



Too True to Be Good at the 1932 Malvern Festival

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ABSTRACT: The Malvern Festival was established in 1929 by the founder and then director of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Sir Barry Jackson. While the Festival began as an event solely dedicated to Shaw, Jackson's guiding philosophy of the Festival soon changed its direction in later seasons as Jackson sought to present a glorified sense of England's past to an audience of international visitors by means of an emphasis on lesser-known classics in English theater. This article explores the reception of Shaw's *Too True to Be Good* (1932) in this context to argue that Shaw's increasingly dystopian visions of England's future as depicted in his later plays clashed with Jackson's organization of the Festival and that Shaw's inclusion in the repertoire and presence in Malvern largely contributed to the Festival's failure in reconciling its images of the past and present.

KEYWORDS: Shaw, Malvern Festival, Sir Barry Jackson, *Too True to Be Good*

George Bernard Shaw's *Too True to Be Good* received its British premiere in 1932 as part of the fourth season of the Malvern Theatre Festival. The Malvern Festival was established in 1929 by the founder and then director of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Sir Barry Jackson. The Festival began as an event solely dedicated to Shaw as in its first season; it featured five Shavian productions including the British premiere of *The Apple Cart*. While during its twelve seasons the Festival fluctuated in the extent of its association with Shaw, in total it presented two world premieres of Shaw's plays and four British premieres. In addition to its dramatic productions, the Festival also featured other activities such as talks and exhibitions and





attracted an impressive list of visitors and speakers including Allardyce Nicoll and Gabriel Pascal as well as performers such as Cedric Hardwicke and Stephen Murray. Moreover, events in Malvern inspired a series of Shavian festivals that emerged following Shaw's death in 1950.¹ The Malvern Festival also possesses a direct descendent in the more successful and longer running Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada, established in 1962.

Despite the significance of the Festival to the latter part of Shaw's career as demonstrated by its impressive list of Shavian productions, the Malvern Festival has received scant critical attention in the past. In Shavian criticism, the Festival is usually mentioned briefly as the location for the premiere of some of Shaw's later plays before these plays are then analyzed outside of the context of their initial performance in Malvern. This outlook on the Festival disregards the incongruities between Shaw's public image and that of Malvern and consequently neglects the significant questions that Shaw's presence in Malvern raises.

The following quote reported in the *Malvern Gazette* in 1929 from the *Irish Times*, in which the writer expressed bewilderment at Shaw's arrival in Malvern, is a useful way to begin unpacking some of those disparities between Shaw and Malvern, and as a result introduce key points of tension between the Festival with Shaw as its central figure and Malvern as its location:

One wonders whether there is not implied irony in the setting of a Bernard Shaw Festival in such a setting as one finds here. . . . This is a city of infinite quiet; no rattle of tram cars strikes the ear or irritates the nerve and the only noise of modernity is the hum of the touring motor-car or lordly bus. . . . And the scarlet of thousands of geraniums gives the only suggestion that the author of "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism" is the object of a Festival. How far Shaw's fame has carried him from the hated and feared revolutionary of twenty years ago may be gathered when he is feted in the quiet respectability of Shakespeare's England. Malvern is no city of youth, everything here points to the past.²

The location of this quote in the *Irish Times* is significant, as it highlights the lack of prior connection between Shaw and Malvern. Shaw was born in Dublin and, by contrast to the festival dedicated to William Shakespeare in Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon, the connection between Shaw and Malvern was unclear. Furthermore, the incongruities between the public images of Shaw, a "revolutionary" playwright who had by this

time produced some of his most well-known plays, and Malvern, “a city of infinite quiet,” pose some significant questions for Shawian scholars. For instance, how were Shaw’s plays produced and received in the context of the Festival in Malvern? What can Shaw’s reception in Malvern reveal about Shaw’s public image in the interwar years and beyond? These questions are at the center of this article as I offer responses through an analysis of the production of Shaw’s *Too True to Be Good* in the fourth season of the Festival in 1932.

