

INTERVIEWING
Fintan O'Toole
Rosalie R. Haddad

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Work-in-progress in Irish Studies

The W. B. Yeats Chair of Irish Studies was established at the University of São Paulo in 2009 and is dedicated to research, teaching and cultural events to introduce Ireland in its historical and contemporary context. Thus, the Chair supports an interdisciplinary programme of research which seeks to explore the Irish dimension in literature, history, philosophy, religion and filmography, and to examine Irish social, political, cultural, scientific and economic issues, including transnational and controversial questions, such as migration, identity and the complexities of global relations.

One of the aims of the Chair is to publish a series of workbooks to share the results of researchers' work-in-progress with students, scholars and teachers in various fields of knowledge, as well as general public interested in Irish Studies.

Interviewing Fintan O'Toole is the first volume in this series, in which Rosalie R. Haddad, a leading Brazilian scholar in George Bernard Shaw's work, interviewed the well-known Irish journalist on his prize-winning publication, *Judging Shaw* (2017). Rosalie R. Haddad has published widely on Shaw's theatrical, fictional, critical and philosophical writings, and has brought his provocative genius to a large audience with the production of some of his plays in Brazil and abroad.

The Editors



Introduction to the Interview with Fintan O'Toole

Rosalie Rahal Haddad

When I attended the Shaw Conference in Niagara-on-the Lake in July 2017, Fintan O'Toole, a highly-reputed columnist, literary editor and drama critic for the *Irish Times*, and the winner of the European Press Prize, and the Orwell Prize for Journalism, gave a lecture on the subject "Ten Rules of Shavian Theatre"¹, analyzed in the fourth chapter of his book, *Judging Shaw*². At the time, I was not familiar with the book but clearly remember the outstanding ovation he received at the end of his presentation.

One year later, as researcher of the WB Yeats Chair of Irish Studies and Brazilian specialist on Shaw's work³, I was

¹ See p. 45.

² Fintan O'Toole, *Judging Shaw* (Dublin: Prism [Royal Irish Academy]), 2017.

³ Little has been published on Shaw in Brazil. Apart from translations of his plays, biographical data and collections of aphorisms, the only important publication was the book edited by the late Daniel Pizza (1970-2011)

invited to interview him at the University of São Paulo on his recent publication, which is also the latest work on Shaw's theatre to date. I was amazed to find out that in addition to a wonderful collection of manuscripts and letters, cartoons and photographs, many taken by Shaw himself, the fourth chapter, which O'Toole named "The Thinking Cap and the Jester's Bells: Shaw's Theatre", outlined an unprecedented analysis of Bernard Shaw.

From the time I began doing research on Shaw's canon, it was my impression that I had covered a reasonable number of secondary sources on his work as a drama critic, novelist, and playwright, until I had the opportunity of reading *Judging Shaw*.

who was a journalist for the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* in 1996 on Shaw's essays: *O Teatro de Ideias: Prosa Crítica de Bernard Shaw* [*The Theatre of Ideas: Bernard Shaw's Critical Prose*]. In what I realized was an unexplored field of research, I have published on Shaw as a playwright, a novelist and a critic, as well as the reception of his plays in Brazil, as follows: *George Bernard Shaw Renovação do Teatro Inglês* [*George Bernard Shaw and the Renewal of the English Theatre*] (São Paulo: Olavobrás/ABEI, 1997) [MA dissertation originally written in English, 'Bernard Shaw and the Crusade for a New Theatre']; *Bernard Shaw's Novels: His Drama of Ideas in Embryo* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Germany, 2004; *Shaw, o Crítico* [*Shaw, the Critic*] (São Paulo: Humanitas, 2009); *Bernard Shaw in Brazil: The Reception of Theatrical Productions, 1927-2013* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2016). In addition, there are several articles published in Brazil and abroad, by the Bernard Shaw Society in New York, lectures at different Brazilian universities on my last book, the most recent one at Trinity College Dublin. There is also an article under submission to be published in a special issue of *Shaw* (*The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies*) in 2020 in celebration of 70 years of Shaw's demise. As for theatrical productions, *Shaw's The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* in São Paulo, 2008, and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, 2018, as well as Brian Friel's *Dancing in Lughnasa* in 2004 and co-produced in 2013.

I soon realized that my questions should be directed to Chapter Four because for the first time, at least to my knowledge, a book was refreshingly reintroducing Shaw, and went as far as portraying this Irish playwright who was born in Dublin in 1856, and lived to be 94, as belonging to the New Millennium.

Interviewing O'Toole on this new angle could be either rewarding or frustrating. When he completely agreed and followed my stream of thought, his answers to my questions described his concern in presenting Shaw not as the famous G.B.S., the intimidating persona whose opinions were searched by journalists and intellectuals, but as a human being who deserved to be presented to the public from different social classes. The idea behind the book was to enable people to make judgment on this author so much read in the English-speaking world. Quite unprecedentedly in Ireland and England, where he lived most of his life until his death in 1950, he was the figure who encouraged people who did not have the opportunity to a formal education the right to think for themselves on any difficult subject. Since O'Toole's father was in this category, he dedicated the book to him and hoped he could read it before his demise in 2017.

During the interview, O'Toole not only introduced Shaw to the audience but also provided me with substantial data which I knew not from secondary sources but from personal experience. It did not come as a surprise to me to learn how misinformed some academics are about Shaw.

