

# Anna Suwalska-Kołecka

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## George Bernard Shaw on the polish stage – a brief overview

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## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW ON THE POLISH STAGE – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

### *George Bernard Shaw na polskich scenach – krótki przegląd*

#### **Abstract**

The main aim of this paper is to delineate the most crucial aspects of the reception of George Bernard Shaw's plays in Poland. Shaw, believed to have set the direction of modern British drama, has been welcomed enthusiastically by Polish audiences since the beginning of the twentieth century. Warsaw was called a "Shavian city" and his popularity reached its peak in the years between the two World Wars. After WWII, Shaw's plays were frequently staged and his political views were presented as being in line with the ruling party's policies. The fall of Communism brought about a decline in his presence on Polish stages, but he reappeared recently in productions that dismantle his plays in postmodern ways.

**Keywords:** Shaw, reception, drama, the twentieth century.

#### **Streszczenie**

Głównym celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie głównych aspektów recepcji twórczości George'a Bernarda Shaw w Polsce. Uważany za dramaturga, który wytyczył kierunek rozwoju współczesnego dramatu brytyjskiego, Shaw był witany entuzjastycznie przez polską widownię od początku dwudziestego wieku. Warszawa nosiła z tego powodu przydomek miasta shawiańskiego, a jego popularność osiągnęła apogeum w okresie międzywojennym. Po wojnie sztuki Shawa były często wystawiane, a lewicowe poglądy autora utożsamiano z obowiązującą linią polityczną partii. Rok 1989 i transformacja ustrojowa spowodowała zmniejszenie zainteresowania jego twórczością. Jego sztuki powracają ostatnio na polskie sceny poddane postmodernistycznemu recyclingowi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Shaw, recepcja, dramat, wiek dwudziesty

### **1. Introduction**

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) is an Irish playwright rated as second only to William Shakespeare in the Anglophone tradition, and the only one who can boast both the Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Academy Award for his screenplay of *Pygmalion* (1938). In the opening chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Sally Peters [1998, p. 3] wrote that: "By his seventieth birthday, Bernard Shaw was one of the most famous people in the world." In recognition of the profound influence the playwright exerted on the British stage, Christopher Innes [2002, p. 13] stated, in a most extensive and detailed study on the subject: "If any single person set the course of British drama over the last hundred years, it was Shaw". The critic attributes the distinct character of British twentieth-century drama to the impact of Shaw's rational plays on ideas dealing with burning social issues like class, injustice, and feminism [p. 5].

The reception of George Bernard Shaw in Poland remains a fascinating, though largely unexplored, area of research. A detailed and comprehensive study goes far beyond the scope of this paper, and therefore my intention is to consider its most crucial aspects and point out the most decisive moments.

## 2. An Impressive start

In examining Shaw's reception in Polish theatres, it is essential to mention the powerful impact he created from the very start, when in 1903 *The Devil's Disciple* was staged in Lwów (Lvov). In December of the same year the play was also produced in Poznań and the following year *Arms and the Man* was shown in Kraków (Cracow). In 1906 theatres in Warsaw and Lvov introduced *Candida* to their audiences, and the Polish premiere of the play was accompanied by a critical essay written by Tadeusz Rittner. In all probability it was the first such piece devoted to George Bernard Shaw written for Polish readers and its author, Rittner, was himself a prominent Polish playwright of that time. Shaw was held in great reverence in Germany at the time, and it can be deduced that his reception in Poland, must have been similar inasmuch as the German premieres took place only a few months before the premieres in Poland [Evans, 1999, pp. 29-30]. It must be borne in mind that in those days Poland did not exist on the maps of the world, having been partitioned among its powerful neighbours: Russia, Austria and Prussia.

