

You Never Can Tell

October 12-November 11, 1995

By George Bernard Shaw

Directed by Nagle Jackson



Study Guide



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In order to find more information about Shaw's life and works, take a trip to your school or local library. There is a wealth of material on these subjects for both adults and children. Ask your librarian for help in finding the books, videos, records, tapes, and magazines you need. Become familiar with your library and you will find that a world of information will be at your fingertips. Most libraries are not restricted by their own collections but can borrow from other libraries to satisfy your informational needs. Become a skillful library consumer. Never hesitate to ask questions. Planning is important however, and the farther you plan ahead, the more time you give your librarian and yourself to find the best resources.



Each show the Denver Center Theatre Company produces has its own unique informational needs. We, here at the theatre, use the resources of our own and other libraries continually. Without access to information, it would not be possible to do what we do whether it is searching for the costumes of a particular period; defining the language of a specific time; discovering the customs and culture of when and where the play takes place; or finding technical information to produce the special effects on stage. Our people have to be well informed. We also think it's important that we share some of the resources we have discovered with you. In fact, this study guide has taken many hours of research, writing and editing in order to help you enjoy the production you are about to see and enrich your theatrical experience at the DCTC.

—Linda Eller
*Librarian, National Theatre Conservatory
A department of the Denver Center Theatre Company
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SYNOPSIS OF **YOU NEVER CAN TELL**

“A family enjoying the unspeakable peace and freedom of being orphans.”

From **You Never Can Tell**, Act I

Y*ou Never Can Tell* is a topsy-turvy comedy in which every character is different from what he or she appears to be, and every situation has an unexpected twist. With love as its theme, the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and lovers are held up to public view so that we might re-evaluate our beliefs and expectations. Although one of Shaw's earlier works, it contains early elements of his masterful ability to transform the comedy of manners into a social commentary.

An emancipated woman, Mrs. Clandon, long separated from her husband and having lived for 18 years in Madeira, comes to a fashionable resort on the coast of Torbay in Devon with her three children. The play begins when Dolly, the youngest daughter, visits a local dentist for a troublesome tooth. When her twin brother, Phil, calls for her, she invites the dentist, Valentine, to meet for lunch. Valentine declines because he has a previous engagement with his landlord to whom he is in debt; that is—until Mrs. Clandon appears with her elder daughter, Gloria. Gloria is ravishing, and Valentine is immediately smitten. The invitation to lunch is confirmed, and extended to the dentist's landlord as well.

At the luncheon in the second act, Mrs. Clandon's lawyer, Finch McComas, is present. It appears he has been sent for to tell the children about their long neglected father. Mrs. Clandon learns from the solicitor the disquieting news that Valentine's landlord, Mr. Crampton, is her not-forgotten-but-still-loathed husband and the father of her children. The situation bodes ill, but when the unsuspecting dentist and landlord arrive, they make the best of the situation even though Crampton is ill-tempered and dogmatic in his opinions about wives and children. The luncheon proceeds, its awkwardness eased somewhat by a considerate and perceptive waiter named William. A conference to discuss the family's affairs is scheduled for that evening. All depart, except Valentine and Gloria. Valentine declares his love to Gloria, who is, in return, thoroughly confused and upset by his avowed passion.

In Act III, Mr. Crampton and Mrs. Clandon remain unrelenting in their dislike of each other. However, the pluck and cheerfulness of Phil and Dolly, aided by the persistence of Valentine, overcome some of their parent's animosity. A happy conclusion is finally reached by the candid common sense of a barrister who just happens to be the waiter's son—“You never can tell, sir.”

“My method is to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say, and then to say it with the utmost levity.” From, *Answers to Nine Questions*.¹

SHAW AND IBSEN

By Sally R. Gass

When Shaw became drama critic for the Saturday Review in 1890, he discovered Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright who was to revolutionize modern drama. Ibsen had reorganized the well-made play into a drama of social commentary which brought controversy back to the stage. Many theatergoers and reviewers considered Ibsen obscene, immoral, and blasphemous; but Shaw came to the Norwegian's defense by saying he gave the public “not what they want, but what is good for them.”²

