

MAJOR BARBARA: Pre-rehearsal interview with Director Greg Hersov

Greg Hersov has been associated with the Royal Exchange Theatre since 1979, becoming an Artistic Director in 1987. His many productions for the Royal Exchange include ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS, BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE, LOOK BACK IN ANGER, UNCLE VANYA and THE HOMECOMING.

MAJOR BARBARA was performed at the Court Theatre, London in November 1905. What influence do you think that the play has had on Twentieth Century British Theatre?

What interests me about this play is when it was written and the reasons for why it was written. The Court Theatre season was really the start of serious quality English drama, as we know it. Writers like Bernard Shaw were very clear that instead of it being about a good night out and watching star actors, the Theatre should be a place where the big issues that effected the Country should be discussed. Shaw describes MAJOR BARBARA as a play for a discussion and in that sense Shaw was hoping that people would turn up and watch a play and that it would help them to understand what was happening in their own lives. This was really the first time in the English theatre that anybody had has this as an idea or an ideology and because of this I think the play has had a huge influence on Twentieth Century British Theatre. I think that playwrights such as J. B. Priestley, John Osbourne, David Hare, Tom Stoppard and Michael Frayn, have all been influcened by Shaw. They have written plays about people and emotions, which are full of ideas and which essentially are exciting for an audience because they talk about both the state of the Country and the state of the Nation. This is exactly what Shaw was trying to do in 1905 with the Court season and why in time the Royal Court Theatre as we know it, I would argue became the home of quality, English Drama.

How does MAJOR BARBARA compare with other plays written by Shaw?

Shaw wrote a lot of plays over a period of forty years, so obviously there are plays written at the beginning, the middle and the end of his career. I think what makes this play so special is that it reflects Shaw's zest for the theatre. When Shaw wrote and directed MAJOR BARBARA some of his other plays had already been performed at the Court, so he knew both the theatre and the actors very well. Shaw wrote great parts in the play, including the smaller roles, because he knew the actors and what they could do. Shaw really enjoyed writing for the theatre and you can tell this in this play, it starts in once place and moves to somewhere completely different and then ends up almost being futuristic. The play is a very exciting, surreal theatre journey. The play is not didactic, it doesn't lecture, and it contains a lot of ideas. It is grounded in good theatre craft, I think that you can see in this play that Shaw wanted to show that he really knew how theatre worked and then he manipulated this for his own ends, it's like a very popular T.V. series which takes a known genre and then does something completely different with it. It's different from his earlier plays because it's theatrically more adventurous and the ethical and moral ideas are on a much larger scale. It also differs from his later plays because like some of them it's not strange and obscure and doesn't drift off into its own land.

How do the plays of Shaw compare with those written by his compatriot Oscar Wilde?

They were both Irish men and I think it's really important to realise this. They both came from Dublin and from completely different backgrounds. Both Shaw and Wilde came over to England and very much stormed the English cultural scene and were seen as the wittiest and cleverest people of their age. They also both had a wonderful ability to skewer English society; they satirised upper class conventions and morality and turned things upside out in a very subversive way. I suppose the differences between them are that Shaw writes about life in a more public way, he writes about politics, history, capitalism and socialism. Wilde once described Shaw's characters as being made entirely from "flesh and blood." Shaw gets inside his characters and gives them almost operatic like speeches, full of passion. Wilde's brilliant wit on the other hand would always have to debunk somebody. The main difference between the two writers for me is that Shaw wrote about public matters and Wilde about private. On one level we should view them both as buccaneering Irish men turning English society inside out. One was more political in his outlook and the other more private.

Do you consider the issue of Arms trading, which is central to the play, to be as relevant to a modern day audience as it was when the play was first performed?

Absolutely. It's one of the reasons I want to direct the play. When I was auditioning young actors for the production, a lot of them were immediately struck by its relevance. They'd initially thought of the play as being a period drama and couldn't believe that it had been written in 1905. In the preface to the play, Shaw writes about an anarchist who blew up two members of the Spanish Royal family in Madrid and he writes about what is meant by the word terrorism and why we don't understand how it happens. I read the preface the day after the recent bomb attacks in Madrid and thought how extraordinary it was that Shaw was writing about a similar event in 1905. The central idea in the play is presented by Undershaft, the Arms dealer who has all these tremendous arguments about the state of the world, and what I think is clever about the play, is that he's not just an Arms dealer but he's also seen very much as representing Global capitalism. Undershaft's main argument in the play is that he's created a wonderful life style and a model town as a direct result of the workers involvement in the most lucrative business known to man, the Arms trade. For me, I think that's a perfect description of how the economy in this Country and in other countries in the West is run, in order to secure nice and pleasant lifestyles, which rest principally on Arms dealing. It's important that we understand that as Country we're very much a militaristic entity and if we've not learnt that from recent history we should realise it now. The picture of Andrew Undershaft's, Arms factory, was one of the reasons why I wanted to direct the play, I thought that it represented the perfect metaphor for where we are now.

