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The United States' Productions of George Bernard Shaw's "Candida" in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a philosopher, essayist, critic, and playwright who imagined “characters and let them rip” (“Plays by George Bernard Shaw” xi). He used clever words and comedy to promote ideas on economics, politics, sociology, education, philosophy, religion and art, which is why his plays, such as “Candida,” have continued to be popular and applicable to audiences’ life experiences from their first debut and into the twenty-first century. This article is a survey of the theater productions of “Candida” in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to date. Selected productions are presented with their reviews to illustrate that the play has continued to be popular because of Shaw’s ability to tell an enduring story and the dynamism of the stars who played the principal characters, particularly, the role of “Candida.”

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a philosopher, essayist, critic, and dramatist who imagined “characters and let them rip” (“Plays by George Bernard Shaw” xi). Shaw began as a

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journalist, an art critic, and finally a music critic. When he finally decided to write plays, it was because he wanted to venture into the theater as a social reformer. Shaw was, in his own way, deeply religious. It was not a religion of Sunday pew-sitting, but of pacifism, of trying to right industrial and societal wrongs. Shaw's religion does not pit man against woman, as much as it pits the willing against the uncertain. Shaw tried to equalize the balance beam between the corruptible and the corruptors, between those in power, and those under the thumb of that power. He believed that, "The most honest ruler becomes a tyrant and a fabricator of legends and falsehoods, not out of any devilment in himself, but because those whom he rules do not understand his business" (Shaw 179). Indeed, he was a radical thinker. And he used clever words and comedy to promote ideas on economics, politics, sociology, education, philosophy, religion and art, which is why his plays, such as "Candida," have continued to be popular and applicable to audiences' life experiences from their first debut and into the twenty-first century. This article is a survey of the theater productions of "Candida" in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to date. Selected productions are presented with their reviews to illustrate that the play has continued to be popular because of Shaw's ability to tell an enduring story and the dynamism of the actors who played the principal characters, particularly, the role of "Candida."

Shaw, the Playwright

Shaw comes from a line of great Irish comedy playwrights: William Congreve, Oliver Goldsmith, George Farquhar, Sean O'Casey, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Oscar Wilde, and John Millington Synge. Within Shaw's repertoire as a playwright, he took up issues of class privilege, education, marriage, religion, health care, and the government. Shaw himself was a Fabian Socialist, which espoused a reformist rather than revolutionary method of social change. The Fabian Socialists, whose association continues to be popular today, embraced the idea of gender equality many years before women had the right to vote in either Britain or the United States. Their ideas also coincided with much of Shaw's about the social and political systems he questions in his writings. The purpose of his plays, as most everything other than criticism, was to provide the "drama of ideas" (Ervine 35-37). Underneath all the amusing characters and clever lines and outrageous plots, Shaw was quite serious as a social reformer. He was a "mature" man by the time he set out to write plays, forty-two, when his first play "Widower's

Houses" was produced in 1892. What shaped his thoughts and ideas that he began to incorporate into his plays was "his acceptance of socialism as a practical mission of his life" (Smith 165).

A list of some of Shaw's most memorable plays (in chronological order) include, "Mrs. Warren's Profession" (1894), the "profession" by means of which Mrs. Warren raised her daughter in luxury; "Arms and the Man" (1894), set in Bulgaria, which satirizes romantic notions about war (Shaw, as a Fabian, was a strong objector to war); "Candida" (1895), one of Shaw's most successful plays, the story of a woman in middle age, her husband and a teen-age poet madly in love with her. She chooses to stay with her husband, because he needs her. Thus the plot revolves around the "weakness of men; "The Devil's Disciple" (1897) about the American Revolution and the English occupation forces, and "Caesar and Cleopatra" (1898) in which an elderly Caesar is seduced by a teen-age Cleopatra.

