptance was more of a win for Ireland than for Shaw as an individual. However, he did not accept the \$32,000 prize – worth \$542,000 today – asking that it be used instead “to encourage intercourse and understanding in literature and art between London and the British Isles”.



Per Hallström, 1923

Hallström, a known Swedish author, short-story writer, dramatist, and poet, clearly spoke from a place of knowledge of Shaw, and his analysis is among the best available. Here is some of what he said:

In France [Shaw] has been called the Molière of the twentieth century; and there is some truth in the parallel, for Shaw himself believes that he was following classical tendencies in dramatic art. By classicism he means the rigorously rational and dialectical bent of mind and the opposition to everything that could be called romanticism.

He began with what he calls *Plays Unpleasant* (1898), so named because they brought the spectator face to face with unpleasant facts and cheated him of the thoughtless entertainment or sentimental edification that he expected from the stage. These plays dwell on serious abuses – the exploitation and prostitution of poor people, while those who perpetrate these abuses manage to retain their respectability.

It is characteristic of Shaw that his orthodox socialistic severity toward the community is combined with a great freedom from prejudice and a genuine

psychological insight when he deals with the individual sinner. Even in these early pieces one of his finest qualities, his humanity, is fully and clearly marked.

Plays Pleasant (1898), with which he varied his program, have on the whole the same purport but are lighter in tone. With one of these he gained his first great success. This was *Arms and the Man*, an attempt to demonstrate the flimsiness of military and heroic romance, in contrast to the sober and prosaic work of peace. Its pacifist tendency won from the audience a more ready approbation than the author had generally received. In *Candida*, a kind of *Doll's House* with a happy ending, he created the work which for a long time was his most poetical one. This was due chiefly to the fact that in this play the strong superior woman which for him – for reasons unknown to us – has become the normal type, has here been given a richer, warmer, and more gentle soul than elsewhere.

In *Man and Superman* (1903) he took his revenge by proclaiming that woman, because of her resolute and undisguisedly practical nature, is destined to be the superman whose coming has been so long prophesied with such earnest yearning. The jest is amusing, but its creator seems to regard it more or less seriously, even if one takes into account his spirit of opposition to the earlier English worship of the gentle female saint.

His next great drama of ideas, *Major Barbara* (1905), has a deeper significance. It discusses the problem of whether evil ought to be conquered by the inner way, the spirit of joyful and religious sacrifice; or by the outer way, the eradication of poverty, the real foundation of all social defects. Shaw's heroine, one of his most remarkable female characters, ends in a compromise between the power of money and that of the Salvation Army. The process of thought is here carried out with great force, and naturally with a great deal of paradox. The drama is not entirely consistent, but it reveals a surprisingly fresh and clear conception of the joy and poetry of the life of practical faith. Shaw the rationalist here shows himself more liberal and more chivalrous than is customary with the type.

Time does not permit us to hint at the course of his further campaign even in his more outstanding works: suffice it to say that without a trace of opportunism he turns his weapons against everything that he conceives as prejudice in whatever camp it may be found. His boldest assault would seem to be in *Heartbreak House* (1919), where he sought to embody – always in the light of the comic spirit – every kind of perversity, artificiality, and morbidity that flourishes in a state of advanced civilization, playing with vital values, the hardening of the conscience, and the ossification of the heart, under a frivolous preoccupation with art and science, politics, money-hunting, and erotic philandering. But, whether owing to the excessive wealth of the material or to the difficulty of treating it gaily, the piece has sunk into a mere museum of eccentricities with the ghost-like appearance of a shadowy symbolism.

In *Back to Methuselah* (1921) he achieved an introductory essay that was even more brilliant than usual, but his dramatic presentation of the thesis, that man must have his natural age doubled many times over in order to acquire enough sense to manage his world, furnished but little hope and little joy. It looked as if the writer of the play had hypertrophied his wealth of ideas to the great injury of his power of organic creation.

But then came *Saint Joan* (1923), which showed this man of surprises at the height of his power as a poet. This it did especially on the stage, where all that was most valuable and central in the play was thrown into due relief and revealed its real weight, even against the parts that might evoke opposition. Shaw had not been happy in his previous essays in historical drama; and this was natural enough, as he happened to combine with his abundant and quick intelligence a decided lack of historical imagination and sense of historical reality. His world lacked one dimension, that of time, which according to the newest theories is not without significance for space. This led to an unfortunate lack of respect for all that had once been and to a tendency to represent everything as diametrically opposite to what ordinary mortals had previously believed or said.