Whenever I attend a conference on Irish studies, he is hardly recognized as an Irish nationalist. There is quite often the consensus that Shaw is more English than Irish. And some scholars in Irish Literature do not recognize how precocious he was when campaigning for women's rights to vote, to receive formal education, to be financially independent; nor do they recognize his fight for social equality in his formal lectures, speeches, and debates from 1885 to 1946, where he presented his social critique on sexual reform, children, socialism, education, drama, censorship, and several other subjects considered taboo at the time.⁴ Of equal importance there is little recognition of Shaw's campaign against Parnell's resignation⁵, of his defense of Oscar Wilde when he was condemned on the grounds of immoral conduct and imprisoned, not to mention his attempts to prevent Roger Casement from being sentenced to death.⁶

When preparing my questions for the interview, I realized that O'Toole was probably the right person to explain this contradictory playwright since he is Irish himself and knows Irish literature. In some ways, Shaw's identity could then be better interpreted in this book.

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⁴ For further information see Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Platform and Pulpit* (New York: Hill and Wang), 1961.

⁵ Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel in *Bernard Shaw, W.T. Stead and the New Journalism* (Palgrave Macmillan), 2017, has an extensive account of Shaw's "brand of journalism" that countered that offered by W.T. Stead against Charles Stewart Parnell.

⁶ See Bernard Shaw, *The Matter with Ireland*, eds. David H. Greene and Dan H. Laurence (New York: Hill and Wang), 1962.

O'Toole was very successful in deconstructing Shaw's image to the young people and to stage directors. The former thought of him as an old man and the latter as a boring playwright whose plays were cluttered with Victorian costumes, furniture and talk. What they fail to see in him is that he is a realist who insists that theatre be like real life in its open-endedness, and where one is left to imagine the afterlives of the main characters. And this is very contemporary, especially if one considers that he wrote his best plays between 1892 and 1923. O'Toole gives as examples *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*. The latter is a musical adaptation of *Pygmalion* and was first staged on Broadway in 1956, six years after Shaw's demise, with a happy-ending. The former had its opening night in London, 1912, and Shaw vehemently refused to comply with directors who wanted the play to have a romantic closure.

Another aspect that makes Shaw very contemporary is the fact that he innovated the English theatre by dismantling the star system. This may seem entirely obvious nowadays, but he destroyed the old Victorian system at the time he was drama critic in the last decade of the nineteenth century. And, his reviews as a critic prepared his way for the great figure that was going to write plays. His opposition to the Victorian frame of mind had severe consequences. Four of his plays, among them *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, were banned by the Censor. At the same time Shaw endured severe criticism by his contemporaries, among them William Archer, a

friend and admirer, who wrote a devastating review of the play.

From personal experience I know how difficult it is to stage and to enjoy a play by Shaw. He can be very liberating, very contemporary when he reacts against a pre-established morality and transmits to the audience there is not a universal truth. He can be shocking when underneath a domestic drama as in *Candida* two men compete for a woman's body; very contemporary as in *Mrs Warren's Profession* he defends women without means to make a living selling her bodies; very shocking in his refusal to create villains or martyrs as in *Saint Joan* when quite unprecedentedly he does no blame the English for burning Joan of Arc at the stake. Very disrupting to an audience that expects on stage a leading character and finds several roles of equal importance.

O'Toole did not put Shaw on a pedestal when admitting that he admired wrong people at the wrong time such as Hitler and Stalin. His only excuse was that Shaw lived too long for his own good and was very contradictory in his beliefs of great men, admiring Stalin and Gandhi to the point of having their photographs by his bedside when he died.

From O'Toole's point of view, he did not write a biography but a book in which one can obtain a general extension of Shaw's life, of his refusal to take things for granted, of a person who deeply believes that people have the right to live dignified lives and refuse to accept general

rules. From my own point of view, it was an enlightening experience to interview such an unpretentious man of letters who provided answers to previously unclarified questions.

Judging
SHAW

FINTAN O'TOOLE

WINNER OF THE EUROPEAN PRESS PRIZE,
AND THE ORWELL PRIZE FOR JOURNALISM

Fintan O'Toole's *Judging Shaw*.
Interview with Rosalie R. Haddad

Rosalie R. Haddad: Before I begin, I must say that for the first time in my academic life I do not feel an outsider when speaking about Shaw. Besides I was relieved to notice that there are still questions I could ask after having you introduce your book. I was amazed at this wonderful collection of facsimiles, manuscripts, letters, cartoons, designs and photographs, many taken by Shaw himself.

My first question is: Does the title *Judging Shaw*? indicate an impartial observer? Why did you choose this title?

Fintan O'Toole: I have to confess I don't like the title and I didn't choose it. This is part of a series produced by the Royal Irish Academy which is the umbrella for academic work in Ireland. So, they began these series in the same format, these very beautiful books, which use a lot of photographs and documents and I think the idea was mostly about Irish historical figures. The first one was Eamon de Valera; it is mostly on people who have grown the country. And I think it is a very nice idea, the idea was to take a new appraisal, but

also to present the public with evidence, so that you can also invite the public to make the judgment too. The reason I did

this is because I was asked to do it.

Shaw was the figure who gave people ... the right to think about difficult questions.