Still Polish theatrical repertoire during the period of what is called 'Young Poland' included the most important representatives of European modernist drama: Ibsen, Hauptman, Wilde, Yeats and Shaw. Of these distinguished artists it was Shaw who was most applauded [Poplawski, 2003, p. 386]. In recognition of his success critics called Warsaw "a Shavian city" and Terlecki [1957, p. 129] writes that no other city could claim to have seen four of his plays in one year. In 1907 *Arms and the Man*, *You Never Can Tell*, *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *The Philanderer* were all produced in Warsaw.

Up to 1913 Polish theatres staged twelve plays out of the 28 written by the playwright as of that time (for comparison purposes, 21 were produced in England). The plays produced in Poland were:

1. *The Devil's Disciple*
  2. *Arms and the Man*
  3. *Candida*
  4. *You Never Can Tell*
  5. *Mrs Warren's Profession*
  6. *The Philanderer*
  7. *Widowers' Houses*
  8. *The Doctor's Dilemma*
  9. *The Man of Destiny*
  10. *Major Barbara*
  11. *Fanny's First Play*
  12. *Misalliance*
- [Dębnicki and Górski, 1957, p. 234]

## 3. Interwar period – Shaw's heyday

Shaw achieved the peak of his popularity in the interwar period in Poland, when the country enjoyed its newly-regained independence. His plays held such an appeal for Polish audiences that they had their world (*The Apple Cart* 14.06.1929) or European continental

(*Too True To Be Good* 4.06.1932 and *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* 15.03.1935) premieres in Warsaw! In a letter written by Shaw to Arnold Szyfman, the director of the Polish Theatre in Warsaw, we learn that the premiere of *The Apple Cart* sparked off a violent controversy and provoked intense jealousy among fellow artists. Shaw writes, supposedly with a dose of literary exaggeration, that the Germans were so furious about him allowing Warsaw to have the premiere that if Sobieniowski (the Polish translator) had not left Malvern before Siegfried Trebitsch (author of German translations), there might have been bloodshed [Terlecki, 1951, p. 130]. The production received enthusiastic reviews, which emphasized the delightful theatrical feast the audience enjoyed, becoming so engrossed in play's long political dialogues that they sometimes seemed not to notice they were in a theatre at all. The critics regretted only that George Bernard Shaw was not there in person to witness the ideal production of his play.

The theatre that wielded the sceptre of the "Shavian theatre" in Poland was the Polish Theatre in Warsaw, which in the years 1914-1939 staged twenty of his plays. During this period his plays were performed 569 times, and in terms of numbers his popularity was exceeded only by Shakespeare (652 times). The productions of his plays covered almost 10% of all foreign plays performed at the theatre, which secured him second rank among foreign playwrights and confirmed his pre-eminent status on Warsaw stages. *Pygmalion* proved to be the record-breaker, as it was shown in four different productions and ran 179 times, ahead of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (120) and Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (117), the latter of which was the monumental play by the Poland's most distinguished Romantic poet [Terlecki, 1951, p. 130]. All of Shaw's plays staged in Polish theatres had a star-studded cast, distinguished directors, and scenography designed by the legends of Polish theatrical design.<sup>1</sup>

Paradoxically, Shaw's presence on the Polish stage stands in sharp contrast to his absence in print. The translations of his plays were available only in single typed manuscripts for theatres. This practice was rather typical of the Polish attitude toward stage drama, which was viewed essentially as meant to be watched rather than read. However, in the case of Shaw the absence of print versions resulted in the incomplete reception of his plays. The audience could not become acquainted with the playwright's views and comments, included in the long prefaces that were his hallmark. Moreover, no comprehensive study of his writings was carried out in Polish until Bronisława Bałutowa published her *Dramat Bernarda Shaw* (*Bernard Shaw's Plays*) after WWII, in 1957. This lack of any substantial academic or critical discussion on the merits of his plays was partially compensated for by a number of articles published in the Polish literary magazine *Wiadomości Literackie* (*Literary News*), founded in 1924. Intended by its editors not to represent any aesthetic group, the magazine soon became a platform of discussion for artists with diverse ideas and tastes. During the magazine's 15 years of the existence George Bernard Shaw was, like Joseph Conrad, referred to 54 times on its pages, which again tied him for first place among foreign artists [Brodzka, Zaworska and Żółkiewski, 1975, p.114].

