

# Candida

BY GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

## The Persistent Voice

**G**eorge Bernard Shaw was born July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland. The Shaws were an upper-middle class family; their relatives included agriculturists, lawyers, and sportsmen living pleasantly and in comparatively easy circumstances. Bernard's father, however, George Carr Shaw, was unsuccessful both as a breadwinner and a parent. He was an alcoholic throughout most of his adult life, a circumstance which influenced his son to be a lifetime teetotaler. The chief inheritance of Bernard Shaw from his unfortunate father was a sense of humor with a strong tinge of irony.

At the age of 15, after several brief and haphazard attempts at formal schooling, Bernard became a junior clerk in a real-estate office. He filled the post so well that he was promoted to the position of cashier after just a year. Though he remained in the office four and a half years, he for the most part hated it, valuing only the opportunity it gave him to talk with the university men about opera and other cultural topics.

Shaw abandoned Dublin for London in 1876. There he continued his process of self-education in the reading room of the British Museum, in hopes of becoming an author.

In 1882, Shaw heard by chance the American orator, economist, and reformer Henry George speak on the Land Question: George proposed a single tax based on the value of land. With such a tax, society could eliminate poverty, which was the result, George believed, of too many taxes. This experience changed Shaw's life. Though he did not join the 'Single Taxers,' he was interested for the first time in economic questions.

In 1884, Shaw joined a small group of radical thinkers in organizing a Socialist group known as the Fabian Society. The name came from a Roman statesman, Quintus Fabius

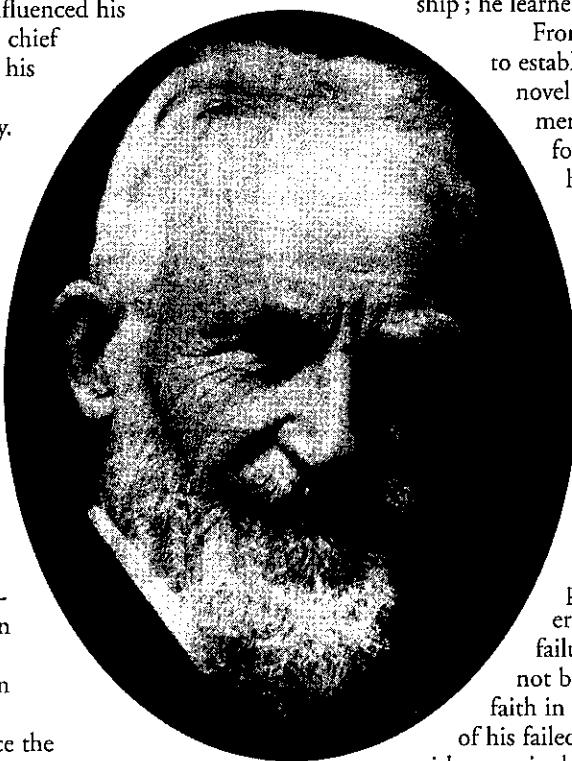
Maximus, known as the "great delayer" because of his reluctance to fight in the war against Carthage. The Fabians believed in the equal distribution of wealth and in equality of income from birth to death, a revolution which they intended to bring about by gradual change through the use of ballots, not bullets. Shaw's writing and speaking for the group were an important part of his literary 'apprenticeship'; he learned to write with clarity and grace.

From 1879 to 1883, Shaw attempted to establish himself as a novelist. His first novel was entitled (as he said, "with merciless fitness") *Immaturity*. After four more novels, each unsuccessful, he ended his efforts as a novelist.

For almost a decade Shaw devoted himself to reviewing art, music, and drama. In 1892, he attempted to launch a career as a playwright with the manuscript *Widower's Houses*. Like Shaw's novels, however, the play was a failure. His second dramatic effort, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, was highly controversial. Focusing on a "woman who owns and manages brothels in every big city in Europe and is proud of it," the play was considered offensive and revolting. These failures were trying to Shaw, but did not bring him to despair. He never lost faith in himself or his mission. (As he said of his failed novels, "Fifty or sixty refusals without a single acceptance forced me into a fierce self-sufficiency.")

