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“Guilty creatures sitting at a play”: Class and Gender in Bernard Shaw’s *Plays Unpleasant*

In his pioneering study of the work of Henrik Ibsen, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), Bernard Shaw outlined his own programme for a new kind of drama in Britain, one that would take as its critical starting-point the “discussion” plays of the Norwegian playwright. Plays should, in Shaw’s view, be written and performed, not primarily to entertain a theatre audience, but to involve it in a cathartic experience of personal and political transformation. According to Shaw, we are all “guilty creatures sitting at a play” (Shaw 1952:687) and the function of the dialogue on stage was to help shake us out of our sense of moral complacency. This was the great radical challenge which Ibsen’s work inspired Shaw to take up: to create a play of ideas and argument that would compel the audience to take sides:

The technical novelties of the Ibsen and post-Ibsen plays are, then: first, the introduction of the discussion and its development until it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making play and discussion practically identical; and, second, as a consequence of making the spectators themselves the persons of the drama, and the incidents of their own lives its incidents, the disuse of the old stage tricks by which audiences had to be induced to take an interest in unreal people and improbable circumstances, and the substitution of a forensic technique of recrimination, disillusion, and penetration through ideals to the truth, with a free use of all the rhetorical and lyrical arts of the orator, the preacher, the pleader, and the rhapsodist. (Shaw 1952:687)

All of these new techniques Shaw himself brought to bear on a trilogy of plays that he completed two years later and which he gave the somewhat disconcerting title, *Plays Unpleasant* (1898). It is these three works – *Widower’s Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893) and *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1894) – that I want to discuss in more detail here. Not only because they have always existed in the shadow of Shaw’s more popular plays, such as *Major Barbara* (1907), *Pygmalion* (1913) and *Saint Joan* (1923), but because I believe they still retain their power to illuminate complicated and conflicting questions of class and gender that face us today: the link between money and morality, marriage and prostitution, capitalism and women’s liberation. Shaw reveals the personal and political interplay of these issues and asks us to reflect on our own lives: how do we live now and how might we live?

Shaw’s career as a politically committed, campaigning writer and public

speaker can be traced back to his reading of a French translation of Marx's *Das Kapital* in 1884. It came as a revelation to him and he later referred dramatically to his "complete conversion by it [...] From that hour I was a speaker with a gospel [...] This went on for about twelve years, during which I sermonized on Socialism at least three times a fortnight average. I preached whenever and wherever I was asked" (Shaw 1949:58-9). This meant not only speaking indoors in meeting halls, but also on wind- and rain-swept street corners all over Britain. It was here that Shaw sharpened his analysis of class society, as well as his powers of persuasion, a mixture of solid economic argument and rhetorical flourish that would stand him in good stead later on when he turned to the theatre as a new platform from which he could propagate his radical view of society. The catalyst for this change in dramatic direction was his encounter as a theatre critic with the so-called problem plays of Ibsen. It was Ibsen who showed Shaw the powerful potential of plays that exposed society's wrongs to the light of public debate.

After starting as a writer of novels, the last and most ambitious of which was *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), Shaw turned his attention to the theatre. His early literary ambition to create "a vast work depicting capitalist society in dissolution, with its downfall as the final grand catastrophe" (Shaw 1980: "Foreword") was to be transferred to the stage. Thus, the trilogy of "Unpleasant" plays that came out of this urge to change the world formed a continuation of Shaw's anti-capitalist mission by other, more dramatic means. As Christopher Innes points out, this new kind of overtly political play was Shaw's most original contribution to the English stage:

[W]hen carried over into drama, this commitment to the political effectiveness of intellectual persuasion is exactly analogous to resolving a play's action through dialogue [...] The preference for dialogue over plot is even more central, since it leads to the one unique theatrical form that Shaw evolved: the Discussion Play. (Innes 1998:162-3)

In the preface to his first play, *Widower's Houses*, Shaw writes: "I have shewn middle-class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth. That is not a pleasant theme" (Shaw 2000:26). No surprisingly, the initial impact on his audience was as shocking as it was innovating, inspiring Shaw to continue in this new propagandistic vein: "I had provoked an uproar; and the sensation was so agreeable that I resolved to try again" (Shaw 2000:14). The two follow-ups, *The Philanderer*, an attack on the institution of marriage, and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, an exposure of prostitution, were, however, clearly too much for the Public Censors and had to wait several years before they were finally given a licence to be performed on the London stage.