What do we learn about Shaw's views on capitalism from the play?

In the play Shaw presents many different views on capitalism and that's what I really like about the play. Capitalism to me, isn't just a creed, it's also the free economy lifestyle. In the play you see people who are wealthy, you see people who are happy and just want to think about money and privilege and you also see people who come from a well off background and who want to change and rebel against it. An entire act is set in the East End of London, which, at the time the play was first performed, was notorious for poverty and neglect. In this act the audience is introduced to a group of people who have nothing and I think we're made to feel that this is a place which represents our own worst nightmare. In this play Shaw is very unsentimental about poverty and the working class, because he has experienced it himself and knows all about it. One of the most subversive things about the play is how Shaw presents the character of Andrew Undershaft, the global capitalist as a very charismatic figure. Some people indeed think he's too attractive and charismatic and has all the best arguments in the play. What Shaw really understood was how buccaneering capitalism can be and we only have to think today of some one like Rupert Murdoch, who in spite of what we might feel about him, is undeniably extremely energetic and talented. He makes things happen and as a socialist; Shaw recognises that the capitalist instinct is indeed very powerful. If you want to oppose this as Shaw makes clear you have to really fight it head on. The play presents a brilliant, but very complex, many sided, view of capitalism and as a socialist it's very easy to see where Shaw is coming from with his own arguments. The play enables the subject to be debated and this really is one of the major purposes of the play.

What qualities did you look for in casting the role of Barbara?

With great roles there are a lot of things that you have to take into account, including the imagination and a technique that an actress requires to play a part, these qualities are what I think distinguish great leading actresses. Major Barbara is a huge part, which requires an actress to be able to register a wide range of emotions. With this particular role, I wanted to find an actress who would make the audience believe that Barbara is a believer and some one who is spiritually on fire. Barbara, is some one who is hugely enthusiastic, a rebel, and an independent woman in her own right. She also believes that she can change the world and that there is a spiritual way to achieve this. You require an exceptional actress to be able to play this convincingly and I believe that Emma Cuniffe, who is playing Barbara, has this quality.

How does Barbara compare with other roles written for women by Shaw?

Like St Joan, Barbara is highly idealistic and a charismatic figure. The difference between Barbara and Eliza Doolittle and quite a few other Shavian heroines is that, although Barbara is romantically involved,

Shaw does not define the character through the relationship she has with her partner. What defines her is being Major Barbara in the Salvation Army a bit like how St. Joan is defined by leading the France rebellion.

This is the first Shaw play that you have directed. What made you want to direct MAJOR BARBARA?

As a Director, I think it's very important to reflect through your work what is going on in your Country and that influences some of the choices you make. The appeal of the play for me is that in MAJOR BARBARA, Shaw deals with questions such as what should England be like, who runs the Country and what principles should we live by? At the moment this Country is in a huge state of examination and turmoil. It seems to me that MAJOR BARBARA has a direct relevance for what is going on today and that the play in an exciting, witty and passionate way, mirrors perfectly many contemporary issues and concerns. The ideas and the excitement of the characters and their clashes are crucial and the sheer theatricality of the play is what excites me. Shaw uses the conventional plotting of period dramas and completely twists it around. Theatrically, it's very exciting because it doesn't stick to the usual rules of the period play. Morally and spiritually, the play speaks to me about where we are at the moment.

What are the challenges of directing and designing this play?

The great thing about directing a classic at the Royal Exchange is that you never feel that you're producing the 58th version of the play! You don't feel that you have to attempt what everybody else has done. There's a very famous stage direction in the play, which refers to a large gun and after spending a lot of time discussing how we could present this in the round, we decided to do something completely different because of the uniqueness of the Theatre space. One of the problems about staging a Shaw play in the round is that by and large a lot of the characters come on stage and just talk to each other. They don't really have a physical life outside of their need to speak to each other. I've directed a lot of plays in the round and the big challenge with this play will be finding ways for the characters to move around the space. Conor Murphy, the designer and I decided with this production to come up with a design, which was a strong and vivid, non-naturalistic theatrical metaphor. Hopefully when the audience come into the theatre they will feel that they are entering an arena, which is quite exciting and sexy. We've taken the design away from being a naturalistic setting to using the floor to make a bold and abstract statement, which hopefully will express what myself and Conor believe the play to be about. Our main influences in talking about the production have been Bertolt Brecht and William Blake. Shaw allows you to invent and imagine quite strong images for his plays and that's what we've attempted to do with creating the different environments for the production. Sound is also going to be extremely important. The play is powered by a certain kind of surging music, featuring Salvation Army bands. Music is very important to me and one of the first things I think about when I'm directing a play is the music that I will be using. I think Shaw throws down a certain kind of challenge for producing his plays which invites actors and directors to be sharp and provocative with how they stage his plays.