Shaw continued writing, only this time he resolved to stop writing "unpleasant" plays that would surely be rejected. His next play, *Arms and the Man*, was his first success. In fact, Oscar Straus, the famous Viennese composer of operettas, made an unauthorized musical version of the play, *The Chocolate Soldier*, which brought in even more money than *Arms and the Man*. Although Shaw was

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frequently offered a share of the royalties, he refused to have anything to do with it. But when a motion-picture version was projected, Shaw brought legal action which stopped filming; he won damages of eight hundred pounds. Characteristically, Shaw never bothered to collect the money.

Shaw referred to his next "pleasant" play, *Candida*, as Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in reverse. In Shaw's play, the husband, Rev. Morell, discovers that it is he—not his wife—who is the doll of the household. Critics speculated that the character of the young poet Marchbanks was the playwright himself; Shaw stated that the idea gave him a "shock that would have killed any other man of my age."

George Bernard Shaw married Charlotte Townshend, a young Irish woman of great wealth, on June 1, 1898. The bridegroom was forty-two; the bride, forty-one. From all accounts, it was a happy marriage. Shortly after his wedding, Shaw completed *Caesar and Cleopatra*—ironically, a play whose theme is the denial of romantic love. This play was followed by a steady stream of dramatic successes—including *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Pygmalion* (1914), *Heartbreak House* (1920), and many others—that firmly established Shaw as both a popular and a prolific playwright. Shaw also continued to write for the Fabian Society and a number of other groups and causes for which he was active (his anti-war pamphlets, issued in 1914, made Shaw many enemies and lost him many friends).

In the year 1924, Shaw launched the play that was to be the climax of his career, *Saint Joan*. Though he lived on for more than a

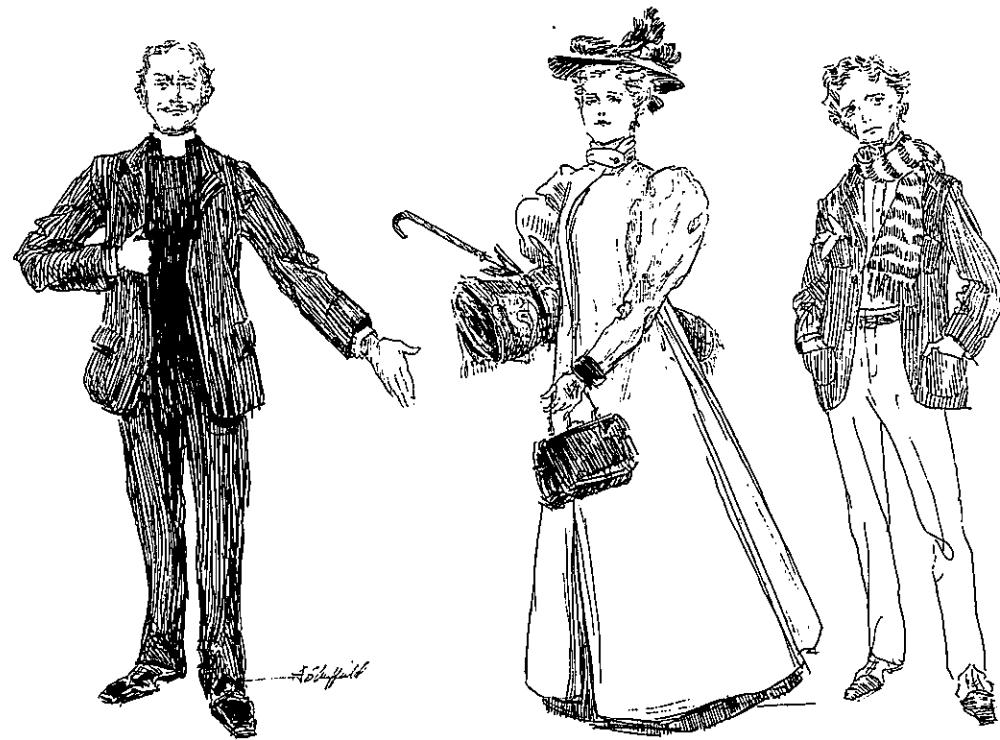
quarter of a century, nothing Shaw wrote afterwards was of comparable importance. Joan is one of Shaw's great characters. "She is," as one critic declared, "the last and most radiant in the long gallery of women that testify to his deep reverence for the high function of the feminine element in life."

