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Arms and the Man: A Synopsis

George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* opens during the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian war. The young, wealthy Raina Petkoff stands on her balcony and admires the scenery. Catherine, her mother, enters to inform Raina that her fiancé – Major Sergius Saranoff - has led the Bulgarian army to a glorious victory. Raina, pleased by the news, goes to bed with a novel.

Shortly thereafter, a man enters Raina's room through the window. A soldier suffering from hunger and exhaustion, he seeks shelter from the mob in the street. After threats and pleas, Raina concedes to hide him in her room. When the danger has passed, the man explains that he is a Swiss mercenary fighting for the Serbs. He also confesses that his gun is not loaded because he carries chocolates in place of bullets, as bullets will not help him survive hunger. The soldier goes on to criticize Sergius' actions on the battlefield (ignorant of Raina's engagement to him), and speaks of war in a way that shatters Raina's idealized conception of it. Over the course of the night both Catherine and the serving girl Louka discover the soldier's presence in Raina's room - in the morning, Raina and her mother sneak the soldier out of the house disguised in an old coat.

A few months later, Raina's father, Major Paul Petkoff, returns home and announces the end of the war. Sergius also arrives, and announces his resignation from the army. The two men then fall into a discussion about a Swiss officer who bested them in a horse trade. The two continue to discuss the rumor that the man had been hidden and assisted by two Bulgarian women. Realizing that the men are talking about their own chocolate-cream soldier, Raina and Catherine pretend to be shocked by such unpatriotic behavior.

When Raina and Sergius are finally left alone together, they act just like lovers should. Yet, the moment Raina leaves for a walk, Sergius makes advances toward Louka. The servant girl rebuffs him, and confesses that Raina has feelings for somebody else. Sergius responds with insults, but his feelings are thrown into confusion.

Finding a moment to speak in privacy, Catherine tells Raina that her father has asked for the very coat in which they had smuggled the chocolate-cream soldier. Right on cue, the Swiss officer, Captain Bluntschli, arrives to return the coat. The men recognize Bluntschli and invite him in, accepting his offer to help with the logistics of troop movements, much to the discomfort of Raina and Catherine.

With some quick thinking and quicker moving, Catherine tricks her husband into believing the coat he was searching for had been in the closet the entire time. Meanwhile, Raina confesses to Bluntschli that she had slipped her portrait and a note into the coat when she gave it to him. Unfor-

tunately, Bluntschli never found the picture, and the two realize that it is still inside the coat pocket. Before anything else can be done, a messenger arrives with telegrams that tell Bluntschli that his father has died and that he must attend to the family business.

Elsewhere, Sergius and Louka argue, and she reveals that the man that Raina loves is in fact Bluntschli. Sergius challenges Bluntschli to a duel, but when Raina charges that she saw Sergius with Louka, he backs down. Raina also informs him that Louka is already otherwise engaged to Nicola, the family butler.

Raina soon finds an opportunity to pull the note she had left for Bluntschli out of her father's pocket. Unfortunately, he had already discovered it, and when he realizes it is gone, he begins to ask about the photo's inscription to a "Chocolate Cream Soldier". Confessions quickly come from everyone. Sergius professes his love for Louka, and he proposes to her. Nicola gives up his engagement to Louka, and is offered a position working for the new couple. Catherine protests the dishonor to her daughter, but Louka tells her that Raina loves Bluntschli, who admits that he also has feelings for Raina. Bluntschli asks for Raina's hand in marriage, and, in order to appease Catherine's wounded pride, he also reveals that his father left him a large fortune. Raina consents to marry him – not for his money, but for love – and the play resolves on a pleasant note.



Raina (Nisi Sturgis) and her mother Catherine (Anne-Marie Cusson) celebrate in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2010 Main Stage production of *Arms and the Man*. Photo © Joe Geinert.