In 1891, Shaw's book-length defense of Ibsen, The Quintessence of Ibsenism, appeared. In it, Ibsen was presented as a passionate realist, a fervent Social Democrat, and a dedicated revolutionary, not unlike Shaw himself. Shaw also called for a new English drama; a discussion drama that would involve problems of conduct and character while challenging the audience. In the Preface to the 1913 edition, Shaw championed the cause of women, as Ibsen had. He wrote:

“In the 1890's one jested about the revolt of the daughters, and of the wives who slammed the front door like Nora in *A Doll's House*. But at present the revolt has become so general—that men are waking up to the perception that in killing women's souls they have killed their own.”³

The characters of *You Never Can Tell* evoke some of the political qualities of Ibsen's men and women. Mrs. Clandon, the errant wife, is a former member of the Dialectical Society and a close spiritual relative of Ibsen's Nora. She is a Darwinist and a feminist—a woman of very decided convictions who has been publishing popular books about them. Her rejected husband, Mr. Crampton, represents the solidly conservative middle class, much like Nora's mate, Torvald. The action of the play involves a discussion of the patriarchal structure of the family and the sanctity of marriage. It therefore borrows something from *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. However, in Gloria, the advanced woman of the future, and in Valentine, the bright but conventional lover, may be seen the spiritual descendants of Mrs. Clandon and Mr. Crampton renewing the duel of the sexes somewhere further along the evolutionary line. To Shaw, their love story is a link in an endless chain of such encounters that began in the Stone Age and end in some unimaginable utopia in the non-foreseeable future.

“Every person who owes his life to civilized society and who has enjoyed since his childhood its very costly protections and advantages should appear at reasonable intervals before a properly qualified jury to justify his existence, which should be summarily and painlessly terminated if he fails to justify it and it develops that he is a positive nuisance and more trouble than he is worth. Nothing less will really make people responsible citizens.”

Radio Address from London to America, 1931.

SHAKESPEARE AND SHAW

by Sally R. Gass

In *Blaming the Bard*, a critical essay and review written by Shaw in 1896, GBS waged war against the idolization of Shakespeare, or as Shaw expressed it, “Bardolatry.” He writes that this “Immortal—is a pilferer of other men’s stories and ideas, with his monstrous rhetorical fustian, his unbearable platitudes, his pretentious reduction of the subtlest problems of life to commonplaces against which a Polytechnic debating club would revolt—.”⁴ Still, Shaw accedes that Shakespeare had the “gift of telling a story; his enormous power of language;—his humor to make him a man of genius who is able to entertain us so effectively.”⁵

Twenty-four years later, he may not have mellowed, for his tone is still as strong and strident, but his perception of “pilfering other men’s stories” seems to have changed. In an article in 1920, entitled *I am a Classic But Am I a Shakespear Thief?*, Shaw writes,

“It was I myself who first called attention to the fact that the so-called Shaw heroine is equally the Shakespear heroine. ... For stage purposes there are not many types of characters available; and all the playwrights use them over and over again. Shakespear’s crude Gratiano is Benedick, Berowne, and Mercutio, finally evolving through Jacques into Hamlet. He is also my Smilash, my Philanderer, my John Tanner. ... take Falstaff’s discourse on honor; and how far are you from Alfred Doolittle’s disquisition on middle-class morality? ... We are plagiarists one of another; ... ”⁶

Traces of Shakespeare’s influence do appear in *You Never Can Tell*. For example, Shaw’s plot is one that centers on the chance encounter, mutual recognition, and reunion of a long-separated family that recalls *The Comedy of Errors*. The twins, Dolly and Phil, have Puckish qualities similar to that character in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Gloria displays a willfulness and independence not unlike Katherine of *The*

Taming of the Shrew, but succumbs to the force of love just as Shakespeare’s Rosalind does in *As You Like It*. The dentist, Valentine, is just as smitten as any Demetrius, Lysander or Romeo ever was.

Crampton, the denied father, is an admonished parent; and he must learn this lesson like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. When Mr. Crampton cries out: “I’m their father: do they deny that? I’m a man, with the feelings of our common humanity: have I no rights, no claims?”⁷ it could be Shylock’s cry to his daughter, Jessica when she runs off with Lorenzo: “My own flesh and blood to rebel.”⁸

But it is William, the waiter, speaking in rhythmical cadences, whose tact and sagacity prompt Dolly to say: “You really are like Shakespeare, William.”⁹ Is this just a clever play on words or has Shaw predicted himself? The character of the waiter seems to share with Shakespeare’s fools, lovers, and comic survivors an acceptance of the anomalies of life. In the last scene, William is given the clown mask. In Shakespeare’s plays, the character of the clown is often the wisest character. He is the symbol of what the play is all about—the acceptance of human nature no matter what masks the other players wear. He is a sermon and a poem on the demonstration of the fulfillment of self to be found in the serving of others.

