Shaw Before His First Play
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Bernard Shaw often mythologized his own history. How and why he completed his first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, as he described the episode, became a laid-back affair, accomplished as any genius would have done it. “I came across the manuscript of the play,” he wrote in the March 1893 preface to the first published edition, only nine months after he had rediscovered once more the abandoned two acts, “and it so tickled me that I there and then sat down and finished it.” Shaw’s shorthand diary is a better source for what happened, for he kept returning to the draft, which gnawed at him. An example is his diary for 27 December 1890, where he wrote that on his way home from Hammersmith after visiting his current lady love, the actress Florence Farr, “Did a little work on the old play in the train.” He may have been thinking of it as a vehicle for her. The next day, a Sunday, he traveled from Victoria Station to Brighton to visit friends and “wrote a scene of the 3rd act of the old unfinished play in the pullman car, going and coming….?” If he did, it doesn’t survive. Only one longhand page of a third act exists, and no Pitman shorthand curls and hooks.

Although Shaw had turned to desultory journalism, and then fiction, soon after he left Dublin for London, he had been a dedicated playgoer in Ireland, nursing his pence for the cheapest seats. Twenty-one in February 1878, and still new to London, he was so sure that he had a future in literature that he began, only to encounter writer’s block, as explained in the opening chapter, a perverse “Passion Play” in Shakespearean blank verse. An unbeliever, he nevertheless had grown up on the canonical Gospels and managed nearly two striking acts satirizing them, in which Jesus, a callow young carpenter enduring a miserable home life, is wooed away by an itinerant philosopher, Judas, who sees possibilities in him as a charismatic, visionary preacher. Forty-nine manuscript pages and 1,260 lines later, Shaw abandoned the effort and turned to fiction, which seemed to have more possibilities.

After completing his fifth unpublishable novel, he penned a *jeu d’esprit* for Edith Beatty, who was teaching him French, and was the wife of his erratic friend Pakenham Beatty. Addicted to the bottle,
Beatty was the central figure in Shaw’s rudimentary French of *Un Petit Drame*. Written in October 1884, his brief farce evinced a continuing interest in the stage, which had been reawakened the year before by William Archer, the young critic and translator of Henrik Ibsen. Archer had encountered Shaw in the British Museum’s Reading Room and had suggested that they pool their ideas and write a play in the French “cup-and-saucer” manner, a comedy of manners after Émile Augier’s still-popular *Ceinture Dorée* (“Tainted Money,” 1855). Wagner’s *Rheingold*, also about tarnished money, was hinted at, as their opening scene would be a hotel on the Rhine, and the hero, according to Archer’s suggested plot, “was ultimately to succeed in throwing the tainted treasure” of the hero’s slum-landlord future father-in-law “metaphorically speaking, into the Rhine.”

Shaw’s addiction to Wagner’s music dramas lay behind Archer’s attempt to draw in a collaborator who had a way with words, but in a later recollection of their beginning was off in date by a year (he recalled 1885) as Shaw’s initial shorthand draft is dated 18 August 1884, and his completion of the second act was recorded on October 14, a week after he sketched *Un Petit Drame*. On November 18 he began a third act, then abandoned it, claiming afterward that he had used up what remained of Archer’s plot. Archer was already bored by his proposal, but he owed Shaw a good turn and arranged for him to do regular newspaper art criticism, which he then parlayed into musical reviews. But Shaw had not lost interest in playwriting. On 22 February 1886, he wrote a “Plan for St. James’s Piece,” intended ambitiously for the St. James’s Theatre and its stars, with a sketchy plot dealing with misdirected romance. It went nowhere, but he returned again on 3 September 1887 to the shorthand draft of what he and Archer had conceived, presumably in heavy irony, as *The Way to a Woman’s Heart*.