About the Author: George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born on July 26th, 1856 to a lower-middle class family in Dublin. Despite being a poor student, Shaw finished his public schooling at the age of 15. Before he reached the age of 16, his parents separated, and Shaw decided to live with his father in Dublin where he got a job as a clerk in an estate office. In 1876, at the age of 20, he moved to London to live with his mother, whose financial support allowed him to follow his literary aspirations and publish his first five novels (all of which were completely unsuccessful).

Shaw officially identified as a Socialist in 1882, and co-founded the Fabian Society in 1884. Despite his stammer and fear of public speaking, he took to the soapbox and developed an aggressive, engaging manner of speaking that lent itself well to his writing.

In London, Shaw worked as an art critic, then as a music critic, and finally, from 1895-1898 as a theatre critic. After recovering from a serious illness in 1898, Shaw resigned as a critic and moved out of his mother's house to marry Charlotte Payne-Townshend.

His career as a playwright began in 1891 with *Widowers' Houses*, which he wrote for the Independent Theatre, or New Theatre – a house dedicated to producing New Drama (Realism and Naturalism) as inspired by Henrik Ibsen in Germany. (*Widower's Houses* had begun years earlier as a collaboration with his friend and critic William Archer – Archer had given up on the collaboration when Shaw's political views overwhelmed his attempts at writing a "well made play".) Shaw wrote nearly a dozen more plays over the next 12 years. However, few of his plays were actually produced until 1904 when Harley Granville Barker took over the management of the Court Theatre. Over the next 3 seasons Barker produced 10 of Shaw's plays. Over the next 10 years, all but one of Shaw's plays were produced by Barker, Barker's friends, and in other experimental theater managements around England.

Shaw eventually became very wealthy due to the royalties from his plays. He stayed active in the Fabian Society, in city government, on committees dedicated to ending dramatic censorship, and in establishing a subsidized National Theatre.

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought on a dark period in Shaw's life. He published a series of newspaper articles which were heavy with anti-war sentiment, and his views made him tremendously unpopular. His reputation took a critical blow, and rumors circulated that he would be tried for treason. He wrote only one major play during the war years, *Heartbreak House*, through which he channeled his bitterness and despair about British politics and society.

After WWI ended, Shaw set to rebuild his reputation with a series of five plays about "creative evolution". In 1925, Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, no doubt prompted by the recent success of his 1923 play *Saint Joan*, which was widely considered one of his better works. He accepted the award at his wife's behest, but only in title; Shaw declined the money offered along with it, asking that it instead be used to translate August Strindberg's works into English.

Shaw lived the rest of his life as an international celebrity of sorts. He traveled, remained active in politics, and continued to write over a dozen more plays (outputting 50 plays in his lifetime, as well as essays, short stories, and novels). In 1943, his wife Charlotte passed away. Shaw himself died in 1950 at the age of 94 from complications after falling from a ladder while trimming a tree on his property.

In his will, Shaw left a large part of his estate to a project to revamp the English alphabet; the project was ultimately very unsuccessful. His estate was further divided among the National Gallery of Ireland, the British Museum, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

In His Own Words

I can no longer be satisfied with fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct, shedding fictitious glory on robbery, starvation, disease, crime, drink, war, cruelty, cupidity, and all the other commonplaces of civilization which drive men to the theatre to make foolish pretences that such things are progress, science, morals, religion, patriotism, imperial supremacy, national greatness and all the other names the newspaper call them.

As [the Bulgarians] had only just been redeemed from centuries of miserable bondage to the Turks, and were, therefore, but beginning to work out their redemption from barbarism—or, if you prefer it, beginning to contract the disease of civilisation—they were very ignorant heroes... And their attempts at Western civilisation were much the same as their attempts at war—instructive, romantic, ignorant.

Victorian England: A Society on the Verge

Although *Arms and the Man* marked George Bernard Shaw's first box office success, it was misunderstood and railed upon by critics who found the content unrealistic and insulting. For a society accustomed to fantastical and moralistic theatrical entertainment, and for an imperialistic country that idealized the military, the character of the chocolate-cream soldier seemed altogether strange and wrong.