The title *You Never Can Tell* suggests the wisdom of letting things happen to you just as Shakespeare espouses in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night or What You Will*. Although Shaw was critical of Shakespeare, he, too, stresses acceptance as a major element of his comedy, *You Never Can Tell*. Perhaps, William sums up Shaw’s changing viewpoint best when he reminds us with gentle irony: “It’s the unexpected that always happens, isn’t it?”¹⁰

“You think that you are Ann’s suitor: that you are the pursuer and she the pursued; that it is your part to woo, to persuade, to prevail, to overcome. Fool: it is you who are the pursued, the marked-down quarry, the destined prey.”

Man and Superman. Act I

SHAW AND THE LIFE FORCE

By Sally R. Gass

Y*ou Never Can Tell* is full of what Shaw called it, the Life Force. To Shaw, the Life Force was that power in the universe that perpetuates and perfects mankind; male and female must get together to reproduce, and this happy ending is only a beginning.

Shaw was a Socialist and a Darwinist, but he saw evolution as something quite different from the scientists. For Shaw, evolution illuminated man’s possibilities. If Nature or some movement for life had perfected man from the ape, what would be possible with man himself as the starting point? The playwright saw evolution as one of the most encouraging hypotheses of science, and he drew faith from it as a manifestation of the Life Force. As Pat Carr writes: “Shaw was a romantic who believed in man and in the divine spark within man.”¹¹

In *The Bishop of Everywhere* by W.S. Smith, the author expands upon the definition. “The Life Force, acting through the will of woman, subjugates man to its purpose, and thereby moves the race to its next higher level.”¹² Since females have the responsibility of propagating the race, they are, therefore, more an instrument of the Life Force than males. But this Force favors organization over chaos, and it requires reason—the intellect to understand its mission. Thus, rational human beings should be conscious of this purpose and endeavor to sustain and to aid the Life Force in realizing its objective. Ordinary people carry out its will unconsciously, but the Life Force requires the conscious effort of all people to fulfill its purpose. There does exist an implied admonition for believers in the Life Force. If we, as a species, do not successfully fulfill its design, we may be abandoned in favor of developing another prospective species to a higher rung on the evolutionary ladder.

In *You Never Can Tell*, the Life Force is portrayed in terms that are more chemical than intellectual. Towards the end of Act II, the frivolous Valentine and the earnest Gloria are thrust into their “proper” roles in this cosmos.

Gloria: “I hope you are not going to be so foolish—so vulgar—as to say love.”

Valentine: “No, no, no, no, no. Not love: we know better than that. Let’s call it chemistry. You can’t deny that there is such a thing as chemical action, chemical affinity, chemical combination: the most irresistible of all natural forces. Well, you’re attracting me irresistibly. Chemically.”¹³



In Act IV, the Life Force touches Gloria, and she is determined to have Valentine. She conquers her lover, now recalcitrant, with a touch and a kiss, and he is lost. The initial infatuation may be over, but life begins.

Shaw’s belief in the Life Force culminated in one of his greatest plays, “Man and Superman.” But he continued to write and speak out on the subject through essays and public forums for the rest of his life. What had been a dramatic issue became his personal gospel in a speech he gave at Cambridge entitled, *The Religion of the Future*:

“Life force has implanted into our minds the ideal of God. We are not very successful attempts at God so far, but I believe that if we can drive into the heads of men the full consciousness of moral responsibility that comes to men with the knowledge that there will never be a God unless we make one—that we are the instruments through which that ideal is trying to make itself a reality—we can work toward that ideal until we get to be supermen, and then super-supermen, and then a world of organisms who have achieved and realized God.”¹⁴