One year later, Shaw received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Though many honors had been offered to him, this was the first he accepted. He accepted the prize money in order to establish a foundation to encourage understanding and interchange of literature and art between Sweden and the British Isles. One accomplishment of this was the transla-

tion of some of Strindberg's plays for the first time into English.

In the twenty-five years remaining to him, Shaw wrote a dozen plays, although none matched his work prior to 1925. He also wrote nonfiction books and a religious tale and lectured on a wide range of public issues.

Shaw died on November 2, 1950, at the age of ninety-four. Following the announcement of his death, all the lights of Broadway were dimmed for five minutes. Shaw left the largest literary estate in English history. He continues to live as an author and to survive on the stages and screens of two continents almost half a century after his death. ★



**G**eorge Bernard Shaw's "pleasant play," *Candida* (pronounced Cán-di-da), is set in the north-east quarter of London in the year 1894. It takes place in the home of the Reverend Mr. James Morell, a Christian Socialist, and his wife, Candida. The play opens with Morell adding to his already overflowing calendar of lecture dates with his secretary, Miss Prosperine ("Prossy") Garnett. He is soon joined by his curate, Alexander ("Lexy") Mill, who displays an unflagging admiration of Morell—an admiration rivaled only by that of Prossy.

It is an important day, the much-awaited return of Candida from a short holiday. Morell is brimming with excitement and even sends Lexy out to do the daily rounds so he may fully enjoy his wife's company. His anticipation is soon soured by an unexpected visit from Candida's father, Mr. Burgess.

Burgess is a coarse man made "sordid by the compulsory selfishness of petty commerce." He and Morell are polar opposites. While Morell has just given his own scarf to

# Candida

## A SYNOPSIS

Lexy to wear before sending him out in the cold, Burgess has been known to offer his workers such low wages that it would have "driven them to the streets to keep body and soul together."

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Candida. She has travelled with a friend of the family, Eugene Marchbanks, a young man whom Morell discovered sleeping on the Embankment. Although Eugene keeps the appearance and living standards of a common laborer, he is an earl and a poet. He is a strange, shy youth of eighteen whose nervousness contrasts strongly with Morell's firm

self-assurance.

Morell soon learns that Eugene is in love with Candida. At first he is amused by this infatuation, but he becomes disconcerted when Eugene criticizes his relationship with Candida and claims that Morell is both undeserving of Candida and incapable of understanding her. Morell begins to doubt himself and wonder whether Eugene has not had some encouragement in these fancies from Candida.

In an attempt to decipher his wife's heart, Morell leaves Candida alone with Eugene while he gives a lecture that he had previously canceled. Eugene, afraid to put his claims to Candida's heart to the test, decides to do the noble thing. Rather than declaring his love, he reads Candida poetry throughout most of the evening. He is seated on the floor, resting his head on her knee, when Morell returns.

Frustrated by this apparently romantic scene, Morell forces Candida to "choose" between the two. Candida's response surprises Morell—and most playgoers, as well. ★

# G. B. Shaw

**E**ven though *Candida* was written just over 100 years ago, co-director Scott Wentworth sees the play in a very contemporary light: "Shaw was a modernist, in all senses of the word. He was a revolutionary. He was a critic of the theatre, not only in his critical writings, but in the plays themselves, which were always a criticism of what had come before and a reinvention of what was to come after. At the time he was writing, realism was the revolutionary thing in theatre, as opposed to outmoded convention.