Too True to Be Good and “A Survey of English Drama”

The concept of the Malvern Festival emerged from a number of successful collaborations between Shaw and Jackson’s Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century. Jackson, a wealthy theater director who used his inheritance to fund his passion for the stage, established the first purpose-built theater for a repertory company in England in 1913. Following the model established by another patron of the theater, Annie Horniman in Manchester, Jackson used this new playhouse to oppose the commercialism of London’s established theater district, aiming to produce a more experimental repertoire of plays in order to, as he emphasized, “serve an art instead of making that art serve a commercial purpose.”³ Shaw was a regular feature in this diet of experimental and intellectual drama with early productions including those of *Candida* and *Press Cuttings*. The most notable of the Shawian productions at the Birmingham Rep, however, was the British premiere of *Back to Methuselah* in 1923. Jackson’s decision to stage *Back to Methuselah* was a welcomed and rare opportunity for Shaw as this play had remained largely unperformed following its world premiere in New York by the Theater Guild at the Garrick Theater in 1922. This reflected the difficulties inherent in staging the play, a cycle play consisting of five acts, which as a result of its length requires to be staged over multiple occasions. The working relationship and friendship that the Shawian productions at the Birmingham Rep engendered between the two men ultimately resulted in Shaw responding with, in Jackson’s terms, “more than the customary twinkling enthusiasm” to Jackson’s proposal for establishing a Shaw festival in Malvern.⁴

However while the Festival began as an event dedicated to Shaw, by 1932 Jackson had made significant changes to the Festival’s direction. In 1931, Jackson presented what he termed as “A Survey of English Drama.” In this season the Festival included seven plays that covered a period of over four hundred years: the earliest play, *Hick Scorer* (unknown), dated from 1513,



and the most current, *The Switchback* (James Bridie), was written in 1929. This change in policy in Malvern reflected Jackson's changing ideas around the target audience of the Festival and also its purpose. Although the Festival had aimed to attract a foreign audience since its first season, this emphasis on overseas visitors was strengthened following the announcement of plans for presenting a pageant of English drama. The emphasis on overseas visitors is evident in the way in which the Festival was promoted during this third season, as in May 1931 Jackson insisted:

As we are definitely catering for students a course of lectures has been arranged for the first week of the Festival. . . . The lectures have been introduced chiefly because parties of students are coming over especially from American and Canadian universities. The response from abroad this year has been extremely gratifying, and makes me feel that a festival of this kind—probably the first held in this country—is serving an important purpose.⁵

In addition to reflecting the growing emphasis of the Festival on overseas visitors, Jackson here also demonstrates the academic atmosphere that accompanied the changes in policy at the Festival. With the introduction of two lectures, one on the play and the other on its time period, that accompanied each piece, Jackson attributed an educational purpose to the Festival that was then reflected in its target audience of students and academics. This was a trend that continued in 1932, as in another survey of English drama and alongside Shaw's *Too True to Be Good* as a contemporary example Jackson presented a series of lesser-known classics including *The Play of Weather* (John Heywood, 1533), *Ralph Roister Doister* (Nicholas Udall, 1552), *The Alchemist* (Ben Jonson, 1610), *Oronooko* (Thomas Southerne, 1695), *Tom Thumb the Great* (Henry Fielding, 1730), and *London Assurance* (Dion Boucicault, 1841).

In addition to Jackson's evolving views on the Festival's purpose and target audience, his decision to present classics also reflected an intense interest in history in English culture that had emerged in the early nineteenth century. Paul Readman argues that the "prominent place of the past" in English culture continued after the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of World War I and into the interwar years.⁶ Readman characterizes this concern with history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as "deep-rooted" and "widely felt" based on a "desire to sustain a sense of continuity at a time of change."⁷

This preoccupation with history materialized in a number of ways, one of which was pageants that incorporated drama and performance. The origins of the rise of modern pageantry appear in the work of the playwright Louis Napoleon Parker and his pageant in Sherborne in 1905. The Parkerean pageants that ensued were large outdoor events through which their organizers aimed to depict historical events related to the location of the pageant in the form of episodes of "community drama." Pageants depended on local participation in all aspects of organization and performance as members of the community contributed to the events as performers, costume designers, and writers. Readman argues that this popular interest in history that the pageants reflected was not representative of a desire to return to pre-industrial times. The past was instead used as inspiration for the future and as a way in which "contemporaries sought to cope with and accommodate change."⁸ Thus the success of this amalgamation of the past and present in these events depended on the suggestion of a sense of continuity and coherence among the images presented. Such ambience was mainly created in pageants through avoiding controversial and divisive subject matters.⁹

While the pageants established a sense of continuity and unity between their images of the past and the present, Jackson failed to establish a similarly harmonious integration of the historical with the modern in the setting of the Festival; a result to which I will argue the production of Shaw's *Too True to Be Good* greatly contributed. In *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw presents a dystopian vision of England where notions of national identity, gender roles, and class are fluid concepts which are subject to change. The play presents mobility in society as inevitable as it reflects on the atrocities of war and the inadequacies of current social, political, and religious institutions governing society in explaining the horrific incidents witnessed. The characters in the play, who are all struggling with the "abyss" left behind by the war, thus offer very contrasting images to those pursued by Jackson in presenting the glories of English drama.¹⁰

