BERNARD SHAW AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Bernard Shaw and the British Regional Repertory Movement

Soudabeh Ananisarab

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The series *Bernard Shaw and His Contemporaries* presents the best and most up-to-date research on Shaw and his contemporaries in a diverse range of cultural contexts. Volumes in the series will further the academic understanding of Bernard Shaw and those who worked with him, or in reaction against him, during his long career from the 1880s to 1950 as a leading writer in Britain and Ireland, and with a wide European and American following.

Shaw defined the modern literary theatre in the wake of Ibsen as a vehicle for social change, while authoring a dramatic canon to rival Shakespeare's. His careers as critic, essayist, playwright, journalist, lecturer, socialist, feminist, and pamphleteer, both helped to shape the modern world as well as pointed the way towards modernism. No one engaged with his contemporaries more than Shaw, whether as controversialist, or in his support of other, often younger writers. In many respects, therefore, the series as it develops will offer a survey of the rise of the modern at the beginning of the twentieth century and the subsequent varied cultural movements covered by the term modernism that arose in the wake of World War 1.

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Contents

Abbreviations

CL 1	Shaw, Bernard. 1965. *Collected Letters: 1874–1897*. Vol 1. Dan H. Laurence (ed). London: Reinhardt.
CL 2	Shaw, Bernard. 1965. *Collected Letters: 1898–1919*. Vol 2. Dan H. Laurence (ed). London: Reinhardt.
CL 3	Shaw, Bernard. 1985. *Collected Letters: 1911–1925*. Vol 3. Dan H. Laurence (ed). London: Reinhardt.
CL 4	Shaw, Bernard. 1988. *Collected Letters: 1926–1950*. Vol 3. Dan H. Laurence (ed). London: Reinhardt.
HRC	The Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.
Plays	Shaw, Bernard. 1952. *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*. London: Oldhams Press Limited.
Prefaces	Shaw, Bernard. 1962. *The Complete Bernard Shaw Prefaces*. London: Paul Hamlyn.

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Legacies: Shaw and Regional Theatres Since 1950

Introduction

In a review of Allardyce Nicoll's *A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850–1900* in 1946, Shaw identified several limits of Nicoll's book and, by extension, gaps more broadly in accounts of British theatre history. Shaw queried Nicoll's focus on events in the commercial sector and its equation with the entire "evolution of the art of theatre". According to Shaw, this approach disregards the "economics of theatre" and, consequently, the work of actors working in regional theatres away from some of the financial pressures in the capital. Comparing the careers of his favourite actor, Barry Sullivan, and Henry Irving, Shaw asserted that "the moral is obvious. London for reputation and quotable Press notices: the provinces for money and artistic scope". After listing major regional ventures, including Sir Barry Jackson's endeavours in Birmingham and Malvern and Rutland Boughton's Glastonbury Festivals, Shaw concluded that "a history of the drama which leaves the provinces and Barry Sullivan out of account […] needs another chapter" ("Theatre, Provincial and Amateur vs Fashionable, and Professional", HRC, Bernard Shaw Works, 30.1).

This book is a response to Shaw's criticism, seeking to fill this gap, which has since persisted in narratives of early twentieth-century British theatre history and in Shavian studies. Regional playhouses, theatre makers and audiences continue to exist on the peripheries of historical accounts and much of the work on Shaw probes the dramatist's connections with

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theatres in London and other major international cities. Here, I will intertwine these two, often separate, areas of scholarship—Shavian studies and British theatre history—to explore the rise and development of the British repertory movement through the involvement of a key playwright and practitioner of this period. This concern with Shaw's regional collaborations is, as Shaw pointed out, inevitably and intrinsically tied to theatre economics. The story of Shaw's involvement with the regions is incomplete without considering Shaw's financial difficulties in London and the everyday business of managing regional and London playhouses at the beginning of the twentieth century. This shift in focus brings to light the labour and achievements of a wide range of theatre practitioners—actors, designers, managers and producers—who played a significant role in disseminating Shaw's radical artistic practices and ideologies in British locations outside the capital city as well as internationally. This relationship, I argue, was mutually beneficial. The association with Shaw advanced and developed the work of these regional companies and playhouses seeking to offer a more experimental repertoire than that found in London's West End.