By then Shaw had found his own way to a woman’s heart, having lost his virginity, at long last, on his 29th birthday, that July 26, to a voracious older woman, Jenny Patterson. The continuing affair may have spilled over into Shaw’s concept of the sexually eager Blanche Sartorius and her rather languid suitor Harry Trench. Beginning on 3 September 1887 he copied the shorthand draft into a notebook, transliterated into English so Archer could read it, while making revisions as he went. Significantly, he made the idealistic Harry, with a newly conferred medical degree, firmly aware that his education has been supported by housing rentals like those that have enriched Blanche’s crafty slumlord father.
On October 4, Shaw noted in his diary that on finishing copying the play, as far as it went, he took it to Archer, who was not at home. Two days later, he wrote: “went up to Archer’s and read the unfinished drama. An argument ensued, Archer having received it with great contempt.” Afterward he wrote to Archer—who had conceived the play—about “impossible” elements that would have to go. One was Archer’s proposal to retitle the play *Rheingold*. Further, “I have no idea how it is to proceed. The peculiarity so far is that there is only one female character; and her social isolation is essential to the situation.” Yet Shaw still felt convinced, unlike Archer, that the “central notion is quite perfect.”

Although the play again languished, in February 1888 he wrote to Alma Murray, the young actress he envisioned as Blanche, and would be his Raina in *Arms and the Man*, that he hadn’t “the faculty” for a play for her: “I once wrote two acts of a splendid play, and read them to an eminent dramatic critic. He laughed the first to scorn, and went asleep in the middle of the second; so I made him a present of the MS (to his intense indignation) and set to [critical] work to destroy the society that makes bad plays possible.” Archer had done nothing with the manuscript, but despite what Shaw had written to Mrs. Forman (she was Alma Murray onstage) the theater still tempted him. He began yet another play, initiated in August 1889. Set in a “swell country house,” it included extramarital flirtation and the projected design, as a wedding gift, of a decorated Italianate chest which gave the scrappy dialogues a title—“The Cassone.”

Writing again for the stage may have been spurred by his seeing *A Doll’s House* in performance shortly before, but “The Cassone” was more Wildean in conversation and commercial in intent than suggesting anything of Ibsen. Without a semblance of Oscar’s quick wit, the dialogues had nowhere to go.

Holding no grudges, Shaw had continued his friendship with the difficult Archer, even reviewing the first performance in English of *A Doll’s House* for him (as “Julius Floemmochser”) in the *Manchester Guardian* in June 1889. The paper’s drama critic could not review his own translation of Ibsen. Although Shaw had nothing but praise for Archer’s making the play accessible in English, he warned him in a letter (11 June 1889) that after the first performance, the cast had abandoned Ibsenite reality for “ordinary stage tricks.” Janet Achurch as Nora Helmer “actually bowed to applause on her entrance, a proceeding that … ruined the illusion.” After Shaw’s successful Fabian Society lecture on Ibsen in 1890, published as *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in
1891, he and Archer would continue to argue about the purposes of drama, live and in print, Archer seeing Shaw’s emphasis on the criticism of society on stage as turning theater into “a moral waxwork.” He complained, despite Shaw’s lively promotion of Ibsen, “I have always said you would end up being Pope.”

A reawakening of the abandoned collaboration was recorded on 29 July 1892. Since Archer had rejected all of it, Shaw now referred to “that play of mine.” In any case it was all in his hand. “Began to set papers in order,” he wrote, “and came across the comedy which I began in 1885”—it was actually begun in 1884—“and set aside after finishing two acts.” When Shaw was at loose ends he often resorted to rearranging his disorganized heaps of papers. While Jenny Patterson, his now tiresome (and fiftyish) mistress of seven years’ standing who shared him unwillingly with Florence Farr, was at Fitzroy Square that evening, she offered a suggestion for some of the papers. A growing pile of back issues of the *World* made a formidable stack. In January 1889 he had spent an evening and the next day cutting out his contributions from the *Star*. If he would scissor out his columns since, Jenny offered, she would mount them in a scrapbook for him. He had art criticism, music criticism, some drama criticism, and odd journalism to be rescued from the rubbish. After she left, he went to work on the papers, inking in, here and there, corrections to typographical errors.

