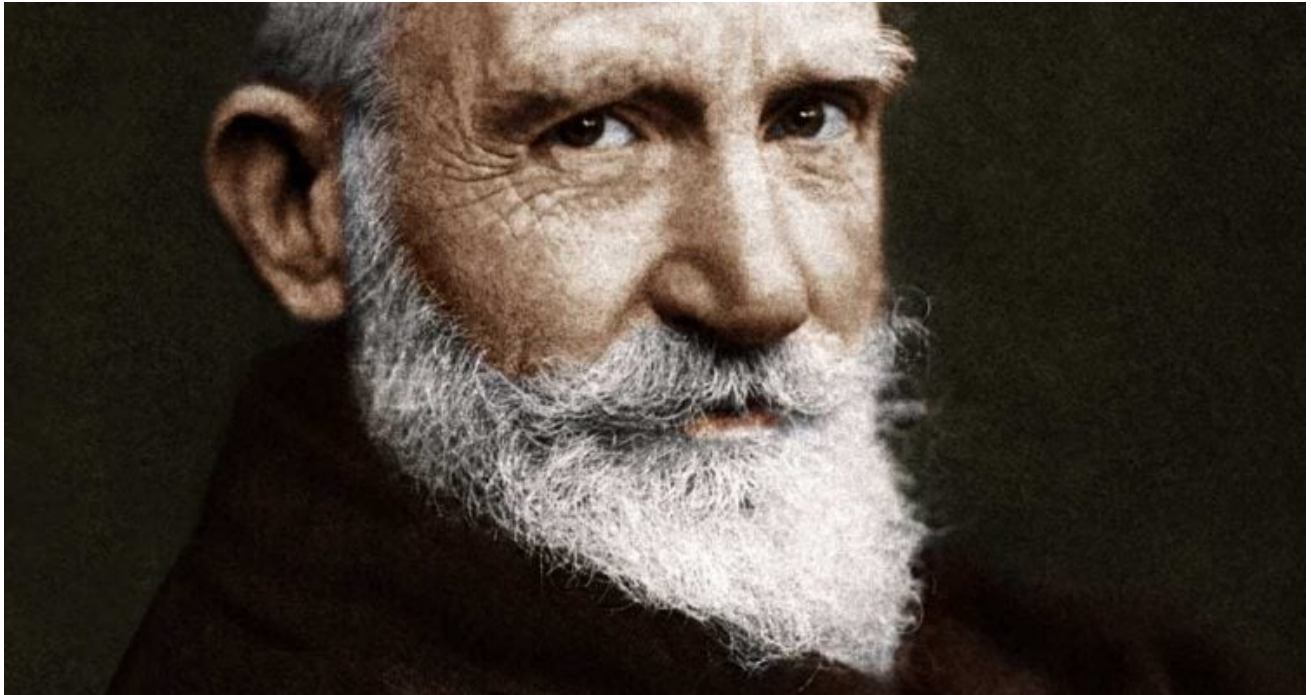


Man and Underman at RADA

British drama students are unhappy with George Bernard Shaw's offstage opinions.

by Theodore Dalrymple



Students at Britain's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art have demanded that the name of its theater be changed. At present, it is named for George Bernard Shaw, who left a portion of his royalties to RADA. (By happy coincidence, the copyright on his work runs out this year, so that henceforth no further money will accrue to the Academy from his estate.)

The students want Shaw's name removed from the theater because he was a fervent eugenicist and made extremely foolish remarks in praise of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. Shaw believed in breeding humans as farmers believe in breeding animals, and once said that unproductive people should be done away with. Needless to say, the academy's administration will accede to the students' demand: it has already declared RADA to have been "institutionally racist" with all the assiduity of someone accused of being a capitalist-roader during the

Cultural Revolution.

My own feelings about George Bernard Shaw are equivocal. He was a high-profile, publicity-seeking crank who espoused many bad causes, and in general preferred a *bon mot* or notoriety to the truth. He called Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister frauds, and to the end of his life did not believe in the germ theory of disease. He likened marriage to legalized prostitution and said many other destructive things to draw attention to himself. How far he believed in his worst pronouncements and expected anyone to be influenced by them is moot.

On the other hand, he was one of the few playwrights in English whose plays can still be performed for the pleasure of an audience a century later. One or two of them might even, without absurdity, be called great. He was undoubtedly very witty, and if he was unbearably opinionated, his prose was always vigorous and quite often elegant. I learned to write from him. Many of his *bons mots* are still nearly as funny as those of Oscar Wilde.

It was as a playwright—one whose fame stretched around the world—not as a thinker or guide to policy that he is commemorated in the name of the theater. His plays have been in print ever since they were written. His achievements in the theater can hardly be denied. He is virtually the founder of the modern drama in English. I can extract at least 20 of his plays from the vaults of my mind.

If every person commemorated for exceptional achievement is to be pulled down from his plinth because he is subsequently found to have been less than a saint (according to current conceptions of sanctity), we shall end up honoring no one except ourselves. We shall not allow performances of Shakespeare because, in his will, he left his wife his second-best bed, thereby revealing (we suppose) his deep misogyny.

The students at RADA should be told that, if they feel so

strongly about the name of the theater, they should go elsewhere. But in the current climate of total pusillanimity and abject surrender, which makes Neville Chamberlain's performance at Munich seem lionhearted, this will never be done.

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