Of the plays Shaw wrote in the twentieth century, one of the most prodigious is "Man and Superman," (1903), another of the plays in which the woman pursues the man. This play is so long, that one of the acts is often performed separately, in staged readings, often referred to as "Don Juan in Hell." This was a huge stage success in the United States featuring famous actors, such as Charles Boyer, Cedric Hardwicke, Agnes Moorhead, and Tyrone Power. Among Shaw's other successful plays are "Major Barbara" (1905), "Misalliance" (1910), "Androcles and the Lion" (1912), "Pygmalion" (1912) and "Saint Joan" (1923).

Of course, the best-known of all George Bernard Shaw's plays is "Pygmalion" (1912), later produced as a musical called "My Fair Lady." Shaw was a proponent of perfecting the English language. He even left money in his will to fund research into simplifying it. Pygmalion is Professor Henry Higgins, a teacher of phonetics. He takes a "guttersnipe" named Eliza Doolittle, and transforms her into an elegant woman. English actor, Sir Reginald Carey "Rex" Harrison, won a Tony Award, Golden Globe Award and Best Actor Oscar for his acclaimed performances as Professor Higgins. Interestingly, Shaw's opinions about men as victim and women as pursuers were emphasized in a special song written for Higgins: "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man?" (Hunt). Evident in Shaw's plays are his comedic talent, and his ability to spin outrageous plots and characters. Many of the plays do not end with a twist or a surprise, but acceptance, whether of death, martyrdom, or as depicted in the play, "Candida," a marriage of convenience.

"Candida"

"Candida," written in 1894 and published in 1898, was a part of Shaw's collection of four comedies titled *Plays Pleasant*. "Candida" is set in London near the end of the nineteenth century. Strongly influenced by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's 1879 "A Doll's House," "Candida" is an eponymous play about a British woman who must choose between her middle-aged staid Socialist cleric husband, James Morell, and a very young romantic poet, Eugene Marchbanks, who has become her suitor. Ibsen's "A Doll's House" resulted in his heroine, Nora, leaving her husband, home, and children when she realized that they were not the best choice for her in life. In contrast, Shaw's "Candida" finally chooses to stay with her husband, Morell, because she realizes it is she who is the strongest figure in the relationship, and she needs to continue to support him. "Candida" is considered to be Shaw's favorite play and is superior both technically and spiritually, as described by critic, John Corbin, in a 1903 review of the play:

The struggle of opposing wills and passions, which, like all playwrights worthy of the name, Mr. Shaw recognizes as the mainspring of true drama, is here most clearly defined and most evenly balanced. On the one hand in Marchbanks, the Pre-Raphaelite Christian, with his vision of life which is as vague as it is high; and on the other is the best type of modern Christian, (a Christian Socialist being Mr. Shaw's choice, though the Socialism counts for little in the conflict of motives,) whose idealism is as short-sighted as it is clear, bold, and sure. The peculiar spiritual force of the play originates in the fact that Candida, true Ibsen woman that she is, however much more gracious and charming, (for the philosophy of Shaw is the quintessence of Ibsenism,) recognizes none of the usual moral conventions as binding. (Corbin 25)

Candida emphasizes the figure of the powerful woman, contrary to standard Victorian comportment. Indeed, Shaw became known for his reputation in dealing with social and political issues of his time in the late nineteenth-century, while Britain was ruled by Queen Victoria, known for her commitment to modest, decorous behavior and conventional gender roles that emphasize timidity in women and strength in men (Ervine 52-58).