"But Shaw never lost that soapbox; the orator in him always comes out. So even thought this is a realistic world that Shaw constructs for his characters, you feel them bursting out of it all the time in all the plays. They are always climbing on soapboxes, not necessarily the way they would in real life, but the way Shaw wishes people would do, passionately, in their own living rooms. Even at its most realistic, there is always in Shaw that wonderful acknowledgement of taking up the public space and public time and get-

ting ideas out into that air

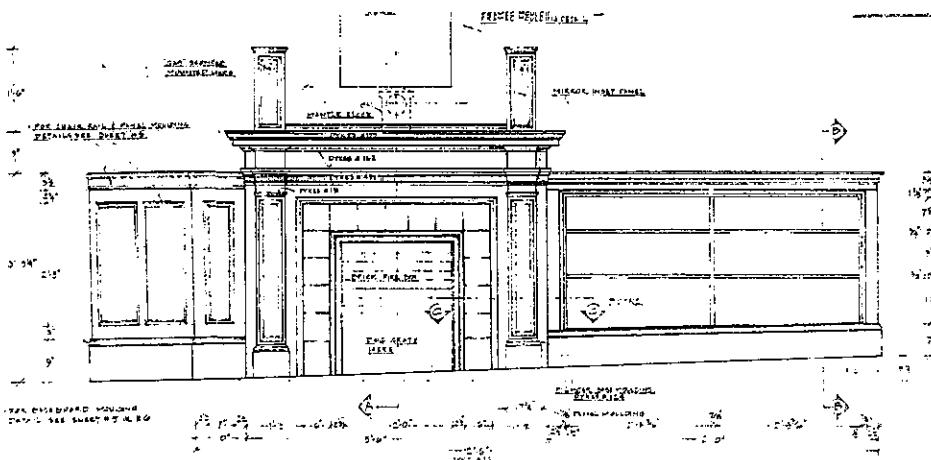
"And fortunately, in Shaw's case, this is done with great humor. In Ibsen and Strindberg, there's a sort of heaviness to confronting the 20th century. It must have been terrifying at the turn of the century, facing this new world—well look, we're doing the same thing now, in our lives. It is quite extraordinary standing there and witnessing and even being a part of the collapse of the old regime and not yet knowing what will come up in its place.

"So that lighter side of Shaw is an important fillip. Many Shaw productions I've seen are too heavy; the actors are acting all the things that Shaw wrote about the plays instead of what the plays are. There is a spirit of anarchy and pranksterism in the plays which leavens Shaw, the social critic. You shouldn't walk into the theatre thinking, oh, this is going to be something good for me. Rather, it is something you will naturally enjoy because it shines a light on a part of humanity that is touching or ridiculous or

perhaps important, depending on your point of view."

Scenic and costume designer for the IRT production is Ann Sheffield. Although Shaw's plays are often performed in traditional box sets, this production is slightly different. When the audience arrives at the IRT, they will see screens across the front of the stage with a black-and-white sketch depicting the street where the Morells live (see illustration on the back of this study guide). As the play begins, these screens will part to reveal the scene, much as a curtain would have done in Shaw's day. Black and white also gives way to color, suggesting the rich lives the Morells share despite their rather drab surroundings. The scene depicted is somewhat similar to a traditional box set, but only half-walls will indicate the boundaries of the Morell's workroom, giving the space a more open feeling. Downstage, near the audience, there is a large open area freeing the actors from the limitations of furniture and creating an open forum for the play's invigorating Shavian debates.

"Shaw's settings are not dynamic spaces," suggests Wentworth, "they're ordinary. They're only of romantic interest to us because it's 100 years later and we think Victorian stuff is romantic and beautiful. But at the time, they were purposefully mundane spaces, workman's cottages and middle-class workrooms, and what made them interesting was the clash of passion and ideas and the fire and light that is created by people desperately trying to re-invent their little part of the world." 



