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The decade of the 1930s was a time of both economic turmoil and international belligerence. In 1935, Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. In 1936, Adolf Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles by moving troops into the demilitarized Rhineland, and Francisco Franco, assisted by these fascist allies, embroiled Spain in a civil war. In 1937, the Japanese bombed an American gunboat on a Chinese river. In 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Prompted by the growing threat of war, the findings of the Nye Committee on abuses during World War I, and a strong anti-interventionist movement, the U.S. Congress passed a series of neutrality acts and in 1937 proposed a constitutional amendment requiring a national referendum before war could be declared.¹

Conservatives feared that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was creating a socialist state, liberals feared that he intended to institute a capitalist-fascist state, and many feared a new war in Europe.² During this inflammatory period, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) produced a well-known play by a politically controversial author that had war as one of its themes: Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*.

Arms and the Man was Shaw's first play to receive a production in London's West End, the first to be performed in both the United States and Germany, the first to inspire a musical version (*The Chocolate Soldier*), the first to become a full-length motion picture, and the first to credit Shaw as his own director.³ Critics have noted the play's antiwar sentiments since its premiere. William Archer stated that Shaw tried "to

knock the stuffing, so to speak, out of war; to contrast a romantic girl's ideal of battle and its heroic raptures, with the sordid reality as it appears to a professional soldier."⁴

The FTP's productions of *Arms and the Man* were the first live performances of a Shavian drama in all but one city, and these productions were given in widely different parts of the United States. In addition, although the FTP was originated to employ jobless theater workers and to enhance the possibility of their employment in commercial theater, Hallie Flanagan, national director of the FTP, also hoped to develop a program that would go beyond the objective of work relief and lay the groundwork for a national theater that advocated social awareness and civic responsibility.⁵

Indeed, Shaw's social awareness and didacticism led to the FTP's relationship with him from 1937 through the end of the project in 1939.⁶ During this period, he and Flanagan enjoyed a business and artistic relationship that both parties prized.⁷ Originally she planned a Shavian "cycle" that would include twelve plays, and many FTP companies wanted to do his plays.⁸ The FTP eventually produced nine of Shaw's plays in cities across the country.⁹

Shaw, who had strong views on almost everything, was a prominent figure during the late 1930s. In *Geneva* and elsewhere, his views on Hitler and Mussolini kept his name and opinions on both the drama and editorial pages of the *New York Times*.¹⁰ Given Flanagan's goals, the pertinence of the play's theme of war, and its outspoken author, *Arms and the Man* seems a particularly good choice. We might expect, therefore, that the FTP's productions of it would highlight issues of militarism, social awareness, and civic responsibility. The FTP's productions of Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*, for example, had incorporated contemporary racial, religious, and political issues through costume and scenic design. Without changing Shaw's text, they had linked religious repression with anti-black and anti-Jewish discrimination, and Caesar with Hitler. All five productions of *Androcles and the Lion* were critical and popular successes, and one was slated to appear in the WPA Pavilion for the New York World's Fair. The time slot was too short, however, and the production did not do so.¹¹

The FTP produced *Arms and the Man* in four cities: San Diego on 27 October 1937; Salem, Massachusetts, on 15 November 1937; Des Moines on 26 November 1937 (followed by a tour of at least nine other cities throughout Iowa); and Detroit on 1 March 1938 (followed by a tour of several suburban neighborhoods).¹² Each production filed a report with the FTP's national office that included summaries from the director and from the design and technical staffs, production sketches, photographs,

and press clippings. The directorial attitudes, varying levels of social commentary these productions contained, differences among them, and their critical reception may reveal more about both the FTP and Shaw's play.

Of the four directors of *Arms and the Man*, only Detroit's Verner Haldene was at all sensitive to the play or to Shaw's underlying criticism of romantic ideals of love and war. Haldene writes, "Like O'Neill, Shaw is one of our best writers for the theater . . . [and] is a master at stinging satire, and high comedy." He apparently liked the play: *Arms and the Man* "is not dated. His [Shaw's] political and social implications seem and play as up-to-the-minute as his later writings."¹³ The prompt book for this production also pays special attention to Shaw's themes of militarism. It includes a preface arguing that the play's most timely subject is "barbarity—militarism—which raises its horrid head from time to time to cast a doubt on the reality of our civilization."¹⁴