To amend typos, Shaw could not help rereading his contributions as he separated them from the yellowing pages. Many evinced an interest in the techniques of playwriting that suggest that whether or not he knew it, he was readying himself to return to *Rheingold*. In the *World* on 3 September 1889, he observed of a new opera that “the first thing to do” to improve it would be “to cut out the plot.” And he added, with reference to the “poor, nasal” voice of the male lead, that it had apparently “never occurred to him that quality of sound is as important in speech as in song.” As a result Shaw approved, in another opera (15 October 1890) of the “golden silence” of the donkey: “If the tenor had only had that animal’s self-possession and sagacity....” In December 1890, he praised the “felicity” of a French company’s acting of Molière, as compared with that of English performers who had “no idea that action and speech are subjects for artistic culture.” Bad acting seemed to him inappropriate even for bad drama, as he observed (4 February 1891) of Arthur Sullivan’s operatic version of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. American expatriate Howard Sturgis had turned the “noble dialogue” into a “fustian” that somehow overwhelmed the critical capacities of
the other reviewers. *Maid Marian*, the Robin Hood opera by Reginald DeKoven that gave the musical world, and multitudes of marriage ceremonies thereafter, “Oh, Promise Me,” was no better, he wrote on 11 February 1891, since the librettist, Clement Scott, had managed only “degrading and dehumanizing” characterizations that were, at least, an improvement upon “the arid wastes of inanity” in contemporary light opera. The next week promised a production of Ibsen’s “masterpiece,” *Rosmersholm*: “We shall see how the papers which have just proclaimed Mr. Sturgis a great dramatic poet will take it out on Ibsen.”

Ostensibly reviewing Italian opera on 18 March 1891, Shaw used the occasion to contrast to the disadvantage of the nonmusical theatre “the stage of evolution reached by drama and opera.” However consummate the acting of Henry Irving as Charles I in W. G. Wills’s forgettable costume vehicle (Lyceum Theatre, 1872, revived 1891), compared with performances by lesser presences in more major works, “now comes the difficulty,” he observed, in valuing execution over the vehicle being staged:

> Charles I interests me so little as a drama that the actor cannot, with all his art, make it affect me one-tenth as strongly as a play of Ibsen’s acted by novices who have not a twentieth part of Irving’s skill. And I would not go out of London to hear the finest performance of [Gounod’s] *Romeo et Juliette* that Europe can produce; whereas I have gone a long way out of England to hear complete performances of Wagner’s works by quite stupendously attractive singers. Now since there is no regular theatre in London which provides me with what I want, I am compelled to make the most unjustifiable assaults on Manager Irving and Impresario Harris in order to force them to attend to my wants for a night or two at the expense of their contented patrons. If I succeed, I know I shall get both gentlemen into no end of trouble. The proper solution is to build another opera house for the advanced party, where it can have the music dramas it likes without ousting those who don’t like them.

What was abundantly obvious from comments that Shaw now realized he had been making throughout his years as a critic was that a new drama and new audiences had to emerge if England were to move in parallel with enlightened cultures elsewhere, and that the advanced drama, like its musical counterpart, would require new impresarios and new houses. His own press cuttings, one after another, became a challenge to himself to supply the deficiency. Yet no clientele for untraditional theater seemed to exist. Jacob Thomas Grein, Shaw’s elder by four years, a Dutch-born critic and journalist working out of London, had tried to emulate the new experimental theaters of Paris and Berlin by founding on a shoestring his own “Independent Theatre.” All he had
going for him, Shaw recalled, were “a handful of faddists and a matter of two-pound-ten or so. He took the nearest thing to a barn left in Tottenham Court Road and organized a performance of one of Ibsen’s greatest plays for the few people who cared.”

That had been *Ghosts*, produced in March 1891 to enormous newspaper notoriety. As Grein came onstage after the curtain to make an opening night speech on behalf of the absent Norwegian playwright, a man in the gallery shouted, “It’s too horrible!” A sarcastic shout followed, Shaw reported to Charles Charrington: “Why don’t you go to the Adelphi?” The 1,500-seat Adelphi Theatre in the Strand, run by actor-manager William Terriss, was the home of popular romantic melodrama. Grein’s eagerness to experiment further—beyond Ibsen—until then had not seriously tempted Shaw, who was more into polemics than practice. Live theater was Florence Farr’s milieu.

Before *Ghosts*, Shaw had watched his mistress perform in Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, which premiered on 23 February 1891—the first production in England. He would pick Florence up after rehearsals and performances to escort her home. Once, before returning with her to Hammersmith, he joined a post-performance Playgoers’ Club discussion of *Ghosts*. His repeated exposures to the nonmusical stage were a long fuse eventually to ignite.

