

SHAW IN POLAND: AN OUTLINE

I. STAGE HISTORY (1903—1956)

Shaw's well-established popularity in Poland may itself seem a paradox. The solid fact of his success is there, of course, but it is also worth while to note that the welcome extended to his works in this country has been diversified by constant misapprehension. A phenomenon so persistent calls for initial comment even in the briefest of surveys.

It is probably true to say that during a period of over fifty years there has been little progress made towards deeper understanding of Shaw's art and purpose. Attempts to handle him monographically and to produce translations of his plays serially for the benefit of Polish readers — such phenomena are quite recent.

For a very long time, unhelped by serious students of drama, press reviewers kept on asking ever the same questions and returned over and over again to the same tentative generalisations. And the note of misunderstanding has never disappeared from discussion. Thus, characteristically, in a fairly recent contribution, the censorious Banall (a character in *Fanny's First Play*) was misread into Banal, and interpreted as a symbol of banality; one feels, however, that the malentendu might have occurred equally well at any given moment of Shaw's Polish career. This is also true of many generalisations, as shown by the record of formulas tending to reduce Shaw to one single dominant characteristic. Shaw's interest in social problems, for example, has been noticed from the first. Already in 1903 a Polish reviewer suggested this was Shaw's main preoccupation; and ever since critics and reviewers have been returning to this point, not only

in Poland. An eminent foreign critic, writing soon after Shaw's death, and agreeing with this point of view, observed that Shaw's first play, *Widowers' Houses*, should be regarded as his best, a statement which, to some extent, makes all Shaw's later production appear a story of decline. This shows how insistent have been the recurrences of a not very rewarding type of generalisation.

Even more characteristic, however, have been the doubts of successive generations of reviewers whether it was possible to accept Shaw as a serious writer. *The Buffoon of The Stage* („Dramatyczny pajac"): the formula made its appearance in the press at least as early as 1906, with the authority of J. A. Kisielewski behind it. And, fifty years later, in 1956, Jaszcz, the popular dramatic reviewer, returned to the same idea summing up his impressions of *The Millionairess* in the idiomatic query: "Kpi, czy o drogę pyta?".

Here, however, one should recognize that the reviewers and the feuilleton-writers have had to face a real difficulty. The critical problem remains, still largely undecided, even with regard to some of the most discussed plays, such as *Androcles and the Lion* or *Saint Joan*, the problem of a focus of meaning artistically valid. From Shaw's prefaces it is obvious enough that he himself is no reliable guide in such matters, for his own valuations of problems and persons sometimes do not seem to correspond to the data of the text. This may be typical of more than one author's comments on his own work, but in Shaw's case such interpretations are peculiarly misleading owing to his publicist's vigour. Shaw the playwright is a much more subtle author, and perhaps less sure of his own purpose, certainly much less of a propagandist. And, of course, the analyst's task is thereby complicadet. "The governing intention" — (as Miss Branbrook has reminded us in her study of Shakespeare's comedies) — "is the most difficult aspect of meaning to establish, indeed some modern critics would deny the possibility of doing so." For critics attempting any evaluation of Shaw the dramatist, this problem, whether on the scholarly or on the popular and journalistic level of criticism, has ever remained unsettling and acute.

More efficient than anything else, however, in inducing misinterpretation have been some purely local and national traits in Shaw's mental composition. It is true that the main formative influences affecting his outlook were European and continental: Wagner, Ibsen, Marx, Nietzsche, and above all, Bergson with his philosophy of the life-force, the idea of biological evolution constantly transcending itself. And it is also true that early XX century Poland was thoroughly familiar with all these ideological trends. To take one example, a nearly complete Polish edition of Nietzsche was ready about 1910. Such facts certainly count for much, and go a long way to explain Shaw's appeal to Polish contemporary audiences. But there is also the contradicting circumstance that all these extraneous elements have become intimately blended in the Anglo-Irish dramatist with his native Protestantism of the local Puritan stamp. Here was, and is, a major source of misunderstanding. People in Poland have not been able to differentiate between the "pleasant" and "unpleasant" plays; they think them all about equally pleasant or unpleasant. All through his creative life Shaw was in rebellion against the smugness and rigidity of his Puritan cultural inheritance. On the other hand, *St. Joan* and other plays are astonishing evidence of his faithful attachment to the core of the tradition. Here is a habit of language and a way of thinking so foreign to the Polish turn of mind as to seem sometimes (to Polish audiences) almost innocent of meaning. Such portions of the dialogue, for example, as aim at the presentation of Saint Joan as a protestant heroine, seem to them empty wordplay. Shaw's Ireland, too, was a very different clime from the country Polish people usually had in mind when thinking of Shaw's Irish extraction.