As the following analysis of the play demonstrates, the content of *Too True to Be Good* clashed with the guiding philosophy of the Festival as presented by Jackson in 1932. While Jackson's festival attempted to present a happy and stable England through its repertoire of past comedies that were presented as demonstrating the glories of English culture and its contribution to world literature, the modern England depicted in *Too True to Be Good* is a dysfunctional society whose ideals have been dismantled by World War I. Thus, while the Festival sought to present a glorified image of England to its foreign visitors, Shaw's play critiques the values and principles supporting England and predicts the gloomy future that adherence



to such systems will bring. *Too True to Be Good* has been interpreted by critics in the past as a dream play in which the dream belongs to either the patient or the microbe.¹¹ This is however not a pleasant dream but a dystopian vision of an unidentified time and location. As Peter Edgerly Firchow argues, any vision of a utopia or dystopia is in essence a critique of the present. Firchow presents visions of utopias and dystopias as intertwined and in dialogue with one another, with dystopias holding “traces of their utopian origin.” Firchow describes dystopias as follows:

They are, as all of these designations suggest, “bad” places, though they are always bad in very special ways. In other words they are not just some random ugly and unhealthy place—such as, say, Gary, Indiana, but bad places that were once and perhaps still are considered to be “good” places, though only by a relatively small number of people.¹²

This is an argument that other critics also support. In *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash describe a dystopia as “a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a segment of society . . . dystopias resemble the actual societies historians encounter in their research.”¹³ In light of this argument, viewing *Too True to Be Good* as Shaw’s dystopian vision of England and the British Empire is then ironically also a critique of the utopian and idealistic images of this country that, as I will argue, were present in the guiding philosophy of the Festival. Thus, the performance of Shaw’s play in the context of the Malvern Festival season in 1932 can be seen to in fact have satirized the Festival itself. This was especially apparent in Shaw’s criticisms of the concepts of religion and the empire that in the context of Malvern were also critiques of their application and presence in the Festival. As Jackson insisted that the plays selected reflected the time in which they were written, I will explore the manner in which Shaw’s images of England in *Too True to Be Good* clashed with those presented by the setting of the Festival and its accompanying plays and events that will revolve around two main themes: religion and the empire.

Religion

In his surveys of European theater which he presented at various lectures to different theater societies around the country prior to the Festival, Jackson emphasized the role that religion had played in the development of drama.

In an address to the Birmingham Civic Society in 1922, Jackson identified religion as the source of the achievements attained by Greek Theater: "The corner stone of Greek drama was its religious character, a character which ensured the greatest seriousness and earnestness of mind from the masses."¹⁴ This is a view that is reiterated in the souvenir book accompanying the 1932 season in which religious interludes are identified as the source of English drama, and Malvern "as a religious centre for centuries" is thus presented as an ideal location for the Festival.¹⁵

In *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw also discusses religion, but in fundamentally different terms to those expressed in Jackson's views, as Shaw questions the relevance of conventional systems of belief in a postwar context. In the play, the religious establishment is presented in the form of Aubrey Bagot. Aubrey is a priest with a passion for sermonizing who prefers form to content when delivering his often lengthy speeches. For Aubrey, as long as the sermon is eloquently spoken and organized, the content is irrelevant:

AUBREY: I feel I must do it if only the doctrine is beautiful and subtle and exquisitely put together. I may feel instinctively that it is the rottenest nonsense. Still, if I can get a moving dramatic effect out of it, and preach a really splendid sermon about it, my gift takes possession of me and obliges me to sail in and do it. (1147)

Thus, Shaw presents Aubrey as a performer whose preaching is a form of playacting, as opposed to the more traditionally accepted views of the priest's message as a transmission of a higher, clearly defined, and irrefutable truth. The play concludes with Aubrey performing yet another one of his speeches, and the manner in which Shaw presents Aubrey's delivery of the speech demonstrates its futility. The patient "claps her hands" and "mischievously encourages" Aubrey to speak as though to entertain those surrounding him (1166). However, as Aubrey begins to perform his speech, other characters desert him and ultimately Aubrey remains alone on stage. Fog surrounds the priest until he is no longer visible to the audience and gradually the words he speaks are also unintelligible. As with the other characters whose exits to a better future seem uncertain, Aubrey also disappears into the "abyss" (1157). Moreover, although some critics, following the Malvern and New York productions, attempted to present this final act of preaching as a reflection of Shaw's belief in the significance of sermonizing, the play's structure resists such explanations. Aubrey's final speech is an endless monologue on a variety of unrelated topics failing to reach a conclusion as both the preacher and the message gradually disappear and



