



## Shaw on the Screen

ACCUSTOMED as we are to see our favorite plays and novels changed, romanticized, provided with happy endings, and otherwise prettied up for the movies, it nevertheless came as a shock to hear that the uncompromising, the intransigent Bernard Shaw had not only permitted the conclusion of "Pygmalion" to be altered, but had actually performed the operation himself. After holding out for twenty years against all offers for motion picture rights, he finally made his own adaptation of "Pygmalion"—for production in England, not Hollywood—and he has expressed himself as being more than satisfied with the result.

But no sooner was the picture released than word got about that Mr. Shaw has now allowed his *Pygmalion* (Henry Higgins) to fall in love with his *Galatea* (Eliza Doolittle) after all. Henry Higgins, his most unbending and imperturbable hero! You will recall that in the printed version of the play, Mr. Shaw wrote that it required not so much a preface as a sequel; and in the sequel he explicitly denounced those sentimentalists who would have Higgins marry Eliza. Higgins, he said, was not the marrying kind; what happened was that Eliza married Freddie Eynsford-Hill and set herself up in a florist's shop, and Higgins went his own independent way.

So we went to the movie of "Pygmalion" prepared for disillusionment. What, we rhetorically demanded, will become of all our ideas about characterization, if an author who has created a certain character once and for all decides later in life to revise his creation and make him over into a different character? We are accustomed to regard the successfully projected figures of fiction and drama as enjoying an independent life of their own, apart from the author, and certainly apart from the author's afterthoughts. This ability to create independent life is supposed to be one of the important values of imaginative literature. Henry Higgins, to be sure, is not among the great characters of modern drama; he

is not even one of Shaw's best characters; but he has a special flavor, and—as it always appeared—a special relationship with Shaw. We did not want to see his metamorphosis.

Well, we have been to the movie, and we are obliged to admit that in spite of the altered denouement, Henry Higgins has not changed, which means that Shaw has not changed. We agree with Mr. Shaw that it is an excellent movie. It has the Shaw flavor, the Shaw bite; it preserves the point and the best part of the dialogue of the play. And it does something else much more important. The last time we saw "Pygmalion" on the stage, in the Theatre Guild production a few years ago, it had just faintly begun to date. It had ceased to be quite the mordant, contemporary satire which it had seemed to us when we first saw it (at seventeen); it was on the way to becoming a nostalgic memory. But "Pygmalion" in the motion picture version does not date. A few slight elisions, a few minor changes of phraseology (the substitution of "slang" for "small talk") have made all the difference. And probably the changed ending has contributed to the rejuvenation. The point of "Pygmalion" was—to put it in its most platitudinous form—that class distinctions are artificial; that they can be overcome in six months by any one who studies phonetics. That was a good point to make

in 1908, fresh, lively, and original; but in 1938 everybody knows it; in the American 1938 of Mr. Coster, even the study of phonetics is superfluous.

To rejuvenate "Pygmalion," then, its emphasis has to be shifted—ever so subtly—from the point to the personalities. That is what has been done, with a skill that never shows the cutting, with a feeling of faithfulness to the original which ought to satisfy every one as much as it satisfies Mr. Shaw. And now, we want Mr. Shaw to make some more movies. There are other plays than "Pygmalion" which have abundant life but have begun to date on the surface. Possibly nothing can be done with the plays which date *in toto*, like "Getting Married," "Overruled," and "Misalliance." Certainly not a line should be altered in the best plays—in "Caesar and Cleopatra," "Candida," "The Devil's Disciple," "Saint Joan." But take the conventions of 1905 out of "Man and Superman" and it would make even a better movie than "Pygmalion"; and think what could be done with "Major Barbara" by removing the Salvation Army and playing up the munitions manufacturer! Suggestions like these may horrify some of the older Shavians. Nevertheless, we should rather see Mr. Shaw bringing his older plays to life than writing more new ones like "On the Rocks" and "Too True to Be Good."

## Old Christmas

BY JESSE STUART

WHEN I walked out across the snow  
I heard the cattle low and low.

And there they stood around the barn,  
Pawing the snow to keep them warm.

These long-haired cattle in the glow  
Of yellow sun and bluejohn snow.

Murt says to me: "Alf, there's the moon,  
You'd better feed the cattle soon."

"So strange but there's the moon," says I,  
"The moon and sun both in the sky."

"Though it is early for the moon,  
I'll go and feed the cattle soon."

The sun went down behind a cloud;  
The frosty wind blew cold and loud.

The sun went down, the barn was lost;  
The earth looked like a graveyard ghost.

And I went back, went in a hurry;  
Was blinded by the big snow flurry.

Says I: "Murt, you're contrary!"  
Says she: "It's twelfth of January!"

"This day Lord Jesus first saw light,  
Was not on no December night."

"Folks got it wrong—this was the day—  
Alf, have you fed the milk cows hay?"

We listen'd to the yearlings low;  
We listen'd to the roosters crow.

Murt says: "That proves it is a fact  
Way chickens and the cattle act!"

"It was the twelfth of January  
That's why we have this big snow flurry."

Yes, wind is wind, a fact's a fact;  
I put the rag back in the crack.

'Pears like it chilled my blood, the wind;  
That wind that kept a-coming in.

And Murt she says: "The alders leaf,  
Because it's Christ's birthday they leaf."

"My mother's mother said she knew  
That, that was why the alders grew."

"Nothing like that in old December.  
Now just think back, do you remember?"

When this was over I went out  
And stretched my arms and stirred about.