In *Saint Joan* his good head still cherishes the same opinion on the whole, but his good heart has found in his heroine a fixed point in the realm of the unsubstantial, from which it has been able to give flesh and blood to the visions of the imagination. With doubtful correctness he has simplified her image, but he has also made uncommonly fresh and living the lines that remain, and he has endowed *Saint Joan* with the power of directly holding the multitude. This imaginative work stands more or less alone as a revelation of heroism in an age hardly favorable to genuine heroism. The mere fact that it did not fail makes it highly remarkable; and the fact that it was able to make a triumphal progress all around the world is in this case evidence of considerable artistic worth.

If from this point we look back on Shaw's best works, we find it easier in many places, beneath all his sportiveness and defiance, to discern something of the same idealism that has found expression in the heroic figure of Saint Joan. His criticism of society and his perspective of its course of development may have appeared too nakedly logical, too hastily thought out, too unorganically simplified; but his struggle against traditional conceptions that rest on no solid basis and against traditional feelings that are either spurious or only half genuine, have borne witness to the loftiness of his aims. Still more striking is his humanity; and the virtues to which he has paid homage in his unemotional way – spiritual freedom, honesty, courage, and clearness of thought – have had so very few stout champions in our times.

What I have said has given a mere glimpse of Shaw's life-work, and scarcely anything has been said about his famous prefaces – or rather treatises –

accompanying most of the plays. Great parts of them are insurpassable in their clarity, their quickness, and their brilliance. The plays themselves have given him the position of one of the most fascinating dramatic authors of our day, while his prefaces have given him the rank of the Voltaire of our time – if we think only of the best of Voltaire. From the point of view of a pure and simple style they would seem to provide a supreme, and in its way classic, expression of the thought and polemics of an age highly journalistic in tone, and, even more important, they strengthen Shaw's distinguished position in English literature.

Hallström's focus on *Saint Joan* can be attributed to a prevailing opinion that Shaw's work was finally recognized after the play debuted in 1923, three years after Jeanne d'Arc was canonized – officially declared a saint – by the Roman Catholic Church.

Hallström's chronology of Shaw's plays began with *Plays Unpleasant*, a volume containing *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer*, and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Unable to get them publicly staged in England, Shaw published them in 1898. As literary drama, they wouldn't be subject to government scrutiny, theatre managers who found them controversial and unprofitable, and actors who were used to the kind of play that had been dominant throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Known as "the well-made play," as perfected by Eugène Scribe, it was driven exclusively by plot. Shaw did not ascribe to the style, saying "I avoid plots like the plague ... My procedure is to imagine characters and let them rip ...". According to Christopher Wixson, he also "sought to awaken audiences dangerously anaesthetized by vapid and trite romanticism" (Wixson, Christopher. [*George Bernard Shaw: A Very Short Introduction*](#). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition).

The plays of *Plays Unpleasant*, as most of his subsequent plays would be, were accompanied by wordy prefaces, often even longer than the script itself. He would discuss the play's themes, offer staging notes, expound on topics both related and extraneous to the play, provide inspiration, and suggest targets for satire. The printed format gave him control over the audience's experience and interpretation of the play, something he had done when he was a theatre critic, a precursor to his playwriting. It also presented his work to a larger audience and gave it more permanence.

Shaw did not picture himself a playwright, deciding that he could disseminate his views on politics, society, culture, and religion more effectively with polemics. Although he became one of the world's most celebrated pundits, he is identified more familiarly by his plays. The various facets of his life – his exposure to poverty, his education, and his grounding in the arts – together equipped him with the means to succeed at both. He was born July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland, the third child and only son in his family. Shaw used "downstart", a word of his own invention that would later become part of the lexicon, to describe his beginnings: "I was a downstart and the son of a downstart." His father, George Carr Shaw, was a corn merchant who was born in Dublin in 1814 and died there in 1885. George Carr's family were part of the Protestant Ascendancy – successful Protestant landowners, merchants, and

bankers – but he squandered his money with drinking and business failures. He was however, known for his superb comic wit, which he passed down to his son.



George Carr Shaw, ca 1854

Bernard Shaw wrote that his family “talked of themselves as the Shaws”, in the way others would “say the Valois, the Bourbons, the Hapsburgs or the Romanoffs ...”. He was painfully aware of the pretentiousness among the Protestant gentry and the social distance between them and his family, spent in what he termed “shabby genteel poverty,” which to him was more humiliating than being merely poor. His disdain for aristocracy continued throughout his life: when he once received an invitation from a local lord stating: “Lord C. Will be home Tuesday between 4 and 6”. Shaw replied: “George Bernard Shaw too”.