British Response to "Candida"

Shaw's acceptance in British society was lukewarm and he had problems getting his plays produced. Shaw was "vilified in the British press, although his ideas influenced President Wilson and eventually contributed to the founding of the League of Nations (the precursor to the UN). Shaw's analysis of the causes of the war implied that "the British were intellectually lazy, blinded by prejudice, blundering, and militaristic," and this made him unpopular (Innes 203). With many trials and errors, Shaw was able to infiltrate the British theater, and on July 30, 1897, Charles Charrington directed, and starred as Morell, in the first public production. The play was performed at in the West End at Her Majesty's Theater on The Haymarket in Westminster. "Candida" first major productions in Britain were the 1903 and 1904 stagings of the play at London's Royal Court Theater produced by and starring Arnold Daly as Marchbanks with Dorothy Donnelly as Candida. The play proved extremely popular and four months of performances were added during 1903. Daly created a touring company for the play later in 1903. "Candida" was reprised by Daly at the Royal Court Theater near the end of 1904, with Kate Rorke as Candida, C.V. France as Morell, and Granville Barker as Marchbanks (Ervine 59-64).

It was during this time, between 1904 and 1905, that Shaw's works began to be produced more frequently at the Royal Court Theater, leading to his popularity as a British dramatist. In fact, during the Spring 1905 season at the theater King Edward VII, the successor to his mother, Queen Victoria at her death in 1901, was audience to a Command Performance of Shaw's work. By 1907, the Royal Court Theater of London had been home to more than seven hundred performances of eleven of Shaw's plays, helping to establish Shaw as a central figure in national and international drama by the time he was middle-aged (Ervine 71-86).

Twentieth Century Productions of "Candida" in the United States

"Candida" led the American performances of Shaw's work by the first decade of the twentieth century. Like so many other playwrights, Shaw simply wrote to express ideas, promote a movement, or even to protest society's mistakes, and was able to parlay this onto the stage to evoke audiences emotions about life and human nature.

The stage, which renders things physically, neurologically, sensuously, is a great instrument of legitimate popularization. Conversely, the over literary spectator who has

seized Bernard Shaw's ideas all too readily, may not have lived through the drama of a Shavian scene until, he too, receives it from the actors' lips, through the actor's bodies, and especially through the actor's eyes. (Bentley 168)

The actors who performed in "Candida" were opening the eyes of their audiences well beyond the theater to Shaw's vision of the world. Major actresses, such as Katharine Cornell (1924-25, 1937, 1942,1946) Olivia de Havilland (1952), Celeste Holm (1970), Joanne Woodward (1981), and Mary Steenburgen (1993), have played the role of Candida, while actors Orson Wells (1933), Burgess Meredith (1942), and Marlon Brando (1946) have played the role of Eugene Marchbanks. Shaw appreciated actors and their ability to convey his messages.

The first United States production of "Candida" was in 1899 in Chicago. It was produced and directed by Anna Morgan, a teacher, director, theater producer, and professional elocutionist, who toured the United States with recitals of poetry and dramatic speeches in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The play was an amateur performance; the cast was comprised of students from her school, the Anna Morgan Studios, located in Chicago's Fine Arts Building. The production was unauthorized, as Morgan did not have Shaw's permission to perform it. However, Shaw heard about the quality of the production and gave Morgan permission to produce as many of his plays as she desired. Morgan did so, beginning with the premier of Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* in 1899 and 1902, which featured an all-female cast. She continued to influence American theater style in the first half of the twentieth century and, "relying on simple staging, maintaining ...the performers' amateur status, Morgan provided an early example of the experimental, noncommercial theater that would lead to the little theater movement" (Pinkerton and Hudson 238).

In addition to Morgan, another woman was instrumental in promoting Shaw's plays, in particular, "Candida." In 1924, Katharine Cornell (1893-1974) took up the starring role of Candida, performing in five productions on New York's famed Broadway stages, including the Roundabout Theater. She was performer as well as producer for the last four productions. She acted in the play's longest running set of performances to date, between December 1924 and April 1925, at the 48th Street Theater for 143 performances. When she first played Candida in 1924, her performance was so acclaimed that The Actors' Guild, owner of the play's production

rights, did not allow any other actress to play the role in New York while she was alive (Mosel 36-77) .