Although he may not have recognized what was happening, he was absorbing the possibilities of Ibsenite drama for his own playwriting practice. His abandoned *Rheingold* had stopped with only one page of the third act. His *Quintessence of Ibsenism* had become an influential attack against “bad plays.” Serious criticism, as he extrapolated from the press’s sour response to Ibsen and its fulsome acceptance of fustian, was in short supply. As he had explained to readers of the *Star* (9 January 1890), “It cannot be denied that the national genius does not lie in that direction; and in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed [man] is king. Even I cut quite a figure here.”

As 1892 wore on, the theater remained very much on Shaw’s mind as a critic and as the companion of an ambitious actress. His current love had not made a mark with Ibsen. Another woman entering his life, Janet Achurch Charrington, who with her complaisant husband had put on *A Doll’s House* in April, elicited from Shaw a long letter on performing Ibsen (21 April 1892) that has often been reprinted as an essay on the art of acting. A few weeks later, a musical column by Shaw in the *World* (18 May 1892), now stacked in the clutter of his study, began
with hardly any suggestion that music criticism—his salaried job—was on his mind at all:

The other day an actor published a book of directions for making a good play. His plan was a simple one. Take all the devices which bring down the house in existing plays; make a new one by stringing them all together; and there you are. If that book succeeds, I am prepared to write a similar treatise on opera companies. The whole situation should be repeated in the last act, with the difference that this time it is the gentleman who must be [seen] alone at the beginning. Furthermore, he must be in a gloomy dungeon, not larger at the outside than the stage of Covent Garden Theatre; and he must be condemned to die the next morning. The reason for putting the gentleman, rather than the lady, in this situation is to be found in the exclusion of women from politics, whereby they are deprived of the privilege of being condemned to death, without any reflection on their personal characters, for heading patriotic rebellions. The difficulty has nevertheless been successfully got over by making the lady go mad in the fourth act, and kill somebody, preferably her own child. Under these circumstances she may sing almost anything she pleases of a florid nature in the distraction, and may take the gentleman’s place in the prison-cell in the next act without forfeiting the moral approval of the audience.

Shaw’s last music review written before his return to the much-abandoned play was delivered to the World on July 28. (It would be published August 3.) In its last paragraph, alluding to Wagner’s pioneering music dramas, Shaw declared that “every man who is not a Pangloss is bound to be in a state of incessant revolutionary activity all his life long if he wishes to leave things better than he found them.” The next day, he exhumed Rheingold and the day after that he noted in his diary: “Set to work to finish the comedy.” He had finally determined that he had something to offer the nonmusical stage, and that it would be in the revolutionary spirit.

As usual on his Sunday (the following day, July 31) Shaw had scheduled a political speech, but he had the afternoon (after rising late, as usual) to employ his purple pencil, “amusing myself finishing the comedy.” He had to quit writing early to take the 5:45 from Victoria Station to Streatham, across the Thames, where a downpour on the Common did not disperse the crowd awaiting him, and he “got rather wet.” A local Fabian offered him a dry coat and some supper. On Monday, August 1, still caught up in the play, he finished a draft of the third act, and on the 2nd, despite going off to meet Florence in the early afternoon, he began revisions of the entire script, purple-penciling small changes in the first two acts to make them compatible with the final act. This meant altering dialogue at the end of the first act and cutting a scene with Blanche and the odious rent-collector Lickcheese from the sec-
ond act. He replaced it with a crucial encounter between Blanche, in a sadistic fury, and Annie, her submissive maid. He had found another female to reveal the virago dimension in Blanche.

Several concepts that had been simmering in his subconscious soon synthesized into a solution for his third act. Years earlier he had explained to Archer that the play’s problem was that there was “only one female character,” yet that her “social isolation” was “essential to the situation.” In place of Archer’s unworkable “long lost old woman,” he introduced a frightened, whimpering maid opposite Blanche, retaining her detachment from her social peers while inserting the necessary female foil. When reviewing a book on acting a few months earlier, he had observed wryly that it helped a traditional melodrama to have an ostensible lady go mad toward the end of the play “and kill somebody, preferably her own child.” Shaw would have the tantrum-prone Blanche attack her own maid—almost a child in age, and trapped in her dependent relationship to her employer.