I had never really written that much about Shaw. I reviewed books and things, but I was always very attached to Shaw, because one of the things about him in the English-speaking world was that he was of course so

much read. He was the figure that huge numbers of ordinary people read, men and women, working- class people, and he was very liberating for them. I think Shaw was the figure who gave people who had not received a formal education the right to think about difficult questions. He could write in a way that was so entertaining and so involving and my father was one of those figures. My father left school when he was thirteen years old and he could barely read or write, he taught himself, educated himself really. And Shaw was a huge hero for my father, he was not just another figure, he was a real hero and he was a hero because later on we went to see the plays, but it was not so much the plays, it was the preferences and the polemics and the excitement of reading this figure who said, “you have to think for yourself, you have to think everything through”. And this was in very orthodox catholic Ireland where thinking for yourself was not a good thing. So, when I was a child the cheap paperback editions of Shaw were in the house – second hand. You could buy them for almost no money, because they were published in

such large numbers. So, my father was still alive – he died earlier this year – and I wanted to get a book on Shaw while he was still alive. You know, when Michael Holroyd wrote the great biography of Shaw in four volumes, I mean, that is the rest of your life! Much as I like Shaw, I feel there are other things I would like to do for the rest of my life, and this book at least gives people a kind of overview.

RRH: I remember being at your lecture in Niagara-on-the-Lake, last year, where you talked about “Ten Rules of Shavian Theatre”, which I have distributed¹; I hope you don’t mind that. And I also remember that you quite modestly said you are not a Shavian scholar, but yours was the lecture that received the most outstanding ovation and people just loved it. My second question is about chapter four “The Thinking Cap and the Jester’s Bells”. In a letter from Shaw to Florence Farr from 1892, he wrote, “It is by jingling the bells of a jester’s cap that I... have made people listen to me. All genuinely intellectual work is humorous”. Well, as this book on Shaw, which I’m sure you can call it a biography, was published in 2017, one feels you wanted to bring Shaw to the New Millennium. Am I correct to assume this was your purpose?

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¹ The handout “Ten Rules of Shavian Theatre” that was distributed to the audience is at the end of the interview.

FO'T: Yes, thank you very much, it is a great question. I think I very much did want to try to reintroduce Shaw. So, I don't really think of the book as a biography. You know much more about Shaw than I do, you know... So, I'm not a Shaw scholar but I did want to reintroduce him. I think young people particularly have a vision of Shaw if they think of him at all, which is this very old man, with a long beard, wearing kind of funny English country clothes, with a walking stick. And the problem with Shaw is that he was old

... in order to promote himself, he would write anonymous interviews with Bernard Shaw.

for a very long time by the standards of the twentieth century; he lived a long, long time. But I think also in the theatre... I would love to have seen your production²... I don't

² *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was staged in 2018 at MASP (Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo) for three months. It was the début of the play in the city. Two previous productions had been staged in Rio de Janeiro in 1960 and 1998 with the same script translated by Cláudio Mello e Souza in 1955. After my lectures on the play to the director and the cast, there was a consensus that Shaw was very contemporaneous and the first production in São Paulo should not be staged as an "old Victorian play". Therefore, the director, Marco Antônio Pâmio transposed the play from the date it was written in 1893 to 1950. Clara Carvalho, who played Mrs Warren, had already updated the translation which sounded old-fashioned to the New Millennium. The set-design created by Duda Arruk was minimalist, the sound track composed by Gregory Slivar, was a mixture of Elvis Presley and John Cage, a highly-reputed-modern American composer in the 1950s. Slivar made an effort to enhance Vivie Warren's youth and independence, and for this purpose he mixed popular and classical music to put in evidence her dilemma between choosing a conventional life style or a career as a mathematician in an accounting office. The combination of these ingredients made it possible to revive the play as modern to the point of being considered very contemporary by both critics and audience. The year 1950 was carefully chosen because Shaw never clarified whether Vivie and Frank were half-brothers. Had it been staged at the present time, a simple DNA exam would have solved the problem.

know how you feel about this, but I think people often have a prejudice about going to see those plays, because they think “Oh, God, it is people in Victorian costumes, it has lots of furniture and there is lot of talk”; and Shaw himself makes these jokes. One part of Shaw’s brilliances, in order to promote himself, he would write anonymous interviews with Bernard Shaw and placed it in the newspapers; in the interviews, Bernard Shaw comes across as a complete lunatic, a kind of strange, bizarre person. He does an interview in which he is promoting *Widowers’ Houses*, which was his first play, and he says “this is just the first part of a thirteen-play cycle and it is the entire economic history of England, and I’m really annoyed, the director is terrible because I have a blackboard with economic formulae on it and the director says ‘oh, they can’t have that in the theatre’ and so ‘why can’t I?’” So,

... it is funny, it is moving, it is unpredictable, ... you feel like you are on a roller-coaster ride sometimes with a Shaw play.

For three months the cast composed of Karen Coelho (Vivie Warren) Caetano O’Maihlan (Frank Gardner), Cláudio Curi (Praed) and Sergio Mastropasqua (Crofts) rehearsed seven days a week under the director’s instructions followed by my comments on Shaw’s demands as drama critic and playwright. We had several rejections from administrators of theatre facilities who were convinced that the cast would not attract an audience because it did not include actors from Globo Television. MASP had barely given us one month to stage the play. After the success of the production, followed by excellent reviews, we received an extension of three months and invitations from other theatres who had previously turned us down. The production was classified among the five best plays in 2018. Clara Carvalho was rated the best actress and received an award from “Aplauso Brasil”.