Cornell went on to reprise the role from March 10 to May 8, 1937, at the Empire Theater for 50 performances; and from April 27 to May 31, 1942 at the Shubert Theater, costarring Raymond Massey as The Reverend James Mavor Morell and Burgess Meredith as Eugene Marchbanks. In 1946, she starred in her last production at the Cort Theater from April 3 to May 2, for 24 performances (Mosel 49-92). This was a special production to benefit the Army Emergency and Navy Relief Funds. Cornell costarred with a young (nineteen- year-old) Marlon Brando as Marchbanks. Brandon went on to become a cultural icon who received three Oscars for his stellar performances. Cornell co-produced the play with Gilbert Miller and received glowing reviews, such as this one from the *New York Times Magazine*:

Candida has come to seem, with the years, almost as much Katharine Cornell's property as Bernard Shaw's. As the radiant lady fought over by the prating parson she married and the mewling poet she bewitched, Actress Cornell long ago found one of her most triumphant roles. Last week she was playing it on Broadway for the fourth time, and playing it well. ("Old Play in Manhattan" 1)

In addition to the major performances in New York, Cornell performed *Candida* in repertory during a transcontinental tour from 1933 to 1934. Although he never saw her act in the play, Shaw praised her in person and writing for her stellar performances and called her "an ideal British *Candida* in my imagination" (Dukore 197).

In addition to Cornell, Several other acclaimed actresses parlayed their talents from the movie screen to the theater to play the part of *Candida*. However, not all of them played the part as well as Cornell. For example, two-time Oscar winner, Olivia de Havilland starred in Thomas Hammond's production at New York's National Theater from April 22 to May 22, 1952 for 31 performances. Although de Havilland has received accolades for her other work, the reviews for her performance in this production were lackluster. As one critic remarked, "It is distressing to report that her *Candida* is not a perceptive one. It has little of the warmth, reserve and insight that Miss Cornell has brought to the part on several occasions" (Atkinson 23). Although Olivia de

Havilland's performance was not on par with Cornell's, other actresses who played Candida excelled.

Katherine Cornell may have been gone from the theater scene, but she was not forgotten. On February 2, 1969, a special event occurred. New York's Roudabout Theater debuted the first production of "Candida" since the 1946 one starring Cornell. The cast consisted of Elizabeth Owens as Candida and Jon Carlson as Eugene Marchbanks. This was a welcomed performance and received good reviews:

Welcome back, Candida, and about time. Good Shaw, and good show....George Bernard Shaw's enigmatic lady of the parsonage last appeared here on the threshold of the atomic age, in Katherine Cornell's 1946 production on Broadway. The old play entered the Roudabout's repertory last night, cozily ensconced in the company's little basement auditorium between two sections of eight rows, fore and aft. (Thompson 29)

Katherine Cornell was hard to replace, but one actress came very close. In 1970, theater audiences were given a rare treat when academy award winner, Celeste Holm (1917- 2012), performed in New York's Longacre Theater's production, directed by Lawrence Carra, from April 6-11 for eight performances. She costarred in this production with her husband, Wesley Addy who played The Reverend James Mavor Morell. Celeste Holms excelled in the role of Candida and one of the many positive reviewers reported, "She is a sunny person with a most subtle touch in comedy (of course), she also can be as broadly funny as the best of them), and she uses this talent with fine effect in playing Shaw's heroine and also benefits from a strongly effective performance by Wesley Addy" (Gaver 12). Holms considered her performance in the play to be one of the highlights of her career.

In addition to reviews of the actors' performances in the play, critics have commented on the heroine and the plot line in terms of the human condition and contemporary feminist struggles of gender roles, autonomy, maternal strife, and marriage. In Leah Frank's review of the 1985 Long Island Stage Company's production "Candida," she explained why the play was still relevant to contemporary audiences.

Shaw's wit and originality zeroed in on the human condition to the continued delight of playgoers everywhere... It is a dramatically effective and emotionally tender play....In

"Candida," first produced in England in 1898, he turns his acutely accurate eye on marriage and how and why successful unions become and stay that way. (Frank)

Frank's review brings to light the long-lasting sentiment of the struggle to find and hold onto love and meaning in life that makes the play a worthwhile one to mount.

