ENG 5061-031: The surrealist George Bernard Shaw

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Beginning in the 1890s, George Bernard Shaw transformed British drama, bringing to it intellectual substance, ethical imperatives, and modernity itself, setting the theatrical course for the rest of the century. At first glance, the term “surrealist” applied to Shaw seems itself a surreal move. His early works are grounded in a kind of didactic realism, characterized by furious drawing-room moralizing and quite dated shock and awe tactics. The plays from his middle period are the most famous and epitomize the style of modern drama with which he is most associated: the discussion play. Even his reputation among academics and critics is largely that of what one contemporary director calls “a boring old geezer lecturing everybody...always knowing better than anyone else what was wrong with everything...the kind of uneven-tempered old farmer who would chase one out of his field with a stick”. In the past two decades, however, this common view of Shaw and his plays seems to be changing as the word “surrealism” has increasingly appeared in conversations about Shaw’s work, especially among theater practitioners. Within such a context, his later plays, generally written off as the result of senile decline or the musings of a lunatic, may actually be the fullest expression of his dramaturgical vision.
In this course, we will interrogate this notion of the “Shavian surreal” over the course of six major plays, juxtaposing our readings of them with the works of other contemporary artists (including Luis Bunuel, Roger Vitrac, Rene Magritte, Salvador Dali, and J.M. Barrie), theorists (including Andre Breton and Antonin Artaud), and scholars. Part of our work together will involve liberating the plays from their paratextual prisons, resisting the MacGuffin lure of Shaw’s voluminous Prefaces and his own mythologized persona and freeing ourselves to analyze what is apt and what is misleading about situating Shaw within the surrealist tradition.

Obviously, this is not in any sense an exhaustive survey course in either modern British drama or even Shaw’s entire body of work but a discussion-based seminar that will ideally provide those new to the field with places to get acquainted and those who have some background in it opportunities to move deeper. Requirements will include short papers, a scholarly footnote, a significant research project, and active, vigorous class participation.

In fact, this course is itself a kind of experiment. Just as surrealism is founded upon unexpected juxtaposition, this course (itself a kind of experiment) will situate Shaw’s plays in relation to the work of surrealist artists. This direction in Shaw’s dramaturgy is coextensive with his movement away from issue-oriented realism and into explorations of what we might nowadays term the postmodern and the postcolonial. The final play in the course will bring together all three of these strands.

Course Policies

1. This is a class for voracious readers. There are quite a few different kinds of texts on the syllabus (and certainly additional critical and creative works that will be required for your research papers), and, while some of them are short, several are very long and many are quite difficult. If you are not prepared to put in eight to ten hours a week outside of class on your reading, you are probably in the wrong class. Seminarians may be required to include readings of plays not covered in class as part of their larger research paper.

2. This is a class for people who like to listen, to talk, to exchange ideas, and to change their minds. If you are not interested in sharing interpretations with the rest of us, you would probably be happier somewhere else. Since such conversations are impossible unless you have done the reading, see #1.

Attendance

Mandatory.

If you become suddenly ill (think Bubonic plague) or the victim of emergency circumstances, please email me or a member of the seminar as soon as possible and stay in touch. Excused absences are accompanied by appropriate legal or medical documentation. Any unexcused absence will seriously undermine your success in this course.
Class Participation

Mandatory.

Think of our meetings as potluck conversations; everyone simply must contribute. Participation in a graduate seminar means careful preparation of the reading, frequent contributions to discussions, and engaged critical thought. You should come to each session armed with observations, opinions, questions, and insights, ready to take an active part in the ongoing dialogue about the course materials and your projects. What you bring to share need not be written out but should refer to specific passages in the reading as the basis for formulating a broader discussion topic or questions. In addition, for the most part, we will not be spending time in class going over the biographies of the playwrights so part of each week’s preparation should include a glance at them from reliable sources, including the introductions in some of our textbook editions.

Besides preparation, class participation also means responding constructively, respectfully, and energetically to what other seminarians share, that you work actively to stretch yourself intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. In short, you are expected to work actively to contribute to the class’s overall movement and to strive to promote dialogue between yourself and other seminarians. I TAKE THIS GRADE VERY SERIOUSLY.

If you plan on doing any of the following things, you should probably drop this class:

1. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence by saying you are ‘just the type of person who likes to sit back and listen to what everyone else has to say.’ Certainly, listening is a premium in this class and is a crucial human skill. But real listening only happens in an exchange. Letting everyone else do the talking means that you’re not really listening because you are busy keeping yourself safe. Of course, this ‘safety’ is an illusion.

2. Remaining in your comfort zone and not talking in class and justifying the silence because you assume that you don’t know enough to participate in class and other people (especially those who talk) do. To approach the class and the work in a way that suggests that one can speak only about what is already known is not only dangerous, but it’s also intellectually lazy.