who is this crazy man? But he is provoking you into thinking that there is something really strange going on here, and it is humorous, it is funny, but somewhat it fits into the prejudice that in the London theatre you will have a new play by Bernard Shaw, and we know there will be twelve characters, some of them pretending to be women, some of them pretending to be men, dressed in different costumes, but they will all be Bernard Shaw talking at you. And there is a feeling that prejudice is there, I think that this is not how theatre should be like. And yet it is very interesting, but if you talk to actors and you talk to people who produced Shaw, they often admit that they started with that prejudice themselves and they went “Oh, God, do I really want to do Shaw?” And then they find “actually, it is really good”, it is funny, it is moving, it is unpredictable, and it is going in all sorts of directions and it is hard to kind of keep a grip, you feel like you are on a roller-coaster ride sometimes with a Shaw play. But, I do think that prejudice is there. Nicholas Hytner, who ran the National Theatre in London for a long-time produced this book last year, just his memoirs of being director of theatre in London, but there is a very interesting thing about Shaw that he tells. The board of the theatre were saying “we really should do something by Shaw” and he said “No, I hate Shaw, I don’t want to do any Shaw, I’m not doing Shaw” and then they had a problem with some play that was supposed to go on and they said, “we may as well do *Pygmalion* or something”. This is a kind of confession, to do a Shaw play, and he said he ended up doing six of Shaw’s plays,

and absolutely ended loving doing them. So, why does that happen? I think it happens because there is a sense of Shaw that the way to make people think is make them laugh and that all theatre intellectual work is humorous.

... to make people think is make them laugh ... humour discomfords us...

Why is that? Because humour discomfords us, a joke is a joke because it is not what we expect, and Shaw is always unexpected, and he is always taking new and different kinds of directions. So, I just hoped to reintroduce a little bit of the intellectual excitement of Shaw and his playfulness, because before he is a playwright, he is a player, he plays a game and it is very entertaining and exciting when you let yourself into it.

RRH: Shaw's Irish identity – his carefully preserved status as an outsider – is a central theme of the book. Consequently, does it imply that he was in a privileged position to criticize both cultures (English and Irish)? Can we say the same about you? Being Irish, knowing Irish literature, you are in a privileged position to analyse Shaw.

FO'T: Great question. Yes, I think one of the games that Shaw has played is a game with Irishness and he is remarkable in the sense that from the time he was a child until his death, he is in a way an Irish nationalist. People don't think of him like this, "oh, but he never changes his mind about the fact that Ireland is an independent country, should be an

independent country, is a different culture, should be self-governing”; you know, he never changes. And he expresses this, I think, in ways that are provocative. So, he takes it for granted in a way, that Ireland is different, and I think the reason why we people tend not to think about him in relation to Ireland is, well, because he did not live there for most of his life, he left when he was twenty. He did come back after he was married, he visited Ireland quite a lot; he came back and forward with his wife; he began to love the west of Ireland and all that, but most of his life was spent in England, so he was an English figure. And, of course, he is a figure in English national life, I mean, Shaw is one of the founders of the British Labour Party, he is the cofounder of the London School of Economics, he is the founder of the RADA, the great dramatic academy in London. He is an institutional figure in England, he was head of – I think this is the funniest thing of all – he was head of the BBC’s committee on the correct pronunciation of English, which I think for an Irishman it is just so wonderful. So, he is a big figure in English national life, but this is not meant that he is not also a figure in Irish national life. And, I don’t know if you know, the great Irish comic novelist Flann O’Brien has a wonderful satiric novel written in the Irish column daily book, which is a satire on the peasant autobiographies written for a period in the Irish language. But, it has a map of the world at the beginning, which is the world as seen by these peasants in the west of Ireland. Ireland as a kind of this big, huge place, and then there is, you know, America

over there, which just has money, order, offices, post offices; Springfield (Massachusetts) is money, order, offices; New York, money, order, offices. And then, there is a place

... he is unusual in not accepting any ethnic definition of Irishness, ... he is absolutely anti-Yeatsian.

called the other side, which is England, and it has money, order, offices; money, order offices. And GBS, you know, is a figure in Irish national life; he should be; but I think there

are two reasons why he is not thought such as one. One is that he is unusual in not accepting any ethnic definition of Irishness, so his relationship with Yeats is very interesting back and forward, but he is absolutely anti-Yeatsian in that sense. So, he does not accept anything about the Celtic nature of Irishness. He is from a kind of British background ultimately genetically, but also one of his big arguments, globally, is that we are all among rules. I think he would have liked Brazil a lot; I mean, he is a real kind of harbinger saying that the idea that nationality is ethnic is nonsense. One of his provocations against Hitler is saying “there will be a black chancellor of Germany, it will happen, it is just a matter of time”. So, he is also arguing in this scenario right. So, he is saying that all the stuff about the Irish language, all the stuff about Celtic identity, is nonsense; forget about it. In Shaw’s play *John Bull’s Other Island*, Larry Doyle said, “when I hear people talking about the Celtic race, I want to burn down London”, and he also says: “all this thing about Celtic race was invented in Bedford Park, West London”,

which, of course, was Yeats's London address. So, that puts him at odds with the mainstream of Irish national literature in one way. The other thing that puts him at odds is politically: "what you keep saying about Ireland is that you should be independent, but what do you want to be independent for?" "What do you want to do with it?"

John Bull's Other Island is a ferocious attack on a certain conservative conception of what independent Ireland could become.