At the same time as he continued to speak to working-class people about socialism in public meetings, Shaw now also directed himself even more urgently towards educating a middle-class theatre audience. This was in line with his new-

found allegiance to the Fabian society, a reformist movement lead by Sydney and Beatrice Webb, who saw the road to socialism being paved with the improvement of the condition of the working class through a slow process of welfare reforms. This meant not only a rejection of violent revolution, but also a redirection of political effort towards winning the most influential and progressive thinking sections of the middle class to the cause. It was, in the final Fabian analysis, to be middle-class reformers who would eventually decide upon and implement the national and local government reforms that would eventually improve the lot of the masses. That was the theory, at least, and Shaw's new ideological offensive was seen as an important political parting shot on stage. This prime object of radicalising his theatre audience he makes clear in the preface to *Mrs Warren's Profession*:

I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propaganda in the world [...] That is why I fight the theatre, not with pamphlets and sermons and treatises, but with plays; and so effective do I find the dramatic method that I have no doubt I shall at last persuade even London to take its conscience and its brains with it when it goes to the theatre, instead of leaving them at home with its prayer-book as it does at present. (Shaw 2000:185)

Not that the moral lesson Shaw sought to teach his audience was any less radical or challenging than in his street-corner speeches. Indeed, to a middle-class Victorian, it must have seemed thoroughly alarming to watch a play in which the basic principle of bourgeois society – i.e. the acquisition and enjoyment of wealth – was put into question. In his later, political primer, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism* (1928), Shaw reiterated his core argument that “Before there can be any wealth to divide-up, there must be labour at work” (Shaw 1982:45). This fundamental conclusion that money always comes from somewhere – some working to earn it while others live off their backs – even today remains an uncomfortable fact that tends to be conveniently forgotten. Thus, Shaw's first plays sought to tear this ideological veil aside and confront his audience with the disturbing suggestion that the money that paid for their middle-class lifestyle might come from some very murky sources. In other words, behind the euphemism of a so-called independent income may lurk the grim reality of a slum landlord squeezing the last penny from poverty-stricken tenants or of young girls selling their bodies to pay their pimps.

In both *Widower's Houses* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* there is a pivotal moment of disclosure in the plot when a young woman discovers that the money that has allowed her to live a life of luxury is morally tainted. Her elevated status rests directly on the oppression of poor people. In *Widower's Houses* it is Blanche who by accident picks up a Parliamentary Blue Book in which she finds her father described as “The worst slum landlord in London” (Shaw 2000:85). There is a typically reformist twist to this discovery, since such official inquiries into the

lives of the poor, their conditions of work, health, sanitation and housing made up the Fabians' most preferred reading matter. The same dirty details are also revealed to Blanche's fiancé, Trench, by her father's obsequious rent collector, Lickcheese. Thus, Shaw makes the audience share fully in the horror that lies behind the gilded drawing-room respectability of this upper-class house in Bedford Square:

LICKCHEESE. [...] Why, see here, gentlemen! Look at that bag of money on the table. Hardly a penny of that but there was a hungry child crying for the bread it would have bought. But I got it for him – screwed and worried and bullied it out of them. I – look here, gentlemen: I'm pretty seasoned to the work; but there's money there that I couldn't have taken if it hadn't been for the thought of my own children depending on me for giving him satisfaction. And because I charged him four-and-twenty shillin to mend a staircase that three women have been hurt on, and that would have got him prosecuted for manslaughter if it had been let go much longer, he gives me the sack. Wouldn't listen to a word, though I would have offered to make up the money out of my own pocket: aye, and am willing to do it still if you will only put in a word for me. (Shaw 2000:59)

The discomfort of both Blanche and Trent is in consequence transposed onto the audience who are taught a small but telling economic lesson in what Marx described in *Das Kapital* as “the most shameless exploitation of poverty” (Marx 1981:908), that is the rent-racking of the poor by slum landlords. The question that Shaw forces his audience to consider is, therefore, a basic one of private morality: **can one live happily on other people's misery?** This dilemma is given an extra twist when Trent, who initially refuses on principle to accept Blanche's dowry from her father, subsequently finds to his dismay that even his own income has been invested in the same slum houses:

SARTORIUS. [...] And now, Dr Trench, may I ask what your income is derived from?