George Bernard Shaw CHRONOLOGY

1856 - George Bernard Shaw born July 26, in Dublin.
 1871 - Goes to work for a Dublin estate agent.
 1876 - Moves to London.
 1879 - Works for Edison Telephone Company; writes first novel, *Immaturity*.
 1880 - Writes novel, *The Irrational Knot*.
 1881 - Writes novel, *Love among the Artists*; grows beard; turns vegetarian.
 1882 - Writes novel, *Cashel Byron's Profession*; turns Socialist.
 1883 - Writes without completing *An Unsocial Socialist*.
 1884 - Joins Fabian Society.
 1885 - Death of Shaw's father.
 1886 - Begins three-year stretch as art critic of *The World*.
 1888 - Begins two-year stretch as music critic (Corno di Bassetto) on *The Star*.
 1889 - Publishes Fabian Essays.
 1890 - Begin four-year stretch as music critic of *The World*.
 1891 - *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.
 1892 - *Widowers' Houses*.
 1893 - *The Philanderer*; *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.
 1894 - *Arms and the Man*; *Candida*.
 1895 - Begins three year stretch as drama critic of *The Saturday Review*; *The Man of Destiny*; *You Never Can Tell*.
 1896 - *The Devil's Disciple*.
 1898 - Marries Charlotte Payne-Townshend; *Caesar and Cleopatra*; *The Perfect Wagnerite*.
 1899 - *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*.
 1903 - *Man and Superman*.
 1904 - *John Bull's Other Island*; defeated as candidate for London County Council.
 1905 - Revisits Ireland for the first time; buys house at Ayot St Lawrence; *Major Barbara*.
 1906 - *The Doctor's Dilemma*; *Our Theatre in the Nineties*; meets Ellen Terry.
 1908 - *Getting Married*.
 1909 - *Misalliance*; *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*.
 1911 - *Fanny's First Play*.
 1912 - *Androcles and the Lion*; *Pygmalion*.
 1914 - *Common Sense About the War*.
 1919 - *Heartbreak House*.
 1920 - *Back to Methuselah*.
 1923 - *Saint Joan*.
 1925 - Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature.
 1928 - *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism*.
 1929 - *The Apple Cart*.
 1931 - Visits U.S.S.R.; *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*.
 1932 - *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*.
 1933 - Visits America.
 1934 - *Collected Prefaces*.
 1939 - *In Good King Charles's Golden Days*.
 1943 - Wife dies at 86.
 1950 - Shaw dies, Nov. 13, at 94.

SHAW A LA CARTE

"All this struggling and striving to make the world better is a great mistake; not because it isn't a good thing to improve the world if you know how to do it, but because striving and struggling is the worst way you could set about doing anything."

Cashel Byron's Profession (Chapter 5)

"The fickleness of the women I love is only equaled by the infernal constancy of the women who love me."

The Philanderer. (Act II)

"The test of a man or woman's breeding is how they behave in a quarrel."

The Philanderer. (Act IV)

"There are no secrets better kept than the secrets that everybody guesses."

Mrs. Warren's Profession. (Act II)

"The great advantage of a hotel is that it's a refuge from home life."

You Never Can Tell. (Act II)

"There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it."

Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant. (Vol. II, Preface)

"The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

The Devil's Disciple. (Act II)

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

Man and Superman. (Epistle Dedicatory)

"The More Things a man is ashamed of, the more respectable he is."

Ibid.

"The greatest of evils and the worst of crimes is poverty."

Major Barbara. (Preface)

"You don't learn to hold your own in the world by standing on guard, but by attacking, and getting well hammered yourself."

Getting Married.

"All great truths begin as blasphemies"

Annajanska.

"Life is a disease; and the only difference between one man and another is the stage of the disease at which he lives."