But perhaps, no more need be said about Shaw's exoticism, for surely the main fact about him is that, notwithstanding such limitations, his appeal has remained broad and huge. No writer can be wholly free from the stamp of his cultural upbringing. When all is said, Shaw's works breathe a spirit of humanism so fervent, and inspire such a merry belief in the dignity and spiritual freedom of man, that these qualities alone, readily un-

derstood by Poles by virtue of their own literary and cultural traditions, sufficiently explain the directness of Shaw's appeal and the amused response which has grown into firm affection. For over half a century Shaw has exercised his sway over Polish audiences, and the end is not view.

With these restrictions and generalities as a necessary introduction, let us begin at the beginning. To the best of my present knowledge, based on imperfect archives research, the first play by the famous dramatist to be produced in Poland has been *The Devil's Disciple* (*Uczeń Szatana*), the place was Lwów (Teatr Miejski), and the date 27 XI 1903. It seems now almost excusable that in what we imagine to have been the excitement of the moment, the author's name underwent a slight change: he was introduced on this occasion (by the playbill) as Bernard Shaw. The event is memorable as this was probably the second earliest performance of a Shaw play in Europe. Frankfort a/M was some months ahead of Lwów in this respect, with *The Man of Destiny* (a slighter work than *The Devil's Disciple*) put on the stage on April 20, 1903. Further research, however, is almost certain to bring to light new facts and to change our present knowledge of Shaw's earliest scenic débuts in Europe.

It is not my purpose to attempt anything in the nature of a provisionally full review. For details of Shaw's early record, especially in Poland, one still has to consult the archives. Although, as suggested, new facts may, and probably will, come to light, they are unlikely to affect the outline of the story which, in its essentials, is already clear enough.

First Cracow and then (since 1918) Warsaw were centres actively promoting interest in Shaw plays. Teatr Miejski (later Juliusza Słowackiego) in the older capital was the real pioneer. In Warsaw, Teatr Polski (under the management of Arnold Szyfman) by a long series of premieres (1919—1939) firmly established Shaw in the liking of the theatre-going public. These were the two main centres of initiative and discovery, but some items of the Shaw repertoire were first performed by other theatres. On October 15, 1904, *Arms and the Man*, one of the first Shaw plays to shock and captivate European audiences, was produced

at the Miejski in Cracow. Thus the ancient Polish capital anticipated, if only by a matter of two months, the Berlin première of this play (Dec. 8, 1904). Anyhow, in that early period of expansion, Shaw sooner found access to the Polish than French-speaking audiences (*Candida*: Brussels, Feb. 7, 1909; Paris, May 7, 1908).

Similar were the fortunes of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, first performed by the Cracow theatre on October 5, 1907. (Berlin: Nov. 16, 1907). Comparatively early, too, was the Cracow public made acquainted with *Misalliance* (Sept. 14, 1912), the date of its London (and English) first production being Feb. 23, 1910. Also, *Fanny's First Play* made its appearance in Cracow (Sept. 13, 1913) only some two years after it had been first performed in London (April 19, 1911).

Some of the leading actors of the time, Stanisława Wysocka and Aleksander Zelwerowicz, among others, contributed the full share of their talent to the success of these early Shaw performances.

Curiously enough, the outbreak of the first World War did not result in the severance of all contact with Shaw, difficult as Poland's position was at the time. For, actually, new Shaw items were, during this period, added to the répertoire of Polish theatres. The war was hardly four weeks old when *The Devil's Disciple* (termed a new "sensational première") was presented, this time to Cracow audiences as an anti-British play (Aug. 27, 1914). Later, in Warsaw, before the war came to an end, two one act plays were produced at the Polski: *How he Lied to her Husband* (Sept. 7, 1916), and *Great Catherine* (Aug. 30, 1916).

