

Brantley vs. Shaw;

In the Matter of Mrs. Warren's Profession

Ben Brantley's airy dismissal of director Doug Hughes' interpretation of Mrs. Warren's Profession (in the Arts section of the New York Times October 3, 2010) as "generally less than delightful" would very likely have inspired Shaw to chastise the critic for his failure to recognize that this play was not meant to be delightful. It was one of three "Unpleasant Plays" Shaw wrote with the specific intention, (as he states in his 1894 preface to the published text) to use their dramatic power "to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts." The other two plays were *The Philanderer* and *Widower's Houses*, the former an exposé of the unjust divorce laws of the time, the other shedding light on the cruel injustice of England's laws regulating property rights of women. In fact, Shaw wrote all of these plays for women; he did not expect men (including, I expect, Mr. Brantley, had he been around at the time) to appreciate them.

I have never seen Mrs. Warren's Profession done with such skillful adherence to Shaw's intention as that displayed by Sally Hawkins in the role of Vivie, the daughter of the indomitable Mrs. Warren. Mr. Brantley devotes four of the eight brief paragraphs of his review to gushing praise of Cherry Jones in the title role, but merely mentions Ms. Hawkins (and then only as "miscast"). Cherry Jones is so widely appreciated in the United States that she can easily get along without Mr. Brantley's incontinent rhapsodies. Ms. Hawkins, on the other hand, although highly

Ann Appelbaum --12/15/2010

The complexity of Vivie's inner life is expressed throughout the play by a certain awkwardness of movement, and an alternating boldness and submissiveness of posture and gesture. The tension upset me and Shaw would have been delighted. Vivie's conflict was palpable in the first minutes of the play as she wrung the hand of the first of a succession of mother's friends with such force that he had to shake the numbness out of his fingers.

In the ensuing scenes, it slowly dawns on Vivie that her mother is an owner of fancy "hotels" in most of the capitals of Europe and enlists young women to work in them as prostitutes. As she realizes that she has lived on the profits of this business, Vivie increasingly is undone. Ms. Hawkins enacts with stunning effect this slow tearing apart of the young woman's inner world as she realizes that she is expected to endorse the values of this corrupt and predatory world just as she is expected to embrace her mother.

I am moved to write this note in the hope that it might offset some of the destructive effects of Mr. Brantley's denigration of this unusual production.

Ann Appelbaum, MD

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November 12, 2010

Dear Mr. Brantley,

I was so distressed by your October 3 review of Mrs. Warrens' Profession, differing as it did so drastically from my impression of the play that I thought of writing a "second opinion" letter to The Times. I smoldered over the matter for weeks - hesitant because of craven reluctance to risk being brushed aside.

At last I managed to write and post the enclosed note, perhaps purposefully waiting until it was too late to be printed by the Times, so as to be sure that no one (except you) could be hurt by my words. But I hope you will read my letter and maybe have some second thoughts about your review and the impact it probably has had on the actors and the theatre company (with which I have no connection, by the way). To say nothing of the potential audience that would be cheated of the chance to see a fine play by Shaw, turned away by your contempt for its current production.

Perhaps (and I realize I'm being carried away by wishful imaginings) - perhaps you would even come to see the play again, see it from my point of view, and then you would apologize to the director and the actors and we would all go out for tea, good friends.... I would apologize to you for my sneering "incontinent rhapsodies" and you would forgive me on the grounds that I could not contain myself being an odd and rather impulsive woman of 86.

Best regards,

Ann Appelbaum, M.D.

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November 8, 2010

To the Editor
Arts Section
The New York Times

Dear Mr. _____

I assume that the enclosed letter is arriving too late for publication, but I am sending it to you anyway, as well as to the performers of "Mrs. Warren's Profession" so that they will know that Ben Brantley's opinion was not shared by all well-educated New Yorkers.

Sincerely,

Ann Appelbaum

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November 8, 2010

Dear Ms. Jones:

I saw your matinee performance as Mrs. Warren on September the 19th – and later saw Ben Brantley’s review of it in The New York Times: I was shocked, not by the well-deserved praise accorded to you, but rather by his insensitivity to the fact that your triumph was part of a cooperative effort on the part of you, your director and the supporting cast. I feel sure you will agree with me that Brantley would have done well to balance his review more soberly, giving credit not only to you as the shining star we all so appreciate, but to the playwright, the director, and your co-stars for a splendid production.

No doubt you know that Shaw wrote “Mrs. Warren” as one of his three “Unpleasant” plays, designed to confront the audiences of his time with their blindness to the cruelty of their society with regard to women. Your splendid portrayal of Mrs. Warren did indeed provide the “glow” that so enraptured Mr. Brantley and assuaged the pain I think many members of the audience must have felt, along with me, during this unexpectedly deeply moving performance.

Sincerely,

Ann Appelbaum, M.D.

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November 8, 2010

Dear Mr. Hughes:

I was emboldened to write this letter by the strong positive reaction I had to your "Mrs. Warren's Profession" and equally strong negative reaction to Ben Brantley's disparaging review in The New York Times. After smoldering for nearly a month, I finally decided to write to The Times, even though there is little likelihood that it will be printed. Anyway, I wanted you to see the letter and to know that I sent it to Mr. Brantley as well.

I plan to be there on this coming Saturday and will try to have a few words with you after the final curtain.

Yours most appreciatively,

Ann Appelbaum, M.D.

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November 8, 2010

Dear Ms. Hawkins:

Having been brought to heartfelt tears by your splendid matinee performance as Vivie on September the 19th, I smoldered for more than a month before feeling able to write the enclosed letter that I clearly should have sent much earlier to the New York Times. (I am, however, sending my "review" to Mr. Brantley as well. Let us hope he profits from it.)

I have no professional qualifications as a theater critic, being an 86-year-old retired psychoanalyst, but I do have some standing, I think, as the mother of a theater critic for the New Haven Magazine! My daughter, Brooks Appelbaum has taught me a lot about theater, and about the importance of an actor and a director working together, as you and Mr. Hughes evidently did in what I found to be a welcome departure from the usual presentation of "Mrs. Warren's Profession."

I will be there this coming Saturday for the final matinee, and will try to have a word with you after the performance.

Thank you very much indeed for your moving depiction of the young woman's struggle to preserve a solid sense of herself while feeling betrayed, not only by her mother, but by her entire society, which differs all too little from the one we inhabit today.

Sincerely,

Ann Appelbaum, M.D.