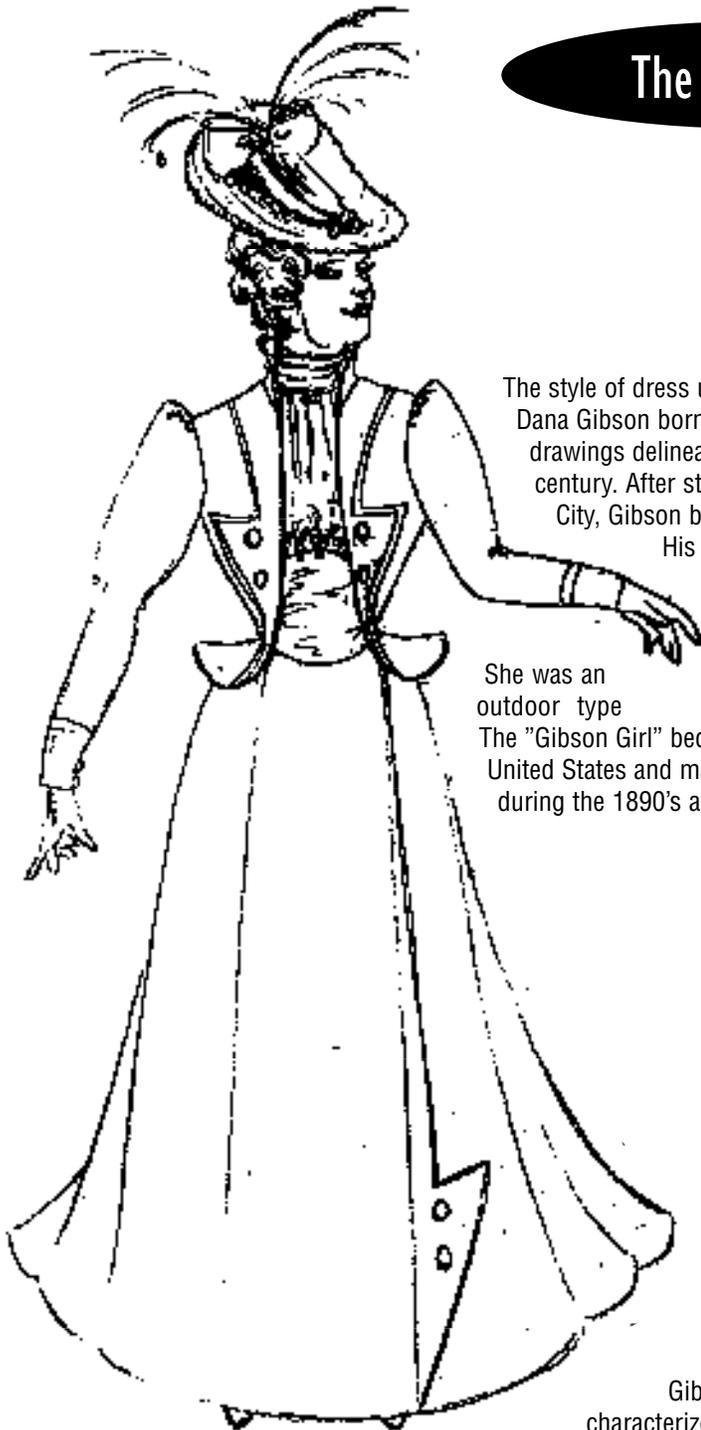
Back to Methuselah.

"One man that has a mind and knows it, can always beat ten men who haven't and don't."

The Apple Cart. (Act I)

The Costumes

THE COSTUMES ARE DESIGNED BY DAVID MICKELSEN.

