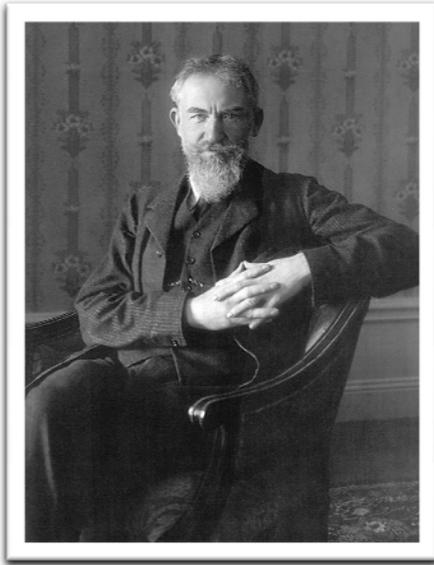


The Shaw Festival

Behind the Curtain



George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856. His childhood was not a good one. The family was quite poor and his father, a grain salesman, was an alcoholic. At the age of 15 he went to work as a clerk. Shortly after taking the job, in 1876, he moved to London, where his mother and sister were living.

Shaw was drawn to Socialist lectures and became quickly involved in the Socialist political scene. He became a member of the Social Democratic Federation and befriended many of its members including William Morris and Eleanor Marx. Shaw gave lectures on the street and distributed political literature. He much preferred to debate rather than participate in violent action. Because of this, Shaw and other

SDF members formed the Fabian Society in 1884 and chose to focus on fact finding and writing and distributing political commentary.

By 1885 Shaw was earning a decent salary for his writing. He began his career in literature by writing music and theatre criticism. Shaw was employed by a small newspaper called the *Pall Mall Gazette*. He worked under Editor William Stead who used the publication to try to initiate social reform.

Jack Grein, founder of the *Independent Theater*, had once expressed to Shaw his disappointment in not ever meeting any good British playwrights. At that point Shaw had written one play but was sure that no one would produce it based on its content.

Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*, in 1885 was written in collaboration with critic William Archer, who supplied the structure. Archer was not pleased with Shaw's work, so it was abandoned. In 1892, Shaw attempted again. He completed the play without the help of Archer. *Widowers' Houses* was an attack on slumlords. It was first performed at *London's Royalty Theatre* on December 9, 1892. Shaw had always believed that it was one of his worst pieces, but it allowed him to find his literary outlet.

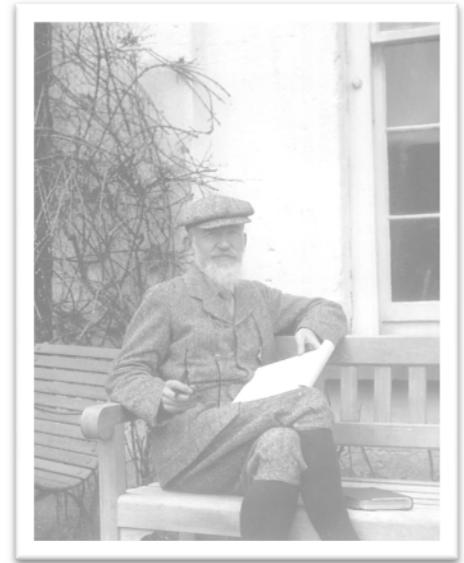
Several years later Shaw began writing more plays that were political by nature. The topics included women's rights, poverty, and shared his strong socialist beliefs. Usually Shaw's plays

had some sort of comedic activity and most audiences dismissed the activist nature of them. Shaw was aware of this, but he continued hoping that reform might come from his work.

In a letter dated January 17, 1909, Shaw said,

I, as a Socialist, have had to preach, as much as anyone, the enormous power of the environment. We can change it; we must change it; there is absolutely no other sense in life than the task of changing it. What is the use of writing plays, what is the use of writing anything, if there is not a will which finally moulds chaos itself into a race of gods.

Shaw's plays were popularized in the 1910s and through the 1920s. He also continued to write political literature and pamphlets. In 1925 Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He accepted the award, but declined the money that went with it.



George Bernard Shaw died at the age of 94 in 1950. He wrote over 50 plays in his lifetime, not including political essays, novels, short stories, and musical criticism. By the end of his life, Shaw was a renowned playwright, very popular in both Ireland and England.

The Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada began in 1962. The festival has grown into an annual festival with over 800 performances a year, dedicated to producing the works of Shaw and his contemporaries. The original goal of the festival was to share Shaw's productions, but has since expanded to include those plays written in, or about issues, from his lifetime (1850-1950s). The main objective of the festival is to do what Shaw always wanted to do and that is to make people think. He wanted to educate people on controversial issues and that is exactly what the festival does!

Learn more about Shaw and the Shaw Festival at www.shawfest.com.

Find classroom materials and program information at www.pbs.org/wned/shaw-festival