This attention to Shaw's social satire is in stark contrast to the other three directors' reports. San Diego's director, whose name does not appear on the program or in the report, offered what appears to be an apology:

This is a Shaw play! Isn't that sufficient to describe *Arms and the Man*? Shaw's lines are never clever. One doesn't have to interpret lines in a Shaw play—the actor merely speaks them and he depends on situations to pull him through a dull evening's entertainment. . . . Shaw is recommended for students of ancient history [and] is not recommended for entertainment-seeking audiences.¹⁵

Salem's director, Eliot Duvey, seems more sympathetic. He reported that the play's mood was "light and spirited" and that it required actors who "had demonstrated possession of a comedy sense of the higher order." His goal was to create "a colorful, pictorial effect with concentration on important relevant details and elimination of unnecessary details," but he fails to elaborate on these "details."¹⁶ Des Moines's director, Clarence Talbot, reported similar concerns about the play:

When the comedy in this is played broad enough to reach large audiences, it loses [*sic*] some of its subtlety and easily slips over into what is termed the "menace of the modern theater." . . . Comedy lines and situations were pointed up and seldom, if ever, was serious philosophy allowed to break through the light satirical comedy.¹⁷

Given this range of directorial viewpoints, it is unsurprising that critical reception was equally varied. In Detroit, Haldene's attempts to illuminate Shaw's satire appear to have been successful. One reviewer noted,

If you are a thorough-going pacifist, you might . . . applaud again the way [Shaw] makes tomfoolery of Balkan and all wars in general and monkeys of military men. If you have a social consciousness too, there is plenty to muse upon, and if your intellectual dish is satire, you will find that also in . . . an enthusiastic if not stellar reading.¹⁸

Although not a rave, this review recommends that the evening would be well spent.

Reviews in the other three locations suggest a disappointing superficiality in both the directors and critics. In San Diego, one reviewer noted that although Shavian drama was rarely performed, "none has lines more suited to the present moment than *Arms and the Man*." He did not cite any aspect of the production to substantiate his opinion of the text. Another explained that "the Federal Players give the . . . story of war, intrigue and love as fine a production as any ever seen here," but does not explain how. A third critic reported that while the play "failed to prove a sensational drawing card," it was "a better-than-expected performance" and then speculated that *Arms and the Man* "doesn't figure to [be as popular as] *Boy Meets Girl*, but that's only because Shavian humor is less widespread in its appeal."¹⁹ In Massachusetts, a reviewer wrote that the play was noted for the "shattering of illusions and ideals" and "a merry wit and caustic satire," but did not suggest that the production embodied these qualities.²⁰

In Iowa, the Des Moines production's tour generated advance publicity that highlighted the "delightful comedy romance filled with dry wit."²¹ Although some advance press intimated more serious and relevant tones for the play—the Traer *Star-Clipper*, for example, reported that advance ticket sales were high and that the townspeople were eager to see Shaw's "timely satire on war"—no review of the production suggests that it fulfilled that promise. Critics merely reported a "well-acted" production for which "the audience . . . felt well repaid for their attendance." No review mentions the play's social or political satire.²²

These reviews may have been shaped, in part, by the FTP's own publicity. In San Diego, Alfred Cross, district supervisor for the FTP, touted "the picturesque locale, the colorful characters, the clever dialogue and

humorous situations.”²³ In Iowa, a publicity flyer encouraged audiences to see Shaw’s “Popular Romantic Comedy Hit: Romance in Love and War set in a mythical Balkan Kingdom.”²⁴ Notably absent was an appeal to the serious ideas that underpin this play.

An indifferent review is rarely the result of publicity or a critic’s indigestion; the theater artists—chiefly actors, directors, designers—are responsible. If Iowa’s production may serve as an example, a lack of theatrical talent may have been the most damaging weakness in these productions. Hallie Flanagan, J. Howard Miller, the FTP’s acting national director, and Herbert Ashton, Jr., the regional director, attended the Des Moines production of *Arms and the Man* when it played on tour in Davenport, Iowa. Although the production was more than a week old, several parts were recast following their visit. Despite these changes, Flanagan shut down the Des Moines project two months later, in January 1938, because of “the combination of none too strong talent and indifferent support.”²⁵ There is no evidence that Flanagan saw any of the other productions, but if she had seen them, there might have been similar scenarios in Salem and San Diego.

