

More Plays off the Page: *Major Barbara*

G.B.S. How many playwrights are known only by their initials? Shakespearian, Chekhovian, Shavian. How many playwright's names have become adjectives? Although we know *who* is meant by "Shavian", just exactly what does it *mean*? Shaw himself said, "My procedure is to imagine characters and let them rip!"

No playwright has expressed with more humor and acerbic wit the foibles of his times as he sees them than George Bernard Shaw (1856 –1950). His life spanned everything from the beginnings of train travel through travel by air, and two world wars. Even I can remember when he died. Only a fall from a ladder while he was trimming a tree at age 94 felled (pun intended) this incredibly exciting and energetic writer. I find myself getting energized whenever I read his plays. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925 and dedicated the money from the prize to popularizing Scandinavian literature, especially Strindberg's writings. He really was an "original."

Shaw was a Fabian socialist who took on capitalism and the effete upper classes; a pacifist who took on war; an early feminist (though not so early as Shakespeare) who made his female characters smarter, more energetic, and more assertive than the many men who surrounded them. A believer in what he called "the life force", his own interpretation of Darwinism, he believed that no less than the preservation of the human race lay to the women, who acted, rather than to the men who merely "talked."

Major Barbara first produced in 1905, takes on all the above issues and several more. Determined that no one be allowed to "misunderstand" his plays, as according to him so many critics did, Shaw wrote detailed stage directions and copious prefaces and afterword's. However, I found somewhere in old notes of mine, "I wish GBS never wrote prefaces so that we could get everything from the text itself! – that's what this course is about."

That's what we intend to do as all the Plays off The Page courses intend: let's get up out of our seats, get the words in our mouths, and try to see what the playwright tells us to do. Let's try to see for ourselves just what "Shavian" means; how the playwright gets his thoughts across through action, characterization, and of course dialogue.

Text: *Major Barbara*, George Bernard Shaw; Penguin Classics ISBN 97801 40437 904 (it's important that we have the same text so that we can all be "on the same page.")

Scripts available at Labyrinth Books on Nassau St. at 10% off. Mention my name or Evergreen Forum and the course.

Read the first act so you'll have an idea of what part you may want to play when we take the plunge.

Leader: Barbara Herzberg has an extensive theatre background, has taught English and drama, and directed plays for many years. She has been a course leader for Evergreen since its inception.

Thursdays: 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon, 8 weeks: October 4 through November 29 (no class on November 22)

Location: PSRC