



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

SPIRITUALITY OF G.B. SHAW REFLECTED IN "APPLE CART"

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONT.: To attend virtually any drama by Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw proves to be both an entertainment delight and a spiritual and intellectual challenge for the average playgoer. And this is certainly true of those fortunate enough to attend Shaw's "The Apple Cart" at the Shaw Festival here in Canada for the current season.

Even Shaw's choice of a title seems a strong indication that whatever social, religious or political views an audience is liable to hold, they will be "upset" in a variety of ways by this excellent drama.

The play, written in 1929 and originally presented in Polish at the Teatr Polski in Warsaw that same year, will billed as a "political extravaganza" for a modern audience. It was also presented in English that same year at the Malvern Festival in England, and had its Canadian premier in 1931.

The time of the play originally is projected 40 years or more into the then future of the 1970s. Richard Greenblatt, the capable director for the current production, projected the play into the modern time of the year 2042.

Modernistic costumes, stage design and lighting attempt to project the audience of the intimate Court House Theatre into the future. The play comes close to making Shaw not only a futurist but virtually a prophet.

"What must have seemed fantastical to his audience then is accepted fact today," said director Greenblatt. "American economic and cultural imperialism is rampant. The corporate agenda holds inordinate influence over our everyday lives and our supposedly democratic representations. The 'queer old geographical expressions' of national boundaries are fast disappearing under the flag of globalization. Our great prosperity and excessive wealth are gained on the backs of the 'Third World' and 'undeveloped' countries. Apathy and cynicism about politicians and political processes are at all-time highs."

And so it was that 70 years ago, Shaw warned the world that we had "better teach our children to be better citizens than ourselves."

The focus of the play, then, is the relationship of the fictional King Magnus ("great") of England, understandingly played by David Schurmann, and his eclectic cabinet led by Prime Minister Proteus ("sea god") excellently played by Peter Millard.

And to add a spark into an already volatile mix, Shaw introduces a new cabinet member Boanerges ("son of thunder") who is the president of the Board of Trade. Michael Ball, who plays the role to a high level with his forceful voice and presence, represents the viewpoint of the Labor Movement but also seems, at times, to favor the monarchy.

Other cabinet members, both male and female, add various viewpoints and fine acting abilities to the presentation that eventually will comment on many areas of human conduct and experience.

A good part of the debate at the center of the drama is simply to question whether England, or any similar nation, is living not a democratic reality but a democratic illusion. The cabinet's discussion with King Magnus often focuses on the reality of a constitutional monarchy with its real or imagined powers. When the King offers to abdicate, as King Edward VIII (later the Duke of Windsor) would do not too many years later, the cabinet simply refused to consider such a possibility even though they refer to King Magnus as just a "rubber stamp" type of ruler. This type of ambivalence is truly Shaw trying to make people think about their decisions, and the consequences.

When the entire matter seems to be fairly resolved, Shaw throws a new and upsetting set of circumstances into the mix. The American Ambassador Ms. Vanhattan, ably played by Lynne Cormack, brings the news to King Magnus that the United States will revoke its Declaration of Independence and rejoin the British Commonwealth. However, it begins to unfold that the U.S. is more interested in controlling than joining this new union.

There is an Irish dimension to the situation when Shaw introduces a proposal from the fictional President of Ireland Mickey O'Rourke, that adds much to the confusion of the members of the cabinet of England.

The final resolution of the play is an excellent exercise by G.B. Shaw of making people realize the value of their decisions, and the consequences that naturally follow. And always, Shaw wants his audiences to think deeply about their outlook and assumptions on life.

Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., a delightful Canadian Village, will host this and other plays until Nov. 11th. For a free brochure, or other information, call: 1 (800) 511-SHAW, or contact them at: www.shawfest.sympatico.ca.