Did Shaw realize what he had drawn from to complete the vision embodied in the earlier acts? Not entirely. Creativity seldom operates on a fully conscious level. He had replaced the irrelevant pages with a depiction of Blanche bullying her maid, who is crouching in fear. The exposure of Blanche’s pathology emerged from memories of an altercation along Wigmore Street between two young women that he had witnessed years before while walking home one evening. The dominant one of the pair was in a black rage: the other was feebly trying to quiet her. The strained strong voice and the whimpering remonstrant one went on for some time. Then came the explosion. The angry one fell on the other, buffeting her, tearing at her hair, grasping her neck. The victim, apparently used to it, cowered against the railings, covering herself as best she could, and imploring her counterpart in a carefully subdued tone, dreading a police rescue more than the other’s violence. Presently the fit passed, and the two came on their way, the lioness silent, and the lamb reproachful and rather emboldened by her sense of injury.

What was also close to the occasion, he recalled in an appendix to the 1893 edition of the play, was having his heroine “attack her servant much as Othello attacks his ancient.”¹ As music critic, he had seen several productions of Verdi’s operatic version of Othello and would soon be writing a column reviewing all the Verdi operas he had seen on London stages. Possibly the two images coalesced as Shaw created one of the most fraught psychological relationships between characters in any of his plays.
Previous commitments kept him from the play for weeks, and his activities, when he seemed to have time to spare, suggested almost that he was again shrinking from his calling as a playwright. Florence Farr was playing Martha in Ernest Cosham’s forgettable *The Homecoming*, at the Comedy Theatre, running through November 4, and Shaw would escort her both before and after most performances. He was also involved in the Shelley centenary celebrations at Horsham, in the Sussex suburbs, which he feared would whitewash an outrageously radical poet who represented in his life and work “Atheism, Free Love, Republicanism, Socialism, and the like.” To Stanley Little, a writer and secretary of the Shelley Society, he predicted (July 29) that the “whole affair will be simply a conspiracy to persuade the silly Sussexers that Shelley was a model Churchman & country gentleman who attained great distinction in literature.”

Before going off with Archer to Cobham on the evening of August 3 to remain overnight in a friend’s farmhouse—Archer had no spare bedroom in his own country cottage—Shaw rushed out two articles puffing the affair. The afternoon *Star* printed one as “Shelley’s Birthday” the next day; the morning *Chronicle*, to which Shaw sent the other, put it in the wastebasket. The event, a major literary occasion, prompted Shaw to buy new boots at Jaeger’s in which to appear for his own talk, where he was attended conspicuously by Bertha Newcombe, an artist long eager for Shaw’s amorous attentions. She returned by train to London with Shaw, Archer, and Henry Salt, and went on with Shaw to the Hall of Science in Old Street, where Shaw spoke on Shelley once more, convulsing his radical audience, according to Salt, with his description of “the Horsham apologetics” offered by local dignitaries eager to make Shelley a respectable Victorian.

There was still no opportunity to return to the play. Shaw had a long piece to write for the *Albemarle Review*, which would become “Shaming the Devil about Shelley” (September 1892). Since he had to lecture in Manchester that Sunday, his first draft was written in the swaying train, the resulting eyestrain leaving him ill by the time he arrived. A walk in the countryside near Marple with his host, John Trevor, restored him. After a night in an inn, and a late breakfast, he gave a rain-drenched open-air afternoon speech at the Ordsall Fair Grounds—an umbrella in one hand, a few note-cards in the other—on the lessons of the recent election, then a seven o’clock speech, “Socialism and Human Nature,” in the People’s Concert Hall.
At ten the next morning, Shaw returned to London, the Manchester Labour Church having reimbursed him his fourteen shillings and some odd pence for the railway fare. (Shaw would accept no fees.) But busy in the city, he could not find time to return to his play, for he had a list of twenty-eight questions on British socialism to respond to for the Paris radical journal *La justice*, as well as further political work at the Fabian Society office. On Tuesday he worked all day on the Shelley article until it was time to lecture on socialism at the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street, to the Post Office Savings Bank Employees—largely women bored by politics but fascinated by the intense, red-bearded speaker. The missionary effort concluded just in time for Shaw to rush off to Hammersmith and Florence Farr.