consequently the play closes without providing a resolution. As Rodelle Weintraub indicates, at the end of the play the audience remains uncertain as to whether the performance has indeed concluded.¹⁶ Thus as Aubrey's speech fails to offer any contributions in terms of providing resolutions in its content and place within the structure of the play, Shaw undermines both Aubrey's role as a priest and the act of preaching.

Shaw's critique of religion is also evident in his depiction of the character of a sergeant who is introduced in Act III holding copies of both the Bible and Milton's *Pilgrim's Progress*. As the sergeant explains, both texts have failed to reflect the atrocities of war, and as a result he can no longer completely accept the message presented in either of the works: "There it is: not a story in a book as it used to be, but God's truth in the real actual world. And all the comfort they get is 'Flee from the wrath to come.' But where are they to flee to?" (1156). As the sergeant positions the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* alongside one another, he indicates that both are indeed fictions that as a result of their status as literature and their specific content fail to correspond with reality. Thus, the Bible is the provider of the imaginary tales that the priest then performs. Furthermore, in a postwar context, some of these stories, such as those involving "slaughtering" and offering sacrifices" (1156), now appear as deeply concerning.

While both Jackson through his guiding philosophy of the Festival and Shaw in *Too True to Be Good* highlighted a connection between the church and drama, their treatment of this connection thus achieved effects that contradicted one another. On the one hand the Festival formed a connection between the two to offer credibility to drama and as a result emphasized the role of theater as a force for reinforcing conventional senses of morality. However, through connecting drama and the church in *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw debates the notion that the church holds any sense of the "truth" and has anything more to offer beyond eloquently spoken sermons. This is a sense that is reinforced by the role of Aubrey as not only a priest, but also a thief, who is introduced as "half-auctioneer and half clergyman" (1140).

But if religion is shown to be failing in *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw also presents science as having failed to provide answers for the questions confronting a postwar world. Aubrey's father is an atheist who scorns his son for being a priest, but is however equally disillusioned by his own beliefs as he is with the religion that his son preaches. Belief in Christianity and atheism are indeed shown to be similar in the play as atheism is presented as just another system of faith. Hence in a language resembling religious discourse the Elder insists: "And now look at me and behold the supreme

tragedy of the atheist who has lost his faith—his faith in atheism, for which more martyrs have perished than for all the creeds put together” (1159). The similarities between faith in Christianity and atheism are then further reinforced by the family ties between Aubrey and the Elder, a father and son, as the representatives of each of these systems of belief.

It was this aspect of the play and its interrogation of current scientific theories such as natural selection that one of the churches in Malvern focused upon in 1932 in their response to the Festival. In a sermon delivered in the town, the Archbishop of Worcester disregarded the play’s criticism of religion in order to offer his interpretation of the play as one that advocated the return of faith to humanity. The *Malvern Gazette* quoted from the priest’s speech:

“We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness, but to those who listen to its message the power of God, and the wisdom of God,” adding, “That is what St. Paul said to the people of his age, which in many respects resembled our own—the age Mr. Bernard Shaw has endeavoured to hold up before us as in a mirror in his new play, *Too True to Be Good*, which some of you have seen, and all have read about.”¹⁷

As the Dean disregarded the play’s criticism of religion, he interpreted the play as a critique of the “lack of faith.” The Dean used the last lines of the play, “I have nothing to say unless some pentecostal flame of revelation of the spirit will descend on me and inspire me with a message, the sound whereof shall go out into all lands, and realise for us at last the Kingdom and the power and the Glory, for ever and ever, Amen” (1168), to present his view that the “pentecostal flame” to which Shaw refers is indeed the “Spirit of God.” However, as the previous analysis of this speech demonstrated, I argue that despite the Archbishop’s attempts in reconciling the content of Shaw’s play and the guiding philosophy of the Festival regarding the issue of religion, his sermon remains unconvincing in light of the content of the play and its robust criticism of the church. In *Too True to Be Good* Shaw criticizes the church and science alike. Furthermore, in consideration of Shaw’s beliefs regarding Creative Evolution and the Life Force that Shaw had by then explicitly discussed in many of his plays, it is evident that if Shaw is advocating any sense of faith, it is not any conventional definition of this term by the church. As the Doctor in Act I insists, all conventional senses of faith, whether religious or scientific, are “humbug,” as it is the force within us that possesses the real power: “You see, it’s easier to believe in bottles and



inoculations than in oneself and that mysterious power that gives us our life and that none of us knows anything about" (1134).