Detroit’s production was the only one to highlight the more serious concerns that the play embodies. In fact, it may have overemphasized the atmosphere of war. One critic noted that the pistol shots of the first act sounded “like trench mortars going off in the orchestra pit.”²⁶ This production is unique not only in its relative success in presenting a Shavian satire, but also in its context. The Detroit project shared its stage with movies as part of a double bill in the Cinema Theater. The reviews all praised *Arms and the Man* but gave most of their attention to the other half of the bill, a Soviet film, *Conquerors of the Arctic*.²⁷

Soviet documentary films were relatively common during the 1930s, and *Conquerors of the Arctic* had won the Paris International Exhibition in 1937.²⁸ Although the coupling of a Shavian play with a Soviet film may imply that the producers of the Cinema Theater believed this play had a leftist appeal, there is no evidence to suggest that there were any communist or socialist links to this production. Haldene’s report reveals a less superficial understanding of the play than the other reports, but his staging was not politically or theatrically “progressive,” to use a term of the period. If the FTP was riddled with communists, as was widely alleged, they missed this dramatic opportunity, for there is no evidence that progressive ideas influenced any of these productions.

In sum, three of the four FTP productions of *Arms and the Man* made no attempt to illustrate or reinforce any of the controversial issues embedded within the text. They viewed the play primarily as a fluffy romantic comedy, and the productions were at most only marginally successful. Only

Detroit's production clearly regarded Shaw's text as potential social satire, and only that production prompted a uniformly favorable response from the press.

The failure of three productions to treat *Arms and the Man* as social satire is especially unexpected when we consider Shaw's own efforts as director to heighten both the dramatic power and biting satire of his play through theatrical elements.²⁹ The play had proved vital and timely when it was revived following World War I,³⁰ and the FTP had responded to world events in other productions—notably Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, which opened simultaneously in twenty-one theaters across the United States, and the aforementioned *Androcles and the Lion*.³¹

How can we explain these apparent incongruities? Shaw's Preface may offer clues. Success for *Arms and the Man*, he argues, depends “not only on *nuances* of execution quite beyond the average skill produced by the routine of the English stage in its present condition, but on a perfectly sincere and straightforward conception of states of mind which still seem cynically perverse to most people.”³² This prescient observation suggests that at least two factors were at play: first, a lack of theatrical skill within the FTP; second, a reluctance by both artists and critics (and, by implication, audiences) to face these issues.

As for the lack of talent, the productions in San Diego, Salem, and Des Moines were clearly substandard despite Flanagan's promise to Shaw that only “groups where we have a high degree of skill in acting and direction” would be allowed to mount a Shavian production.³³ One wonders how she might have kept her promise. Many chroniclers of the FTP have sung high praises for its “outstanding achievements”³⁴ and its long series of “miracles.”³⁵ In the case of *Arms and the Man*, the FTP was not up to Shavian, or perhaps to its own, standards. Even Shaw's less complicated works require more than average talent.

As for the lack of social awareness among both directors and reviewers, few appear to have perceived that their traditional notions about love and war were being challenged. In the case of *Arms and the Man*, our socially aware and vital national theater had skirted “the great debate” over America's military role during a particularly troubled time.³⁶

It may be, as Eric Bentley wrote a decade later, that the construction of both/and is the most effective way to approach Shaw. When one considers Shaw's plays as both comedy and social commentary, the production will more likely succeed.³⁷ When *Arms and the Man* was viewed as an inadequate substitute for “boy meets girl,” it was unsuccessful. If a recent Equity production at Ivoryton Playhouse serves as an example, directors, actors, and audiences still view the play as romantic fluff.³⁸ Although the FTP missed the mark in this case, it was the first to present Shavian plays to a national audience.

