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Shaw's Epic Theater

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Directing is often defined as a process of solving problems. Rehearsals must address issues from the mundane, such as crowd control and the movement of sets and props, to the more abstract, such as the playwright's references and themes. Choosing to direct new productions of classic plays presents its own set of challenges or problems to be solved: What fresh insights can this specific director and company bring to this play? What in the play speaks to audiences across periods? At what point do interpretive choices allow the play to be seen anew or obscure the play with the director's desire to provide an original concept? In his 2003 production of *Misalliance* at the Shaw Festival, director boldly chose to use antirealistic Brechtian techniques. The use of these techniques raised a new possibility in staging. In the past, many theater professionals have based their staging of Shaw on a mistaken belief that his plays are inherently realistic, leaving productions mired in fourth-wall realism. Here was a new option: to take Shaw at his antirealistic word in production choice and, in fact, to present a discussion.

Misalliance, although it closed after only eleven performances in 1910 and was not revived again until the 1930s, has recently enjoyed a very busy and popular life in production. This revival of interest is not surprising considering the play's focus on parents and children, gender roles, and marital choices and its heightened theatricality: characters parachute out of the sky, engage in a *La Ronde*-like dance of relationships, and find themselves entangled in a sensationalist subplot featuring revenge and a decades-old secret.

From a directing point of view, *Misalliance* presents several staging issues. The play is approximately 100 pages with no act or scene breaks. Each familiar conflict and plot line is undermined at its inception, disrupting audience expectations. Shaw's own descriptions of the setting are extremely realistic, seeming to discourage experimental or avant-garde approaches. His stage designs, sent for the first New York production, called for a hat stand, writing table, worktable, sideboard,

rhododendrons, and "a distant landscape of fir clad hills."¹ Tarleton repeatedly advises the other characters to read authors [End Page 135] with whom an audience, particularly a twenty-first-century audience, might be unfamiliar. The most difficult matter of all is how to find a style for a play that, when it was first produced, was called "a debating society of a lunatic asylum" and which boasts a subtitle declaring it to be "a debate in one sitting."² Recent reviews continue to condemn the play as "garrulous," with "a script that exhausts patience and a plot that surpasses belief"—not so far off from the *Times* reviewer of 1910 who said that "characters do not keep to the point because there is no point to keep to."³ As Stanley Weintraub points out, contemporary directors have largely solved these problems by presenting the play as a French farce, with its multiple entrances, exits, and hidden spaces.⁴ While the farcical model may accurately embody the play's chaotic tone, its adoption diminishes the impact of the discussion.

The problem with these productions has been, perhaps, that they try to fit the play into a style for which it was not intended, reflecting a dullness of approach rather than of material. Shaw decried the nineteenth-century practices of both melodrama and the well-made plays churned out by Sardou and Scribe, even coining the term *Sardoodledom* to describe their well-oiled but trivial machinations. He called such works "cats' cradles, clockwork mice, mechanical rabbits" with plots like "jig-saw puzzle[s]."⁵ In 1894 he wrote that "stage realism is a contradiction in terms," and thirty years later, in a letter to Alexander Bashky, he asked, "[H]ave I ever been what you call a representationist or a realist?"⁶ Martin Meisel points out that Shaw objected to the well...

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