On Wednesday and Thursday, he continued working on the response to Georges Clemenceau’s *La justice* which, despite the energy he put into it, would never be published. There was still no time the next day for what he called “regular work” since his afternoon was to be spent with Florence in Kew Gardens. And even that interlude was spoiled by their encountering the intense labor union politician John Burns, a future Cabinet member. Shaw was cajoled into spending so much time with Burns that Florence “was left to stroll about alone during all the time we had at our disposal.” Saturday included an art exhibition opening—for a review in the *Star* that he would write the next Tuesday—and, finally, the completion of the Shelley article. Sunday meant giving the usual Fabian lecture, this time in Victoria Park, Hackney, and submitting to an interview afterward for the socialist paper *The Clarion*.

For most people, August was usually an uncrowded month, but Shaw seemed always to be missing trains and walking doggedly in the rain, writing letters on political matters, and philandering reluctantly with the insistent Jenny Patterson and the frustrated Bertha Newcombe on days when he was not in Florence’s company. On a rare weekend when he could have worked on his play, he took the train to Hindhead and spent a Saturday with Havelock Ellis, sunning himself on the beach and talking the day away, returning in the evening only to spend his Sunday in the country discussing politics with editor H. W. Massingham.

No inner drive to find himself as a playwright seemed evident as August waned. He would meet Florence most afternoons and walk with her along the barge towpath from Hammersmith westward to Putney. On a Saturday or Sunday, he would visit old friends in the London suburbs and make a holiday of the occasion, playing tennis for the first time in years, reading *Moby-Dick*—“The Whale,” as he called it—and,
later, *Tom Sawyer*, and playing piano duets with Henry Salt’s lesbian wife, Kate. Returning by rail from another friend’s cottage, he amused himself by writing doggerel that he sent to his hosts Geraldine and Herbert Wildon Carr. Geraldine had been one of the young women who, impatient about Shaw’s trifling with her affections, had married someone else. It had been another rainy weekend, and during his visit he scribbled verses about the umbrella being “mightier than the Pen.”

Home again, he lectured in the East End to a Fabian group and on the way home fashioned some verses for Florence to assure her that his wandering affections (“this overplus”) meant no less love for her.

Still, he was not going back to the play, finding every possible other thing to do, from revising a failed 1880 novel (*The Irrational Knot*) for reprinting, to reviewing operas and concerts as the new London season opened. He even went with Florence to the Horticultural Hall at Earl’s Court to see Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, the programs and admissions costing him a week’s worth of vegetarian restaurant dinners and a day’s working time. Tinkering with what was probably the weakest of his five early novels absorbed his spare time through all of September and part of October—while he covered musical events in London. (Yet the novel’s theme about the negative aspects of marriage may have contributed subtly to the play still gestating.) For review he also went to Winchester to see Frank Benson’s company perform *The Merchant of Venice*. Possibly the commercial sleaziness in the production had some subliminal impact on Shaw. Even so, it was October 20 before he returned to *Rheingold*. He had taken the Underground that afternoon to Ravenscourt Park to visit “FE,” but Florence was out. He had intended to read from his draft to her. Shaw let himself in with his key to the flat “and waited, working at the play, which I decided to call *Widowers’ Houses*. I wrote in a scene near the end of the second act.” That scene, reworked from his Wigmore Street memory, may have convinced him that Florence should be his waspish heroine. Florence was back by five. Shaw read to her the augmented role.

The next day, he noted: “Tried to begin World article, but could not get the play off my mind and at last set to work and finished revising it.” He then took off for a half hour’s tryst with the eager Jenny Patterson, left for supper at a vegetarian restaurant, and a Fabian Society meeting. With deadlines to meet, he also read and reviewed Richard Le Gallienne’s *English Poems*, which, he told *Star* readers, was “commonplace” and “banal.” Mourning the “bludgeoning” of his unpretentious book,
Le Gallienne wrote verses warning that being reviewed by Shaw was like being “a nightingale within a Minotaur’s paw.”

Politics and an orgy of music reviewing kept Shaw busy through late October. One occasion took him to the Empire Music Hall, where he saw the dancer Caroline (“La Belle”) de Otero perform in suggestive scenes that shocked even Victorian audiences used to the daring cancan. Two puritanical gentlemen actually hissed, Shaw reported on the 19th. Their lack of aesthetic appreciation, he charged, was a cultural crime. He would publish the names of the offenders if they identified themselves to him.

