

I am the government of your country

By William Eaton

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George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, which premiered in London in 1905, is shining once again in an excellent production at New York's Pearl Theatre. The dominant personality, of a play that offers half a dozen or more strong characters, is Andrew Undershaft, an enormously successful weapons manufacturer—for anyone and everyone, without prejudice, throughout the world. As Undershaft himself puts it:



To give arms to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of persons or principles: to aristocrat and republican, to Nihilist and Tsar, to Capitalist and Socialist, to Protestant and Catholic, to burglar and policeman, to black man white man and yellow man, to all sorts and conditions, all nationalities, all faiths, all follies, all causes and all crimes. The first Undershaft wrote up in his shop IF GOD GAVE THE HAND, LET NOT MAN WITHHOLD THE SWORD. The second wrote up ALL HAVE THE RIGHT TO FIGHT: NONE HAVE THE RIGHT TO JUDGE. The third . . . The fourth had no literary turn; so he did not write up anything; but he sold cannons to Napoleon under the nose of George the Third. The fifth . . . The sixth, my master, was the best of all. He wrote up NOTHING IS EVER DONE IN THIS WORLD UNTIL MEN ARE PREPARED TO KILL ONE ANOTHER IF IT IS NOT DONE. After that, there was nothing left for the seventh to say. So he wrote up, simply, UNASHAMED.

Apparently the character had a number of real-world sources, including the German armaments family Krupp. As the above passage may suggest, the ranks of capitalism are full of chief executives and entrepreneurs like Undershaft, and Shaw gives him many other speeches and *bon mots* that continue to speak of life under capitalism. (“Food, clothing, firing,

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rent, taxes, respectability and children. Nothing can lift those seven millstones from Man's neck but money; and the spirit cannot soar until the millstones are lifted.”)

Two more extracts from the third act to fill out this piece. Undershaft's son Stephen, a weak young man, reveals that, instead of going into the family business, he wants to go into politics. This pleases Undershaft, who has a low opinion of his son.

UNDERSHAFT: He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career. Get him a private secretaryship to someone who can get him an Under Secretaryship; and then leave him alone. He will find his natural and proper place in the end on the Treasury bench.

STEPHEN [springing up]: I am sorry, sir, that you force me to forget the respect due to you as my father. I am an Englishman; and I will not hear the Government of my country insulted. [He thrusts his hands in his pockets, and walks angrily across to the window.]

UNDERSHAFT [with a touch of brutality]: The government of your country! I am the government of your country: I, and Lazarus [his business partner]. Do you suppose that you and half a dozen amateurs like you, sitting in a row in that foolish gabble shop, can govern Undershaft and Lazarus? No, my friend: you will do what pays US. You will make war when it suits us, and keep peace when it doesn't. You will find out that trade requires certain measures when we have decided on those measures. When I want anything to keep my dividends up, you will discover that my want is a national need. When other people want something to keep my dividends down, you will call out the police and military. And in return you shall have the support and applause of my newspapers, and the delight of imagining that you are a great statesman. Government of your country! Be off with you, my boy, and play with your caucuses and leading articles and historic parties and great leaders and burning questions and the rest of your toys. I am going back to my counting house to pay the piper and call the tune.

Later on in this act, Barbara, one of his daughters, asks if his employees obey all his orders?

UNDERSHAFT: I never give them any orders. When I speak to one of them it is “Well, Jones, is the baby doing well? and has Mrs Jones made a good recovery?” “Nicely, thank you, sir.” And that's all.

CUSINS [Barbara's fiancé and the person destined to take over the armaments company]: But Jones has to be kept in order. How do you maintain discipline among your men?

UNDERSHAFT. I don't. They do. You see, the one thing Jones won't stand is any rebellion from the man under him, or any assertion of social equality between the wife of the man with 4 shillings a week less than himself and

Mrs Jones! Of course they all rebel against me, theoretically. Practically, every man of them keeps the man just below him in his place. I never meddle with them. I never bully them. I don't even bully Lazarus. I say that certain things are to be done; but I don't order anybody to do them. I don't say, mind you, that there is no ordering about and snubbing and even bullying. The men snub the boys and order them about; the carmen snub the sweepers; the artisans snub the unskilled laborers; the foremen drive and bully both the laborers and artisans; the assistant engineers find fault with the foremen; the chief engineers drop on the assistants; the departmental managers worry the chiefs; and the clerks have tall hats and hymnbooks and keep up the social tone by refusing to associate on equal terms with anybody. The result is a colossal profit, which comes to me.

Links, Credits, Practical Information

Shaw produced several versions of the text, in part, apparently, to preserve his copyright for as long as possible. The quotations above are from the text made available online by Project Gutenberg.

The Pearl Theatre's production, co-produced by the Gingold Theatrical Group, runs through December 14. While I am not a Shaw scholar, it seems fair to say that in *Undershaft* the playwright created a lovable monster who, among other things, overran his play. In the Pearl Theatre production, the result is a weak ending, after many superb scenes. While there are many excellent performances, Hannah Cabell's as Barbara (pictured at right) stands out. Dan Daily, who does a very good job with *Undershaft*, is pictured above.