TRENCH. [*defiantly*] From interest: not from houses. My hands are clean as far as that goes. Interest on a mortgage.

SARTORIUS. Yes: a mortgage on my property. When I, to use your own words, screw, and bully, and drive these people to pay what they have freely undertaken to pay me, I cannot touch one penny of the money they give me until I have first paid you your seven hundred a year out of it. What Lickcheese did for me, I do for you. He and I are alike intermediaries: you are the principal. It is because of the risks I run through the poverty of my tenants that you expect interest from me at the monstrous and exorbitant rate of seven per cent, forcing me to exact the uttermost farthing in my turn from the tenants. And yet, Dr Trench, you, who have never done a hand's turn of work in connection

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with the place, you have not hesitated to speak contemptuously of me because I have applied my industry and forethought to the management of our property, and am maintaining it by the same honourable means. (Shaw 2000:72)

Sartorius's arguments could have been taken straight out of the mouth of today's bankers and brokers who defend their unbridled stock market speculation and exorbitant bonuses with the excuse that they are only giving their customers what they want: a fat profit on their investments. Shaw shows that as a result of this ethos of capitalist greed, no one is left untouched by the corrupting hand of the system. Not only that, he refuses to let his audience off the hook by giving the play a feel-good ending in which the two lovers somehow manage to escape the cold grasp of their economic dependence in the name of true romance. Love does not conquer capitalism, neither in Shaw's play nor in real life. On the contrary, we see Blanche berating her fiancé for his misplaced idealism and the play closes with a highly charged erotic reunion between the two in which money and marriage are merged in an unholy alliance of bourgeois self-interest:

BLANCHE. [...] But I forgot: you have found that there is some money to be made here. Lickcheese told you. You, who were so disinterested, so independent, that you could not accept anything from my father! I suppose you will try to persuade me that you have come down here on a great philanthropic enterprise – to befriend the poor by having those houses rebuilt, eh? Yes: when my father makes you do it. And when Lickcheese has discovered some way of making it profitable. Oh, I know papa; and I know you. (Shaw 2000:94)

Thus, there is a gendered aspect to Shaw's exposure of the inner workings of the financial system that transforms the personal into the political in people's private lives. The fact that both Blanche and Trent give in to the demands of their elders transforms their love relationship into a mercenary marriage of economic convenience which, in Shaw's view, is no more than a sentimentalised form of legalised prostitution.¹ This is an issue that he returns to even more provocatively in the third of his *Plays Unpleasant: Mrs Warren's Profession*.

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In the opening lines of his Preface to the play, Shaw states that it "was written in 1894 to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are

¹ In *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism*, Shaw writes: "In short, Capitalism acts on women as a continual bribe to enter into sex relations for money, whether in or out of marriage; and against the bribe there stands nothing beyond the traditional respectability which Capitalism ruthlessly destroys by poverty, except religion and the inborn sense of honor which has its citadel in the soul and can hold out (sometimes) against all circumstances" (Shaw 1982:223).

forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together" (Shaw 2000:181). He ends this broadside with another shot at the institution of marriage, suggesting that marriage and prostitution are two sides of the same coin, both the result of the economic pressures that impose themselves on women in patriarchal society: "If on a large social scale we get what we call vice instead of what we call virtue it is simply because we are paying more for it. No normal woman would be a professional prostitute if she could better herself by being respectable, nor marry for money if she could afford to marry for love" (Ibid). Later on in the Preface, Shaw insists "Mrs Warren's Profession is a play for women; that it was written for women" (Shaw 2000:200). This was clearly the case in one tangible respect: the play was immediately banned by the Lord Chamberlain (a man) for being "immoral and otherwise improper for the stage" (Shaw 2000:181). It took ten years for it to be licensed for public performance in 1905. That Shaw had touched upon a very sensitive nerve is clear also from the outcry by male reviewers against the "ordure" (filth) on stage when the play was finally put on in both London and New York (Shaw 2000:206). Part of the reaction was due to the fact that not only does Shaw portray prostitution as a trade that is endemic to class society, he also allows the prostitute in the play, Mrs Warren, to speak out in defence of her profession against a male world of middle-class hypocrisy. Defiantly, she hits out against the double standards of society by exposing the intimate link between men's pockets and their penises. Thus, we are shown no image of either the morally reprehensible "fallen woman" or of the self-negating female "angel of the house" of Victorian mythology. Moreover, the audience is once more made to shift nervously in their seats with no comforting resolution in sight. Hesketh Pearson comments in his biography of Shaw: "As the play showed that female prostitution was the inevitable result of a capitalistic society, the managers [of theatres] who depended on capitalists to fill their stalls displayed no eagerness to put it on" (Pearson 1987:197). He adds that taken together, the controversial subject matter of his first three plays made Shaw give them the epithet "Unpleasant", because both the "public and critics thought them nasty" (Pearson 1987: 200).

Once again, the plot in *Mrs Warren's Profession* revolves around a shocking discovery: the money that has enabled Vivie Warren, the daughter of Mrs Kitty Warren, to live a life of privilege, as well as get a Cambridge university education, comes in fact from her mother's chain of brothels in Ostend, Brussels, Budapest and Vienna. Moreover, Frank Gardner, the young man with whom she is amorously involved, turns out to be her half-brother – his father, the Reverend Samuel Gardner being one of her mother's ex-clients. As dramatically as in *Widower's Houses*, Shaw peels off the civilised facade of genteel, middle-class manners, its life of leisure and pleasure paid for this time by the market in human flesh. The point is driven home by Sir George Crofts, her mother's pimping partner, who reminds Vivie of the intrinsic connection between money and refinement: "Only that you've always lived on it. It paid for your education and the dress you have on your back. Don't turn up your nose at business, Miss Vivie;

where would your Newnams and Girtons be without it?" (Shaw 2000:263). The latter reference is to the two residential colleges at Cambridge University that were initially reserved for middle- and upper-class women. The point of moral complicity in this comment is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's statement: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Quoted in Gilloch 2002:247). Shaw does not leave it at that, however, on the level of a salutary reminder of the physical exploitation that lies behind the lifestyle of the leisured classes. The exposure of Mrs Warren in front of her daughter is not accompanied by any hand-wringing remorse or declaration of shame. On the contrary, Kitty Warren turns out to be a very unapologetic, self-made woman of the streets, who has a hard-earned understanding of both the roots and social role of prostitution:

Everybody dislikes having to work and make money; but they have to do it all the same. I'm sure I've often pitied a poor girl, tired out and in low spirits, having to try to please some man that she doesn't care two straws for – some half-drunken fool that thinks he's making himself agreeable when he's teasing and worrying and disgusting a woman so that hardly any money could pay her for putting up with it. But she has to bear with disagreeables and take the rough with the smooth, just like a nurse in a hospital or anyone else. It's not work that any woman would do for pleasure, goodness knows; though to hear the pious people talk you would suppose it was a bed of roses [...] Don't you be led astray by people who don't know the world, my girl. The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she can't expect it: why should she? (Shaw 2000:249-51)

Although not every woman can relate to what is said here, there is nevertheless an issue of gender politics that remains as valid now as it was then. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw wrote that "unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself [...] Therefore Woman has to repudiate duty altogether. In that repudiation lies her freedom" (Shaw 1952:574). This rejection of the double standards of patriarchy is what Kitty Warren brazenly personifies in the play. The fact that she does this both as a prostitute and a pimp is of course an affront to public morals, something that makes the play even now a problematic contribution to the debate about gender. Shaw takes up the battle cry of the New Woman that protested against the patriarchal order of Victorian society, paving the way for the campaign of civil disobedience by the Suffragettes in demand of the right to vote, to divorce and to get an education. In contrast, however, Kitty Warren's voice is not that of a middle-class political reformer, but expresses instead the reality of the streets, something not often heard on the English stage. Her own experience of migration

from prostitute to pimp has only made her even more cynically aware of the sometimes brutal choices facing a woman in order to survive in a man's world:

Of course it's worth while to a poor girl, if she can resist temptation and is good-looking and well conducted and sensible. It's far better than any other employment open to her. I always thought that oughtnt to be. It cant be right, Vivie, that there shouldnt be better opportunities for women. I stick to that: it's wrong. But it's so, right or wrong; and a girl must make the best of it. But of course it's not worth while for a lady [...] And whats a woman worth? Whats life worth? Without self-respect! Why am I independent and able to give my daughter a first-rate education, when other women that had just as good opportunities are in the gutter? Because I always knew how to respect myself and control myself [...] Where would we be now if we'd minded the clergyman's foolishness? Scrubbing floors for one and sixpence a day and nothing to look forward to but the workhouse infirmary. (Shaw 2000:250)

According to Sally Peters, Shaw maintained an "unflagging intellectual commitment to feminism" throughout his life (Peters 1998:12). Michael Holroyd also writes that "From *Mrs Warren's Profession* onwards, Shaw campaigned in the theatre for the economic independence of women which would give them individual choice as to the direction they wished to go" (Holroyd 1979:168). This challenge is confronted at the end of the play when Vivie finally refuses her mother's money and chooses to live and work in a London office on her own. Not only does she reject any continued financial support, she also turns her back on her filial duty to love and respect her mother. She does as Shaw appealed to all women to do to "repudiate duty altogether", or as Virginia Woolf would later call it "Killing the Angel in the House" (Woolf 1995:5) in order to be free. Thus, once again, no mercy is offered to an audience that might hope for a note of forgiveness or reconciliation in the play. Shaw is clearly at this stage in his dramatic career not in the business of providing either moral excuses or happy endings.

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The remaining play in the "Unpleasant" trilogy is *The Philanderer*, a drama that comes face to face with this whole question of the New Woman: what is she really like? Sometimes referred to derogatively in the debate of the time as the "Unwomanly Woman",² Shaw, in contrast, celebrates her in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* as the rebellious "Womanly Woman", one who breaks free from the patriarchal expectations placed upon her as the perfect wife, mother, sister or daughter: "A whole basketful of ideals of the most sacred quality will be smashed

² For a discussion of this contemporary debate, see further Kerry Powell's essay, "New Women, new plays, and Shaw in the 1890s".

by the achievement of equality for women and men [...] And the advantage of the work of destruction is that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies" (Shaw 1952:575). Shaw's prime role model here is of course Nora Helmer in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879), a woman whose decision to abandon both husband and children Shaw applauds as representing the first step towards her personal liberation:

[S]he sees that their whole family life has been a fiction: their home a mere doll's house in which they have been playing at ideal husband and father, wife and mother. So she leaves him then and there and goes out into the real world to find out its reality for herself, and to gain some position not fundamentally false [...] (Shaw 1952:601)

In *The Philanderer*, Shaw tackles this difficult gender issue head on: how are men and women to get on together equally in a society that is not equal? One big problem is, as Shaw sees it, the predatory nature of men's sexuality throughout patriarchy, something of which even Shakespeare was eloquently aware. In *Othello*, for example, he has Emilia express her exasperation at the voracious sexual appetites of men who prey on women:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:
They are all but stomachs, and we are all but food;
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full
They belch us.
(Act 3, Scene 4)

In Shaw's play, Julia complains in a similar vein about the degrading objectification of her sex: "Must I stand to be bargained for by two men – passed from one to the other like a slave in the market, and not say a word in my own defence?" (Shaw 2000:172-3). Her friend, Grace, reacts ironically to the same oppressive masculine order of things: "They think this a happy ending, Julia, these men: our lords and masters!" (Shaw 2000:175). The philanderer, or sexual predator, in the play is Charteris, a man who has carved out a career for himself seducing and abandoning women, doing little else in his pursuit of sensual pleasure. There is now, however, a different, more critical consciousness among the women he meets, which he describes as "Ibsenist". It is striking to see how Shaw pre-empted in his play the debate in the 1960s and 70s about the sexual revolution in which women were encouraged to adopt the promiscuous habits of men as a proof of their own personal liberation.³ Shaw questions even at this early, turn-of-century stage whether the idea of women behaving like men is really a step in the right emancipatory direction. In his turn, Charteris seeks to exploit the ideas of the New Woman as a means to continue having it all his own

³ For a fuller discussion of this recurring issue within the women's movement, see Chloé Avril's chapter on "Sexuality" in her study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (2008), pp. 35-80.

