

Discovery and Confinement in
ARMS AND THE MAN
And
DESIGN for LIVING

It's easy to imagine Bluntschli, the Chocolate Soldier from Shaw's ARMS and the MAN striding through the world of the play and quickly sweeping away the cobwebs of Romantic idealism obscuring the vision of Raina, Sergius, and, to some extent, Raina's parents. Their subsequent confrontation with hard edged reality is initially disturbing but then bracing, and ultimately satisfying.

In contrast, the characters in Noel Coward's DESIGN FOR LIVING seem inevitably confined in their menage a trois relationship as the play progresses. They are well aware that the culture of their time will not accept their situation, but they refuse to shed the special "Veneer" it gives them. Leo, the playwright, explains it colorfully: "It's all a question of masks, really; brittle, painted masks ... We must have some means of shielding our timid, shrieking souls from the glare of civilization." (P.114)

The contrast is perhaps inevitable, given the differing artistic intentions of Shaw and Coward. Noel Coward was a multi-talented man who could write, act, sing, and direct. He used all those talents prolifically in a long career to entertain generations of audiences, and indeed he saw himself as primarily an entertainer, giving audiences fairly sophisticated pleasure. However, he didn't always just aim to help his audiences pass the time agreeably. Beneath the smooth, skillful surface of his plays, he sometimes challenges audiences to recognize the hypocrisy of their attitudes and the limits of their tolerance, particularly regarding the varieties of sexual behaviour.

When we turn to Shaw and challenging audience attitudes, eliminate "sometimes." Shaw always challenges his audiences. He uses a wide variety of approaches, from recreations and reinterpretations of history to

farces to “discussion plays” to entertain, yes, but also to inform and persuade audiences about the causes he believed in passionately, with Creative Evolution, language reform, and more professional opportunities for women, being just a few of them.

True to form, then, the “chocolate cream” soldier, **Bluntschli**, explains the brutal facts of cavalry charges, like the one her hero, Sergius, has just led, to Raina: “He did it like an operatic tenor ...with flashing eyes and lovely moustache, ... Shouting his war cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills. We did laugh. ... But when the sergeant ran up white as a sheet, and told us they’d sent us the wrong ammunition, and that we couldn’t fire a round for the next ten minutes, we laughed at the other side of our mouths. ... Of course, they just cut us to bits. And there was Don Quixote ... thinking he’d done the cleverest thing ever known, whereas he ought to be courtmartialled ...He and his regiment simply committed suicide; only the pistol misfired.” (pp.31-320) ... Raina is “deeply wounded,” but this first puncturing of her daydream serves her well when she discovers there are more unvarnished facts to be faced.

Rather Late in DESIGN FOR LIVING, Otto, the painter, warns: “ Our lives are diametrically opposed to ordinary social conventions; and it’s no use grabbing at those conventions to hold us up when we find we are in deep water. We’ve jilted them and eliminated them and we’ve got to find our own solutions for our own peculiar moral problems.” (p. 72) The play gives us beguiling, sophisticated dialogue, skillful use of the conventions of farce, and it ends appealingly with the principal characters laughing and collapsing together on a couch, but Otto’s challenge is never really met.

One overall conclusion, somewhat surprisingly can be that Coward, the self-professed entertainer, and Shaw, the avowed propagandist, are more similar in practice and effect than it would first appear. Both took care to keep audiences attentive and amused, and both (Shaw routinely, Coward

sometimes) hoped that audiences, as they left the theatres, would think as well as laugh.

Still, the differences seem to cry out for recognition. In *ARMS AND THE MAN*, a surprise (and very convenient) plot twist, the reported death of Bluntschli's father, means that the chocolate cream soldier has inherited a string of hotels, and will take Raina away from her home to a new, real, and very comfortable life. At the same time, Sergius, no longer beguiled by "the higher love," will ignore class differences and marry Louka, the servant girl.

In contrast, once again, although Otto complains about "This endless game of spiritual ping pong," (93), and Gilda, when she leaves the menage to become an independent, successful business woman for a time, proclaims, "I'm cured. I'm not a prisoner anymore," (82) she doesn't trust her freedom, and, as soon as Otto and Leo find her, Gilda surrenders her independence without a murmur of protest. Instead, she joins Otto and Leo in laughter. The three of them have each other, yes, but that means they are still alienated from practically everyone else, quite unsurprisingly, given what Otto, at one point, acknowledges: "They (the ordinary people)... could say with perfect truth ... that we were loose-living, irreligious, unmoral degenerates, couldn't they?" (73) Therefore, despite that defiant laughter, the ending seems to focus our attention on three people who are not only alone, but also effectively confined together. Their situation, indeed, makes the play's title pointedly ironic.

So, did Noel Coward set out to produce a kind of cautionary tale, warning potentially free thinking, free living people not to deviate very far from the safety of conventionality? No, I would argue instead that he hoped to evoke some sympathy for people who are different, but who don't really pose a threat to anyone else, and could safely be simply left alone. Although the play was performed successfully on both sides of the Atlantic, I doubt that it could generate very much sympathy for Otto, Leo and Gilda, in 1933, or in succeeding decades ... until now. If the three of them were actual people today, they could be social media sensations. There are many things to criticise in our culture today, but there are at least

some sections of the public who have broadened their understanding, their tolerance for differences, and their capacity for empathy.

By John McInerney, 7/22/2023