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Review of "Bernard Shaw and Gabriel Pascal." Edited by Bernard F. Dukore.

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[Book Review](#)

Bernard Shaw and Gabriel Pascal

Bernard Shaw and Gabriel Pascal. Edited by Bernard F. Dukore. Volume 3 of Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. 224. \$40.00.

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the film industry knows how difficult it is for writers of serious literature to have their work translated faithfully to the screen. Even under the most sympathetic production and direction, authorial concerns can be ignored, and the overall tone and tenor of a work misrepresented. Studio and investor demand for profit can lead to damaging cuts and reworkings, and the inherent difficulties of re-imagining a work in a new artistic medium can try the abilities of even the most talented filmmakers. Under less than ideal production and direction, as George Bernard Shaw learned in the early years of the sound era, the results can be disastrous. After refusing for years to have his plays filmed, on the grounds that silent movies could not do justice to his famed dialogue, Shaw finally relented in 1930--three years after the introduction of "talkies"--and signed a contract with British International Pictures authorizing a film version of *How He Lied to Her Husband* (1931). Despite managing to have his play filmed in its entirety, Shaw found the results disappointing, as he would a later BIP production of *Arms and the Man* (1932), for which he approved changes and wrote new dialogue. *How He Lied* was little more than a filmed stage play, with almost no camera movement and unimaginative editing, and *Arms and the Man*, by the same director, Cecil Lewis, was just as poorly directed, not to mention underfunded and ruthlessly edited by BIP in ways that made a travesty of Shaw's screenplay. German and Dutch versions of *Pygmalion* in 1935 and 1937 proved even greater disappointments. Although Shaw made cuts and composed new scenes for these films, his efforts were ignored and in both cases the original play was reworked beyond recognition, despite the fact that Shaw's contracts specified that his screenplays would be adhered to exactly.

It was not until Shaw started working with Gabriel Pascal that he had any success having his plays put to film. A Hungarian émigré of immense charm and with a tendency to fabricate tales about himself (he claimed at different times to have been a kidnapped royal child, an orphan, and a shepherd boy who ran off with Gypsies), Pascal produced what are widely regarded as three of the best Shaw films ever made--*Pygmalion* (1938), *Major Barbara* (1940), and *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945). *Pygmalion* in particular set a high standard of excellence; it was a huge critical and commercial success and helped cement what would become a long-standing partnership between the two men. Besides being expertly directed and acted, the film won two Academy Awards, including one to Shaw for best screenplay, and was the largest grossing British film in the United States up to that date. Shaw himself regarded it as a tremendous triumph for both intelligent filmmaking and the British cinema, and until his death in 1950 he refused to work with any other

filmmaker. As he told Pascal in one of his letters, he regarded *Pygmalion* as "an insult to Hollywood all through. An all British film made by British methods without interference by American script writers, no spurious dialogue but every word by the author, a revolution in the presentation of drama on the film" (23).

A selection of the Shaw-Pascal correspondence is gathered together in this volume; sixty percent of the letters are previously unpublished. As a document of the partnership, the selection could not be more welcome. Pascal genuinely admired Shaw's work, and his productions were true collaborations with the author, even though Shaw joined him on the set on only a handful of occasions. In his letters he consults with Shaw on all the details of production: financing, casting, costuming, location of shooting, scheduling, and script changes. If Shaw did not quite have a veto over Pascal's decisions (important aspects of *Pygmalion* and *Major [End Page 180] Barbara* were changed against his wishes), the playwright's suggestions were always taken seriously, and frequently guided Pascal in his actions. During the shooting of *Major Barbara*, for instance, Pascal was so pleased by Robert Newton's performance as Bill Walker that he pleaded with Shaw to write an additional scene for Newton in the third act. But Shaw would have none of it, arguing that "to bring an actor on the stage with nothing to do after he has made his effect in scenes where he was all important is to spoil his part and make a disappointment of him instead of a success" (94). In the end, though, Pascal convinced Shaw to let him bring the actor back for a brief, largely wordless scene at the end of the picture, despite Shaw's better judgment.

Although their correspondence rarely becomes the sustained conversation one might have hoped for, Bernard Dukore's superb introduction and informative annotations make sense of the gaps that personal encounters have left in their communications. As with the other two volumes already published in the University of Toronto's *Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw* series, this is a model work of scholarship, precisely reproducing almost every extant letter that concerns their professional relationship and situating these in larger contexts of concern. For the Shaw enthusiast, the volume is a delightful supplement to *The Collected Screenplays of George Bernard Shaw* (1980), which Dukore also edited; one sees more exactly which incidents compelled Shaw to rewrite his plays in the manner he did. *Bernard Shaw and Gabriel Pascal* also provides a clear behind-the-scenes view of filmmaking in the 1930s and 1940s. The volume shows how hard it was to secure financing that would respect the wishes of the screenwriter, the difficulties of filming during wartime, and the impossibility of overcoming distributors' demands for censorship. Above all, it demonstrates the difficulties of producing big-budget films outside the studio system. As much as Shaw and Pascal's correspondence is a testimony to their achievements, the letters are also a sad record of the many projects they planned but never completed, a document that makes one wonder what else the two might have accomplished under different circumstances.

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