

More Plays off the Page: *Caesar and Cleopatra*

"Comedy . . . requires a sense of humor and a good deal of vivacity . . . ; it is the manufacture of misunderstandings " [G.B.S.]. No playwright has expressed with more humor and acerbic wit the foibles of his times as he sees them than George Bernard Shaw("Bernard Shaw" as he preferred, since he always dropped the "George" because he hated it; 1856-1950).

Last year we looked at a play that dealt with his contemporaries (*Major Barbara*, 1905). But what would he do if he tried to bring his humor and wit to a far more ancient world? Would it still satirize the foibles of *his* Britain and the characters he found worth poking fun at? Or could he really immerse himself in a different time and place, imagine and bring to life a world quite different from his own?

Caesar and Cleopatra (1898) takes us far back to the Roman Empire. We are in the Egypt of Cleopatra. Shaw indulges his most extravagant "filmic" fancies, taking us from the Sphinx, to palaces, to the lighthouse at Alexandria, to the sea, and then INTO the sea. These changes of venue are very challenging on the live stage. There is always great talk. Caesar is one of Shaw's "supermen," a man of great brain and understanding. As Eric Bentley says, "His Caesar is a realist with a soul." Cleopatra, a mere girl, Caesar tries to teach to be queenly. Intent that no one be allowed to "misunderstand" his plays, as according to him so many critics did, Shaw wrote detailed and copious prefaces and "afterwords." In some old notes I found this: "I wish GBS had never written prefaces so we could get everything from the text itself!"

And that's what this course is about: ***not about what others have said about it, but what the play says for itself.*** What we intend to do in all the "Off the Page" courses is to get up off our chairs, get the words in our mouths, and try to see what the playwright tells us to do. Let's see for ourselves how the writer gets thought across through action, characterization, and, of course, through dialogue.

Please note: This play will lead into the Spring to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, written in the same year as *Macbeth* and *King Lear* when the Bard was at the top of his game. It is the continuation of this story, but written about 400 years earlier. We'll see who is the real feminist and whether the idea of "the superman" holds up in Shakespeare's world.

TEXT: *Caesar and Cleopatra*, by GBS at PSRC only. Buy at the desk for \$5. This text not available commercially at Labyrinth or on Amazon.

FOR FIRST CLASS: PLEASE HAVE READ ACT I, SO YOU HAVE SOME IDEA OF WHAT PART YOU WANT. We will switch parts every act.

Leader: Barbara Herzberg, who has extensive teaching and theatre experience has been teaching at the Evergreen Forum since its inception.

Wednesdays: 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 8-10 weeks, beginning October 2 (no class on 10/9)

Location: Monument Hall, Maximum 30 seats