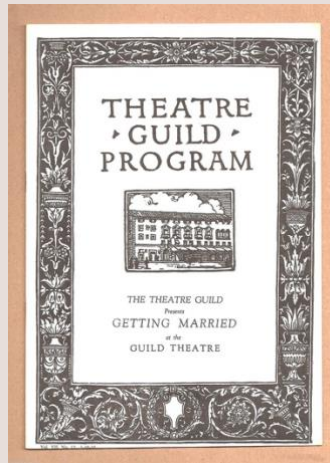
Nevertheless, he married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a wealthy aristocratic, when he



Charlotte Payne-Townshend, ca 1887

was 42 and they enjoyed a long and very close marriage. This too was a contradiction: Shaw openly denounced the institution of marriage. He never spoke in favour of

marriage explicitly or in his speeches or writings. Both in the text and bombastic preface of his famous play *Getting Married*, he wrote elaborately on the topic of marriage. In the preface, he declares that marriage is the subject of the most dangerous nonsense, saying: 'if the mischief stopped at talking and thinking it would be bad enough; but it goes further, into disastrous anarchical action'. He believed in love but not in marriage; he rooted for love and union of two souls in love, but he ridiculed the need to warrant acceptance from others by signing some legal contracts and saying I do in the church. He said: 'There is no magic in marriage. If there were, married couples would never desire to separate. But they do.' He goes on to say that the institution of marriage is unreasonable and inhuman to the point of utter abomination.



Original program, *Getting Married*, 1908

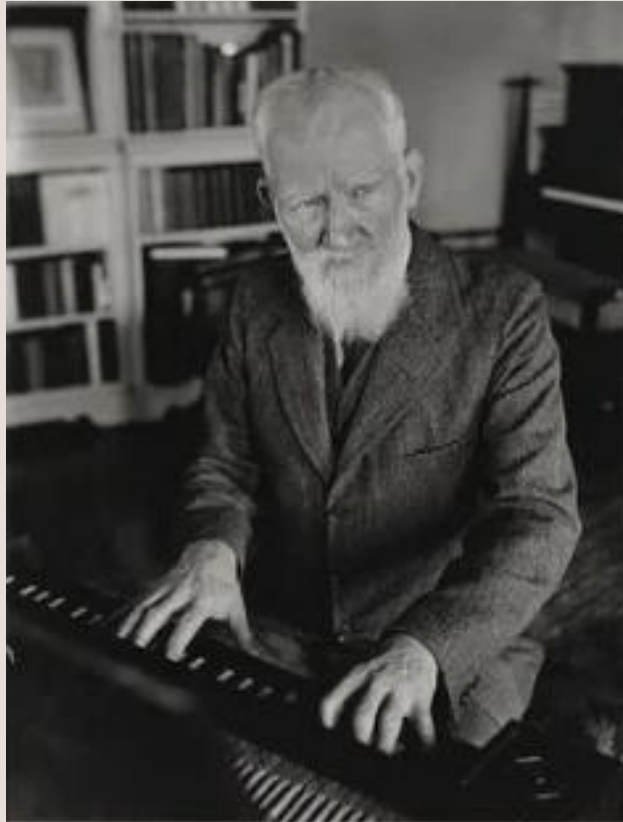
Shaw's mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw, also known as Bessie, was born in 1830 in Carlow, Ireland. She married George Carr in June 1852, whereupon her aristocratic family disinherited her for marrying a man they regarded as "a drunk".



Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw, ca 1855

Nevertheless, one of the greatest gifts she bestowed on her son, which came from her family background, was music. She became a well-known vocalist in Dublin. Her voice coach, George Vandeleur Lee, lived with the family for seven years. He greatly

influenced the young Bernard and would later help establish him as a professional cultural critic. Musical talent flourished in the Gurly family, all of whom played instruments, and Shaw was no exception. Early on, he became a baritone vocalist, a self-taught pianist, and proficient whistler “from end to end” he wrote, “[of] leading works of Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi”. Their influence was especially profound on his eventual craft as a playwright in which he said he “‘scored’ stage voices”; “my method, my system, my tradition”, he would later claim, “is founded upon music”. He would credit Handel for teaching him that “style consists in a force of assertion”.



