

George Bernard Shaw: Theatre-goers should not laugh out loud



2 NOVEMBER 2015 • 10:31AM

George Bernard Shaw, who was born in Dublin on 26 July 1856, wrote more than 60 plays, among them Man and Superman, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Major Barbara, Saint Joan, Caesar and Cleopatra and Pygmalion. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925. On 8 April 1914, on the eve of Pygmalion, Shaw spoke to the Telegraph. On 2 November 1950 he was out following his hobby of tree pruning when he fell and fractured his thigh. He died shortly afterwards.

This is how the interview appeared in 1914

MR. BERNARD SHAW ON FIRST NIGHTERS

Ninety-nine playwrights out of a hundred will cheerfully – or perhaps it would be more correct to say dismally – confess that they look forward to the first stage performance of a piece with something very like a feeling of absolute dread. Mr. Bernard Shaw is not one of them, as you will quickly gather if, as I did yesterday, you ask him how he feels regarding next Saturday evening at His Majesty's Theatre.

"No," he emphatically said, "I am not at all anxious as to the representation of Pygmalion on Saturday. With such a cast, and after the pains that have been taken with the preparation – the production, as people call it – there can be no ground for the smallest anxiety on that score. The question is, will the first night audience give the play a chance? Will the hygienic gentlemen, who have been told by their doctors that there is nothing so good for the lungs as a hearty five minutes' guffaw be there? Will the kindly people who think it encourages the poor, dear actors to be interrupted at every tenth word by shouts of appreciation all be laid up with influenza, as I most fervently hope they may? Will the faithful pilgrims who come long distances and sit on the steps of the theatre all day to secure a front seat, and devote their whole souls to giving receptions to their idols at the most disconcerting moments, will they be there?"

PUBLIC AND PLAYWRIGHTS

"If so, you may put the idea of an artistic performance out of your head; the thing is impossible. The continuity of the play will be lost; all the transitions from one mood to another, which cost so much artistic study and work to perfect, will be obliterated; the performers, trying to concentrate themselves on a long and difficult task, will be distracted and forced to give up all attempt at fine work in despair; the spectators will be worried by their own noisy enjoyment; and, finally, they will lose their trains and go home half an hour late, cross and tired, and have words with one another, ending with, 'I will never go to the theatre with you again while I live.'

There is nothing so succulent as the science of human speech

"That is the sort of thing that happened at the first night of Androcles and the Lion, which was such a horrible experience that the next first-night – that of the revival of The Doctor's Dilemma – was deliberately fixed so as to clash with that of The Night Hawk, which took all the regular first-nighters away. The result was most successful. But there is nothing to clash with Pygmalion, and I suppose we shall have the usual well-intended, good-natured riot that is the disgrace of the English theatre. Why on earth don't people laugh internally, like old Weller in Pickwick? I can't understand why the Playgoers' Club or the Club of First Nighters do not take up this question, and insist on the right of a play to be heard as attentively as a music drama by Wagner or Strauss."

"But do you seriously expect an audience to listen in dead silence, no matter how funny the lines are?"

LAUGHTER A BAD HABIT

"I do not see why they should not; loud laughter is merely a bad habit. But I am not myself a dead silent playgoer. At the first night of Sir James Barrie's Adored One, a gentleman said to me, as I left the stalls, 'You object to anyone else laughing in the theatre, but you have been laughing yourself all through the play.' So I had been; but my laughter did not interrupt the performance, nor prevent my neighbours catching the next words of the play, nor interfere with the concentration of the actors on their parts.

"Pygmalion, which is in five acts, will last until church time on Easter Sunday morning if the first-nighters refuse to contain their tears, cheers, and laughter until the ends of the acts. If that happens, I will in future cut out all the good things in my plays on the first night, and thus get the whole business finished in five minutes, of course, giving complete printed copies to the critics. The whole question is one of good sense and good manners. It is only on first nights that people are obstreperous. They mean well. They think they are gratifying the performers and helping to make the evening a success. When they understand that they are really doing their utmost to ruin it, they will, I hope, oblige me by behaving in a reasonably continent way."

A SERIOUS PLAY

"But is Pygmalion irresistibly funny?"

"Not at all. There is nothing in it to force anyone to be uproarious or else burst. I can listen to it without yells of merriment; and I, as the author, ought to be more amused by it than anyone else. It is really a serious play, though the pill is sugared by the romance of a flower girl changed into a lady by a gentleman whom she meets by accident on a wet night when they are both sheltering from the rain under the portico of St. Paul's Church, in Covent Garden. But the tragedy comes in the fate of the flower girl's father, whose story is really a modern version of the old Don Juan play, *Il Dissoluto Punito*. This man is an Immoralist, a lover of wine, women, and song, a flouter of respectability, one whose delight it is to *épater le bourgeois*.

"In the old play he is cast into Hell by the statue of the man he has murdered. In my play a far more real and terrible fate overtakes him. No: it is not the fate of Oswald in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, nor of the young man in Brieux's *Les Avaries*. Nothing like that at all. Something quite simple, quite respectable, quite presentable to the youngest schoolgirl. And yet a fearful retribution. The rest of the play is merely to

call public attention to the importance of the study of phonetics, which has always been one of my favourite subjects.

"Let me tell you one remarkable fact. The translation of the play into Swedish by Mr. Hugo Vallentin has been made extremely difficult by the fact, astounding to a Londoner, that in Stockholm all classes speak the same language. That is real civilisation. Here a flower-girl speaks one language and a duchess another, though the difference is not so great as the duchess thinks, especially if she is a smart duchess. We shall never have a standard English until we have a National Theatre co-operating with a serious Academy of Letters. Not that either of them will do anything, but people will keep saying that they ought to do something; and that is how things finally get done."

"All this," I remarked, "sounds very serious. Retribution is rather dismal; and phonetics seem a trifle dry for dramatic fare."

"Not at all. To a properly trained mind there is nothing so succulent as the science of human speech."

"But you admit some romance. The flower-girl marries the gentleman, of course?"

"Nothing of the kind. It would be illegal. She married somebody else last Monday."