In the 1930s a hint of discord surfaced between Shaw's popularity among theatre audiences and a change in the critical attitude toward him that took place at that time. Theatre goers were amused by his humour and enchanted by his clever handling of irony, paradox and satire, whereas the voices of the reviewers revealed ever deeper tones of criticism. Generally, the reviewers shared a growing anxiety about his theory of life force and long-lived supermen. The critics, albeit wrongly, attributed these views to the plays of the later period and the playwright was accused of irrationality and betrayal of socialistic ideas. Much controversy surrounded the Polish premiere of *On the Rocks* (at The Polish Theatre), which took place on the Polish stage almost simultaneously with the London production at the Winter

<sup>1</sup> Bronisława Bałutowa provides extensive details concerning particular productions. See: *Dramat Bernarda Shaw*. 1957. Łódź-Wrocław: Ossolineum.

Garden Theatre in 1933. Produced shortly after Hitler gained power in Germany the play, which proclaimed the need for a strong leader, struck a sinister cord and came under considerable criticism [Kurowska, 1987, pp. 208-209]. All in all, critics blamed the playwright's blurring artistic vision on his age.

#### 4. Post-War years – Continuing popularity approved by the party

In the early post-war years in the communist system, culture was controlled by party ideologues and the Polish president, Bolesław Bierut, followed the so-called 'Zhdanov doctrine' that defined cultural production in the Soviet Union. According to this new philosophy of artistic creation, artists had to conform to the party line and all art should be politically inspired. Since "incorrect art" was considered to be an ideological diversion [Stiles, 1992, p. 117], the doctrine proclaimed the elimination of all foreign, "bourgeois" influences and the propagation of socialist realism. Although generally in Poland the execution of these conditions took on a weaker form than in the Soviet Union, nonetheless the existing political propaganda imposed stringent conditions on the cultural life of the country.

Stalin's death in 1953, followed by the death of Poland's president Bolesław Bierut, brought the period of the most ruthless repression to an end. In 1956 the drama journal *Dialog* was founded as an indication of the change in the cultural policy and a break with the regime of censorship. As it published the latest plays of leading Western authors, the journal contributed substantially to the (re-)introduction of world drama to Polish theatres. Apart from Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* was included in the first issue, the journal presented plays by Dürrenmatt, Adamov, Ionesco, Albee, and Pinter, among others. Thus the year 1957 marked an end of a period of almost two decades stretching back to WWII, when Western plays were almost entirely absent from Polish stages.

The reception of the George Bernard Shaw's plays back into Polish theatre during this period stands in stark contrast to his earlier reception. His plays proved not only entertaining and popular with wider Polish theatre audiences, but also served a political purpose that was in line with the ruling party's policy. His denunciation of bourgeois democracy, satirization of social conventions and the hidden hypocrisies of the post-Victorian audience, and finally his seeming endorsement of socialist views caused his work to be easily absorbed into the Polish theatre of the post-war years. A careful analysis of the productions of his work in post-war Poland reveals a number of interesting facts.

Firstly, as early as in 1945, and despite the state of severe destruction the country suffered during the war, *Pygmalion* was staged in three cities: at Ziemia Pomorska Theatre in Toruń, at the Old Theatre in Cracow, and at Kameralny Theatre in Łódź. The following year brought another series of productions dispersed in different parts of the country: *Village Wooing* (Warsaw), *Candida* (Cracow), *Major Barbara* (Toruń and Łódź), *Getting Married* (Cracow), *The Devil's Disciple* (Łódź, Częstochowa, Warsaw), and *Arms and the Man* (Kielce).