The Empire

In addition to the concept of religion, in *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw also scrutinizes the state of the British Empire and its influence abroad. In Act II Shaw transports the audience to "a sea beach in a mountainous country," and while the precise location of this landscape remains unidentified, the audience is aware that it is a "military cantonment" (1141) and presumably a colony of the British Empire. The natives of this land are never depicted on stage and their actions are only reported. The only representatives of the native's language and culture are the patient's comic efforts at dressing as a native in "headdress, wig, ornaments, and girdle," which is "proper to no locality on earth except perhaps the Russian ballet" (1144), and the patient's use of "English back slang" (1151). The identities of the colonizer and the colonized have merged as Shaw ridicules and consequently undermines signifiers of nationality such as culture and language. When Colonel Tallboys asks the patient whether she is a "native," Moppy replies: "Yes, a native of Somerset" (1153). Shaw's positioning of the terms "native" and "Somerset" alongside one another challenges the concept of the natives as the "other" and consequently the colonizer as in any way superior to the colonized. As Christopher Wixson observes, in this act, through the cross-dressing performances of a number of characters such as the patient, Aubrey, Sweetie, and Meek, Shaw subverts "identities and notions of constructed difference" and proposes that the English view themselves "as rather than merely *through* the subaltern" and consequently dismantles any notions of the colonized as distinctively different to the colonizer.¹⁸ Furthermore, although Act I concludes with the patient anticipating a life of bliss outside of the confinements of her home in England, life in this exotic and unfamiliar territory proves to be just as problematic. In Act III, the patient explains:

THE PATIENT: Popsy stole my necklace, and got me to run away with him by a wonderful speech he made about freedom and sunshine and lovely scenery. Sweetie made me write it all down and sell it to a tourist agency as an advertisement. And then I was devoured by parasites: by tourist agencies, steamboat companies, railways, motor car people, hotel keepers, dressmakers, servants, all trying to get my money by selling me things I don't really want; shoving me all over

the globe to look at what they call new skies, though they know as well as I do that it is only the same old sky everywhere. (1161)

In Acts II and III, the characters discuss their identities and their sense of disillusionment as English men and women in a setting outside of their country of birth. As Shaw dismantles the patient's utopian images of this new land in Acts II and III, he undermines any notion of these occupied territories as means of escape as the characters take their postwar anxieties and concerns with them to this new setting. While such concerns seem to contrast explicitly with Jackson's aims for his surveys of English drama that were the foundation of the Festival at this time, they also ironically satirize the festival-going habit. In the Malvern production of *Too True to Be Good* in 1932—and thus before an audience of mainly tourists—Shaw criticized the concept of escaping to “sunshine” and “lovely scenery” and questions the worth of “tourist agencies,” which no doubt many of those present in the Malvern Theatre had employed in order to arrive at the premiere.

In *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw depicts this colonized land as a contributor to the concerns confronting the characters in the play as in addition to systems of belief such as religion and science, Shaw also depicts England's influence abroad as another crumbling concept and thus illusion. Colonel Tallboys, who is the military figure in control of the forces in his region, is presented as incompetent and removed from reality. He scorns Meek for lacking fighting spirit and insists that as a result, Meek is an incompetent soldier: “Your nerves! What business has a soldier with nerves? You mean that you are no use for fighting, and have to be put to do anything that can be done without it” (1149). However, regardless of Tallboys's opinion of Meek, Meek is shown to be an intelligent and capable individual, as in Act II it is Meek who suppresses an attack by the natives. As it is later revealed that Tallboys is included in the Honours list for a K.C.B. only because according to him “the Government is preparing for a general election and has had to make the most of these modest achievements” (1163), Shaw seems to ridicule England's military achievements and undermine any notion of England's influence abroad as sturdy and permanent. The uprising that Meek is successful in combating signifies the presence of tension between the colonizers and the colonized. However, although in this specific instance the English manage to claim victory, as Tracy Davies indicates, it is unclear for how long the natives will continue to be suppressed by flying maroons into the sky.¹⁹