Despite now rare interludes with “JP,” the tireless Shaw was still seeing Florence Farr almost daily, taking her as before to the theater or escorting her home afterward. Ernest Cosham’s *The Homecoming* was nearing the end of its unmemorable 107 performances. His own play was being copied now by a professional typist. He was pleased with himself for having inserted the pathetic Annie into it, even writing her into the third act. Blanche was now more believable as the hellcat that both frightened and fascinated her puzzled suitor.

Shaw’s diary gave no motive for the new title, a retreat from the Wagnerian allusion to tainted money. Yet the opening setting remained a hotel on the Rhine. Later he downplayed his “farfetched Scriptural title,” derived from the New Testament tongue-lashing by Jesus (Matthew 13:14; Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47) of the pious hypocrites whose lives of outward respectability—including rich garb—derived from “devour[ing] widows’ houses.” The sartorially splendid social climber Sartorius, Blanche’s rack-renting father, is a widower, hence Shaw’s overly subtle satiric touch. His potential audiences, he guessed, brought up on the Bible, would recognize his irony even if they had never read a line of Ruskin, who referred more than once to “widows’ houses,” or had never heard a Christian socialist sermon on the evil profits from slum rentals, which also benefited the Established Church.

Something else had also clicked in Shaw’s mind. The next day would see the first of two performances of Webster’s revenge tragedy of 1619, *The Duchess of Malfi*, at the Independent Theatre. Shaw and Florence were planning to attend the second performance the following Monday. Jack Grein had resorted to an act of stage archaeology, Shaw understood, because Grein’s theater had no new plays to experiment upon. Shaw posted a typed copy to Grein and went for a long walk.

Shaw had long had an open invitation from Grein to submit a play to the Independent Theatre, and in apocryphal memory recalled Grein’s
deploring the dearth of new English plays, and his own response that he had one “you’ll never have the courage to produce.” The less romantic evidence of Shaw’s diaries does not confirm that challenge—only that it took a “long evening” for Grein to read *Widowers’ Houses* and accept it. Grein may have bridled, as he recalled later, at some of the implicit socialist “propaganda” on slum landlordism in the dialogue, and worried that the script was only a “first fairly successful effort,” but in a few days Grein arranged to have Shaw visit on Thursday, 27 October at 7:30 to discuss casting a production. It was the first original English work that Grein had been offered, and by a writer well known in advanced circles. He was not going to let the opportunity slip.

There was never any question in Shaw’s mind now that Florence Farr would be the predatory Blanche. Typed copies of the script were available for players still to be assembled, and the opening performance was quickly set for December 9 at the Royalty Theatre in Dean Street, Soho. When the first rehearsal was held at the Mona Hotel, a pub with token rooms upstairs, with Herman de Lange presiding as director, not all eight members of the cast had been recruited. Of the eighteen rehearsals, only eleven would include the entire cast. Shaw seemed to be everywhere, reading the parts of absentees and sometimes usurping the roles of cast members who were present. Performance also required some cutting of lines, which Shaw insisted on doing himself. Finally, de Lange urged Shaw to get on with his other work, and the abashed playwright reluctantly agreed to vanish.

There was still an old novel to re-revise, dozens of musical events to cover, lectures to give, Fabian and other socialist politicking to do, art exhibitions to review, and promotion to concoct for the play, including a mock interview with himself that Shaw arranged to have published in the *Star* on November 29. In it the fictitious and none-too-bright interviewer stumbles over the title, which he confuses as *Wendover’s Horses*. That Shaw could draft the skit for the *Star* with such airy confidence seems remarkable, given the ramshackle production’s problems.

Shaw’s anonymous interviewer arrives at the “desolate stone steps” that lead to 10 Fitzroy Square and climbs to a “very small room” that—despite some undoubted artistic license—very likely represents how and where Shaw lived and worked when he was not hastily scratching lines into notebooks under streetlamps and in rocking railway carriages. He is discovered between a wide-open window and a roaring fire, seated before a typewriter on a stand:
A table at his side was untidy beyond belief. Dusty heaps of letters and papers in utter disorder were mixed up with stationery, inkstands, *Stars, Chronicles*, butter, sugar, stray apples, knives and spoons, a full breakfast cup of cocoa [at half-past eleven in the morning], and a plate upon which Mr. Shaw, as I entered, was dumping down a helping of porridge which he had just extracted from a saucepan on the hob. I confess I felt embarrassed. Not so my host.…

Eventually Shaw is asked whether he is a follower of Ibsen—a charge he denies. As far as England is concerned, he expostulates,

“Ibsen is a follower of mine…. When I was 24, I wrote a book called *The Irrational Knot* which reads nowadays like an Ibsenite novel. When I wrote the first two acts of *Widowers’ Houses* I had never heard of Ibsen…."