Another reviewer also commented on issues relevant to contemporary society. Alvin Klein reviewed the 1997 Yale Repertory Theater's staging of "Candida, and gave the production a stellar review, citing the appeal of the proto-feminist characters of Candida and Prossy (Morell's secretary) for contemporary audiences:

Although Shaw assails piety and sanctimony and pits the socialism of Candida's husband against the opportunism of her father, Mr. Burgess, the play amounts to more than just "words, words, words," a familiar Shavian refrain of self-parody. It is more concerned with personal than with ideological conflict. (Klein)

The social conditions of a century before have barely changed and the relevance of the story described in "Candida" still asserts itself.

Like the previous two reviews, Les Gutman's comments about the 1998 Off-Broadway performance of "Candida" at The Pearl Theater on the lower East Side of New York City focuses on the premise of the play as one that remains worthwhile for contemporary viewers. Gutman calls the play "remarkably edgy" for the time periods in which it was first published. Candida, according to Gutman, is "a fascinating examination of what we would call 'sexual politics,' against the backdrop of a portrait of this strong but enigmatic woman" (Gutman). This oft-cited opinion of the play's interconnectedness between the nineteenth century and contemporary era illustrates what makes the play so appealing, and in accordance with Shaw's mission "to move forward both his characters and his audience, to bring them to a measurably more advanced stage of self-understanding" (Byrne 381).

Shaw's implicit feminist messages did not go unnoticed by actresses who vied to play Candida. Among the actresses who played the part of Candida that still has a stellar career is academy award-winner Mary Steenburgen. She is a feminist, political activist, and friend/campaigner for President George and Hilary Clinton. In 1993, she starred in the

Broadway's Roundabout Theater Company's production that debuted on April, 11, 1993. She was specially chosen for the play because of her social, cultural, and political appeal to audiences, and her performance received a rave review:

Although she is 40 and showing some lines around her eyes, Steenburgen projects a minxlike, flirtatious quality that is rare in the character of the happily married wife of the upright, rugged and vain Rev. James Morell. But if she plays her character too coquettish at times, Steenburgen handles the two men in Candida's life with witty aplomb -- especially in the scene when she acts as a sort of referee as they bid for her love. (Johnson G1)

The witty handling of the men as mentioned in this review reflects Shaw's passion for getting his ideas across, often as a battle between male and female. What made Shaw such an important influence on the theater was his justification of honesty as the foundation for every play he wrote.

Twenty-first Century Productions

The ubiquitous Internet and "pumped up" television programming have distracted many prospective theater goers. However, "Candida" has still managed to attract audiences in the first half of the twenty-first century. In Spring 2009, Chicago's Writer's Theater Company debuted a musical adaptation of "Candida" titled "A Minister's Wife." Michael Halberstam conceived the musical, Austin Pendleton adapted it, and the music and lyrics were written by Joshua Schmidt and Jan Tranen. Like so many stagings before it, this new production of the story of a woman forced to take account of her strength and choose between loves was able to find audience members with whom to speak and connect more than a century after it was first performed. The first run of the production was sold out, and extended three times by popular demand for thirteen weeks ("Writers' Theater Presents"). The success of the musical adaptation attests to Shaw's ability as a dramatist who "offered a realism that was open to "changing personalities and interpretations of successive actors." Further, Shaw explained,

The fact that a skillfully written play is infinitely more adaptable to all sorts of acting than available acting is to all sorts of plays (the actual conditions thus exactly reversing the desirable ones) finally drives the author to the conclusion that his own view of his

work can only be conveyed by himself. And since he could not act the play singlehanded even if he were a trained actor, he must fall back on his powers of literary expression as other poets and fictionists do. (Williams 245)

