

A Concert Reading of Bernard Shaw's *Buoyant Billions*

Adapted by Christopher Wixson / Directed by John McInerney

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Illustration by Claire Winsten (*Buoyant Billions*, Constable & Co., 1949)

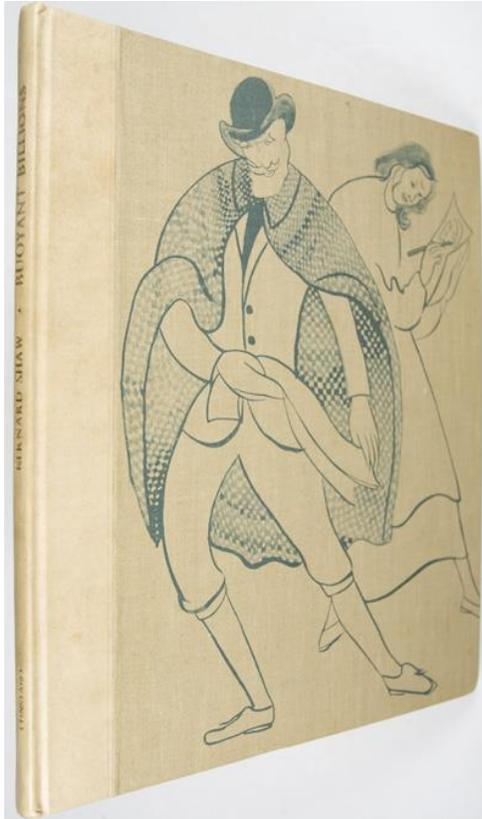
Characters (in order of appearance) / Cast

A Taoist Priest.....Richard Dietrich
 Sir Ferdinand Flopper, a solicitor.....Michael O’Hara
 Tom Buoyant, the Firstborn, a middle-aged widower.....Bob Gaines
 Dick Buoyant, the Secondborn, a younger man.....Michel Pharand
 Mrs. Secondborn, a younger woman.....Brigitte Bogar
 Mrs. Thirdborn, wife of the absent Harry Buoyant.....Barbara Inglese
 Eudoxia (“Doxie”) Buoyant, an unmarried girl of 20.....Justine Zapin
 Frederick (“Fifty”) Buoyant, an irreverent youth of 17.....John McNerney
 Clementina (“Clemmy”) Buoyant, a middle-aged woman.....Dorothy Hadfield
 A Young Man, in his earliest twenties, smart but artistically unconventional.....Larry Switzky

Setting: A drawing room in Belgrave Square, London, 1947

A drawing room converted into a Taoist temple on a domestic scale, with white walls just enough rose tinted to take the glare off, and a tabernacle in vermilion and gold, on a dais of two broad shallow steps. Divan seats, softly upholstered against the walls, and very comfortable easy chairs of wickerwork, luxuriously cushioned, are also available. There is a sort of bishop’s chair at one corner of the tabernacle. The effect is lovely and soothing.

Stage Manager/Zoom Effects.....Sharon Klassen



Cover Illustration by Claire Winsten (Constable & Co., 1949)

Bettering *Buoyant Billions*
By Christopher Wixson

“Provisionally, you may call it ‘Piffle.’” So Bernard Shaw told an *Evening News* reporter in March 1947 when asked for the title of his brand new play, his first in nearly eight years that ultimately would become *Buoyant Billions*. “Piffle” was a colloquial term, coined in the 1890s, to denote empty or ineffectual talk or, as a verb, the act of talking nonsense. A shocking remark then, since piffle is quite simply Shavian kryptonite, the antithesis of the ethos of his plays and Fabian politics which put all its faith in the power of meaningful discussion to reform culture and advance civilization. Later on, the actor Maurice Colbourne would be disappointed that “so apt a title was discarded” since, for him, it “couldn’t be bettered . . . as a terse, vivid, accurate, and just description of the play.” Needless to say, he doesn’t stand alone in his perception, as *Buoyant Billions*, which ended up to be Shaw’s very last full-length play, has been much maligned and neglected. In 1952, Felix Grendon defended it in the pages of the Shaw Society of America *Bulletin*, reminding readers of the tendency among critics of “belittling and pooh-poohing” each new play by Shaw despite having climbed “on the Shavian band wagon” just before the first World War “to modestly announce themselves as the leader of the band”:

Back again, they do their stuff as of old, and pronounce *Buoyant Billions* impossibly talky, talky! No doubt the poor fellows will see the light round about the year 2000.