3. Complaining when everyone does talk that it’s a waste of time and inefficient. Or remaining so married to ways you have been taught in other courses and disciplines that you see as a ‘tangent’ any meaningful, principled discussion that doesn’t necessarily mention the word “theme” or “symbolism.” Just because the normative educational culture of a nation afraid more than anything else that its students will learn to think divides classroom activity into binaries of ‘on-task’ and ‘off-task’ doesn’t mean that that is a useful or even humane way of doing things.

I will serve as a resource and guide and occasionally cranky curmudgeon, but it’s your class to shape and energize. Individually and collectively, this course carries with it a responsibility to drive the inquiry and conversation. Because this is a graduate-level course (thus a thinking-intensive and collaborative venture), you must be committed to becoming more resourceful and reflective as an interpreter, researcher, discussant, and writer. The degree to which you demonstrate this development in class and in your written work will certainly be a factor in my determination of your term grade.
Cell Phones and Computers

You may bring your computer to class with you, assuming that you use it in a scholarly and responsible fashion. This means that you will only have applications and windows related to the current discussion open. You may not check email, news, or box scores, surf the web, use chat applications, play games, or otherwise distract yourself and those around you from the class conversation with your computer.

You are likewise expected to use cellphones in a responsible manner: turn them off when you come in to class. If you have an emergency for which you must be available, you must discuss it with me beforehand and keep your phone on vibrate.

Under no conditions are you allowed to text message, take pictures or video (illegal in class), play games, or use the cellphone in any other manner during class. The nature of our scholarly endeavor together necessitates mutual respect and dedicated attention during the too short time we have to discuss these texts. Violating any of these policies will result in your participation grade being lowered by a full letter grade for each violation.

Other Sundry Matters

*If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

*The grade breakdown is as follows:

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<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Final Paper (10-12 pages)</td>
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<td>Surrealist Sessions Work</td>
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<td>Final Exam</td>
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<td>Scholarly Footnote</td>
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<td>Class Participation/Other Writings</td>
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*I am assuming each of you will pop by my office at least a few times during our time together to discuss the progress of your thinking and research. I am regularly available to meet with you during my scheduled office hours before class or by appointment. To make an appointment, speak to me after class or contact me via email. You should get into the habit of checking your email daily. There will be a class list on which I will post changes in assignments (if they arise), course-related announcements, and talking points.

*Any paper with your name on it signifies that you are the author—that the wording and major ideas are yours, with exceptions indicated by either quotation marks and/or citations. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use (appropriation and/or imitation) of others' materials (words and ideas). Evidence of plagiarism will result in one or more of the following: a failing grade for the assignment, an F in the course, and a report filed with the Judicial Affairs Office.

Response Papers – In order to insure quality discussions, you need to write a single-spaced, one to two-page response paper for five of our class sessions. These must reflect an understanding of the material and a narrowly focused “point of entry” for analysis. You should choose very specific points in the plays, which each offer thousands of possibilities. You must tackle one at a time. The structure of the response will be “three threads and a thesis”. The three threads can be virtually anything of importance (or that you think you can make important) that catches your
These threads should form a pattern; for instance, a metaphor that recurs (people as packages in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) or an unexpected image (say the brain as a stomach in *The Mill on the Floss*) or a contradiction the play seems to be setting up (perhaps heroic qualities to a villainous character). Avoid what would be banal or generic (such as blood imagery in a tragedy).

The best way to prepare for this type of assignment is to keep a piece of paper next to you as you read to jot down ideas, tensions, repetitions, quirky thoughts etc. (including page numbers when possible). Be interesting. Challenging. Surprise yourself with your own intellectual capacity and wit. Part of the surrealist spirit is juxtaposing what initially seem to be unrelated objects and finding relationships. Take intellectual risks.

After you have developed a list of various thread sequences, choose one and develop analytic, argumentative claims about the material rather than merely descriptive thesis statements. For instance instead of reporting on the text ("There is a pattern in the play, and it is x."), offering simple opinion statements ("The playwright argues x, and I agree), or compare/contrasts with our own time ("At that time, they believed X, and we nowadays believe Y."), demonstrate how the thread is useful in understanding the thematics of the larger play or at the very least understanding its key visions and questions.

Since you will write five of them, it is wise to start early (after the Wednesday session) on the following week's reading. These "Pearl" papers should be telescopic in structure, that is, begin widely and gradually narrowing in focus until we arrive at some insight and some specific questions so that others can continue the discussion. Overall, they should be useful, engaging, and dialogic in nature.
Footnote

Choose a word that appears somewhere in one of Shaw's plays we have read thus far (including stage directions), a word, name, or concept that meant something in England when the play was written that it doesn't exactly mean today or a word, name, or concept that is archaic and foreign to us in 2008. Appreciating the distinctiveness about what that word, name, or concept meant then, you shall argue, helps us unlock the meaning of the line in which it appears and the larger thematics of the play. It can be an obscure historical allusion or a specific requirement of set the playwright prescribes. In the past, students have written on topics as varied as Vivie Warren's bicycle (a symbol for audiences at the time of "New Woman" independence) and Shaw's use of the name "Herbert Spencer" to describe Ramsden's demeanor when grappling with Tanner. Avoid "easy" topics such as Tanner's allusion to Hamlet. Be daring in your choice.