I fed the milk cows forks of hay  
To calm them in a sort of way.

I called the chickens to the crib  
And shelled them corn to stop their gib.

And when I went to slop the pigs  
I found the leafed-out alder twigs.

So green and pretty in the snow.  
After the storm in sunset glow.

I had to stop and shed some tears  
The way folks slander Christ these years.

## Letters to the Editor: *Political Implications of Steffens's Letters*

### Interpreting Steffens

SIR:—Since John Chamberlain chose to write of the political implications in Lincoln Steffens's "Letters" and his life, I think some of the confusions and false interpretations in his article should be pointed out. Those which touch on underlying philosophical differences of outlook—or differences of philosophical outlook—are too long to discuss here. But where Chamberlain misinterprets Steffens to bolster up his own views, I think it is fair and important to point out his misconceptions.

It does not matter whether one regards Steffens's feeling, the last years of life, that he had found an answer to the evils he spent a lifetime investigating, as "tragedy" or triumph. What is evident from even a cursory reading of the "Letters," is that he neither "closed his mind" nor embraced any "dogma." Had he closed his mind "hard" there would scarcely have come to his door, as there did in his latter years, a continuous stream of people of all political complexions—Epics, technocrats, communists, believers in Social credit, Utopians, single taxers, Republicans, Democrats, New and Old Dealers—whether students, teachers, businessmen, personnel men, politicians, writers, industrialists, philosophers or scientists—to discuss and listen to his views and ideas. They could have read Marxian dogma if that was all he gave them.

Mr. Chamberlain commits one sin I think unworthy of a person of his powers: he says Steffens stood for communism, and then he defines communism in his own way, quite arbitrarily. Certainly Lincoln Steffens did not stand for John Chamberlain's conception of communism. That would be clear to even a superficial reader of the "Letters." I think Mr. Chamberlain could well leave to professional confusers—those who dare not see clearly—that particular intellectual sin.

Steffens's letters over a period of seven or eight years discuss from many points of view just what he admired about the Soviet Union, and those principles he saw being carried out in that economy which he believed applicable in the United States. He may have been wrong, but that doesn't appear to me "confused," "mixing values," a "parable," nor "hitting off-center." It is, curiously enough, when Steffens grows most clear, most aware that he is seeing a possibility of a way out, and most precise in his reasoning as to why it is a way out, that Chamberlain condemns him.

Steffens did not advocate the employer-state. He wanted the removal of economic privilege. If, it seemed to him, the only method *so far invented by human beings* to reach this desirable end, were the use of economic coercion on those opposed to the desired end for the time being, it would have to be used for the time being. He did not say that was eternally the only way or could be eternally the only way. What he said was that no one, not even Mr. Chamberlain, had invented any other way yet. Again and again Steffens quoted



"I think it's very encouraging. They're much sorrier than *The Atlantic Monthly* was."

Lenin to the effect that it would be a generation before a communist state produced one communist; and again and again he quoted the Russian leaders to the effect that they did not have a communist state yet.

Steffens never looked for a "group that dared to strike for the total power" (whatever that may mean). He thought that Mussolini had discovered something: that people didn't want to attend to the daily details of municipal and state administration: that they preferred to "let George do it"; and that therefore there was "an empty throne in every country" (as Mussolini said). What Steffens remarked on was that Mussolini, believing this and wanting the total power, acted on his belief and took that throne. I remember his pleading in a talk on his return to the USA in 1927: "You called me a communist when I reported on Bolshevik Russia; you call me a fascist now that I report on Fascist Italy. Next year I'm going to China; when I come back from there, please don't call me a Chinaman."

Steffens's biggest lesson, which he had laboriously learned and which he tried to teach those last years, was that what you did had an entirely different significance *according to when you did it*. John Chamberlain could consult the paragraphs which discuss why, if one is speaking of values, it is important to ask "When?" Steffens was enormously interested in that question, and never ceased to think about it, talk about it, measure it in the light of the body of facts and observations he had gathered. If it seemed necessary, at one point in human history, to seize the total power temporarily in order to make a world in which everyone would finally have opportunities, and if no other method was apparently available to human ingenuity at that time, Steffens

preferred that seizure of power to the slow—or rapid—degradation and demoralization of human life we witness now. That choice he stated as clearly as possible in his introduction to Billinger's "Fatherland." I do not think it should become a political weapon for those who do not share Lincoln Steffens's beliefs, to twist them into unrecognizable form, and then deplore that he held them.

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### Mr. Chamberlain Replies

SIR:—I don't know why Ella Winter is arguing with me. She objects to my statement of Lincoln Steffens's final position—and then goes on to state that position as I understand it to be, and as I thought I had stated it for *The Saturday Review*. I've talked with a number of people who went to Steffens for advice in his last years. They all came away with the same answer: "Let the Communists head up the United—or Popular—Front." Liberals, he said, were incapable of achieving "it." But my objections to giving the reins to totalitarians of any kind is that they are even more incapable of achieving "it." In backward countries where there is no middle class the communist-totalitarians achieve despotism; in bourgeois countries they provoke fascism. They can't lead liberals because liberals, in the final analysis, aren't going the same way. In more personal terms, they can't lead this particular liberal because he would rather die than go that way. This liberal has learned his lesson from the death of 3,000,000 Russian peasants and the Moscow trials, which, however you take them, are a confession of the bankruptcy of the Leninist-Stalinist strategy and tactics.

It is indeed important to ask "when." But it is more important to ask "how."

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