“Shakespeare is your model, perhaps?”

“Shakespeare! Stuff! Shakespeare—a disillusioned idealist! A pessimist! a rationalist! a capitalist! If the fellow had not been a great poet, his rubbish would have been forgotten long ago…. If my play is not better than Shakespeare, let it be damned promptly.”

Eager to escape the overwhelming and disconcerting presence, the interviewer attempts to leave, refusing a belatedly offered vegetarian “refreshment” of a glass of water and some carrots. “Where and when is the performance to take place?” the *Star’s* man asks as he descends the stairs with obvious relief.

“On the 9th, I believe. I don’t know where—perhaps at the Avenue, or the Royalty. Ask Grein: he knows…."

Shaw knew the venue very well. However, the last week of November remained full of uncertainty as to whether there would be an opening at all. His diary entry on the 22nd records: “No rehearsal, the part of Trench the male lead—being rejected by all.” Still, his enthusiasm for his first completed play was enough that he offered it the same day to publisher John Lane, who had expressed interest in putting out a book of the script. It would not be, Shaw said honestly, “a very gorgeous investment,” but if offered as a limited edition and thus an instant rarity, it might be bought “by a certain number of idiots who would not buy anything of mine for a penny or a shilling.” Timing was everything, he urged. The play was to open in two weeks. “To confess the truth,” he added, “the chief attraction for me is the opportunity of presenting a copy to each of the actors, who are all playing for nothing.”

In the end, Lane cautiously begged off, and the play did not appear in book form until the next May under another imprint, Henry & Co. More immediately crucial was the production, which had secured a Harry Trench but was still without someone to play the Dickensian
rent collector Lickcheese. Legend later had it that the hard-drinking James Welch walked into the Mona Hotel only to purchase a pint at the bar, innocent of the rehearsal going on, and was dragooned into the cast; but the truth is in Shaw’s diary entry for November 25—“Welch turned up to play Lickcheese; and we rehearsed the first two acts for the first time with a full cast.” Welch had been solicited but no one was really confident he would materialize. (Intensely loyal to his players, Shaw would give Welch future roles—salaried this time—of Major Petkoff in *Arms and the Man* in 1894 and William the Waiter in *You Never Can Tell* in 1900.)

The 25th had been quite a day, even for Shaw. The day before, unable to finish rehearsing the second act because there was as yet no Lickcheese, Shaw had worked at the *Irrational Knot*, escorted Florence to the rehearsal, written letters (possibly one to Welch), finished and sent off part of his review to the *World*, and then gone to Hammersmith Terrace to play piano duets with May Morris, remaining overnight. Returning by train the next morning, he tramped the Bond Street galleries for an art review, adjourned to the first full rehearsal, and then covered his fourth and last press exhibition for the week at the Old Water Colour Society. He went home briefly for his mail, went out again (since his mother never fed him) to have dinner at the vegetarian Orange Grove, and then walked to a Fabian Society meeting at eight, where, he recorded, he spoke “several times.”

Somehow, *Widowers’ Houses* was performed as scheduled, at 8:30 on December 9, although he had noted on a day earlier in the month what must have been characteristic of them all—that he was “rather addled” by his workload. Suddenly Shaw, in his own words, was “infamous as a playwright”—a notoriety that would take all his skills as self-publicist to exploit. In a curtain-speech after the play’s noisy reception, he assured his audience that if it had been “received lightly,” he would have been disappointed. What he had dramatized was an unsavory reality in contemporary life, but he “heartily hoped that the time would come when the play … would be utterly impossible and wholly unintelligible.” The passage of years would prove it to be neither. Although the first production achieved only two little-regarded performances, the stage had finally claimed Shaw. Now there would be no stopping him.