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George Bernard Shaw - Drama of Ideas

P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, Ph.D.

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Abstract

In the history of English Drama, George Bernard Shaw occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English Theatre for over sixty years and his influence, name, and fame are all pervasive despite not possessing a firsthand exposure to the theatre as some of his other contemporaries; he divulged his artistic sensibilities in a variety of roles as actor, director and later as a producer of plays. He acted and played some roles and parts along with amateurs in some performances too. Present article aims at making an in-depth study of how Shaw's Dramas are Dramas of Ideas and how the material of his plays is the mental substance in which modern life is lived.

George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw with his tall and erect figure, straight like a ramrod, and his grey beard, has almost become a legend. He was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary, and the

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most complex personalities of modern time. He is a Socialist, a Fabian, a Pacifist, a vegetarian, and many others things. He is also anti-capitalist, anti-cannibalist, anti-smoke, anti-drink, anti-royalist, anti-democrat, etc.

By nature Shaw was a tireless crusader for social justice and righteousness. He was a propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people. Social reform was his mission. He tried to liberate his age from humbug, mental sloth, social apathy, superstition, sentimentalism, collective selfishness, and all the static ideas which have not been consciously subjected to the tests of real life and honest thought.

Shaw was a ruthless critic but he criticized in a most charming and pleasant manner. He attacked institutions, which are not sensitive, in preference to people who are: and when he did criticise individuals he added sugar to the pill, so that they could swallow it without making a wry face. He could not only take the attacks of his enemies with good humour but by means of his wit was able to turn them to his own advantage. In his personal life, Shaw was a man of simple habits, who shunned luxury of every kind, and for whom the best recreation was work.

In the History of English Drama, he occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English Theatre for over sixty years and his influence name, and fame are all pervasive despite not possessing a firsthand exposure to the theatre as some of his other contemporaries; he divined and divulged his artistic sensibilities in a variety of roles as actor, director and later as a producer of plays. He acted and played some roles and parts along with amateurs in some theatricals too.

Shaw's Stage Directions

Shaw had an implicit conviction that an author is the most desirable director of his plays. The stage directions in Shaw's plays serve multiple purposes. They offer to create an intensive picture of the background settings, indicate the costumes and appearance of the players

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and more patiently enrich the play itself with many subtle and artistic touches. With complete, talk of self-consciousness he would inform by intention to draw out the full value out of a line or utterance. He could assume any role, any physical attitude and make any inflection of his voice whether the port was that of an old man or young man a budding girl or an ancient lady with his amazing lands he would illustrate the mood of the line.

Shaw had a tremendous passion for perfectionism. He would often test his limits of endurance by undertaking five, six or even seven hours of prolonged rehearsals. It was on universal opinion that to be rehearsed by Shaw, meant to experience by dynamic and stimulating power. He possessed the keen art of perceiving and conversing aptly and appropriately.

Shaw was knowledgeable, vivid, occasionally funny, but incisive and a match for any critic in the classic tradition. He had a taste for comparative analysis and an essential ability of hitting off a performance in a single stroke. Whenever the productions of his plays caused public commotion, he used to set it down to modern thought or novelty of an advanced projection, disclaiming any responsibility for originality. This ability to superimpose apparent novelty on an essentially trite conception was perhaps the most useful of all the lessons Shaw learnt from the playwrights he criticized. He attempted to avoid assembled plays from a construction kit of readymade character and incident.

There is yet another fact which Shaw was well aware of in his deepest and most fastidious level of personal consciousness that art cannot be essentially didactic. He explored thoroughly all the dramatic regions in his entire career as a dramatist. He had an unwavering attachment to issues relating to his time but have recurrence and profound validity even in the present age throughout the continents. He is one of the great world educators ever born, one who has prompted the learned intellectuals to think for themselves. He was compelled by a sense of mission to seek and regard the various issues of life with an open mind. He felt that it was his

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destiny to educate Londoners as he expressed to the Journalists of his day and, he did fulfill the obligation. He wrote to change the world. Irving Wardle writes teaching is the central passion in all Shaw's major plays.