The notion of the British Empire as depicted in *Too True to Be Good* is, I would argue, in direct contrast with the imperial outlook of the Festival. In the 1932 season of the Festival, as with those already discussed, there was a



strong emphasis on foreign visitors, especially those arriving from Canada and America. Furthermore, Jackson planned to transfer some of the plays from Malvern to Canada in what can be described as an imperial venture: "Sir Barry gave me another interesting piece of news. 'I am not only bringing Canadian visitors to England, but in the autumn, I am sending plays to Canada.'"²⁰ Indeed, in an untitled broadcast from the Birmingham Rep in 1931, Jackson described Canada as an ideal location for the performance of English drama and consequently presented theater as a suitable method for extending England's imperial ties with this country: "Canada is a wonderfully exhilarating place, and I firmly believe that just as we share our ancestry in common, one with the other, so our culture is essentially the same. Nowhere in the Empire is there more active loyalty and co-operation with the Mother Country than in the Dominion."²¹ Jackson, entirely at home with this language of territory and possession in a way that Shaw can never be, presented the Festival as an opportunity to improve international relations as he held a party for the overseas visitors as part of the 1932 season. This led the *Malvern Gazette* to conclude that "Sir Barry can truthfully be looked upon as our chief Ambassador in the cause of international friendship."²²

While the Malvern Festival was a regional theatrical event, Jackson used Malvern as the location of the Festival and its associations with Englishness as described in the Festival book ("To think of Malvern is to envisage all that is loveliest in our English countryside")²³ and the repertoire of the Festival to present his vision of a wider national cultural identity that fundamentally differed from the ideas presented by Shaw in *Too True to be Good*. Jackson considered Malvern rather than London as a metonym for England, even though, as demonstrated by Jackson's own engagement with theater in the capital, London provided a cultural, economic, and creative hub that could scarcely be altogether ignored by the theater maker. Jackson's use of the Festival as a way to extend England's influence abroad and especially in Canada clashed with Shaw's depiction of an England transferring into a postcolonial world in which the country must confront the prospect of the loss of its empire.

Thus, the tension between continuity and a need for change is at the core of Shaw's dystopian vision presented in Acts II and III of the play. In *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw laments the long-lasting and poignant effects of World War I. In Act II and in regard to Sweetie's dismissal of accepted gender roles and a conventional sense of sexual morality, Aubrey insists:

AUBREY: Since the war the lower centres have become vocal. And the effect is that of an earthquake. For they speak truths that have never been spoken before—truths that the makers of our domestic

institutions have tried to ignore. And now that Sweetie goes shouting them all over the place, the institutions are rocking and splitting and sundering. They leave us no place to live, no certainties, no hell, no commandments, and no God. (1149)

Aubrey's assessment appears accurate as the characters occupy a world where religion and science are "sundering" institutions and national identity and social class becoming fluid concepts. In *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw presents characters that adopt new identities and reside in a world that, in the words of Moppy's mother, "is just the opposite of what I was told about" (1165). This is a world where in a reversal of commonly accepted scientific views, the microbe is made ill by the patient—a patient who then in Act II swaps roles with her nurse and poses as a native maid. Shaw's preoccupation with crumbling institutions and defying expectations as expressed in the content of the play is also reflected and as a result emphasized in the manner in which *Too True to Be Good* is structured. Act I concludes with the microbe attacking the play and informing the audience that *Too True to Be Good* "is now virtually over; but the characters will discuss it at great length for two acts more. The exit doors are all in order. Goodnight" (1141). According to the microbe, the play is now falling apart, as watching the subsequent acts is pointless and all has now been said. Moreover, the structure of the play adheres to Mrs. Moppy's observation that everything is the opposite to that which it should be as the microbe suggests that this beginning act is the conclusion of the play while, as discussed, the ending of the play will later appear as uncertain. As a result of his deconstruction of the structure of the well-made play and the content of *Too True to Be Good*, Shaw thus refuses to provide any resolutions to the questions posed in the play.

Nonetheless, in the absence of any clear solutions, *Too True to Be Good* succeeds in emphasizing the need for change as opposed to stability. As Shaw will also later emphasize in another play of this period, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, in a world where nothing is certain but uncertainty, one can only embrace change. Shaw's interrogation of the systems governing society indicates their inadequacy and the need for "mobility," as Aubrey explains to Sweetie: "Fickleness means simply mobility, and mobility is a mark of civilization. You should pride yourself on it" (1148). This is in direct contrast to the sense of stability and continuity suggested through the use of historical events in the pageants as mentioned.