"Is it just to have a catholic-church dominated little state, where you just exist in poverty, where you lock up women and children who are not wanted, where you export most of your population to the rest of the

world; is that what you want?" And he is saying this in *John Bull's Other Island* in 1904, which is a ferocious attack on a certain conservative conception of what independent Ireland could become. When he came back to Dublin – he did not like Dublin, he grew up in Dublin and he feared it and hated it in some ways, because it was too much for his weak pre GBS self when he was there – but, when he came back in 1910, he was the most famous Irish person ever existed. Back in Dublin, when he was going to give a public address, everybody wanted to go there, and they thought it was going to be very funny, and entertaining, and sentimental. When he gave an address, he said, "Do you know where I was this morning? I was in the South of the Union" [South of the Union was a major workhouse]. "Do you know how many children are in the workhouse?"

Do you know how many children are in the workhouses in Ireland? You all are going to burn in hell; every one of you is going to burn in hell; this is your responsibility when you die; and when you go to the gates of heaven, these children will be waiting for you and you will say, ‘what did I do, why did I tolerate this?’” So, he is doing this all the time, he is provoking and saying “Yes, you want to be independent, but what do you want to do with the independence?” And that also places him as an uncomfortable figure.

RRH: In your book, on page 164, you said that “anti-climax is a good thing” – very Irish, very 21st Century. I quote, “Shaw’s greatest departure from Ibsen is his embrace of anti-climax – *A Doll’s House* builds towards Nora’s decision to leave her husband – *Candida* does not leave her husband at all. The scandals in *Mrs Warren’s Profession* do not, as they would in Ibsen, bring the house down. Shaw is a realist in that he insists on theatre being like real life in its open-endedness. We are left to imagine the afterlives of the main characters....”. Would you say that although Shaw is chronologically Victorian, in this aspect his drama is very much contemporary? Furthermore, in the way that “he democratized scepticism – the notion that there is no truth at all – and therefore that lies don’t much matter”.

FO’T: Yes, I think that it is usefully put. I think Shaw is a very contemporary figure and this is one of the reasons I think that he needs to be unleashed in the theatre, because

*Shaw's plays don't
fill up to the climax
you expect.*

he is much more radical and head spinning than people think he is. And I think this thing about anti-climax is very important for it, so

Shaw's plays don't fill up to the climax you expect. The most famous examples of this are, of course, *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*. So, *My Fair Lady* is ironically a personal successful version of Shaw. There is a very good production of it on Broadway at the moment, and it is still really working, I mean, it is a great musical; I love it. But, the struggle with *Pygmalion* and with *My Fair Lady* is that people wanted to film them, and the question is, how does it end? And, of course, everybody wants it to end with Eliza marrying Higgins, which, to Shaw, is an absolute abomination. You know, this man has taken control of this woman, tried to make her and literally remake her in a way, and then he is going to possess her in the end. No! She is going to walk out and the anti-climactic end is, is she going to marry the sort of soft foolish guy? Why? Because she can control the soft foolish guy. He absolutely adores her, he is not problematic and what she wants..., remember..., I don't know if you know the play, but in the beginning, Eliza is a flower seller, you know; she is selling flowers at night; I mean, it should be quite brutal, she is out on the street, the men are coming out of the theatre. So, she is out, it is raining, she is trying to sell flowers. Why? To get some money to eat; this is not romantic. And, in the end, what does she want? She wants to own a flower shop; that is what she wants because she leaves her own boss;

she has economic independence, she is in the relationship where she is at least equal to the man, so she is going to marry Freddy. And this is always in Shaw's mind, but he does not say it because it must be open-ended. But, it is very interesting the way Broadway and Hollywood insist on the happy ending, which is, she must marry Higgins; and this is an example, I think, of the radicalism of Shaw, because it is very interesting watching *My Fair Lady* on Broadway earlier this year. What do you do with *My Fair Lady* in a YouTube era? *My Fair Lady* ends up with she saying to Higgins... and, in fact, the image that Shaw has is the most cruel, brilliant, brutal reply by a woman to a man. Higgins says "oh, but you can't leave me now that I'm used to you", and she says to him... "you have my voice on your recordings, and if you are lonely you can consider playing my voice." It is a brilliant image, it is an extraordinary, modern image, this recorded voice. So, Higgins is going to be left as a lonely old man with this voice. But, what do you do with it now? You can't have this climatic ending that everybody wants? And it is very interesting, in the current Broadway production, they know they must break it, so at the end Michael Reagan breaks the entire frame of the stage and Eliza walks out, not only walks out Higgins, but she walks out through the entire audience and steps out of the theatre. She is getting out of there and

My Fair Lady is just an example of how contemporary in many ways Shaw is about gender; about power ...

this is very interesting. It's just an example of how contemporary in many ways Shaw is about gender, about power, about all these things that are important to us now.

RRH: On page 155 of your book, you said “Shaw did more than anyone else in England to end the reign of the actor-manager and dismantle the star system, which may seem entirely obvious today; he also reacted against a kind of comedy in which there was little else but hilarious action”. My question is: have the audience preferences changed significantly since then?

FO'T: Yes, it is a very interesting question. Shaw is a very unusual figure at that, he was both Jesus Christ and John the Baptist; he was his own John the Baptist. He worked as a theatre critic before he became a playwright and a lot of this theatre criticism was preparing the way for the great figure that was going to write plays.

... as a theatre critic, his great power was destructive. He really destroyed the old Victorian system.

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But as a theatre critic, his great power was destructive. He really destroyed the old Victorian system which was the star system, the actual manager. You know, you didn't go to see Hamlet, you went to see Henry Irving in Hamlet; you didn't go to see Racine, you went to see Sarah Bernhardt, the actor being at the absolute centre of what was produced. Well, if

we can judge from the way that people wrote about it, every play has essentially the star with all these other satellites kind of moving around the stage but not getting in the way of the star. So Shaw is a very important figure in the creation of the repertory system. It is very interesting because, of course, it's almost exactly parallel with what the Abbey is doing in Ireland, and pretty much at the same time. The "Shaw

... there is a relation that the main energy is always triangular... it is dialectical as Marx's dialectics.

