



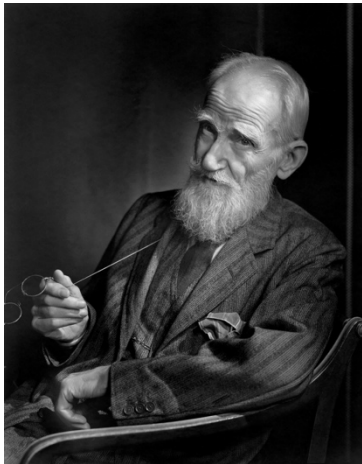
The Quintessence of GBS

George Bernard Shaw—Master of Media Manipulation

By Jerry James

If you're going to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh. Otherwise, they'll kill you.

—Attributed to George Bernard Shaw



George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) by Yousuf Karsh

During his long career, George Bernard Shaw, that self-educated gadfly of odd habits, not only managed to subvert the British stage, but he also affected world drama in such a way as to merit his own adjective: Shavian.

And he did it all through what Christopher Wixson calls a “fervent commitment to substantive verbal exchange... [displaying] a way with words that is articulate, vigorous, playful, and, above all, opinionated.” Shaw had no money, no education, no powerful friends, yet through the power of the English language, he managed to become his own brand: GBS.

Fintan O’Toole attributes this to Shaw’s being a “consummate performer,” one of “the first to understand that, in this mass-media age, performance is not just what happens on the stage, it is everywhere.” Had he lived in this century, Shaw would certainly have been a master at exploiting social media, a wizard at short videos on Tik Tok.

Vegetarian, socialist, pacifist, atheist and always, condemner of hypocrisy, Shaw was so quotable, he became someone who “never said most of the things I said” long before Yogi Berra. He was also lucky enough to be able to recover, when, like any critic of society, he went too far.

How in the world did Shaw manage all this?

Dublin

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856. His parents were of English descent, members of the Protestant Ascendancy who ruled Ireland's Roman Catholic majority. Father George, a drunken failure, thought he had married for money. Mother Bessie, 16 years younger, had a fine singing voice—but very little cash.



Shaw's Mother (L) and Father (R) with George Lee (C)

Shaw thought it possible that his real father was Bessie's voice teacher, George Lee, who shared a house with them from the time the boy was 6. In 1873, Bessie left her husband and moved with Lee to London.

After indifferent experiences at 4 different schools, Shaw dropped out at 15, took an office job and devoted himself to concerts, museums and voracious reading. In 1876, he followed Bessie. Shaw so despised his father that he later dropped his first name.

London

Living with his mother, Shaw thought of becoming a painter. But because he needed money, he took a job ghostwriting music criticism for Lee, from whom he had earlier received a free musical education. Shaw liked it and sought out more freelance work. But at 20, wehy-faced and bland, how was he to stand out from the crowd? The five novels he wrote between 1879 and 1883 didn't help, because they didn't sell.



Shaw at 20 (1876)

Shaw's makeover began almost by accident, just as his writing career had, when he grew a red beard to hide his smallpox scars. Then, he became a vegetarian. Later, he declared himself both an atheist and a pacifist. And in 1882, he joined the Fabian Society.

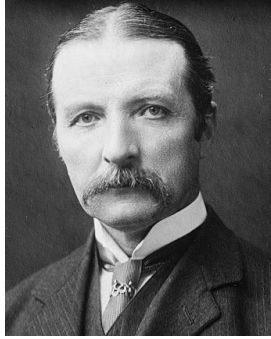
Socialism

The Fabians were a group of moderate socialists, who hoped to gradually transform England. Shaw became a tract writer, speaker and advocate for the cause. Now, he could *perform*, giving over 2,000 speeches. As a costume of sorts, he bought his first woolen Jaeger suit, a style he would wear for the rest of his life. He even had an affair with Karl Marx's daughter.



Shaw at 35 (1891)

In 1883, Shaw met William Archer, who was translating the plays of Henrik Ibsen, plays that were banned from the London stage because of their social content. (This would eventually lead to Shaw's 1891 book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.)



William Archer

Archer got Shaw a job as art critic on *The World*. Later, he would become music critic on *The Star* and eventually, the vituperative theatre critic on *The Saturday Review*.