Together with *Pygmalion*'s three performances, thirteen of Shaw's productions thus took place within a year following the end of the war. Another interesting regularity emerges when we consider these plays that were among the most frequently chosen for theatres' repertoires. The choice of *The Devil's Disciple* by as many as three theatres in 1946 displays a clear tendency that is reinforced by the fact that *Arms and the Man* was staged by twelve (!) theatres all over the country from 1946 – 1949. Both plays mock the traditional model of military heroism and contrast it with the attitudes of common sense and duty. In this way they were in compliance with the general tendency that prevailed in Polish theatres in those days, which turned war into a subject of thorough and painful analysis. The recent traumatic experiences made war a recurrent topic that was analyzed from various viewpoints, including diagnosis of the genesis of fascism, probes into the essence of the generation "contaminat-

ed” with death, or attempts to reveal the ambivalent nature of what is conventionally treated as cowardice and heroism. The echoes of war could be heard in Polish theatres for years to come, and the frequency with which these two Shaw plays were staged reflects the mood of the time, which witnessed the production of approximately 100 plays devoted to the theme of war [Krzyzanowski and Hernas, 1984, p. 205].

All in all, in the post-war period George Bernard Shaw’s plays held a prominent position in the repertoires of Polish theatres all over the country, which is proven by the large number of productions. The data speaks for itself:

- *Pygmalion* was staged 44 times
- *Mrs Warren’s Profession* - 37 times
- *Arms and the Man* – 31 times
- *The Devil’s Disciple* - 21 times
- *Widowers’ Houses* -19 times
- *Candida* -18 times
- *Saint Joan* 14 - times

Almost all of Shaw’s plays that had their premieres before the war repeated their success during this later period. However, one of the plays that was never staged following the end of the war was *Man and Superman*, and this non-production speaks volumes about the negative and critical appeal it had for Polish authorities and audiences. Shaw also made his presence considerably felt in the new media – television. His work was frequently presented, often in different productions, on Polish Television Theatre. Founded in 1953, Polish Television Theatre has played an important cultural role in promotion of the theater, and since its creation it has presented over 4000 theatrical productions. To celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 1993, a list of 100 golden productions was drawn to choose the best from among this impressive number, and Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* from 1971, directed by Aleksander Bardini, was there as well.

The anniversary of George Bernard Shaw’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1956 provided a good opportunity for critics and academics to bring the playwright’s life and career to the attention of Polish readers. In all the publications that came out to commemorate this very special anniversary, a strong wish was expressed to bridge the gap between the scant criticism devoted to Shaw’s writing, and his regular presence on the Polish stage. All of the articles, with no exceptions whatsoever, expressed great appreciation to Shaw for exposing the wrongs suffered by people, and for struggling against capitalist exploitation and against the hypocritical pretence that denies the injustice and violence we inflict on others. Equally, his revolutionary treatment of theatrical speech, which toppled the old traditional canons, was widely discussed. Antoni Slonimski, a life-long admirer of Shaw since the 1920s, expressed his certainty that the position of Shaw’s works in the world’s collective memory would be equal to that of the wall-paintings covering the Sistine Chapel. To highlight his emotional concord with the playwright, Slonimski [1956, p. 5] recalled his last conversation with Shaw, where he drew a comparison between Ireland and Poland. Both countries, Shaw claimed, were Catholic, poor, and rural, and both brought up their youth in the midst of patriotic exaltation, so that they could be led to a war of liberation. Shaw went on to state that Poland exceeded his own country, for it went down the path of the only way that is right - the road to build socialism.

The opinions expressed by Slonimski were in general agreement with the assessments that appeared in the press of both the playwright’s dramatic output and of his political stance. One might, however, note a tendency to undermine Shaw on the grounds that what the playwright thought to be socialistic did not correspond with Marxist ideology. A fundamental objection was that socialism, as understood by Shaw, was not conditioned so much by social development as by biological processes that, by way of evolutionary change, were going to eliminate Yahoo and generate a better species. Shaw’s lack of belief in the working

class and democracy was, in the then-current state of affairs, interpreted as a manifestation of contempt for man and his aspirations [Wiśniowski, 1957, pp. 154-157]. Although praised as a courageous critic of capitalistic pathologies, Shaw was not seen as strong and perceptive enough to resign from his bourgeois ideology and recognize the leading authority of his own working class. One can clearly see that the major focus of these reviews was on an ideological evaluation from whatever view was legitimized as the 'only correct view' at that time, and the language used reflected the official political jargon.