The British regional repertory movement began when Annie Horniman leased the Midland Hotel in Manchester for the staging of a season of experimental plays in 1907. This followed a series of short-lived ventures in London, including the famous Harley Granville Barker—J. E. Vedrenne seasons (1904–07) at London's Court Theatre, that sought to defy recognized West End conventions and stage non-commercial work. Taking inspiration from these London initiatives and the work of the Abbey Theatre, Horniman and her Artistic Manager, Iden Payne, instituted in Manchester the model of repertory theatres that followed. Rowell and Jackson summarise the aims and practices of the movement in *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain*, the only full-length study of the British regional repertory movement, as

> the establishment of a *repertory system* of presenting plays (whether the short-run or 'true repertory'); the offering of a high quality and *varied repertoire of plays* […]; the improvement in *standards of acting and staging*; the securing of *civic or state patronage*; and the forging (or reforging) of the vital links that must exist between a *theatre and its community*. (Rowell and Jackson 1984, 173–174)

The movement soon reached many other towns and cities across England and Scotland, including companies in Glasgow (1909), Liverpool (1911), and Birmingham (1913). The collective work of the movement signified a major resurgence of theatrical activity in the regions, where many theatres had, by the early twentieth century, become largely venues for London touring companies rather than the producers of new work. The regional reps staged the drama of a diverse list of playwrights, including examples of celebrated classics and new work. They also nurtured the careers of many well-known and influential theatre artists.

The impetus behind the movement is complex. One of the consequences of the industrial and urban expansion of British cities in the nineteenth century was an awakening of feelings of local and civic pride. The notion of "cultural capital" then became relevant; a vibrant cultural scene for some formed an important part of the civic identity they wished to cultivate and, importantly, project. This expansion, also, of course, offered the economic means through which new theatre initiatives could be funded and sustained. Theatre benefactors, like Horniman and later Jackson, acquired the wealth they used to support their theatre activities from the "growing retail food market" (Cochrane 2000, 142). Despite these material realities, however, as Claire Cochrane highlights, the "collective ethos" of the movement, including the views of key figures like Horniman and Jackson, was "fundamentally anti-urban" (2000, 138). Those involved in the movement often criticised aspects of the commercialisation and industrialisation that had propelled this urban growth. This tension in the movement's ideological underpinning had consequences for the activities of the repertory theatres on the ground; a rejection of commercialisation in the theatre included with it occasionally a disdain for the popular. These repertory theatres received criticism, often from locals, for catering to coterie audiences and only pursuing "serious" drama. Unsurprisingly then, repertory theatres experienced periods of, sometimes for the duration of their existence, financial hardship.

From the early years of the movement, Shaw was a favourite with the regional reps. Horniman's season at the Midland Hotel included a production of Shaw's *Widowers' Houses*, and this trend did not stop when she moved to the Gaiety Theatre in 1908. Similarly, Shaw's work frequented the stages of repertory theatres in Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham. The regional theatres produced an extraordinarily diverse range of Shaw's drama, covering his better-known comedies—which offered the reps opportunity to produce several crowd pleasers without sacrificing their

ethos—and some of Shaw's most experimental plays, as seen in Shaw's collaborations with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and later the Malvern Festival (1929–49). Shaw also became a great source of inspiration and an ally for the movement, as well as a confidant and friend to many of those involved. Shaw was no stranger to the ideological approaches of the movement, having engaged in, and occasionally started, similar debates in other contexts. As we will see in Chap. 2, Shaw's collaborations with the regional reps emerged out of his increasing frustration with London's commercial theatres. The case studies in this book present a rich history of Shaw offering advice, on matters of artistic significance as well as issues relating to the overall direction and finances of the reps, and words of encouragement to company members.

"Place" and "Regionalism"

I have selected the term "regional" in place of "provincial" when discussing productions and playhouses positioned outside London. This is to avoid the pejorative connotations associated with "provincialism", which are also discernible in the very outlooks on regional theatre that this book seeks to dismantle. Drawing on the work of Donald Read, particularly the assertion that anyone who "came from or lived in the provinces was likely by this fact to have a talent in some way in need of improvement" (Read 1964, 262), Lez Cooke concludes that "in literature and culture throughout the nineteenth century the connotations of "provincial" were largely negative", before tracing similar attitudes in the "New Wave" of literature, theatre and cinema that emerged in the mid-to-late 1950s, where "London is seen as the centre of artistic and cultural activity, associated with 'modernity' whereas the industrial North is described far more negatively" (2015, 13).

