

'As her actual condition was pure  
upstart, there were only two  
opinions about her. One was that  
she was miraculous: the other  
that she was unbearable.'  
(Bernard Shaw, preface to *Saint Joan*)

- INTRODUCTION -

On 26 April 2016, the New York Times published its main editorial on attempts by the then presumptive Republican nominee for the presidency of the United States to soften his abrasive and uncouth image. It was headed ‘The Donald Trump Pygmalion project’.<sup>1</sup> The ambition of Donald Trump’s newly appointed campaign manager, it suggested, would be ‘to turn this Eliza Doolittle into a candidate more acceptable to decent society, in time for the general election’. The paper’s editors did not feel the need to explain the references to *Pygmalion* or to Eliza Doolittle. Knowledge of at least one of Bernard Shaw’s plays could be taken for granted among the paper’s well-educated readers.

And yet those same readers might have found it hard to appreciate just how profoundly Shavian the world had once been. As the author of *Pygmalion* and perhaps a few other plays like *Arms and the man* and *Heartbreak House* Shaw’s place in the history of the theatre is general knowledge. His image—tall, thin, red-bearded, distinctively dressed, of puckish mien—would still be easy enough for most people to identify from a lineup of twentieth-century caricatures. A few older people may even occasionally season their conversations with a phrase that was once common: ‘As George Bernard Shaw said...’ (often applied whether he did or not).

But to the degree that Shaw is now thought of, it is as a figure from the past, an eminent Victorian or an Edwardian gadfly. His plays, when they appear on stage, generally come with stuffy drawing room furniture and gorgeous dresses, drawing audiences into an odd space somewhere between *Downtown Abbey* nostalgia on the one side and old political quarrels on the other. And, in an era when we do not like to be talked at, there are all those words. Shaw’s characters talk a lot and Shaw himself talked even more, emitting an endless stream of plays and prefaces, of interviews and interventions, of serious pamphlets and spiky letters to the press, of speeches and self-advertisements. Samuel Johnson said of *Paradise Lost* that no man ever wished it longer, and it is probably fair to say that no-one ever wished that Shaw had been just a little more loquacious.

I grew up, however, with a very different Shaw: the working-class hero. In our corporation house, battered second-hand copies of cheap Pelican editions of Shaw were always to hand. When we got free tickets to the Gate Theatre in Dublin, it was often to see a Shaw play—*Fanny’s first play* was my second-ever play. When we went to the National Gallery, Shaw’s devilish statue stood guard at the entrance and many of the best paintings had

‘Shaw Bequest’ on their frames—I thought he had personally given them to us. When we walked into town we would sometimes take a small detour up Synge Street just to pass the house where he was born, a house grander than ours certainly but modest enough to be within our ken.

And there was nothing dutiful about any of this. To my father, a self-educated bus conductor, Shaw was a pure delight. He was the big, sharp, shiny pin pricking the pretensions of church and state, of bosses and bishops. He was, moreover, an ally. Shaw was not, to men like my father, a guru to follow. He was a kind of older, smarter, intellectual big brother, a pathfinder who had opened the way to the rough but exhilarating terrain of thinking for yourself. The big thing about Shaw was that he had said the unsayable and somehow got away with it—implying that so, perhaps, might you.

The purpose of this short book is to try to restore at least a little of that admiration for what Shaw did and what he got away with. I would like to restore him, moreover, to the twenty-first century. This is an introduction to Shaw that aspires, with due modesty, to be also a reintroduction. I argue here that Shaw can be seen as a much more contemporary figure, one who has more in common with Bob Dylan and David Bowie than he has with William Gladstone or Anthony Trollope. (It seems somehow fitting that it was Dylan in 2016 who became the first artist to match Shaw’s hitherto unique feat of winning both an Oscar and a Nobel prize.) Like Dylan or Bowie, he was one of the great masters of self-invention, a nobody who captured the zeitgeist. Shaw was one of the first private individuals on the planet to understand fully how to generate—and how to use—global fame. He was among the first private citizens to grasp the possibilities of mass media and the age of mechanical reproduction for the creation of a different kind of power in the world. He was one of the first to understand that in this mass media age, performance is not just what happens on the stage, it is everywhere.

He did all of this, moreover, while showing everyone that he was doing it. The alter ego he created, the omniscient GBS, may have become in some respects a monster he could not control, but he never fully hid behind it. He was a magician who kept up a running explanation on his own tricks. He did it all, too, for a purpose. Shaw was not always right, sometimes hideously wrong and struggled to maintain his optimism about humanity. But his most important work is driven above all by a deep hatred for economic

oppression and inequality. This, too, has contemporary meaning: much of our twenty-first-century politics could do with reintroducing itself to Shaw's coruscating assaults on the self-serving nature of power and the corrupting influence of poverty, both on those who suffer it and those who benefit from it.

What follows, then is neither a biography of Shaw nor a critical study of his art. He has been superbly served by his modern biographers, notably in Michael Holroyd's magisterial four-volume *Bernard Shaw* and A.M. Gibbs's wonderfully lucid *Bernard Shaw: a life*, and I do not pretend to compete with them.<sup>2</sup> Nor is this book at all a comprehensive account of Shaw's vast legacy of theatrical, fictional, polemical, critical and philosophical writing. Some of his sixty plays do not feature here and neither do his extremely interesting early novels. This book is, rather, an invitation to reconsider Shaw as a figure who has something of great importance to give to the twenty-first century. We find ourselves in a time when provocation, showmanship, the contrary spirit, are divorced from serious thought, from a sense of common humanity and from a commitment to genuinely free thought. GBS brought them together, and in doing so he poses a challenge to our times as bracing as the one he set for his own.

Following pages: Letter from the secretary of Minister for Education Richard Mulcahy to the director of the National Gallery, 25 January 1950, asking about the existence of a statue of Shaw 'by Troubsky (?)', which is stated to be in the cellars of the National Gallery', and enquiring whether, if it exists, the statue might be suitable for public exhibition.

Costume design after Charles Ricketts for 'Two ladies of the Court', from the 1924 production of *Saint Joan* at the NewTheatre, London.