However, George Bernard Shaw was not seeking to create popular entertainment with his plays – on the contrary, he saw his art as a means to affect social change in a country and an era that he saw as selfish and corrupt. Shaw was part of a new movement in theatre appropriately dubbed "New Drama". Today the genre is known as Naturalism, a subset of the revolutionary Realist genre that Henrik Ibsen had spearheaded in Germany in the 1870s.

The goal of Naturalistic drama is to present a "slice of life" on the stage. Shirking magical and historical plot elements as well as traditional dramatic conventions, Shaw aimed to present real people in real situations behaving realistically. Naturalistic drama drives at presenting the seediest and harshest realities in particular – although *Arms and the Man* falls under Shaw's "Pleasant" plays which "deal less with the crimes of society, and more with its romantic follies, and with the struggles of the individual against these follies."

Shaw intentionally made use of traditional aspects of melodrama, an extremely popular form of entertainment in Victorian England. This genre relied upon stock characters, exaggerated coincidences, drastic shifts between tone and mood, and the comedy of cross-class romance. Above all, however, the Victorians expected their drama to moralize, to depict clear and predictable outcomes for the good characters and the bad, and to portray idealized and romantic visions of the world. Those who enjoyed *Arms and the Man* took it for a farce, and those who disliked the play took its disregard for tradition as offensive. Interestingly, the play's subtitle – "A Romantic Comedy" – was billed as "An Anti-Romantic Comedy" shortly after its premiere, presumably in an effort to prepare audiences who missed the connotations and subversive humor of the first subtitle.

Nearing the turn of the century, and drawing ever closer to the coronation of a new monarch, England was a major world power with a strong military presence and an ever-increasing empire: in the period between 1870-1900, Britain grew to occupy an area of 4 million square miles. Imperialism was at its apex, and Britain was competing with other major world powers (including Germany, France, and Russia) for global presence. The constant required effort to occupy and maintain diverse colonies around the globe necessitated war, and, thus, heroized the military. In artistic

depictions across all media, Victorians were accustomed to the stock character of the British heroic soldier.

King Edward VII himself (still Prince of Wales when *Arms and the Man* debuted in 1894) longed to be in the military. With a reputation as a bit of a playboy, and as the epitome of ignorant and careless elitists to the English working class, Edward disliked *Arms and the Man*, issuing the official statement: "His royal Highness regretted that the play should have shown so disrespectful an attitude toward the Army as was betrayed by the character of the chocolate-cream soldier."

However, as Shaw would later argue, his character was nothing if not realistic – a statement supported by testimony from military servicemen themselves, not to mention the play's exceeding popularity as entertainment for the troops. What was really at stake, therefore, was the Victorian's idealized world-view. Shaw's Bulgaria represents any country or society presumed inferior, and his play criticizes the desire to be "civilized". Shaw and others were beginning to speak out strongly on these subjects, and the Socialist movement and the emergence of the Labour Party would be in full force in only a few short years.

It must be noted that Shaw's commitment to Naturalism got him in trouble on more than one occasion. For instance, *Arms and the Man* was never popular in Bulgaria, where its comedic depiction of the Petkoffs as striving for upward social mobility was taken as insulting to the nation. Tensions were still high as late as the 1920s when one performance in Petrich was interrupted by members of the Macedonian revolutionary organization, and when the Bulgarian minister to Germany protested the play's use of Bulgarian "slurs". Nevertheless, Shaw defended his writing to the end, insisting that the Petkoffs' obsession with hand-washing, for example, was not meant to insult the Bulgarians, but rather to criticize that "they were adopting the washing habits of big western cities as pure ceremonies of culture and civilisation, and not on hygienic grounds."

Arms and the Man voices Shaw's criticism not only of war and Imperialism, but ultimately of romanticism and idealism – and these were the foundations of society in Victorian England and, indeed, the basis for the Bulgarians' success in the Serbo-Bulgarian War. With two world wars just around the corner, at the end of the 19th century, Shaw was anticipating the end of a golden era for England and the dawn of a new age of cynicism and political upheaval.