These derogatory perspectives on life in the regions manifest in accounts of British theatre history in the form of the relevant neglect of regional theatrical activity in these narratives. Acknowledging this gap in scholarship, David Coates wrote in 2019 that "for a decade or more there has been a concerted effort to refocus the spotlight away from London and towards Britain's neglected regions" (129). Ros Merkin, whose work on Liverpool belongs to this new wave of scholarship to which Coates refers, also draws attention to the "old binary of the metropolitan and the local" (2012, 91), to highlight the exclusion and neglect of regional theatres from historical accounts of British theatre exemplified in Michael

Billington's influential *The State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (2007). Here, Merkin defends regional theatre scholarship not only from London centrism but also from calls for adopting a more "global" perspective at the expense of local theatre histories. Responding to Marvin Carlson's suggestion that for theatre historians to "expand the geographical boundaries of their investigations", they must "become less provincial" (2004, 177) Merkin argues:

> This is not to argue that the broadening and widening of theatre history that has taken place is not welcome, but to ask what we might be missing in what can become a stampede to follow fashions and trends in theatre history. If an inclusive history of world theatre is not to leave out Times Square or Bunraku, why exclude Liverpool? (2012, 92)

Jo Robinson also defends the inclusion of the local in theatre history scholarship to argue that in a time in which theatre historians are encouraged to think global, a "combination of the local and global" is the "most useful stance" (2007, 240). This outlook is reflected in Robinson's research, most notably in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* (2019) co-edited with Claire Cochrane, in which the co-editors are sensitive to fostering a truly more "inclusive conversation". They insist on, quoting Thomas Postlewait (1991, 161), the need for theatre historians to consider "not only *where* but *how* they look" (9) and, consequently, the contributors to this volume are encouraged to "reflect on aspects of theatre history which mobilize a detailed and embedded knowledge of the local and regional, while also highlighting questions of historiographic approach and method that are of interest and relevance beyond the particular geographical or temporal contexts from which they emerge" (16).

Similarly, I am invested in unpacking the interconnections between the local, national and global in theatre history, and specifically in this account of Shaw's collaborations with British regional theatres. I draw on relational models of understanding regions, which consider places "as open, discontinuous, relational and internally diverse", and consequently, regions as "a construction of space–time: a product of a particular combination and articulation of social relationships stretched over space" (Allen et al. 1998, 143). As James Moran and Neal Alexander note, "This way of thinking, although not uncontested, makes it possible to see regions in their global context, always in process of construction, defined by their

interrelations with other places, rather than forming a stable, self-contained, and ahistorical entity" (2013, 12). Similarly, Doreen Massey argues that "such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities":

> The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that "beyond". Places viewed this way are open and porous. (1994, 5)

If we accept the work of regional theatres as operating in this complex process of becoming and identity making, then their endeavours must be contextualised within relevant national and global contexts. The birth of the British regional repertory movement must be situated amidst growing calls at the beginning of the twentieth century for the establishment of a National Theatre in England as well as developments in European modernist and avant-garde theatre. I find it helpful to conceptualise the British regional repertory movement as a network of relationships. This approach follows Massey's formulation of "place" around "social relations" (2) to imply a non-linear system of interconnected people. Every individual's entry point into the network is, however, of course, bound up with their specific ideological, social, and importantly, geographical positioning.

This view of the concepts of "place" and "region" has impacted the source material with which this book engages and my approach to them. I am particularly concerned here with piecing together specific regional productions of Shaw's plays and their reception. In this process, I draw on archival material where available—production photos, costume and set designs and other relevant ephemera. I also use newspapers, and this usage extends beyond published production reviews. Matthew Franks observes that "at the peak of repertory fever, newspapers [...] published dozens of playgoer letters daily" in which correspondents "frankly stated what theatre meant to them and to their families and communities" (2020, 50). In exploring Shaw's collaborations with the British regional repertory movement, I am not merely interested in highlighting the interest of regional audiences in Shaw's drama. Instead, I seek to unpack the ways in which productions of Shaw's plays may illustrate or have contributed to this complex process of regional identity formulation, and to that end, the

debates unfolding on the pages of local newspapers offer relevant and useful insights. Foregrounding the voices of periphery, in this case regional, audiences also adds to our critical understanding of Shaw's drama, offering new interpretations and perspectives on his oeuvre.