Shaw on Malvern

Prior to his arrival in Malvern, in November 1928 and ahead of the first season of the Festival, Shaw wrote to Jackson suggesting the production of Harley Granville Barker's new play *His Majesty* for the Festival.²⁴ This was again followed by another letter in January in which Shaw made a similar suggestion: "But I am rather apologetic about being the only fish in your basket. Remember that you are a full generation younger than I, and that even in Malvern it is not wise to worship the setting sun, especially on the east side of the hills. What about that play of Barker's?"²⁵ However, this was a suggestion apparently dismissed by Jackson, as Barker's work never appeared in the Festival. Moreover, in the Festival book in 1936, Shaw once again emphasized the significance of modern drama in the Festival's repertoire: "The ideal programme for Malvern would be of new plays by new men."²⁶ Shaw's desire to create a suitable location for the performance of modern drama was also present in his writing prior to his involvement with the Festival and was thus a persistent concern for the dramatist. For example, the emphasis placed on classics in the plans of the committee pursuing the establishment of a National Theatre in England had been a major point of disagreement between Shaw and other supporters of the movement. In a letter to the drama critic J. Comyns Carr in 1908, Shaw insisted that he would not sign the latest report to be sent to the Executive Committee due to a clause emphasizing the classics in the repertoire of the proposed National Theatre:

Did the committee realise that what the clause means is that out of the three plays which are to constitute the weekly repertory of the theatre, two must be old plays: one of them at least thirty years old and the other at least three hundred. At the same time that we make this monstrous stipulation, we have not imposed a single obligation to produce any new English work.²⁷

Consequently as Jackson pursued similar policies in his guiding philosophy of the Festival to those that Shaw criticized in this letter, by 1933 Shaw was left disappointed by the Festival's progress as he presented his evaluation of Jackson's Survey of English Drama in a mockingly disparaging tone:

After Hick the Scorer the Renaissance plays, the Rocco plays, the early Victorian plays, though they were entertaining enough in their way, could not take us in. As pictures of life they were the most

amazing trash, but very instructive trash, too. Their idealism is still doing as much mischief off the stage as it did before the terrible onslaught of Ibsen exposed its danger and falsehood on stage. It may be that in the end they will become unbearable, and be driven out of the Malvern Festival by medieval drama and post-Ibsen modern drama.²⁸

Thus for Shaw, who had spent a large part of his life advocating the cause of Ibsen and battling against the well-made plays dominating London theaters at the end of the nineteenth century, Jackson's festival had transformed into a reiteration of the sense of idealism Shaw abhorred.

In his piece for the Festival book in 1936, Shaw expressed his sense of estrangement from the Festival due to the political content of his later plays when referring to his play *On the Rocks*, which was one of the Shaw plays presented that year (the others being the better known *Saint Joan* and *Pygmalion*):

And it is a wholly political play (the scene is in the cabinet room in 10, Downing Street throughout); and though it has proved a striking example of how very funny a political play can be without ceasing to be true to life, I wish I could present something fresher and fitter for the Malvern air. Unfortunately, the play on which I am at present engaged, entitled *Geneva*, goes to the very depths of politics. Besides, it is not finished.²⁹

It was the performance of *Geneva* during the 1938 season that presented Malvern with its first world premiere of a Shaw play. This was, however, following Jackson's departure in 1937. As Jackson's guiding philosophy failed to create adequate public interest in the Festival and amid local opposition to a festival that largely catered to outside visitors, Jackson ceased his support of the Festival. Roy Limbert, the lessee of the Malvern Theatre and the new manager of the Festival, sought to present more well-known plays and strengthen the connections between the Festival and the West End. However, following Jackson's departure, which also signaled an end to his financial support of the Festival, the Malvern Festival continued for a further three seasons amid a continuing lack of local public support and financial difficulties before dismantling in 1949.

Events in Malvern demonstrate the sheer extent to which controversy and schism characterized Shaw's public image in the interwar years. The combination of the content and form of Shaw's plays as well as his political views,



