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Historical Background of *"The Devil's Disciple"*

In 1896, when he was 40, Bernard Shaw's sense of failure had brought him to the verge of physical collapse. For the past year he had been making a living in London as a drama critic at \$10 a week, but the sheer drudgery was causing headaches and neuralgia. He was the author of five unsuccessful novels and of seven plays, only three of which had achieved noncommercial productions before small audiences. The best of these, "Candida," had been taken on by the actor-director Richard Mansfield, but abandoned as impossible in rehearsal. Shaw was becoming discouraged and physically run down; he wrote to the actress Ellen Terry,

"Oh, Ellen, I am the world's packhorse; and it beats my lean ribs unmercifully."

But in the autumn of 1896, his talent for self-advertisement brought him an interesting commission, which led to his first success: "The Devil's Disciple." William Terriss the actor-manager of the Adelphi Theater, was the greatest living exponent of melodrama those absurd plays in which the hero is exposed to a preposterous series of dangers, which he overcomes with manly fortitude and heroic self-sacrifice.

Shaw was greatly struck by an example that he saw at the Adelphi Theater, and he wrote in his review:

"A really good Adelphi melodrama is of first-rate literary importance, because it only needs elaboration to become a masterpiece."

And Terriss, who was used to being dismissed by the drama critics, was so delighted by this unexpected tribute that

he wrote to Shaw suggesting a collaboration - which was undoubtedly what Shaw had been angling for in the first place.

Unfortunately, Terriss's synopsis of an ideal Adelphi melodrama was a combination of all the plots of all the melodramas he had ever played in; at the end of every act he was dragged off into penal servitude, and then came bouncing cheerfully into the next act without any attempt to explain the change in his fortunes. Shaw tactfully pointed out its shortcomings and sketched out his own plot set in the period of the American Revolution. He began writing "The Devil's Disciple" in September 1896, and finished it three months later.

But when he read it aloud to Terriss, the actor looked increasingly bewildered, then fell into a deep sleep. The idea was abandoned.

Mansfield proved to be more sympathetic. He felt he owed Shaw a favor for changing his mind about "Candida." Besides, he could see that "The Devil's Disciple" contained every stock situation of good melodrama. The play was presented for the first time in the Hermanus Bleecker Hall in Albany on Oct. 1, 1897, and was such an obvious success that it transferred three days later to the Fifth Avenue Theater in New York, where it ran for 64 performances. By the end of the year, Shaw was telling Ellen Terry: "I roll in gold."

The breakthrough came just in time. The life of a drama critic was turning Shaw into a physical wreck.

The immediate success of "The Devil's Disciple" is understandable. Shaw was right when he said that a melodrama "only needs elaboration to become a masterpiece." As far as theater managers were concerned, Shaw was too cerebral. In rejecting "Candida," Mansfield had told him:

"The stage is not for sermons - not my stage. 'Candida' is charming . . . but pardon me - it is not a play."

So Shaw decided to combine his own intense moral preoccupation with the crudest and silliest elements of melodrama. All the characters in "The Devil's Disciple" are stock characters. All the situations had been used a thousand times before - the reading of the will, the hero (inevitably named Dick) arrested by mistake, the love scene in the prison cell, the final speech on the gallows - borrowed from "A Tale of Two Cities" - and the last-minute reprieve.

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Stock
characters

Examined closely, the play is seen to be a tissue of absurdities. If it had been badly written, the audiences would have regarded it as an insult to the intelligence. But Dick has wit and style as well as an open-necked shirt and a manly chest, and the result is a melodrama vitalized by intelligence and seriousness. If it had been written "straight," without the ironic overtones, Shaw would have been classified with Marie Corelli and Mrs. Henry Wood, the best-selling sentimental novelists of the day. As it is, the audience can revel in the romantic situations while convincing themselves that the pleasure is intellectual. Shaw gets the best of both worlds.

But the essence of the drama is a trick Shaw had learned 20 years earlier, when trying to become a novelist. It might be described as "the clash of egos," but it would be even more appropriate to describe it as "the clash of egoists." He creates tension by introducing two strong - or at least self-opinionated - characters, and then bringing them into conflict.

In "The Devil's Disciple" we are immediately introduced to Mrs. Dudgeon - sour, shrewish, puritanical - "Shaw admitted his debt to Dickens's Mrs. Clennam and then to the minister Antony Anderson, a muscular Christian of imposing presence. The family gather for the reading of the will. When the atmosphere of chilly, narrow-minded Puritanism has been sufficiently established, "the devil's disciple," Dick Dudgeon, comes in. The clash of egos is instantaneous and satisfactory:

MRS. DUDGEON: (Rising and confronting him). Silence your blasphemous tongue. I will bear no more of this. Leave my house.

RICHARD: How do you know it is your house until the will is read? (They look at one another for a moment with intense hatred, then she sinks, checkmated, into her chair.) A careful reading of the play reveals its absurdities. When the minister's pretty wife tells her husband that Dick has been arrested in his place, and he rushes out calling for his horse, surely he would pause to explain that he is hoping to rescue Dick, and not merely trying to save his own neck. But that would ruin the suspense. And when, in the last scene, Anderson gallops up with a safe conduct, it is not clear why this should prevent them from going ahead and hanging Dick. But this is unimportant. Like "Batman," "The Devil's Disciple" makes a deliberate virtue

of absurdity. Where it differs from "Batman" is that we do not even notice it.

For Shaw, the real point of the play is that Anderson, in spite of his clerical collar, is a born soldier, and has no innate sympathy with the ideals of Christianity, while Dick, in spite of his professions of allegiance to the devil, is a born Christian who finds it natural to risk his own life to save another man's.

Inevitably, some of the early interpreters missed the point. Murray Carson, who played Dick in the first commercial performance in England, was convinced by a critic that Dick must be secretly in love with Judith to risk his life for her husband, and that - according to Shaw -

"His explicit denial of his passion was the splendid mendacity of a gentleman whose respect for a married woman . . . seals his passion-palpitating lips. From the moment this fatally plausible explanation was launched, my play became my critic's play, not mine. Thenceforth, Dick Dudgeon nightly concerned the critic by surreptitiously imprinting a heartbroken kiss on a stray lock of her hair whilst he uttered the barren denial."

Shaw tried to destroy the grounds for this interpretation in the stage instructions of the printed version:

"(Judith) is pretty and proper and ladylike, and has been admired and petted into an opinion of herself sufficiently favorable to give her a self-assurance which serves her instead of strength."

All the same, it was not entirely the obtuseness of the critic and the actor that produced the misinterpretation. Shaw was a born romantic, and the melodramatic absurdities of "The Devil's Disciple" are moving and exciting because he reveled in them. But more than half of the major romantic artists and poets of the 19th century had died prematurely, and Shaw had no intention of becoming a member of any "tragic generation." His realism was based on a will to survive and change the world. "The Devil's Disciple" was the first play in which this Shavian principle was clearly exemplified. That is why it produces such an effect of tonic exhilaration.