For it was now the turn of Warsaw to become the chief home of Shavian drama. For twenty years, and more, the Polski kept fostering the cult, adding, within this period, some 17 new Shaw plays to its repertory, mostly translated by Mr. Florian Sobieniowski whose services to the cause of Shaw in Poland are thus exceptional. One line taken was to arrange for a world première, and to present the newest products of Shaw's dramatic invention before they had made their appearance elsewhere. The arrangement was facilitated, indeed, made possible, by the terms of

personal intimacy existing between Shaw and Mr. Sobieniowski. It was, of course, not at all exceptional for Shaw to agree to have a play first performed abroad, either in America or on the Continent. Thus *Pygmalion*, for example, appeared in German garb (Berlin, Nov. 1, 1913) in advance of the London production (April 11, 1914). Even then, however, Warsaw (Polski, March 10, 1914) managed to anticipate the latter performance. Twenty years later, a series of new plays by the old dramatist made their first, or practically the first, appearance in Warsaw: *The Apple Cart* (World première), June 14, 1929; *Too true to be good*, June 4, 1932; *On the Rocks*, Dec. 15, 1933; and *The Simpleton of Unexpected Isles*, March 15, 1935; *The Millionaire*, May 28, 1936.

In 1939, the run of *Geneva* in the Polski was interrupted only by the progress of the Hitlerite invasion. The leading actor of the cast, Józef Węgrzyn, was later imprisoned by the occupation authorities for having impersonated in this play the character of Battler (Hitler).

The carefully prepared premières of Shaw plays were important events in the Polish theatre life of the thirties, and their success showed how eager people had become to cultivate contact with all new manifestations of the dramatist's art and thought. Even more valuable, however, as a real introduction, was in the inter-war period the presentation of many older plays from his best creative years now either first performed, or interestingly revived: as, e. g. *Major Barbara* (30. X. 1919), *Heartbreak House* (1930, at the Narodowy, Warsaw), *Fanny's First Play* (29. III. 1919), *You never can tell* (10. VIII. 1923), *Saint Joan* (3. XII. 1924), *Man and Superman* (24. II. 28), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (5. III. 31). *Pygmalion's* success was greatest: in the Polski alone this comedy had five runs between 1914 and 1937; in all 179 performances were given; and in the post-war years the play has re-asserted its popularity.

Some of Shaw's early comedies sharply criticising the fin-de-siècle bourgeois society, have lately attracted attention, and enjoyed long runs in many Polish theatres: witness the success of *Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in post-war years. Revivals of *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, and *The Devil's*

Disciple have also met with outstanding success. All these old Shaw plays have proved capable of a fresh appeal to new audiences under changed historic circumstances. But, as other revivals show, some of his middle period work is also felt to be still vital: and sometimes, surprisingly, a product of his old age as flimsy as *A Village Wooing* (a play with a curiously Chester-tonian message) reveals itself to be capable of interesting and attracting large Polish audiences. Revivals of *You never can tell*, and, more recently, of *The Millionairess*, point to the same moral. Last not least, new productions of *Saint Joan* have met with warm response from audiences in Cracow and Warsaw, while the first introduction of one of Shaw's latest plays in *Good King Charles's Golden Days* (in the Polski, Warsaw, 1956) met with undeservedly scanty success.

Thus the story of Shaw in Poland, a record of over fifty years, is a testimony to a lasting cultural contact and to an interest decidedly more than superficial. For, when all the imperfections of the transmission have been allowed for, the fact remains that practically the whole body of Shaw's work have secured hearing on the Polish stage: 29 out of the canon of some 32 major plays. This certainly is a striking record, for a modern dramatist. Of his more ambitious work, three plays, viz.: *John Bull's Other Island*, *Back to Methuselah*, *Buoyant Billions* — have not, as yet, found their chance of addressing Polish audiences in Polish. These, in all probability, are only temporary exceptions to the rule of ready, amused and grateful assimilation... Already, anyhow, Shaw's Polish record has added a chapter to the story of his all-European theatrical success.

II. CRITICISM: THE EARLIER PHASE

To investigate, in some detail, Shaw's early Polish record as mirrored by the pioneer phase of critical reception, is a task interesting for historic and bibliographic reasons. For one thing, it means exploration in a field hitherto unsurveyed. Then, the eagerness of the response, as manifested chiefly by press notices, and the number of writers and reviewers joining in the discus-

sion, are remarkable. Although, as a playwright, Shaw made his home in Poland before achieving a European fame, indifference has never been the note of the early reception; instead, it was the dramatist's good fortune to have aroused the interest of his Polish public from the first. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out, this journalistic animation has not appreciably tended, in the course of time, to produce any real retinement of perception or greater precision of critical formulas. In support of these statements let us here attempt a preliminary critical and bibliographical survey of the earlier phase of the reception, covering a period of nearly twenty years (roughly: 1903—1923).