which by this time included his controversial and often misunderstood comments on the rise of fascism in Europe, presented Shaw as distinctly out of joint with the happy, stable, and unified England reflected in Jackson's guiding philosophy of the Festival. In 1932 and thus concurrently with the fourth season of the Festival, celebrations were held in Stratford to commemorate Shakespeare's three hundredth birthday and the opening of the Memorial Theatre. As with events in Malvern, organizers of Shakespeare's tercentenary celebrations also embraced the modern through broadcasts to all BBC stations and relays to America while emphasizing a connection with the past by highlighting and celebrating the rustic elements of Stratford as a location where Shakespeare "would feel at home."³⁰ As the following report published in the *Malvern Gazette* demonstrates, in direct contrast to Shakespeare whose less controversial public image positioned him successfully in this context, Shaw's mere presence was considered a disturbance to the sense of stability and continuity that this amalgamation of past and present in such events attempted to achieve: "Sir Archibald . . . in a humorous reference to the fact that the gathering was about to be linked up with the outer world by the microphone for the principal speeches, he warned the assembly that they must take care that no ribald remarks, 'even from Mr Bernard Shaw' were uttered."³¹ In consideration of Shaw's dystopian images of England presented in *Too True to Be Good* and his views regarding Jackson's policies in Malvern, one can only assume that Shaw felt equally uncomfortable and misplaced amid the contexts described.

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NOTES

1. For a comprehensive discussion of these festivals, see Robert G. Everding, "Planting Mulberry: A History of Shaw Festivals," *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 18 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998), 67–93.

2. "The Recent Festival: Dublin's Comments," *Malvern Gazette*, 13 September 1929, 3.

3. Sir Barry Jackson, "Introduction," in Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1924), xi–xv, xiv.

4. *Drama: The Quarterly Review of Theatre*, n.s., 20 (Spring 1951): 29–31, quoted in George Bernard Shaw and Sir Barry Jackson, *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw: Bernard Shaw and Barry Jackson*, ed. L. W. Conolly (London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 35.
5. “Old and New Plays for Malvern Festival: Interview with Sir Barry,” *Observer*, 3 May 1931, 19.
6. Paul Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture: 1890–1914,” *Past and Present* 186 (February 2005): 147–201, 147.
7. Readman, “Place of the Past,” 150.
8. Readman, “Place of the Past,” 191.
9. Pageants continued to appear across the country during the interwar years. See Mick Wallis, “Delving the Levels of Memory and Dressing Up the Past,” in *British Theatre between the Wars: 1918–1939*, ed. Clive Baker and Maggie B. Gale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190–215.
10. *Too True to Be Good*, in *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw* (London: Odhams Press, 1952), 1131–68, 1157. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
11. See Rodelle Weintraub, “Too True to Be Good: The Bottomless Abyss since World War I,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 19 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999), 119–27, and Christopher Wixson, “‘These Noxious Microbes’: Pathological Dramaturgy in George Bernard Shaw’s *Too True to Be Good*,” *Modern Drama*, 56, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.
12. Peter Edgerly Firchow, *Modern Utopian Fictions from H.G. Wells to Iris Murdoch* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2008), 4.
13. Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, “Introduction,” in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, ed. Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–21, 1.
14. *The Theatre and Civic Life*, Birmingham Central Library, MS 978, box 26, 3.
15. Maxwell Frazer, “The Malverns,” in *Malvern Festival Book 1932*, 7–11, 7.
16. Weintraub, “Too True,” 122.
17. “Too True to Be Good: Dean of Worcester and G.B.S.,” *Malvern Gazette*, 19 August 1932, 8.
18. Wixson, “These Noxious Microbes,” 7.
19. Tracy C. Davis, “Shaw’s Interstices of Empire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, ed. Christopher Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 218–39, 231.
20. “Old and New Plays for Malvern Festival: Interview with Sir Barry Jackson,” *Observer*, 3 May 1931, 19.
21. *A Broadcast from the Birmingham Rep*, 13 November 1931, Birmingham Central Library, MS 978, box 22, 5.
22. “Malvern’s World Famous Festival: Another Triumph for Sir Barry Jackson,” *Malvern Gazette*, 5 August 1932, 5.
23. *Malvern Festival Book 1931*, 14.
24. *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw*, 35–36 (21 November 1928).
25. *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw*, 38.



26. "This Year's Program," in the *Malvern Festival Book 1936*, 8–9 (8).
27. Letter from George Bernard Shaw to J. Comyns Carr, 12 December 1908, National Theatre Archives, smnt 2/1/4. There is an element of self-interest here as due to the limited productions staged by the proposed National Theatre, Shaw must have felt a sense of competition with dead playwrights.
28. George Bernard Shaw, "Dramatic Antiquities at Malvern," first published in the *Malvern Festival Book 1933*, reprinted in *Shaw on Theatre*, ed. E. J. West (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1958), 226–28, 227.
29. "This Year's Program," 8.
30. "The New Shakespeare Theatre: Prince of Wales's Speech," *Manchester Guardian*, 25 April 1932, 5.
31. "The Bard of Avon: World Homage to Shakespeare," *Malvern Gazette*, 29 April 1932, 3.