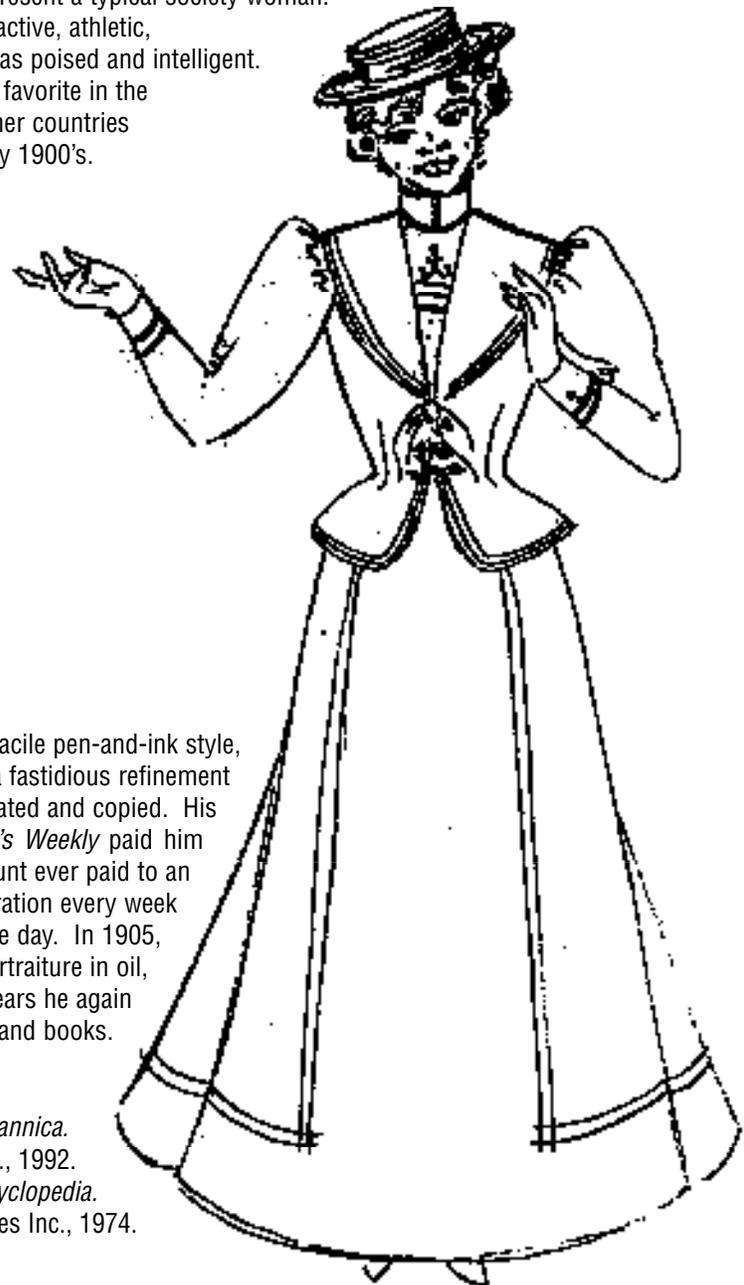


The style of dress used in this production is that of the "Gibson Girl." Charles Dana Gibson born in 1844 was an artist and illustrator whose "Gibson girl" drawings delineated the American ideal of femininity at the turn of the century. After studying for a year at the Art students' League in New York City, Gibson began contributing to the humorous weekly *Life* magazine.

His "Gibson Girl" drawings, modeled after his wife followed and had an enormous vogue.

The Gibson Girl was intended to represent a typical society woman.

She was an outdoor type who was poised and intelligent. The "Gibson Girl" became a favorite in the United States and many other countries during the 1890's and early 1900's.



Gibson's facile pen-and-ink style, characterized by a fastidious refinement of line, was widely imitated and copied. His popularity is attested by the fact that *Collier's Weekly* paid him \$50,000, said at the time to have been the largest amount ever paid to an illustrator, for which Gibson rendered a double-page illustration every week for a year, usually of comic or sentimental situations of the day. In 1905, he withdrew from illustrative work to devote himself to portraiture in oil, which he had already taken up; but within a few years he again returned to illustrating magazines and books.

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Notes

1. Bartlett, p.764
2. Carr, p.28.
3. Shaw, p.831.
4. West, pp.31-32.
- 5.,6. Shaw, pp.51-53.
7. Laurence, p.260.
8. Shakespeare, p.368.
- 9.,10. Laurence, p.247, p.263.
11. Carr, p.21.
12. Smith, p.27.
13. Shaw, p.72.
14. Smith, p.96.

Activity Package

No artist creates in a vacuum, they are effected by the events in the world around them. Here are some of the significant events that occurred during Shaw's creation of "You Never Can Tell."

1895-1896

HISTORY AND POLITICS

Chinese defeated by Japanese at Wei-hai-Wei; end of Chinese-Japanese war. Queen of Korea assassinated with Japanese help.

Cuba fights Spain for its independence.

Frederick Douglass, American abolitionist reformer and orator died.

Utah becomes a state.

William McKinley elected 25th President of the U.S.

LITERATURE, THEATER, MUSIC

Oscar Hammerstein, American librettist born.

H.G. Wells "The Time Machine."

W.B. Yeats: *Poems*.

Tchaikovsky: *Swan Lake*, ballet.

Harriet Beech Stowe, American novelist and abolitionist, died.

Chekhov: *The Sea Gull*.

Richard Strauss: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, GROWTH:

Wilhelm Rontgen discovers x-rays.

Marconi invents radio telegraphy.

Auguste and Louis Lumiere invent a motion-picture camera.

Konstantin Tsiolkovski formulates the principle of rocket reaction propulsion.