Shaw's Characterization

Shaw was creating his stage characters with personalities of living performers in mind. Allardyce Nicoll regards 'the course seasons during which he worked so hard at perfecting the staying of his plays, were a deliberate attempt to capture the attention of the general public and through these spectators of the more prominent players of the age and the attempt was successful". Evidently Shaw's outlook and aims bear a contrast from these of the minor authors of his day Shaw's works present an encomium of his own philosophical, sociological and commercial pronouncements as he stood at the head of the band of innovators, who aimed at establishing the play of Ideas upon the English Stage.

He desired to express outright his inner most, ratiocinative, individual thoughts on almost all subjects. There was no dramatist of his time who could give effective expression and in the most diverse tones. He had the potential ability to create an intellectual thrust through his plays and enthrall the audience. The theatre became always a means to the end with him. The categorical criticism that his criticisms that his plays are better to ad than listen is unjustified, as some of his plays believe and declare universal generalizations inherent in life and true to mankind.

Throughout his whole career he continually sought in 'lengthy prefaces to propound his theories concerning the universe in gendered life in particular with undisguised admiration His belief that the unfit should be disposed is common place knowledge. He always proceeded on basic issues, posing a series of basic questions.

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In his preface to "Three plays for Puritans" Shaw writes, "since I gave my plays pleasant and unpleasant to the world two years ago, many things have happened to me. I had then just entered on the fourth year of my activity as a critic of the London theatres. They very nearly killed me. I had survived seven years of London music, four or five years of London pictures and about as much its current literature, wrestling critically with them with all my force and skill. After that the criticism of the theatre came to me as a huge relief in point of bodily exertion". Having visited the theatres for three years, he confides, doctors claimed that the soul of him has become inane and is feeding unnaturally on his body. He retreated into the mountains and in solitude and seclusion set about writing books and plays which appear in volumes II and III. He considers the fatal crossing and re-crossing of the London Playhouse threshold had debilitated him and sapped out the vital energies.

Irish Influence on Shaw

Shaw never lost an occasion to show his Irish contempt for English, while remarking that the English are incapable of making a play or presenting one. The sportsman instinct and sensualism prohibits their ability to consider the theatre as a place of edification besides amusement. Speaking for the audience who frequent the theatres the majority belong to the least robust of all the social classes who make their humble livelihood in sedentary employment devoid of luxury or nagging relatives. He contends that these are the one who preserve the innocence of the theatre, since they neither possess the philosopher's impatience to get to stark realities nor entertain longing of sports man intense and violent action or sensuality.

Shaw confirms the non-existence of the English influence on the theatre because the rich purchasing — powerful Englishman prefers politics and church going. His soul is too stubborn to be purged by an avowed make between when he wants sensuality he practices it; he does not play with voluptuous or romantic ideas. From the play of ideas and the drama can never be anything more, he demands edification and will not pay for anything else in that arena". Most of

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the time, just as one man's meat happens to another man's poison, so also one age's longing could be another's age's loathing, expresses Shaw: It is a Valliant effort on the part of the theatres to cater to the diverse interests of people of different ages, classes and temperaments through some momentous subject of thought.

Shaw discerned that many actor managers were far more successful since they presented plays which at least appealed to them. The true state of commercial affairs of the theatre projected a desolated picture of attempting to please everybody, but really pleased no body. This was due to ritualistic thought that the public did not want brains nor wanted to think but only craved for pleasure at the theatre. But Shaw observes that there already existed a section of the public who disliked going to the theatre to be merely tantalized. This called for a drastic turn to words the projection of Universality of appeal to all. However the immediate recourse to sex appeals turned out to be a failure. Shaw noticed the transformation and remarks in fact these so called problem plays in variably depended for their dramatic interest on foregone conclusions of the most heart wearying conventionality concerning sexual morality.