GB Shaw, 1932

Shaw didn't just teach himself to play the piano. After developing an antipathy towards formal schooling, he became a lifelong, self-directed learner. Until he was 10, his uncle, the Reverend George Carroll, tutored him, saturating him in the works of Shakespeare and in the Bible. After that, he became a pupil at four other schools for short periods of time. He hated them all and declared he had learned absolutely nothing. So, at fourteen, he embarked upon his own independent study. In his last will, which he completed just before his 94th birthday, Shaw chose to bequeath the posthumous royalties from his estate to three cultural institutions which, he said, had helped him enormously in those formative years.

When he died in November 1950, he left a third of his royalties to the National Gallery of Ireland, which he called the “cherished asylum of my boyhood”, as he had spent many happy hours wandering through the gallery's rooms. It was the place, he wrote, “to which I owe much of the only real education I ever got as a boy”.

Another third share of his royalties was bequeathed to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, or Rada. His long association with the dramatic arts and the theatre began in those self-educating years when he attended performances at Dublin's Theatre Royal. He awarded the final share to the British Museum. He had spent countless afternoons in its reading room as a young man, a habit that remained with him through his lifetime.

These three institutions acted as a source of inspiration and learning for the young Shaw. He wanted to reward them, so that they could go on to provide future generations of young people with the same kind of education and insight into the human condition that he had received there.

He wrote disparagingly of his father and his childhood in general, his parents' marriage and 1872 separation – Lucinda left her husband that year to follow her voice teacher, George Vandeleur Lee to London when Bernard was almost sixteen years old. His sisters accompanied their mother, and he joined them four years later.



Lucinda Shaw and George Vandeleur Lee, 1877

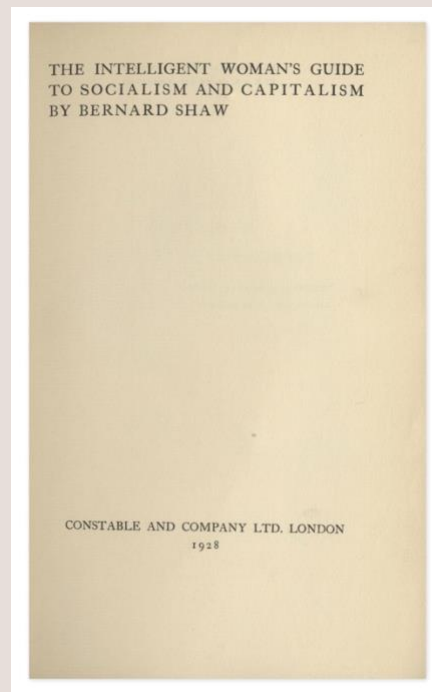
Although he would often deny the extent of their influence, those earlier experiences were the catalyst for Shaw's unique political and artistic sensibility. He grew up adjacent to tenement districts, where disease was rampant, as well as famine, illiteracy, and unemployment. As a youth, he witnessed suffering and religious, class, and political discrimination. He saw how poverty, which he called "the worst of crimes," put up barriers to individual attainment, meaningful discussion, and collective advancement. Eventually, he would spend his entire professional life trying to eradicate it, exposing its inhumanity in books, pamphlets, speeches, and his plays.

To support his family, Shaw worked at 16 as a clerk in a Land Agency. It helped promote a thriftiness that would endure even after his financial success. Nevertheless, he was miserable and quit in 1876 after five years, determined to become a professional writer. He joined his mother and sisters in London, and for the next three years, he let his mother support him with her earnings as a music teacher.

Between the years 1879 and 1883, he wrote five novels, all of which were received poorly.

In 1879, he worked for a few months as a right-of-way agent for the new Edison telephone. In his own words, this was the last time he "sinned against his nature" by seeking to earn an honest living. Like the Land clerk job, however, it spurred an interest in technology that he would have the rest of his life. Through his plays, Shaw would introduce technology that was reshaping social life outside the theater: he put an electric bell in the Petkoff's library in *Arms and the Man*; an open touring car in Act II of *Man and Superman* (1902); an airplane that crashes through the ceiling of a country house in *Misalliance* (1909); and a phonograph in Act II of *Pygmalion* (1912).

1879 proved a watershed year for Shaw. He joined the Zetetical Society, a debating club where he learned, as did much of London that he was a powerful public speaker. At one of their meetings, he heard Henry George, the American lecturer and author, speak about economics and social theory. Wanting to learn more, he read Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and immediately converted to socialism. He would become one of the pillars of the philosophy, voicing its message of constitutional and evolutionary socialism in public parks and meeting halls, and writing about it in his dramas, pamphlets, and books like *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, which he wrote in 1928.