William Ramsay discovers helium.

Niagara Falls hydroelectric plant opens.

French physicist A.H. Becquerel discovers radioactivity.

Alfred Nobel died.

DAILY LIFE

King C. Gillette invents the safety razor.

Oscar Wilde's unsuccessful libel action against The Marquis of Queenberry.

First modern Olympics held in Athens.

First Alpine ski school founded at Lilienfeld, Austria.

Beginning of the Klondike gold rush.

RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, LEARNING:

Five annual *Nobel Prizes* established for those who during the preceding year shall have conferred the greatest benefits on mankind in the fields of physics, physiology and medicine, chemistry, literature, and peace.

1. How do you think these events influenced the thinking of the audience attending the play?

2. Make a list of events that have happened in the last two years that have changed or refined your opinions. Perform this exercise on an individual basis and compare during class time; it will be interesting to compare later and to discover what is collectively acknowledged as a significant event. Conversely, it will also be interesting to see the differences of opinions in what actually represents a significant event.

THE SHAVIAN PERSONALITY

The public perception of the Shavian personality was that of half-clown, half-boor, and all wit; it amused some, irritated many, and was idolized by a few. For fifty-six years the public beheld this wit and prankster, the anarchist, the teetotaler, the feminist, the antichrist, the brilliant talker, and millionaire Socialist, the dramatic personality who became as well known by his mere initials as by his name. This was the playwright whose plays, dramatic criticism, constant letters to the papers, public lectures, debates and diatribes, whose fifteen conflicting public images made him the most fascinating and formidable man in the English theatre until his death. He was an eccentric. He wore no shirt because he would not entwine his middle in two layers of material and instead wore a head-to-foot undergarment. On principle, he wore unlined jackets and gray collars and addressed his envelopes in the top left-hand corner, because they looked "more beautiful" that way. He spelled "programme" "program" and "Shakespeare" "Shakespear." He took a dip in the swimming pool of the Royal Automobile Club every morning before breakfast throughout the year. He was a man with such a passion for machines that he once nearly bought a cash register merely because he was fascinated by it, and such an inability to use them that he was constantly having accidents. He was a man that called marriage a form of legal prostitution and schoolmasters slave-drivers. He was the vegetarian, the anti-vivisectionist, the militant non-smoker. He spurned sentimentality of all kinds.

**THE SHAVIAN PERSONALITY WAS A PUBLIC PERSONA.
PUBLIC PERSONAE DO NOT ALWAYS REVEAL THE REAL
PERSON.**

1. Pick a personality, the president, a TV personality, a sports or literary figure etc. and write a paragraph describing their public persona. If there is information on their private lives, contrast this public figure's private life with his public persona.
2. Are "Public Personalities" real or illusions? Are they like carefully crafted like character's in a play? Explain.
3. How do you go about establishing a public persona? What do you see classmates doing to establish their school personae? What is your school persona?

**REVIEW: *YOU NEVER CAN TELL AT THE COURT THEATRE*
MAY 2, 1905**

The story of this play is so small a part of it, that it is not worth while telling; the interest lies entirely in the characters. *You Never Can Tell* has proved one of the most popular of Mr. Shaw's plays, partly because its peculiar wit and high spirits communicate to the spectator's mind a kind of dancing freedom; and partly because the criticism in it upon social distinctions, the family, and the conventions of courtship, instead of being hurled in truculent harangues across the foot-lights, is conveyed indirectly during the course of the story—and, lastly, because the whole play is tinged with the serene resignation of the old waiter's gentle refrain, 'You never can tell, sir, you never can tell.'... Mr. Shaw's plays may or may not be comedy; their pervading spirit is certainly rather one of scrutiny than of indulgence, and humanity on his stage is always under the stare of a searching eye; but whether the presence of these qualities in his work settle the question or not, it is clear that *You Never Can Tell* approaches more nearly than the others to what everyone considers comedy.

1. Pick a character in the play and describe his purpose/motivation or what he represents in the play. Do a character study. What is the playwright trying to convey?
2. The twins Dolly and Philip are difficult to characterize. Some suggest that these characters are conscious of themselves and behave accordingly and the element that they contribute (not counting fun) to the comedy is the innocent hardness and delicious inconsiderateness of youth. Why do you think the characters of Dolly and Philip are in the play?