A different approach and area of interest can be seen in the article published in *Kultura* (Culture) - a leading Polish émigré literary/political journal founded by Jerzy Giedroyc near Paris, which from its inception in 1947 until 2000 played a prominent cultural role for the Polish people, both those in exile as well as those in Poland. Not bound by the demands of communist doctrine, Tymon Terlecki [1951, p. 135] published an article probing into the reasons for Shaw's popularity in Poland and the scope, if any, of his influence. Terlecki believed that in the 1920s, when Poland regained its independence after 123 years of partition, Shaw served as an effective antidote to the mood prevailing earlier. Literature and art aimed to keep alive the hope that freedom can be won, and intended to raise the spirits of the nation and celebrate national values. To achieve its goals it appealed to emotions, struck lyrical cords, and framed its message in intensely patriotic language. According to Terlecki Shaw, with his intellectual feast of ideas, provided relief from the emotionality which predominated on Polish stages. His theatrical works emanated with optimism and with a belief in the possibility of change, thus performing a vital therapeutic function. By softening the tragic national memory, Shaw's plays made people believe that the tracks of history had been reversed and our Polish predicament would be changed for the better. Through his laughter, paradox, and optimism, Shaw in some way relieved the Polish audience from a sense of national duty, respect for tradition, and the demand for patriotic sacrifice. With the outbreak of World War II, these hopes were shattered, and instead of exerting a profound influence Shaw became merely "an intellectual tickle".

Terlecki [134-135] observes that when the time of trial by fire came about Warsaw, the Shavian city, had reached the summit of its tragic pathos. Terlecki is alluding here to the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and the operation of the Polish resistance Home Army, whose major political objective was to liberate Warsaw from Nazi Germany before the Soviets did so. It was hoped that in this way the Polish Underground State would be empowered and the Soviet control over the country significantly diminished. The Polish resistance was crushed after 63 days of fighting with little outside support, even though the Red Army occupied the East bank of the Vistula River. The losses were enormous: 16,000 members of the Polish resistance were killed, about 6,000 wounded, and between 150,000 – 200,000 Polish civilians died, mostly in mass murders. Together with the earlier damage, over 85% of the city was destroyed as German troops systematically leveled house after house. After the war, most soldiers of the Home Army were persecuted and imprisoned, and the very name "Home Army" was censored. Not until 1989, when official censorship was abolished and the state archives opened, did historians begin to scrutinize the Warsaw Uprising, although there is still no agreement over whether the objective was ever possible to attain. Interesting enough Terlecki himself, expressing his support for the Uprising, uses it as a touchstone of Shaw's influence in Poland. When Warsaw was ablaze, the flames were certainly fanned not by the intellectual virtuosity of Shaw, but rather by the valiant spirit of Romantic heroism.

Despite the popularity Shaw's plays enjoyed for almost nine decades on the Polish stage, it is hard to consider him as a formative actor exerting a substantial influence on the shape of Polish dramaturgy. The generally-held opinion is that it was mostly French theatre, with Maurice Maeterlinck and Paul Claudel, which left its mark on Polish artists of the Young Poland period. Their influence resulted in a model of symbolic and oneiric dramatur-

gy, rich in allegorical ornaments, characterized by the linking of theatre with metaphysics [Kaczmarek and Michalczuk, 2004, pp. 100-101]. These trends continued in the inter-war period with Stanisław Wyspiański, who drew from Romantic and symbolical inspirations, exerting a profound impact on the development of Polish theatre over the course of almost a century. Later, after WWII the political situation in the country forced artists to resort to tactical ploys in order to mislead the censors. As a result the art of allusion flourished, turning plays into coded messages that the audience deciphered by reading carefully between the lines. The Theatre of the Absurd, with its indefiniteness, openness and fuzzy borders between dream and reality, proved to be a perfect vehicle for Polish artists. Marek Kędzierski [2009, p. 170], writes about the reception of Beckett's plays in Poland as follows:

“Indeed, Beckett can even be seen as a kind of bridge between Poland's pre-war writers and those who began writing drama during the thaw. Witkacy's pure form and Esslin's concept of the absurd converged in Warsaw in 1960.”

The plays written by Mrożek or Różewicz, or the avant-garde experiments of Kantor or Grotowski for which Polish theatre is famous world-wide, seem to suggest that Polish plays diverged drastically, in their metaphysical sensitivity, from the intellectual debates in which Shaw engaged in his works.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus the reception of George Bernard Shaw's writing proves to be a fascinating as well as complex phenomenon. The great popularity enjoyed by the playwright throughout the history of communist Poland cannot be accounted for exclusively by historical and ideological circumstances, because he also held a strong appeal for audiences before the war. At the same time, while loved by theatre goers he was certainly neglected by academic circles and his unprecedented popularity did not lead to a thorough examination of his artistic, as well as ideological, stances.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the fact that Shaw was politically correct during the communist times certainly backfired on his plays and reputation, and after the collapse of Communism in 1989 there was a sharp decline in his popularity. Theatre directors began to seek new names for new times. However, his name did not entirely disappear from theatre billings. The latest productions of Shaw's plays include *Mrs Warren's Profession* staged at Zależny Theatre in Cracow in 2006. The director and at the same time leading actress, Anna Sokołowska, found the play particularly relevant to the changing economic reality, where money achieves a cult status and justifies all means to obtain financial satisfaction.

There are also two recent productions which deserve special attention, as they display the growing tendency in contemporary culture to take freely from other works and blend them into a new self-conscious whole. *Joanna d'Arc*, produced at the Śląski Puppet and Actor Theatre Ateneum in Katowice in 2010, is an excellent example of such a technique. It is based on Shaw's *Saint Joan* and the play combines, in a truly postmodern way, the texts of Anouilh, Schiller, Claudel and Shaw, featuring the famous French Virgin. It was directed by Karel Brožek, a legend of the Czech puppet theatre, to celebrate 55 years of his artistic career. The play won the widespread applause and was considered a stunning success.

Another production that reverberates with echoes of Shaw's texts is the play *Pygmalion*, staged in 2014 at the Komuna Warszawa Theatre, directed by Wojtek Ziemilski. Ziemilski is known for inviting his audiences into close cooperation and participation in the ensuing events. What he shares with Shaw is his predilection for shaking up the audience

<sup>2</sup> Barry Keane's recent work - (2016), *Irish Drama in Poland. Staging and Reception, 1900-2000*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press - is the first comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Irish playwrights from Yeats to Beckett have contributed to the Polish stage.

and taking it away from conventional expectations and receptive habits. This time Ziemiński also surprises his audience, for instead of acting based on a ready script, the actors turn into performers who improvise in compliance with the reactions of the public. Despite its title, the play does not take a single line from Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Instead it makes a reference to its central theme, which is the social advancement of a cockney-speaking Covent Garden flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, which she attains as a result of speech lessons she receives from Professor Higgins. Ziemiński takes from Shaw the idea of speech learning as a process by which we are initiated into culture, and presents it alongside two parallel stories: a child's upbringing, where language acquisition is essential to his or her development, and the mother's training as an actress, where learning speech control is an essential professional skill. In this way, it may be said that Shaw has entered yet another phase of reception. His plays, like those of Shakespeare, have become texts of the past that are reassembled and recycled in the process of playful postmodern deconstruction.

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