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way, not least sexually. Their conflicting interpretations of this seemingly more liberated lifestyle are captured in the following exchange between himself and Julia:

CHARTERIS: Let me remind you, Julia, that when we first became acquainted, the position you took up was that of a woman of advanced views.

JULIA: That should have made you respect me the more.

CHARTERIS: [*placably*] So it did, my dear. But that is not the point. As a woman of advanced views, you were determined to be free. You regarded marriage as a degrading bargain, by which a woman sells herself to a man for the social status of a wife and the right to be supported and pensioned in old age out of his income. That's the advanced view: our view. Besides, if you had married me, I might have turned out a drunkard, a criminal, an imbecile, a horror to you; and you couldn't have released yourself. Too big a risk, you see. That's the rational view: our view. Accordingly, you reserved the right to leave me at any time you found our companionship incompatible with – what was the expression you used? – with your full development as a human being. I think that was how you put the Ibsenist view: our view. So I had to be content with a charming philander, which taught me a great deal, and brought me some hours of exquisite happiness. (Shaw 2000:107-8)

To this cynical, self-serving male rationalisation of sexual liberation, Julia replies with some personal home truths: “No. You made me pay dearly for every moment of happiness [...] I was your plaything, not your companion [...] Better for me if I had never met you!” (Shaw 2000:108). Although the tone is satiric, especially when Shaw portrays the intrigues of the “Ibsen Club” which only accepts female members who are “not womanly” and male members who are “not manly” (Shaw 2000:118), the reality of the unequal power relations between men and women is dealt with seriously in the play. Shaw shows how difficult it is for an emancipated woman to live in an unfree society and how she constantly risks being demonised, either as a slut or a shrew. Then as now, it is a male strategy of attack in order to protect a position of power and privilege by disarming the critical views of feminists by condemning them as “unwomanly” and therefore unnatural.

In 1972 Margery M Morgon noted that *The Philanderer* “has received scant critical attention”, mainly due to “the difficulty of approaching it satisfactorily as a thesis play about a contemporary social evil” (Morgon 1972:30). A quarter of a century later, Frederick J Marker confirms this continuing neglect of the play by claiming that it “is often regarded by critics as a minor work” (Marker 1998:111). I think there is another reason why this might be, and this goes for all three of Shaw’s *Plays Unpleasant*: they are all still too close to the bone, not least for male critics, who feel directly implicated by Shaw’s uncompromising exposure of

public morals and private behaviour. In a world where there seems less and less of a sense of either personal or political accountability, not least among the ruling class, Shaw's unflinching dramatisation of the discrepancy between words and deeds remains a challenging experience for any audience, or reader for that matter.

Summing up Shaw's achievement as a political playwright, Alick West points to the paradigmatic shift in political perception that Shaw's plays achieved on the English stage:

Shaw wished to express a conflict which was in fact that of class against class; but the dramatic form from which he had to start was steeped in the prevailing social conception that the world of middle-class society was the natural, permanent, real world, the only world. Shaw had to break through the barrier, which most dramatists were too awed even to approach, defending the imaginary world of the drama against the forces of change in the world of reality; he had to create the means to express dramatically that the men and women on the stage were members of a society based on exploitation. He created these means; and the degree of intellectual energy required to defy the dramatic convention of the time with such boldness as in the *Unpleasant Plays* is a measure of how intensely Shaw was conscious of capitalist exploitation. (West 1950:169)

In our own troubled times, there is a growing awareness that not only is the present state of boom-and-bust capitalism ultimately unsustainable, not least ecologically, but that any fundamental transformation has to come from below – those in positions of (male) privilege will not budge willingly. As I have tried to show here, Shaw's early plays can still be read as a contribution to the ongoing ethical argument for radical change and that another world is necessary and possible. Shaw's writing helps us find the courage to contest the power of the status quo as well as to realise that other more democratic world.

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