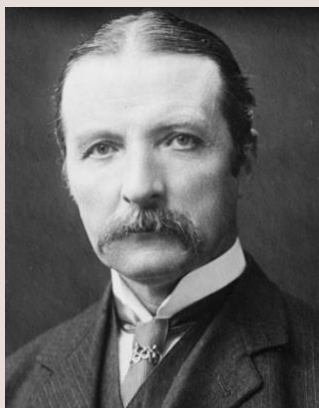
First edition, 1928

In 1884, he read a tract on poverty that was published by the Fabian Society, Britain's oldest leftist political think tank. He joined them and was soon elected to the Executive Committee. His association with the Fabians gave him even more renown

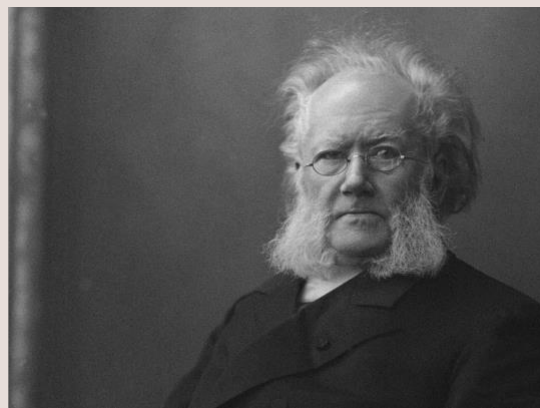
as a polemic writer and speaker. It also brought him together with his future wife and helped push him towards his career as a playwright.

His background, brush with poverty, father's humor, mother's musical talent, and inquisitive mind brought him to his convictions; next, we'll see how he came to theatre as a vehicle for those convictions.

While in London, the young Shaw started ghostwriting music reviews for George Vandeleur Lee, his mother's voice coach and the man with whom she fled her marriage from Bernard's father. During one of his long afternoons at the British Museum Reading Room, Shaw met William Archer, the drama critic and editor and translator of Henrik Ibsen. Archer got him a job on the reviewing staff of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885, which provided him with his first real experience as a critic. When



William Archer, undated



Henrik Ibsen, undated

Archer resigned as the art critic for *The World*, a widely influential British weekly newspaper, he arranged for his job to go to Shaw. Archer recognized that Shaw knew little about art but realized that Shaw thought that he did, which was all that mattered. Shaw felt that to learn about art, you only had to look at pictures, which he had been doing for years in the Dublin National Gallery.

Shaw was now in the next stage of his career: a literary, music, and art critic. In 1894, Shaw's critical purview expanded to include the theatre when he began reviewing plays for *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art*.

After William Archer introduced him to the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Shaw wrote extensively about the playwright, promoting his theatrical style, which was a complete break from the popular, romantic, and melodramatic theater of the day. Shaw recognized Ibsen as a great ethical philosopher and a social critic – a kindred spirit. In 1890, Shaw read his paper "*The Quintessence of Ibsen*" at a meeting of the Fabian Society. Sometimes called *The Quintessence of Shaw*, it set forth Shaw's belief that the function of dramatists is to concern themselves principally with how their characters react to various social forces. Further, they should tie their works to a new morality based upon an examination and challenge of conventional mores.

If Ibsen was the first lightning bolt, the second came in the form of the aforementioned Charlotte Payne-Townshend, the future Mrs. Bernard Shaw, whom he met in January 1896 through fellow Fabians. An Irish heiress, she was deeply concerned with the many problems of social justice. He was immediately attracted to her.



The Shaws at home, 1905

In July 1897, Charlotte proposed marriage. Although that is considered a reversal even now, it was reflective of their shared feminist ideals. He refused her: she was wealthy, and he didn't want to be considered a "fortune-hunter". She left him and moved to Italy.

In April 1898 Shaw had an accident that crippled him. When Charlotte heard the news, she travelled back to visit him in London. Soon after she arrived on May 1, she took him to the hospital, where he had surgery on his left foot. She cared for him post-operatively, and while recuperating, Shaw changed his mind about two things that would transform his life forever. The first was Charlotte: he proposed, and they married June 1, 1898.