Shavism, or, Why Are Those Stage Directions So Detailed?

Despite seeing commercial success as a playwright in his lifetime, despite winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, and despite garnering a wealth of commentary, criticism, and other attention to his works, George Bernard Shaw seems to have always been a man out of his time. Although he is widely acknowledged as a wit and comedian, an intellectual and a philosopher – his politics, his ideas about religion, and most of all his drama, have borne the brunt of harsh criticism decade after decade.

Shaw's narrative style, unique enough to earn its own adjective – Shavian – has been criticized as overly verbose, sententious, impersonal, unrealistic and unexceptional. The man himself has been pegged as arrogant and untalented.

And yet, as many modern critics have come to propose, simply the enormous quantity of attention paid to Shaw and his work make his influence and his genius undeniable. His plays have even been enjoying a recent resurgence over the past couple of decades, particularly in politically-conscious theaters.

Shaw began his career as a critic of art, music and theater after a stint as a failed novelist. He came to drama with the same motivations that had brought him to his other forms of writing and oration – politics (Socialism, to be precise). Inspired by the Naturalistic dramatists like Ibsen, and volunteering to fill the same niche in England, Shaw wrote his first play to support the New Drama movement in the New Theatre. Thus, like it or not, Shavism is firmly rooted in didacticism and rhetoric.

A reader of Shaw's plays will note another striking attribute: extensive stage directions. Here, his authorial voice seems to take firm control of any potential production, dictating not only what appears and takes place on stage, but even the minutiae of the external environment of the scene or the internal psychosis of the characters. The initial description of Sergius in *Arms and the Man*, for example, goes on for a full page, including such descriptors as:

The result [of Sergius' appearance] is precisely

what the advent of nineteenth century thought first produced in England: to wit, Byronism. By his brooding on the perpetual failure, not only of others, but of himself, to live up to his ideals; by his consequent cynical scorn for humanity; by his jejune credulity as to the absolute validity of his concepts and the unworthiness of the world in disregarding them; by his wincings and mockeries under the sting of the petty disillusion which every hour

spent among men brings to his sensitive observation, he has acquired the half tragic, half ironic air, the mysterious moodiness, the suggestion of a strange and terrible history that has left nothing but undying remorse, by which Childe Harold fascinated the grandmothers of his English contemporaries.



Bluntschli (Sean Mahan), Raina (Nisi Sturgis) and Sergius (Anthony Marble) in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2010 Main Stage production of *Arms and the Man*. Photo © Joe Geinert.

No doubt such text would confound and terrify the actor just hired to portray such a character; this reads more like a novel than a play (or, more accurately, more like a political manifesto than an evening's divertissement.)

Indeed, much of these incidental "directions" were added by Shaw specifically for the published version of the script. *Arms and the Man* was first published in the volumes of *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant* in 1898, four years after the play's debut at the Avenue Theatre in London. In publishing his plays for readers' consumption, Shaw saw an opportunity to further elucidate his intended messages behind the performance. It enforced a sort of intellectual responsibility – one that he often found lacking both in theatre audiences, critics, and even actors.

Furthermore, as an outspoken Socialist, Shaw took advantage of the Freedom of the Press – a liberty not awarded on the Stage. Many of his plays (*Arms and the Man* by no means excluded) frequently faced censorship, in England and abroad. Additionally, in concert with his democratic ideals, publishing his plays allowed them to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

**Sources for this study guide
(and other resources):**

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About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (formerly called “New Jersey Shakespeare Festival”) is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving nearly 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. Through its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the east coast, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 48th season in 2010.

In addition to producing and presenting classic theatre, the Theatre’s mission places an equal focus on education— both for young artists and audiences of all ages. The Theatre nurtures emerging new talent for the American stage and cultivates future audiences by providing extensive student outreach opportunities. Through our work, we endeavor to promote literacy, civilization, community, cultural awareness, the theatrical tradition, and a more enlightened view of the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting “new” theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

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