



# Bernard Shaw's **WIDOWERS' HOUSES**

## RESOURCE EXTRA

When the hot-tempered Harry Trench falls for wealthy heiress Blanche whilst on holiday, he thinks that nothing can stand in the way of true love. But after discovering that his prospective father-in-law is the worst landlord in London, he finds his morals and desires are pitted against each other...

### **WIDOWERS' HOUSES Synopsis**

Dr Harry Trench and his friend William De Burgh Cokane are travelling through Europe when they meet Mr Sartorius and his daughter Blanche. Trench is from an aristocratic family though he has little money having just finished medical school – his only income comes from being a mortgagee. Trench asks Sartorius for permission to marry his daughter. Sartorius is happy with the match but insists that Trench writes to his aunt Lady Roxdale to gauge her response. Although it is clear that Sartorius is a man of wealth there is a question mark over the source of his money and Blanche's 'breeding'. Trench has no interest in whether his family will accept Blanche, as he loves her regardless, but agrees to follow Sartorius' wishes.

A few weeks later Trench and Cokane visit Sartorius and Blanche at their home in a prestigious part of London to formally agree the engagement. Before they arrive we meet Mr Lickcheese, one of Sartorius' employees. The audience learn that Sartorius is a slum landlord and he fires Lickcheese for being too lenient with the tenants – which isn't very lenient at all. Lickcheese begs Trench to speak to Sartorius on his behalf and Trench is sickened to learn that his prospective father-in-law is a slum landlord. Trench hides his dismay from Sartorius but implores Blanche to live off his rather paltry income of £700 per year. Blanche is insulted that he won't accept any money from her father and thinks that it is an excuse to end the relationship; the pair have a terrible row and break off their engagement.

Trench and Sartorius discuss the morals of his income and Sartorius reveals that Trench's own income actually comes from a mortgage on Sartorius' property. Sartorius states that 'every man who has a heart must wish that a better

state of things was practicable. But unhappily it is not'. Trench's earlier moral objections seemingly disappear and he hopes to still wed Blanche, but she rejects his proposal.

The remainder of the play examines how Trench comes to terms with his living being made from exploiting the poor and how this affects his relationship with Blanche. The play raises lots of questions without giving many answers – shifting the responsibility for providing these answers onto the audience and their own set of morals. **WIDOWERS' HOUSES** leads us to question: can morals ever be objective?



*Roger Lloyd Pack as Mr Sartorius (Photo: Jonathan Keenan)*

## Money, Money, Money

WIDOWERS' HOUSES originated as a collaboration between Shaw and William Archer, a drama critic, in 1885. However, this was abandoned after an unresolved disagreement. Shaw resumed work on it alone some years later and it was first performed at London's Royalty Theatre in December 1892.

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In this quotation, George Bernard Shaw describes the nature of WIDOWERS' HOUSES:

**"Here we are confronted not only with the comedy and tragedy of individual character and destiny, but with the social horrors which arise from the fact that the average homebred Englishman, however honourable and good natured he may be in his private capacity, is, as a citizen, a wretched creature who whilst clamouring for a gratuitous millennium, will shut his eyes to the most villainous abuse if the remedy threatens to add another penny in the pound rates and taxes which he has to be half cheated, half coerced into paying"**

This quotation could be applied to all three of what George Bernard Shaw called his 'unpleasant' plays. This doesn't mean that WIDOWERS' HOUSES is a horrible or dark and humourless play, far from it - Shaw's first play is a punchy and witty script. 'Unpleasant' referred to the problems of English society and the questionable morals of the people within it. These are the weighty issues that Shaw tries to highlight in this sharp comedy.

So, why is this play so 'unpleasant'? It deals with issues of love and money, and love *of* money. These are timeless issues and issues that Director Greg Hersov feels are 'so acutely relevant during these difficult and turbulent economic times'. Lickcheese, the rent collector, who reveals to Trench that his prospective father-in-law is a slum landlord, poses the first moral dilemma of the play:

*Lickcheese: "But I suppose you'll take your share when you marry Miss Blanche, all the same. [Furiously] Which of us is the worse, I should like to know: Me that wrings the money out to keep a home over my children, or you that spend it and try to shove the blame on to me?"*

What follows is what the Director describes as a 'horribly accurate display of what money does to people's morals and emotional behaviour'.

Hersov and Designer Ashley Martin-Davis have created a stylish, beautiful visual world for the play but they are interested in subverting this world. There is a gold stage on frame – suggesting that the audience are being presented with this world, the characters are being put on display and the audience are invited to judge them.

Now, in 2009, big business and banking institutions have begun to fall around the world; we are hearing more and more stories of how one or two key individuals have readjusted their moral indicators in a desire for personal gain. Unrestrained ego and a misplaced sense of power have left us all questioning our sense of responsibility. As a socialist and campaigner for social equality Shaw appears to have seen it coming.

*"I am an Englishman; and I will suffer no priest to interfere in my business."  
Sartorius; WIDOWERS' HOUSES (1892)*

*"Bankers have for too long been allowed to express their business vision without let or hindrance or seemingly any moral guidance. Now we will pay for their avarice."  
New York Times (2008)*



*Ian Shaw as William de Burgh Cokane (Photo: Jonathan Keenan)*

**DID YOU KNOW?** In order to be exempt from examination by the Lord Chamberlain Office (a theatre censorship law), WIDOWERS' HOUSES had to be presented as a private performance.

## George Bernard Shaw

**George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a writer, dramatist and political thinker. He worked as a respected music and theatre critic before becoming a novelist then a playwright. Shaw wrote more than 60 plays during his lifetime and in 1925 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature.**

He was born in Dublin but moved to London in 1876. The fact that he was Irish is often forgotten and yet is probably quite important in his view of the English society that he was to become part of. He had an outsider's eye. Even when he became the celebrated powerhouse and very much part of the establishment, his writing always cast another view, pricking conventional hypocrisy and challenging firmly held beliefs. Sometimes his political agendas would appear as lengthy introductions to his plays. They were more his personal opinion than a description of the play and they would often be longer than the plays that followed! He saw his work as a means to further his humanitarian and political causes; even when it went against public opinion, his outsider's mentality drove him on.

*"I, as a socialist, have had to preach as much as anyone, the enormous power of the environment...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"*

Unfortunately much of his audience would ignore the messages in his plays and come instead for the great entertainment that they provided. Shaw knew this and even when his views went so much against public opinion that they began to affect the box office takings, he was still principled and unrelenting.

**WHY NOT?** Research slum housing, of the kind that Sartorius owned. Create a collage of images, colours and textures based on your research. Use your collage to design the set for a fictional play, set in the slums. Compare your set to the set of WIDOWERS' HOUSES, which represents Sartorius' world.

**WHY NOT?** Improvise a scene showing Lickcheese coming to collect money from the tenants. At any point in the improvisation the audience can stop the action and suggest what they think Lickcheese might be thinking, but not saying. Does he feel pity or disgust for the tenants? Is he thinking about his own family? Repeat this exercise using a scene from the play. The actors read the lines from the script, but the audience can stop the action to suggest what the characters are really thinking.

### **WHY NOT?**

Imagine your income comes from investing in a business. You learn that the business is unethical, and that its profits come from the suffering of others. Write a pros and cons list stating the reasons for and against withdrawing your investment.

### **POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Morals versus desire (in the case of Trench)
- Morals versus desperation (in the case of Lickcheese)
- Does money matter? If so, why does it matter? Does it matter how you earn it?
- Sartorius' argument that if the poor were given better housing they wouldn't look after it
- Does money make you happy?
- What would you do in Trench's situation? Why?