Within a scheme essentially chronological, certain categories of special interest may be singled out. As such let us list: (1) pioneering critical ventures, (2) special studies, (3) reviews penned by authors of established celebrity, (4) translations for the stage, (5) translations published in book-form. To some of these categories will be brought a nearly exhaustive interest; to others, merely selective.

The first Polish Shaw première *The Devil's Disciple* (Lwów, 27 XI 1903) has also furnished the occasion for the first critical pronouncements which still seem well worth noting. It may be conjectured that the anonymous writer who had provided the translation for the stage, and who chose to be represented on the playbills by the letters B...e', was also the author of the extensive essay (signed Quis) published in the „*Dziennik Polski*” (Lwów) on the eve of the first night (26 XI 03). The heading was: "Shaw: literary profile". It may also be surmised that the author's true name was Barbara Beaupré (later known as translator of Conrad's *Chance* and H. G. Well's *Joan and Peter*). The essay on Shaw reveals a capacity for synthetic grasp and even a comparative maturity of judgement. An extract will illustrate this: "Among the English contemporary playwrights (we read) Shaw is perhaps the only one who has scorned easy compromise and courageously followed a road of his own. The meandering line of his progress points to tragicomedy as possibly the chief vital form of future European drama. Shaw is one of the few modern spirits fully aware of this trend[...]" The dramatist's preoccupation

with social problems was also noted, and his satire was felt to be rather of the biting sort: "Central to his purpose is the omnipresent Shavian motif: criticism of society. Criticism is here perhaps a word too feeble: for in fact, it is flagellation, wild hitting drawing blood[...]"

Interesting, too, after a space of over half a century, are two other reviews which, in accordance with the rigorous journalistic habit of the time, appeared hard upon the first night in the theatre. In the longer of these notices (*„Gazeta Lwowska"*, N 274, 29 XI 1903), Adam Krechowiecki praised the play for its intellectual and dramatic qualities and hoped it would long keep the stage, although he found fault with the impersonator of the leading role (Ludwik Solski). Contrary to expectations, the play was off after no more than three performances.

It is possible that the failure was partly due to misunderstandings deplored by another critic (Kl. Kołakowski, *Uczeń Szatana*, *„Dziennik Polski"*, 29 XI 1903): "The theatre [according to K.] has quite misunderstood the message of this play and definitely distorted it. A producer who has not sufficiently studied to grasp Shaw's original method of presenting things, will never understand the serious purport of this tragedy punctuated with tomfooleries. [...] As regards the performers, our only criticism is that they have measured out their talent against a play demanding a peculiar style of acting, never as yet practised among us, and that they have not realised the need for this freshness."

Already, then, in these three earliest reviews, some points characteristic of later discussion have been stressed: the baffling, tragi-comic character of these dramas, the prominence of social problems in them, the serious danger of misunderstandings conducive to misinterpretation. The subsequent endless variations on these themes have shown how difficult it was for critics and admirers of Shaw to improve upon these early formulae and to advance beyond them. Here let us, however, indicate some further manifestations of response testifying to Poland's steady growth of interest in the British playwright within the next twenty years.

It was in the nature of things that such interest should, in the

main, be stimulated by theatrical productions, and that its function should thus be marginal. On the other hand, it derived vitality from the fact that from time to time brilliant writers have joined in the discussion, reflecting the contemporary opinion of literary circles in Cracow and Warsaw. In this connection one may mention the names of some of the then best-known dramatic critics, e. g. Konrad Rakowski (review of *Arms and the Man* (*Bohaterowie*), 1904; Władysław Rabski (rev.: *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *Widowers' Houses* (*Domy pana Sartoriusa*), *You never can tell* (*Nie można powiedzieć*), all in 1907, Władysław Bogusławski (rev. *Candida*, 1906); Wł. Piński (r. *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1906); T. Konczyński (*Man and Superman*, 1906); J. Flach (*You never can tell* (*Marnotrawny ojciec*), 1906); S. Krzywoszewski (*The Philanderer* (*Klub Ibsena*), 1907); Cz. Jankowski (*Widowers' Houses'* (*Lichwa mieszkaniowa*), 1909); E. Breiter (*Major Barbara*, 1919); St. Pieńkowski (d-tto); some leading poets have also responded to the challenge: Kornel Makuszyński wrote in 1908 on *Arms and the Man* (*Bohaterowie*), Stanisław Miłaszewski on *Fanny's First Play* (1919) ...The list (needless to say) is not meant to be exhaustive. It does not comprise two critics who have written chiefly in the inter-war period (1919—39), and whose work has been saved from oblivion by having been collected in voluminous editions: Jan Lorentowicz and Boy (T. Żeleński). Hardly a play by Shaw has passed without their comment, but both these critics have always been more interested in the theatre than in problems of literary analysis.