While footnotes are generally quite short (no more than two well-developed paragraphs), the research behind them will be substantial. As an example, in Shaw's play Getting Married, Bishop Bridgenorth is referred to by his family as "the Barmecide". It has two possible sources, each the focus of a paragraph in your footnote. One is a Persian family of scribes and viziers (800 AD) known for their cultural patronage, tolerant religious views, and lavish expenditures on public works and palaces. The other is the dictionary definition of a Barmecide --- a give of benefits that are illusory, imaginary, or disappointing – taken from the name of an Arabian Nights prince who once served a feast consisting of lavish dish-covers with nothing beneath them. In each paragraph, after succinctly providing the source definition(s), you would spend the remaining few sentences connecting the definition productively to the play.

Remember: the driving point of your two paragraphs should be to teach your reader something they didn't know and then make clear how it leads to productive interpretation of the play. You're teaching them that something they thought was straightforward and uninteresting is actually full of meaning and fascinating. The research will help you to make your point, but you are responsible for making the footnote meaningful and engaging and useful to understanding the larger thematics of the play. Be well-informed and take bold intellectual risks.

Research Project:

Develop an original essay (10-12 pages) dealing with some primary Shavian text from the course. Please limit your focus to one Shaw play. No biographical criticism. No "compare/contrast" discussions with other authors/works. No overly-reductive or overly-generalized readings ("This play was written during the war and reflects the war."). The length is designed to be ideal for conference presentation (with a bit of editing). The text(s) you discuss may include but are not limited to texts read in class, and I can offer suggestions for primary texts that might interest you. This should be a well-argued textual analysis that must cite and situate itself in relationship to relevant scholarly work, using correct MLA format, but what's most important is that the essay develop a clear and persuasive argument of your own.

The first part of the assignment is a three-to four page narrative due July 9 in which you outline your proposed project and explain your preliminary research results, and an annotated bibliography listing eight or more sources (outside the course readings) relevant to your project. (Do not even consider using Wikipedia or Googlebooks for anything related to this course.) The final paper will be due on July 30. I will be happy to read and comment on drafts, outlines etc.
but the latest I will accept a draft for review is July 23. In the last meeting of the term, each seminarian will present their papers in the manner of a conference presentation.

I expect you to touch base with me frequently (either via email or in person) on the progress of your project. (Starting early is always the smart way to go, especially in the summer.)

**Some Reliable Historical Sources:**

Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*
Jean Chothia, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890-1940*
P.F. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*
Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama*
Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale eds., *British Theatre between the Wars 1918-39*

**A Reliable Online Resource:**

Richard Dietrich’s modern survey:  http://chuma.cas.usf.edu/~dietrich/britishdrama.htm

Schedule of Assignments

THIS SCHEDULE MAY CHANGE AT ANY TIME ACCORDING TO THE NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF THE CLASS. MAKE SURE YOU ALWAYS BRING IT WITH YOU FOR MODIFICATION.

June 9  Introductory Comments and Discussion
Bunuel’s “Un Chien Andalou” (1929)
“Irish Theater” documentary excerpt
“Greetings from George Bernard Shaw”

**Email me this week with your interests and background!**

11  Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession / Response #1 Due
Carlson’s “Psychic Polyphony” (handout)

“The real Shaw is the actor, the imaginary Shaw is the real one.” -- GBS

16  Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (skip Act Three) / Response #2 Due
Selections from Shaw’s *Fanny’s First Play* Induction pp. 92-6 / Epilogue

18  Shaw’s *Misalliance / Response #3 Due
Gillian Beer’s “The Island and the Aeroplane” (handout)
Lisa A. Wilde’s “Shaw’s Epic Theatre” (via Project Muse)

23  Vitric’s *The Mysteries of Love*
Breton’s *The Surrealist Manifesto* (1924)
Sandrow’s “Dada and Surrealism” (handout)
Cardinal’s “The Surrealist Proposition” (handout)
Surrealist Shaw?
**Please bring copies of the first three plays by Shaw we have read to this session.

25 Barrie’s *Peter Pan*
Ann Wilson, “Hauntings: Anxiety, Technology, and Gender in *Peter Pan*”

FOOTNOTE DUE

30 Shaw’s *Heartbreak House* / Response #4
Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Britain* pp. 1-20

July 2 Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*
Strindberg’s “Author’s Note to A Dream Play”

7 Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*
Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte
**Familiarize yourself with these painters for this session.

9 Paper Proposal Due / Conferences

14 Shaw’s *Too True to be Good* / Response #5

16 Shaw’s *Too True to be Good*
Butler’s *Postmodernism* pp. 13-21; 44-53
Morgan’s *Twentieth-Century Britain* pp. 13-14; 31-7

21 Shaw’s *Too True to be Good*
Lee Miller’s photography, Magritte, and Dali

23 Shaw’s *Too True to be Good*
Homi Bhabha’s “DissemiNation”

28 Final Exam (Open book) / Read “Shakes vs. Shav”

30 Presentations / Long Paper Due