Another production that drew audiences away from the Internet was at Milwaukee's American Players Theatre from July to September, 2005. James Bohnen was the director, Susan Angelo played Candida, and Jason Bradley played Marchbanks. Reviewer, Damien Jaques commented on the play's exploration of women's issues that are relevant today and the fact that other works do not approach them as Shaw did:

We can forgive George Bernard Shaw his weakness for polemical windbagery because he wrote "Candida." It's not the only fine play to come from his pen, but it may well be his bravest and most perceptive. "Candida" is still ahead of its time. The physical and emotional strength of women is now acknowledged by a society that has female soldiers, firefighters, police officers and a fourth-place finisher in the Indianapolis 500. But there is still precious little public discussion of the emotional and psychological dynamics in male-female romantic relationships. Why specific people become couples, and how self-effacing strength supports hidden weakness is a topic rarely explored in theater. "Candida" is the shining exception, and the American Players Theatre has opened a stirring production of the classic on its outdoor stage. (Jaques E8)

Not only does "Candida" address social issues that make audiences ponder, but it also provides quirky comedy that makes audiences laugh out loud. Candida is "so classic in her situation and so completely is she master of it, and so clever is the twist Shaw introduces in the end, that this is not just perhaps Shaw's biggest box-office play, but his one persuasively romantic comedy" ("Four Plays by Bernard Shaw" X). This was evident in California Shakespeare Theater's production, which began on September 4, 2011, directed by Jonathan Moscone. The cast consisted of Julie Eccles as Candida, Nick Gabriel as Marchbanks, and Anthony Fusco as the Rev. James Morell. The performances received wild applause and critic, Robert Hurwitt, exclaimed that,

The laughter rolls freely through the Berkeley hills as the suspense builds incrementally from each of the three acts to the next. Even if you know "Candida" well - and the

remarkably timely 1895 comedy of marital manners has long been one of Shaw's most popular - it's impossible not to feel involved in the characters' fate in the production. (Hurwitt)

Shaw livened the world of theater with his wit and humor. Comedy is still being written, still laughed at and applauded. But, the comedy of ideas, the comedy that flaunts the falsity of society and proposed to change it is unique to Shaw who believed that,

By his teasing and his clowning... he could help to make his audience more fully aware of their real situation...If they laughed and ignored the message, or objected to the message as preachiness, it was partly because the status of reality in the plays was equivocal, the special distorted vision of the comic fighting the claim to absolute or realistic truth. (Byrne 381-2)

Although only a select few of the "Candida" productions are covered in this paper, the United States has hosted many, performed in various venues, from college campuses, to small theaters to Broadway. "Candida" will continue to be a fixture in the American theater. One future production will be at Pittsburgh's Public Theater from April 17-May 18, 2014. Gretchen Egolf will play the role of Candida. Ted Pappas, the director stated that "Candida was a smash when it premiered in 1903 and is still a triumph of sophistication" (Public Theater's 2013-13 Season" C5).

Shaw's plays were the railings of an Irishman, in side-splitting scenes and actions, against a restrictive society headed by a Royal Court and the Upper Crust of snobs, mostly shielded from, and impervious to the real world. As we move further into the new millennium we take with us lessons of the past. One of the things we have learned is that one can come from humble beginnings and still have a major impact on an entire industry, and productions of "Candida" keep George Bernard Shaw alive in theaters around the world. Shaw, writing on the theater and his own plays, said "My gift...is a gift of lucidity as well as of eloquence. Lucidity is one of the most precious of gifts: the gift of teaching, the gift of explanation. I can explain anything to anyone. And I love doing it" (Dukore 3). Shaw made it possible for the words of his plays to be remembered. The movie reviewers and critics have taken much pleasure in contemporary revivals of "Candida," and part of the allure of the play lies in the relationship the

viewer can have between the play's characters and her/ his own life and times. The play's social and political themes transcend the cultural changes that have occurred since its first theater production, and continue to be applicable to contemporary life in the twenty-first century.

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