Boom", as it's known in London, starts in 1904 and it's very much through the Royal Court Theatre; so the Royal Court Theatre was essentially established to do Shaw's plays and the repertory system. In a Shaw play, there is

never one leading character; what I'm trying to say is that there is a relation that the main energy is always triangular; there are always three main characters and it is dialectical as Marx's dialectics in a way. Shaw is influenced a lot by Marx, so you got the thesis, the antithesis and the synthesis going on all the time. But, one of the ironies is that you, I don't know what it is like here, but in London or in New York, for example, you could not do a Shaw play without a star. You know, we are back very much to the commercial theatre circle in the English-speaking world, to the actor manager and the star system. People will go to the theatre to see someone they already know from the movies or from the TV, and these are often fantastic actors. I wouldn't be dismissive of them, but Shaw is quintessential repertory

theatre. I'm sure you found this when you produced *Mrs. Warren's Profession*; you had to have strong actors in really all the roles, you can't afford to have those who are not, really, strongly present. So, the reasons to that kind of irony, I'm thinking, is that theatre has changed. I think, I hope, that Shaw's estate isn't listening to this, I'm very glad Shaw is going out of copyright in 2020 in the English-speaking world. He died in 1950 and that is a seventy-year copyright, which means he is still in copyright, and that means that actually there is an approach to doing him that is still quite official, and after 2020 people will be able to, you could just do a Shaw play, you could do whatever you like, and I think this will be actually very good. I think that there will be a lot of terrible, crazy, complete inappropriate productions, but also every playwright needs to try things out, do strange versions, set them in Mars or do all females in males, just to almost rediscover something. I think that he is now seen as kind of classic. I find people in Dublin or London saying "oh, I went to a Shaw play, and it was very good!" They're really surprised it was good and if people are surprised it is good; there is something wrong about the way it is being approached.

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RRH: On page 169 of your book you wrote "Acting is not truth", followed by

"The Decay of Lying" in which Oscar Wilde wrote "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life". "The twist in Shaw is that the art that people generally imitate is bad

art.” “Shaw mimics his heroes and in doing that there are no heroes. His is not a drama in which people are simply exposed for not living up to proper morality, what is exposed are assumptions about morality itself”. Does this bring Shaw closer to the twenty-first century than Wilde?

FO'T: That is a great question. I think, first of all, we must accept that Shaw takes an enormous amount from Wilde. I think Wilde has an enormous influence on him, the paradoxical methods where you take an orthodox morality and, as Wilde said, you put that into question. I think he takes that very much from Wilde, and he takes it further. And one of the reasons I think Shaw is important to us is that we exist in a culture of the moment, where our dilemma is this relentless assault on truth, and the idea of the truth as a valid concept. And our answer to that, as thinking people, is we don't know because, as academics, as critics, we all know that truth is not a single thing or a simple thing. But this is being exploited politically for very toxic purposes, which is to say “Oh, there is no truth, and it doesn't matter if it is true or not, therefore evidence is meaningless, therefore I can make any assertion I like with no trouble.” I think one of the reasons Shaw is so important to us is that his plays are a crucible in which these things are tested. So, I don't think Shaw is saying that there is no truth or there is no

... our dilemma is this relentless assault on truth, and the idea of the truth as a valid concept.

morality; what he is saying is that we have to find it, that it is a dynamic process, whereby we have to invest ourselves; even as members of the audience we have to enter into this game, if you like; it is a game, it is a performance, it's being tested as we go along. One of Shaw's great assaults in Victorian England, one of the biggest ideas is character, mainly male characters of course. Character is something you have and is fixed, and of course, this is also a theatrical idea; but what Shaw says is, actually, there is no character. Ellie, for example, in *Heartbreak House*, was a timid little

*Shaw is absolutely
situational ... Truth
is always situational.*

woman who was lost in this big house, but at the end of the play she is this kind of extraordinary, dominant figure who is almost in a kind of ecstatic stage of power; how does she get from there to there? This is the question. So, what you have in Shaw is that people must find how to behave morally in the situations in which assumptions about morality are usually wrong. Shaw is absolutely situational, and I think what he brings us back to is a simple question: why is theatre important? Does it matter at all? And I think most of you would say theatre matters because it is a crucible in which we test and discover our morality. It is a crucible discovering what is the truth of the situation. But the truth about this situation does not say this is a universal simple fixed truth. Truth is always situational and is always there for us to find. And I think that's why Shaw is at his best a great playwright because he does that kind of thing to us. Again, I

think this is one of the reasons why it is worth rediscovering him.

RRH: Page 171 starts: “Nothing can be undone”. This goes straightforwardly against the beliefs of the Catholic Church. Shaw’s plays do not lead to repentance but to creative evolution. Would you say that creative evolution is his strong belief, his attempt to improve mankind not through religion but evolution? For example, *Man and Superman*. Still focusing on this point, it also evokes Nietzsche and later, eugenics, Hitler (whom he admired except for his anti-Semitism), Mussolini, and Stalin – Shaw did not believe in democracy but privileged totalitarian regimes. Was this the reason he was downgraded by academics? Totally put aside in the 1980s?