Notes

1. For a more detailed analysis of world events and American reaction, see Robert A. Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965); Robert A. Divine, ed., *Causes and Consequences of World War II* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969); Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against the War: The American Peace Movement, 1941–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Wayne S. Cole, *Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle Against American Intervention in World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); and Patrick J. Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler: America's Entry into World War II* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987).
2. Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 84–85.
3. Bernard F. Dukore, ed., *Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man: A Composite Production Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. xi.
4. T. F. Evans, ed., *Shaw: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 60–63.
5. See Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1940), p. 265; and Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935–1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 94.
6. See Michael O'Hara, "On The Rocks and the Federal Theatre," *Shaw* 12 (1992): 79–88.
7. See "Shaw Correspondence," Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, Special Collections and Archives, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia (hereafter referred to as FTP Collection); and "Shaw Correspondence," Works Progress Administration Collection: The Federal Theatre Project, Record Group 69, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (hereafter referred to as Record Group 69).
8. "Shaw Correspondence," Record Group 69.
9. Flanagan, *Arena*, p. 193; "Shaw Correspondence," Record Group 69; and Flanagan, New York, to Shaw, London, 23 September 1937, File Copy, Record Group 69.
10. See Brooks Atkinson, "Flurry on the Shaw Exchange," *New York Times*, 21 August 1938, IX, p. 1; "Get Things Done," *New York Times*, 7 August 1938, IV, p. 8; and James B. Reston, "After the War What? British Writers Debate the Shape of Things to Come," *New York Times*, 19 November 1939, VII, p. 3. Indeed, Shaw's *Common Sense about the War*, originally written in reaction to World War I, remained controversial in 1937. See Edmund Wilson, "Bernard Shaw at Eighty," *Atlantic Monthly* 161 (February 1938): 202, 205.
11. See "Production Report" files for *Androcles and the Lion* in Seattle, Los Angeles, Denver, Atlanta, and New York, FTP Collection.
12. Flanagan notes in her history of the FTP that *Arms and the Man* was produced in "San Diego +5" which suggests that a total of six groups may have produced the play. Available evidence documents only four productions: San Diego; Salem, Mass.; Des Moines, Iowa; and Detroit. That two of these productions toured extensively within their states may be the source of discrepancy.
13. "Director's Report," in the "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Detroit, Michigan, 1937," FTP Collection.
14. "Script #S83 (5), *Arms and the Man*," FTP Collection, p. 3.
15. "Director's Report," in the "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, San Diego Project, 1937," FTP Collection.
16. "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Salem, Massachusetts Project, 1937," FTP Collection.

17. "Director's Report," in the "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Des Moines, Iowa, 1937," FTP Collection.
18. "The New Play," *Detroit News*, 2 March 1938, press clipping in "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Detroit, 1938," FTP Collection.
19. "Press Notices" hand-copied from the *San Diego Tribune*, *San Diego Union*, and *San Diego Sun* in the "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, San Diego Project, 1937," FTP Collection.
20. "Famous Play by Shaw Staged at Empire Theater," *Salem Evening News*, 17 November 1937, press clipping in the "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Salem, Massachusetts Project, 1937," FTP Collection.
21. "Arrangements For Federal Comedy Made," and "South City to Boost Lincoln High Stadium Fund by Attending Play," advance press clippings in "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Des Moines, Iowa, 1937," FTP Collection.
22. "'Arms and the Man' at Opera House in Traer on Thanksgiving Night"; "Play Is Given Good Reception"; and "Federal Players Offer Shaw Play Here Last Night"; press clippings in "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Des Moines, Iowa, 1937," FTP Collection.
23. "Press release," 20 October 1937, in "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, San Diego, 1937," FTP Collection.
24. "Playbill for *Arms and the Man* for Roosevelt High School, Des Moines, Iowa," Playbill File, FTP Collection.
25. Flanagan, *Arena*, p. 165.
26. "The New Play," press clipping in "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Detroit, 1938," FTP Collection.
27. "Production Report for *Arms and the Man*, Detroit, Michigan, 1937," FTP Collection.
28. See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 71ff., 85ff. See also "At the Cameo, *Conquerors of the Arctic*," *New York Times*, 22 November 1937, p. 15.
29. Dukore, *Arms and the Man*, pp. xxx–xxxiii.
30. *Ibid.*, p. xxx.
31. See Flanagan, *Arena*, pp. 115–29.
32. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 1:381.
33. Flanagan to Shaw, 7 May 1937, Record Group 69.
34. Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 231.
35. Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 250.
36. See note 1, above.
37. See Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. xvi; and Bernard F. Dukore, *Bernard Shaw, Playwright* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), p. 162.
38. Jane Stanton, director, Ivoryton Playhouse, Ivoryton, Conn., 3 July 1992.