The Shaws' marriage was known to be celibate, despite Shaw's advocacy of female sexuality. He asserted that the Life Force, the underlying philosophy of his concepts of Creative Evolution and the Superman, required women to be free to follow their desires, declaring that, contrary to popular belief, women were not disinterested in sex but were sexually driven. Charlotte was an exception. Reportedly, the couple experimented with a sexual relationship for a brief time, but she found herself remarkably uninterested in it.



Charlotte and Bernard in Italy, 1927

The third thunderbolt also came about because of the accident. In 1898, Shaw shared with *Saturday Review* readers that the experience of undergoing a surgical procedure on his foot enabled him finally to understand the "British drama and the British actor". He would throw in the towel, having "tasted the bliss of having no morals to restrain me from lying, and no sense of reality to restrain me from romancing" whenever he felt "the chill of a moral or intellectual impulse". As soon as those feelings began to come on, he would reach for the ether he had been prescribed for his pain. "I can write plays in it," he said, "I can act in it; I can gush in it: ... I can be pious and patriotic in it; I can melt touchingly over disease and death and murder and hunger and cold and poverty in it, turning all the woes of the world into artistic capital for myself."

The truth was, he didn't really mean it. He blamed his change of heart on the oblivion induced by the drug. He had not pictured himself a playwright before that, but now he was purpose-driven – his intention was to use the stage as a social weapon.

Shaw resigned in 1898 from the *Saturday Review*, effectively giving up his career as a critic to devote his energies full time to writing for the theatre rather than about it. In retrospect, each of the paths he took led to writing for the stage.

Plays Pleasant followed *Plays Unpleasant*, with *Arms and the Man* the first of them. It enjoyed a good run at the Avenue Theatre from April 21 to July 7, 1894, and it has continued to be revived to this day, 128 years later. At last, the real Shaw had emerged — the dramatist who united irrepressible humor with urgent and significant purpose.

RESOURCES

Associated Press. "[Bernard Shaw, 94, Dies in his Home](#)", *The New York Times*, November 2, 1950.

Biswas, Uma. "[Arms and the Man—An Explanatory Note](#)". Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi, May 2020.

Dungan, Myles. "[On This Day - Nov 18th 1926 - George Bernard Shaw Refuses the Nobel Prize for Literature](#)". *Myles Dungan Blog*. WordPress.com, November 18, 2016.

Ferguson, Donna. "[His fair lady: how George Bernard Shaw's wife played a vital role in his masterworks](#)". *The Guardian*, May 29, 2021.

Hallström, Per. "[Presentation Speech for The Nobel Prize in Literature 1925, awarded to George Bernard Shaw, December 10, 1926](#)". From *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969.

Landes, William-Alan. "Explanatory Notes, Arms and the Man". *Arms and the Man, The Devil's Disciple, and Caesar and Cleopatra*, Switzky, Lawrence (Ed.). Oxford University Press, October 26, 2021.

MacIntosh, Jay W. *The Origins of George Bernard Shaw's Life Force Philosophy*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, December 30, 2011.

"[May 25: Charlotte Payne-Townshend, Part I](#)". *Making Queer History*.

"[May 28: Charlotte Payne-Townshend, Part II](#)". *Making Queer History*.

Mencken, H. L. "[George Bernard Shaw as a Hero](#)". *The Smart Set*, January, 1910.

O'Hanlon, Oliver. "[An Irishman's Diary on George Bernard Shaw and the National Gallery of Ireland: The Shaw must go on](#)". *The Irish Times*, September 2, 2015.

O'Toole, Fintan. *Judging Shaw: the radicalism of GBS*. Prism, Dublin, Ireland. 2017.

O'Toole, Fintan. "[The world has never needed George Bernard Shaw more](#)". *The Irish Times*, October 28, 2017.

Satran, David. "[The Chocolate Cream Soldier and the 'Ghastly Failure' of Bernard Shaw's Arms And The Man](#)". *Shaw*, Vol. 28, Shaw and War (2008), pp. 11-33 (23 pages). Penn State University Press.

Shaw, George Bernard. [*The Project Gutenberg eBook of Arms and the Man*](#). Release Date: June 17, 2001, updated: January 2, 2022.

Shaw, George Bernard. [*Arms and the Man*](#), as directed by Anita Grannis and adapted by Robroy Farquhar's Flat Rock Playhouse, Flat Rock, NC. Samuel French, 1958/1986.

Weintraub, Stanley. "[George Bernard Shaw: Irish dramatist and critic](#)". Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022.

Wixson, Christopher. [*George Bernard Shaw: A Very Short Introduction*](#). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.