FO’T: Yes, it is really important when you are trying to judge someone objectively to say that there is a dark side, you know, there is a dark side to

Shaw. I almost wish Shaw had a normal lifespan for his time, this way he would die in his seventies, actually because he was writing

In the 1920s, 1930s he wrote about the crises, the great depression, the crises of democracy, and he became very impatient.

almost everything up to the mid-1920s when he really is an extraordinary liberating force. Like so many intellectuals in the 1920s, 1930s, he wrote about the crises, the great depression, the crises of democracy, and he became very

impatient, starting to look for those figures who got to move history onwards, and began to admire great men. So, he admired Mussolini, he defended Mussolini, he had this really kind of grotesque attitude with Hitler which is so wrong, that all his anti-Semitism is completely wrong and grotesque, all racism is ridiculous but at least he was getting people back to work, he would be a great man if it wasn't for the anti-Semitism. He admired Stalin, went to visit him. Shaw was so famous that Stalin gave him about two hours. Stalin never talked to anyone and Shaw came back saying that Stalin was a gentleman, a lovely Georgian gentleman; it is not a pleasant stuff. We must remember a couple things: one is that the two people he admired – he had two photographs by his bedside when he died – one was Stalin and the other one was Gandhi; so Shaw is always a contradictory and complex figure. And he did believe in Nietzsche when he said superman equals Gandhi; Gandhi is superman but also is superwoman, as in *Back to Methuselah* which is an extraordinary five-play cycle, which goes back to the entire human history and, as a science fiction, to the distant future, and superman merges as a woman at the end of the play. So, he is very complex, but he is not in eugenics; if he is, it is in the most benign way. He believes in the evolution of species, and like so many people he is fundamentally, deeply, deeply, shocked and depressed by the First World War. Maybe watching this kind of self-destruction depressed people so much and Shaw is one of those, and he says: we have evolved as species enough to the edge of destroying ourselves and not

to be able to stop ourselves. Therefore, we need to evolve, we need to live longer. Shaw thinks we have to live about two hundred years so that we can acquire some wisdom, but his idea of evolution is contrary to eugenics. He says that we can engineer evolution, but stopping certain people from living and selecting what we think is the good people, Shaw says that this is absolutely ridiculous, since we have no idea of what a really good people would look like, so how could we ever possibly breed them? What he says is that there is a life instinct; he believes there is this life instinct, which is working through us, which is greater than us, and that is not eugenics. So, what he is basically saying is that the problem for the life force, the reason why it is bottled up, is because women are oppressed. And because women are oppressed, a beautiful woman will marry a man she is not attracted to because she has no money herself. And therefore, evolution is being blocked. So, Shaw's eugenics is universal basic income: give everybody enough money and they will have sex and reproduce with whoever they want, and then the life force will work better. So, he is complicated, he is extraordinarily stupid some ways in the 1930s and 1940s. You have to understand that he is old, he is very isolated, he is in this kind of monstrous position where he is this huge figure, where every time he steps out of his door, the newspapers people are there asking, "what do

... the problem for the life force, the reason why it is bottled up, is because women are oppressed.

you think about this? What do you think about that?” And he can’t, because he is trapped in the GBS mode, he can’t

say “just leave me alone, I’m an old

... *the place where
his ideas really
happen is on stage.*

man, I didn’t really have the chance to think about that”. He gives his opinions about everything and it does affect his reputation, but I

think, in some ways unfairly. I think you mentioned his last great play is *Saint Joan*, 1924; it is very hard for a playwright to exist for another quarter of a century; but the place where his ideas really happen is on stage. It is there where he deals with all his contradictions, and really is alive as an intellectual and in his power as a playwright. I mean, so what? How many playwrights have six great plays? Even in the end? Let’s leave Shakespeare aside. In the English language there is a tiny number. I think Shaw has honourably six great plays at least, maybe more and, you know, the fact that there are so many bad ones, mostly from his later life, who cares? The good ones are what really matters. If you’ve got six plays, and you had a good strike rate even in 20%, that puts you right up there in terms of the greatest playwrights of the English language.

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RRH: In your book *Judging Shaw*, you mentioned on page 152 that he “is sometimes ferociously sexual: *Candida* may look like a domestic drama, but two men compete for a woman’s body, *Heartbreak House* is a series of erotic parlour games ... if Shaw is played sexlessly, the plays will seem sexless.

But it is to contemporary productions to find a way of doing otherwise.” Are we to understand that directors still misinterpret Shaw? Does that apply to Irish, English, and American directors in general?

FO'T: Yes, I would love to know more about Shaw in Brazil and your own productions³, because I think translation can be very liberating. Although people often say this is not in the original language; but that also leaves a whole burden of assumptions, and a kind of dull

tale to this particularly version of something, and I imagine that if you're doing a translation you can start with some kind of freshness.

I would love to see somebody doing Shaw naked because so much is tied up.

This may be kind of ridiculous, but

I would love to see somebody doing Shaw naked because so much is tied up. Most English and Irish productions, I think, are almost the first to hire this costume designer, because you have all this beautiful Edwardian dresses and you have all this stuff, and it looks fantastic, it looks beautiful; but it is not a fashion show; one of the things it does is the body is lost. I mean, you mentioned the photographs in the book and Shaw kind of liked taking photographs of himself

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³ In addition to Shaw's *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* in 2008 (*O Idiota no País dos Absurdos*) and *Mrs Warren's Profession* in 2018 (*A Profissão da Sra. Warren*), Rosalie Haddad also produced Brian Friel's *Dancing in Lughnasa* in 2004 (*Dançando em Lughnasa*), co-produced in 2013, and *The Millionairess* in 2019 (*A Milionária*).

naked, there are many naked photographs of himself. He was actually very liberated about the body, and where is the body in so many of the productions you see of Shaw? You know, the yearning, the sexuality, the sexual games that are going on and Shaw is very shocking, and you thought “oh my god, those people are crazy.” The sexual prevalence was there. And yet, it is somehow hidden behind this power case of beautiful costumes. And so, again, I would love to see your own production because...