Comparably, Shavian scholarship has also tended to reflect this metropolitan bias. Accounts of Shaw's life and work mostly focus on Shaw's London and international connections to the detriment of his regional collaborations. For instance, *Bernard Shaw in Context* (Kent 2015), one of the more recent edited volumes on Shaw, includes forty-two fascinating essays covering a wide range of themes: "people and places", "theatre", "writing and the arts", "politics", "culture and society" and "reception and afterlife". Amongst these essays, several deal directly with Shaw's London endeavours—"London", "The Court Theatre" and "Reception in London, 1892–1950"—and the index includes more than eighty references to this city as well numerous entries on specific London ventures, like the Vedrenne-Barker seasons, The Independent Theatre and the Stage Society. Mentions of British regional towns, cities and theatres are largely absent; however, and apart from Jackson, Shaw's main regional collaborators do not appear in the volume. This absence diminishes the significance of Shaw's regional collaborations and presents the London-based experimental ventures of the early twentieth century as the main distributors of Shaw's radical aesthetic and ideological practices in this period and one of the main examples of Shaw's enduring influence on British theatre. As we will see, this approach obscures the complex networks of circulation and influence that existed in this period and in which Shaw actively participated.[1]

Mapping the Road Ahead

In line with this approach, I begin this book with exploring aspects of the theatrical context in London that influenced the rise of the regional repertory movement and Shaw's decision to collaborate with such theatres and companies. It is out of the scope of one book to explore in detail the work of each individual theatre. Instead, this book is structured around four

[1] The main exception to this tendency is Shaw's involvement with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, aspects of which L. W. Conolly has documented, most notably in his *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw: Bernard Shaw and Barry Jackson* (2002), and on which this book builds.

main case studies that illustrate the work and aims of the repertory movement and Shaw's contributions to its development. However, where appropriate, I refer to the exchange of plays and artists that occurred between these repertory theatres—an approach that reflects my conceptualisation of the movement as a network of relationships—to unpack the personal and professional collaborations on which the repertory movement was based.

Two major factors have shaped my choice of case studies: the significance of the theatre's contributions to the history of the repertory movement and the extent and nature of its collaborations with Shaw. Manchester is where the repertory movement began, and the Gaiety's extensive tours introduced Shaw to many regional audiences. Glasgow's significance to the focus of this book lies in the venture's status as a regional theatre with national aspirations and the first company to stage a censored play, Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* in 1913, outside of London. Jackson's Birmingham Repertory Theatre, the focus of Chap. 5, was one of the only remaining of the early repertory theatres when the War ended in 1918, and in the years that followed until Shaw's death in 1950, this theatre mounted impressive productions of Shaw's more experimental later plays, including the British premiere of Shaw's cycle play, *Back to Methuselah* in 1923. The Malvern Festival, which Jackson established in 1929 and initially dedicated to Shaw, is another example of the Birmingham Rep's collaborations with Shaw. Although the Malvern Festival was not a repertory theatre, this was a regional venture that grew out of the repertory movement and shared with repertory theatres aspirations for staging experimental theatre away from the commercial pressures dominating the West End. The particular festival model adopted, however, was unique. This chapter reveals Shaw's involvement with early twentieth-century festival cultures and aspects of Shaw's public image in these final decades of his life as reflected in some of the local reaction in Malvern to the Festival and Shaw as its central figure. In this book's concluding chapter, I explore the legacies of Shaw's collaborations with the reps through analyses of specific productions of Shaw's plays by several regional theatres from the 1950s to the present. This history reveals that Shaw no longer holds the central position he once did with regional theatres. The criticisms directed at his work, however, are remarkably like those Shaw received for the duration of his career.

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London

In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, a lecture delivered to the Fabian society in the summer of 1890 later extended and published in 1891, Shaw began a fierce attack on the plays and theatres of London's West End that he would later repeat and expand through his drama. In *The Quintessence*, Shaw celebrated the rise of the New Drama in the continent and praised the work of Ibsen as the movement's most prominent playwright. Shaw's laudatory evaluation of Ibsen highlighted the technical novelties of Ibsen's drama that according to Shaw were anathemas to many London theatre managers. Shaw argued that Ibsen's "introduction of discussion and its development" as the main point of action in the play liberated drama from the "old stage tricks" through which audiences were "induced to take an interest in unreal people and improbable circumstances" (1922, 205). Shaw intertwined his praise for Ibsen with criticism of common practices in London's West End to argue that Ibsen's characters were particularly badly suited for playing within the actor-manager system that dominated British theatre and by which actor-managers became the focus of productions. For Shaw, these actors failed to grasp Ibsen's complex characterisation, which defied conventional understandings of morality resulting in the actors' reluctance to play these roles and produce Ibsen's plays. In an appendix to *The Quintessence*, only published in the 1891 edition of the text, Shaw concluded that the resistance to the plays by "old playgoers" is

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