Studies purporting to offer literary "portraits" or "profiles" independently of any immediate stimulus from the stage, were also from time to time appearing, but usually were undistinguished by profound or intimate knowledge. Shaw was then seldom read in the original and his Anglo-Irish background has remained somewhat mystifying. Whatever the handicaps, some of the most original dramatic writers of the age have clearly felt the attraction of the new phenomenon and voiced their opinions in separate essays. The first to enter the field was Adolf Nowaczyński, playwright, satirist and critic. In his study: *Bernard Shaw and the new English drama* (reprinted, *Wczasy literackie*, War-

szawa 1905) — he devoted more space to the discussion of his subject than any reviewer until then. A little later, two other brilliant Polish playwrights made attempts at appreciation and criticism, if only within the narrower bounds of journalistic ventures. J. K. Kisielewski, in the title of his short essay (*Dramatyczny pajac B. Shaw*, „Słowo Polskie”, 1906, N 424), hit upon a catchword which has had a great vogue ever since. It has summed up the ever-recurring doubt, whether Shaw's technique and ideology are not mainly the expression of an irrepressible zest for fooling. On the whole, in the summing up, the word 'harlequin' (*pajac*) has seemed to cover the essentials of the case better than any other formula... The other contemporary Polish playwright, the possessor of a sensibility peculiarly delicate and very different from that of G. B. S., was Tadeusz Rittner. He also committed himself to a critical pronouncement (*B. Shaw*, „Świat”, 1906, N 9).

Some essayists, once voluble and active, now almost forgotten, might be remembered here again in this connection: one might mention, for example, Emil Breiter, who, in 1909, wrote on *Bernard Shaw, the critic* („Krytyka”, vol. 2, p. 233—6), and again, more comprehensively, in 1919 („Teatr”, N 2).

As regards translation, the name of Mr. Florian Sobieniowski is inseparable from the tale of Shaw's later conquest of Polish stages (between 1919 and 1939). In the earliest period, however, the task has been undertaken by many pens thus for historical reasons deserving mention although, presumably, all traces of their work have since perished. As already suggested, Barbara Beaupré, the translator of *The Devil's Disciple* (Nov. 1903), first undertook this task. Others to follow suit were: K. Rakowski (*Bohaterowie*, 1904); Z. Światopełk-Słupski (*Klub Ibsena*) (*The Philanderer*), 1907; T. Konczyński (*Nie można powiedzieć*) (*You never can tell*), 1907; J. Nowicki (*Uczeń Szatana*) (*The Devil's Disciple*), 1914; R. Ordyński (*Major Barbara*), 1919; and this catalogue is no more than provisional.

These, then, were the indispensable literary complements to Shaw's theatrical success in Poland, now contributions practically effaced from annals of literature. Indeed, Shaw's purely literary record in Poland has long been peculiarly scanty. And it is not

an easy bibliographical task to ascertain which, in fact, is the very first Shaw item to have appeared in book form. Apparently this distinction can be claimed by *Caesar and Cleopatra* in Bronisława Neufeldówna translation (who also produced a Polish version of G. K. Chersterton's *Preface* to the drama (Warsaw, 1921). Next to be offered to the reading public was *Saint Joan*, in Florian Sobieniowski's Polish version (*Święta Joanna*) (Warszawa 1925). After another interval of five years, it was the turn of *The Man of Destiny* to be printed in Polish (*Mąż przeznaczenia*, tr. Wilam Horzyca, Warsaw, 1930, Biblioteka dramatyczna „Drogi”, N 1). None of these renderings touches the level of real literary competence, and all are now antiquarian curiosities. — Some of Shaw's novels and pamphlets have also been translated, e. g.: *Socjalista na ustroniu* (*An Unsocial Socialist*), tr. Roman Jaworski, Lwów, 1916; *Miłość wśród artystów* (*Love among the artists*), tr. Fl. Sobieniowski, Poznań 1928; *Stary rewolucjonista a nowa sztuka*, Warsaw, 1921.

The next thirty years (1930—1959) have considerably enlarged the list of published translations. The fact is outside the chronological scope of this survey; but the mediocre average quality of the newer work does not constitute a definite break with the standards of the earlier period.