RRH: we didn't do anything like that.

FO'T: I know you didn't do anything naked. I just think, I'm very optimistic about when Shaw comes out of copyrights,

It is incredible what Shaw did with gender... sexuality... economics...

I think a lot of young theatre companies will say “we don't have to pay to do this, pay royalties”, and suddenly discover that we got this incredible treasure and really profoundly interesting and

entertaining, amusing, challenging dramas which deal with so many things that are back being so current, you know, such as gender. It is incredible what Shaw did with gender; it is so radical and interesting, the way he deals with sexuality, the way he deals with economics; he is one of the few people that put money on the stage, where the money comes from. It is not like, even in Wilde who is so radical in many ways, these people are just rich; that is kind of silly that they are

just rich; where is the money coming from? Shaw always says that the money is there; his attack on the moralization power that we have talked earlier. Some of these things are so radically interesting: language, I mean, he managed a play about language, about the way languages in social classes are interwoven. I know we are going to talk about translation later on, I would love to see somebody doing *Pygmalion* on translations and repertory with the same actors too, because it's fascinating. Both parts talk about the construction of language and how power is intrinsic in language so there is so much to be done with Shaw. I suppose and hope that doing this exhibition and all this, is just to say, "look at them again, take a look at them again". There are so many rich things that are there and, hopefully, someone will see.

RRH: What do you consider to be your main ideas in the book that are either different or new as compared to several biographies and other extensive literature on Shaw?

Fintan O'Toole: I don't really think of *Judging Shaw* as a biography and, hopefully, if you are looking to get a general extension of Shaw's life you can get it from the book, and I think that it is important. There is not a lot of things in that sense. If you are going to write about Shaw it is very hard to do it in less than eight- or nine-hundred pages. So, I hope the book is relatively short to read and it is only about 75000 words and that, it might just give people an opportunity to

get into his world, and I think this is a vaster world. I think I try to suggest that as an Irishman I see things in various kinds of ways, and I think a lot of what is being written about Shaw is either as someone who ignored Ireland or someone who became English. I think this misses a huge part of the point there. And I would hope that it is fair to him, it kind of does justice to this master side of a Frankenstein theory that he was trapped in but also, in a certain way, reintroduce him as a figure of extraordinary creativity, originality, and courage. He was a brave, brave man. I think he took on lots of things which still hold a lot of love worth for us, and energy. I think maybe we need political energy. Shaw said politics is everything and is at the centre of how we live, and what he said to us is that, in the end, I suppose the argument is not so much, it doesn't really matter what Shaw asks us to think, it is more that he tells us how to think. And I

Shaw is passionate, committed, deeply believes in the capacity of people to live better dignified lives.

think that, for people like my father who had no education, there is liberation in that. What he did was, he taught us the difference between two words that are often used in English as if they mean the same, but they are quite the opposite: cynicism and scepticism. We are at a very cynical society now, in general. Oscar Wilde says that a cynical person knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Shaw is not a cynic, Shaw is passionate, committed, deeply believes in the capacity of people to live better dignified lives. He is a

sceptic, and scepticism is not the same thing as cynicism. What Shaw senses is that again and again you have not just the right to be sceptical, even if you are the poorest and the lowest of people, you have the right to be sceptical, it is not just a right but a duty, you have the human duty to say, “why are you saying this? What is your basis for that argument? Why are you making me assume that you have some rule that I have to obey as a human being if you can’t justify that rule to me?” And if we don’t rediscover the virtue of scepticism as opposed to cynicism I think we are in deep trouble, but I think scepticism is the great civic virtue, and I think maybe Shaw, as well as his kind of great theatrical richness, also has something to contribute to our sense of ourselves as civically-engaged people.



Ten Rules of Shavian Theatre.
Fintan O'Toole's Lecture.
International Shaw Society Congress – Niagara-
on-the-Lake, Ontario, 2017

1. No cause and effect
2. Motivations don't matter
 - . Motivations are not internal, as in the Greek Theatre
3. Characters don't shape the drama; the drama shapes the characters
4. Anti-climax is a good thing
5. Form is a trap
 - . Although his plays use excess form, disconcerting the audience
6. Morals are not to be vindicated; they are to be discovered
 - . Substitution of Custom for Conscience
 - . Moral passion is fundamental value in his work
7. Acting is not truth
8. The sounds you make are not who you are
 - . Opposed to Irish Theatre tradition
9. No shame, no suicide
10. Nothing can be undone
 - . Doesn't do redemption nor forgiveness
 - . Sense of immortality of the deed (very Greek)
 - . Stakes are higher when the deed is inexorable

Together those rules place the audience in deep uncertainty
and create a drama in which the drama really matters

Ficha técnica

Mancha 11,6 x 17,8 cm
Formato 15,0X 21,0 cm
Tipologia Cheltenham Light 11 e
Monotype Corsiva 20
Papel miolo: Couché 150 g/m2
capa Dura