Shaw himself confided that he was a specialist in immoral and heretical plays, deliberately with an objective of converting the nation to his opinion and belief on all social and ethical matters. It was a valiant struggle which he undertook to force the Public to reconsider its morals. In a specific mode, the prefaces proved 'the thing' by which he could flay the public conscience, while the play was the vehicle by which he conveyed 'the thing'. Through and artistic employment of the dramatic presentation on stage, he created a social awareness in the dull conscience of existing society.

Shaw's Theatre

Shaw believed that the theatre was a place, which people could endure only when it enabled them to forget themselves. Only when thin attention was fully captured their interest thoroughly roused, sympathies raised to earnest expectation. Could it appeal and gratify the people who visited ft The Bohemianism of earlier generations was gradually and steadily

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replaced by compelling social recognition of the virtues of blameless respectability inherited in by Shaw. Prior to that, the theatre was an insufferable place that had left a black mark on the character of English nation. He enables every penman to play on their romantic illusions, will be led by the nose for more completely than they ever were by playing on their former ignorance and superstition. Nay, why should I say will be? they are. Ten years of reading have changed the English from the most stolid nation in Europe to the most theatrical and hysterical". Essentially maintaining a particular attitude towards art, it was Shaw's avowed attempt to rescue it from profaneness and immorality.

Shaw ardently believes that every generation invariably produces men of extraordinary faculty, but lack the new ideas produced by their predecessors, however clumsy they might have been and are not even attempted by those succeeding them. Such a lacuna of new ideas and techniques deprives them of the epoch making distinctions. Mastery of new ideas and Techniques enables one to harness and constantly express through art as a profound medium of communication with society and the world. It should be the honest human endeavour of the champions of various parts of expression to surpass Homer or Shakespeare. Shaw made a valiant attempt and succeeded in appealing to and educating the playgoers of his day, by questioning the established ideas which nobody ever before had even attempted to question or doubt.

Shavian Themes

In the mighty tradition of stage conquerors just as Shakespeare had annexed it from Homer or Marlowe, Shaw conquered it through his powers of invention, humor and stage ingenuity. In one of his prefaces he declares "I saw the old facts in a new light. Technically, I do not find myself able to proceed otherwise than a former playwrights have done True, my plays have the latest technical improvements; the action is not carried on by impossible soliloquies and asides and a many people get on and off the stage without requiring four doors to a room which in real life would have only one. But my stories are the old stories, my characters are the familiar

harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloon, my stage tricks and suspense and thrills and just on the ones in vogue.

Shaw ascertain that the whirligig of time would reconcile his audiences to him because he was not merely attempting to portray or depict stage puppets but was on to a serious attempt at substituting natural history for conventional ethics and romantic logic. Shaw's twentieth century characteristics in this regard are hailed and admired as his original contribution to the field of drama whereas he claims to the contrary and asserts that he has only been prodigiously clever. He confesses "I seem prodigiously clever to those who have never hoped, hungry and curious across the fields of philosophy, politics and art. Karl Marx said of Stuvart Hill that his eminence was due to the flatness of the surrounding country". The same could be attributed to his own care. He faithfully, believed that with moderate ability and the existing demand for notabilities of all sorts, any one could stake a claim and acquire a reputation in any field of activity, be it military, politics or fashion. What he calls for is an enduring sense of reputation that would bring in its wake hope to the world of expectation and flood of general enlightenment to citizens of the globe. It is only in this manner has a Plato or a Shakespeare outlasted his day and survived in people's memories for centuries because they choose to cultivate in the soil of ignorance and there by reaped a bounteous harvest.

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P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, Ph.D.
Head, Department of English
V.R. Institute of P G Studies
Nellore -524001
Andhra Pradesh
India
sreemupydala@gmail.com