(above)

Working drawings by scenic designer Ann Sheffield for the stage right fireplace wall in *Candida*. The floor line is drawn at an angle because the stage is raked; that is, the stage floor slopes downhill towards the audience.

(opposite and left)

Preliminary costume sketches by Ann Sheffield for (left to right) Rev. Morell, *Candida*, *Marchbanks*, *Burgess*, *Prossy*, and *Lexy*.

# The World of the Play

George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* is set in the late nineteenth century, in the north-east quarter of London, among the lower middle class. This world is inhabited by a new and somewhat insecure faction. It is a faction of families who can afford a "daily"—a young girl who comes in to do the scrubbing, cleaning, and sweeping, all the hard work of maintaining a house without electricity. This "daily" is a symbol of achievement; she is a status symbol. She proves that this new faction can have servants just like the governing classes.

This group goes to church because the "best" people go to church. They go to lectures to improve themselves. They read newspapers. They are eager for education because they know that education gives power. They are modern and conservative at the same time. Underneath the mask of nineteenth century strangeness—the long dresses, bowler hats, and rigid social structures—are people very like ourselves, people much like those who live in the suburbs of any great city at



this or any other time.

It is in this kind of environment that *Candida* was brought up. Her father, a textile manufacturer, raised her in one of the monotonous, dirty homes that line the damp streets of the north-east quarter of London. She has married a little above her original station in life. Rev. Morell is an intelligent Church of England parson—the shepherd of those "best" people who attend church, the speaker at those lectures which promise education and self-improvement. *Candida* has entered a

world of "good works," children, a socially conscious husband, and a (seemingly) ordinary household.

Although the Morells do not share the middle-class snobbery of their neighbors—their "daily" is a necessary part of the household function, not a status symbol—they do share their neighbors' middle-class lifestyle. It is one of Shaw's theatrical delights that from the midst of such ordinary surroundings can spring a play so full of wit and humor and ingenious ideas. ★

## The Fabian Society & the Social Reform Movements of the 1800s

The Fabian Society was founded in 1883-84 by a small group in London who aimed at "reconstructing society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities." In 1889, the society published *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, edited by George Bernard Shaw, which has since then sold in large numbers.

To put it simply, the Fabians' aim was the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people; they felt this goal could be reached only through extensive economic action by the state. The Fabians put their faith in evolutionary socialism rather than revolution; they regarded the state as a social machine to be captured and used for the promotion of social welfare, not as an instrument of class domination to be overthrown.

The society's national membership reached its peak in 1946 with 5,089 members. Thereafter, it declined sharply.

The principal activities of the society are promoting socialism and educating the public on socialist lines through meetings, lectures, discussion groups, conferences, pamphlets, and books. Much of the impact of Fabianism was through the gradual permeation of Fabian ideas among teachers, civil servants, politicians, trade-union officials,

and others in influential positions. The work of the society tended to become more specialized in dealing with such subjects as economic planning, social security, consumers' councils, monetary policy, and housing; but leaders of the society also encouraged the organization to deal with the problems of man in society, in order to discover how far people might aspire toward equality, a classless society, and a widely dispersed power of self-government.

The Fabian Society was one of many such political-philosophical organizations created in the 19th century. The rise of the Industrial Revolution, with its broken promises of better working conditions and its contrasts of extreme wealth for a few and extreme poverty for many, led many thinking people to re-evaluate social and moral traditions and to search for new and more effective methods of social and economic governance. Discussion and debate were foremost among the activities of these organizations, and attending such lectures and meetings was a common activity among certain people. An eloquent and dynamic speaker (such as Rev. Morell in *Candida* or, for that matter, Shaw himself) would indeed have a full calendar of speaking engagements with these many groups. ★

*The sketch above, by designer Ann Sheffield, will be used for a series of scrims that function like a proscenium curtain for *Candida*. The sketch represents the neighborhood in which the Morells live in a north-east section of London.*

## IRT PLAY GUIDE

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