By 1891, *The Sunday World* could write, “Everybody in London knows Shaw. Fabian, Socialist, art and musical critic, vegetarian... artist to the tips of his fingers, man of the people to the tips of his boots.”

Playwright

Bernard Shaw—GBS—was famous. Now what? As Christopher Wixson noted, “He frequently used reviews to agitate about social issues... including censorship, child exploitation... women’s equality, and public health.” What if he, like Ibsen, could bring topics like this to the stage, using as his weapons “the fierce castigation of comedy and the ruthless light of laughter?” (GBS) What a performance *that* would be!

Shaw’s first plays also ran afoul of the Lord Chamberlain, England’s official censor. His first hit was *Arms and the Man* (1894), a Mittel-European farrago, which deftly undermined love, honor and the military.

It set a template for most of Shaw’s work. He would take a common theatrical form, like the country house play, find something wrong at the very heart of it and turn the result into something quite different and unexpected, as in *Heartbreak House*.

Like a British Balzac, GBS sought to reveal the great crimes behind respectable people’s great fortunes. Major Barbara, for example, can devote herself to the Salvation Army, because her wealthy father sells munitions.

By 1898, Shaw’s public performance as GBS was so successful—that he suffered a nervous collapse. He was nursed back to health by Charlotte Payne-Townsend, whom he then married. Their companionate union would endure until her death in 1943.



Shaw and Charlotte, 1905

Also in 1898, he published the works the Lord Chamberlain had barred from the stage as *Plays Unpleasant*; their topics included slumlords and prostitution. To accompany the texts, GBS wrote prefaces, some as long as the plays themselves. This would become his common practice.

By the time the first use of the adjective “Shavian” appeared in 1904, Shaw had written *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, *Candida* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*, among others.

Gadfly

Fame allowed Shaw an even greater license to say anything he damn well pleased. And he did, with special emphasis on kicking “Shakespeare,” as GBS spelled it. (Spelling reform was another of his hobbyhorses.) Indeed, his last play (for puppets) would be called *Shakes vs. Shav*. Even his unpleasant plays were finally produced.

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The public was less amused by *Common Sense*, the pacifist pamphlet GBS wrote on the eve of World War I, in which he blamed the upcoming conflict on both sides.



Shaw in a sportive mood

Shaw got out of that one by sending a long dispatch from the Western Front singing the praises of the common British Tommy.

Blunders

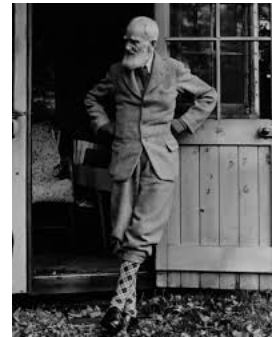
Man and Superman was first performed in 1905. In it, Shaw began to feel his way to something beyond Fabian Socialism. He called this concept Creative Evolution, a process through which the Life Force would gradually bring about the Perfection of Man. But as far back as 1902 he had written, “Beware the pursuit of the Superman. It leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the human.” Would that GBS had listened to his own advice!

Creative Evolution was all well and good, Shaw eventually concluded, but what if there were already among us those whom he called “World Betterers?” They would serve as the antidote to “the mass of ignorance, weakness, and timidity” which was delaying the Perfection of Man. Promoting these men would be Shaw’s greatest performance, a performance on a world scale.

Unfortunately, those GBS saw as World Betterers turned out to be Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. And although he later rejected Mussolini and Hitler, because of their anti-Semitism, he retained a soft spot for Stalin.

Luckily, few listened. Instead, they focused on *St. Joan* (1923) and on Shaw’s becoming the first of only two people to win both the Nobel Prize in Literature (1925) and an Oscar (Best Adapted Screenplay-*Pygmalion*-1939). The other is Bob Dylan.

Finale



Shaw at Ayot St. Lawrence

The Shaws moved to Ayot St. Lawrence in Hertfordshire in 1906. He would live there until his death on November 2, 1950, occasionally sending out such words of praise as, “You are my 5th-favorite actor, after the Marx Brothers.”

Of course, GBS wrote his own eulogy. He was no doubt sorry not to be able to deliver it. What a performance it would have been!

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is... a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.