Round about the year 2019, Leonard Conolly prompted me to reread *Buoyant Billions* with his conviction that the play would be well-served by a radical adaptation. What I discovered was fascinating --- a unusually extensive creative evolution and revision process, an unexpectedly rich and complex set of script versions, and an unsure, conflicted playwright trying to transpose Shavian world-bettering and dramaturgy into the new key of the Atomic Age.

In early 1936, as he was drafting *Geneva*, Shaw began a new play initially titled “O Bee Beeze Beez” but quickly rechristened *The World Betterer*.ⁱ Created en route to Honolulu, Hawaii between 17 February and 23 February, the sixteen-page first act consisted of a sustained debate between a father and son regarding the merits of Marxist revolution over Fabian gradualism to spur social change. The son (called simply “He”) makes his case through an elaborate ice cap analogy, punctuated by a reference to Niagara Falls which had earlier that month atypically frozen over. From there, the play’s origin story gets decidedly murkier.

While the playwright’s manuscript notations definitively fix the opening act’s creation, there is no firsthand indication of the second act’s composition date. In it, He travels to the jungles of Panama and encounters She, a saxophone-playing refugee from British high society similarly disillusioned with capitalism. Scholar Stephen Joyce hazards that the conclusion of the first act and all subsequent acts were not developed for another whole decade (1946). However, Shaw’s secretary, Blanche Patch, claimed that “The Adventure” (the second act’s subtitle) with its tropical setting had been “written years before the rest of it,” asserting it was “almost certainly suggested to Shaw when steaming through the Panama Canal where its scene, crawling with alligators and serpents” is set.” Indeed, he and Charlotte had been through the canal less than a week before he began the first act, and the two acts share close affinities in style and action, although “The Adventure” might also have been drafted when Shaw briefly returned to the play in August 1937.



Sketch by Claire Winsten

In any case, Shaw then inexplicably put the play aside for nearly a decade, perhaps because another global catastrophe seemed inevitable and imminent in the fall of 1937 and because the initial world-bettering prospects of Fascism (at least in the hands of Hitler and Mussolini) were rapidly tarnishing for the playwright. Shaw was certainly at a crossroads in his thinking at the time, tempering his weary frustration at the glacial pace of postwar democratic reform with overly optimistic excitement over contemporary authoritarian figures. It is also an unusual period for Shaw's playwriting. In between abandoning *The World Betterer* in 1937 and returning to it in 1945, he spent eight years in frantic revision of *Geneva* to keep up with changing developments in the news but didn't write any new plays, instead pursuing screenwriting. What would become his only new play during this time -- *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939) -- was in fact begun as "an educational history film." Shaw mysteriously returned to *The World Betterer* on 2 August 1945 --- mere days before atomic bombs are dropped by the Americans on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (on the 6th and the 9th) and in the midst of steady streams of Holocaust refugee children into England.



"A Discussion" is fully forged in November 1946 as the play's concluding third act, and its new title *The Buoyant Billions: An Adventure and a Discussion* reflects the radical departure in idiom of the new material from the fable fantasy of the older, although not from familiarly Shavian style. Ayot St. Lawrence neighbor Stephen Winsten recalled being stunned by the conclusion's disparaging pessimism when the playwright shared the new script during a visit in early 1947. Shaw remained restless over that version's thematic thrust and unsatisfied with its architecture, sharing in a personal letter that he felt the play "so bad that [he] ought to burn it." After he added a fourth act, he recorded on 13 July 1947 that the "Worldbetterer play" was finished and had it privately printed, with the intention of having it produced that August at Malvern. Unfortunately, the first Festival after the war would get postponed until 1949, and, in the interim, Shaw just couldn't let the play be and kept on tinkering. In the summer of 1948, he was sending revisions to Siegfried Trebitsch, who was at work translating the script in preparation for its October world premiere in Zurich. According to Dan Laurence, Shaw

ultimately would revise the prepublication text ten times, the last being completed on 31 October 1949, making it “the longest gestation of any play in the Shavian canon.”

The Malvern Festival’s 1949 summer season (dedicated to Shaw) would see the first English production of *Buoyant Billions*, followed by a five-week run in October at Prince’s Theatre in the West End. A television version was broadcast on the BBC on 14 November 1949 starring Frances Day and Denholm Elliott, but revivals have been exceedingly rare. That *Buoyant Billions* has never been much performed (and *never* at The Shaw Festival) is perhaps not too surprising since its original reception, for the most part, was not approbative.



Shaw being amused by actors (L-R) Denholm Elliott, Kenneth Mackintosh, and Frances Day, who is using a branch to represent a saxophone; in the yard of his next-door neighbor, they are rehearsing for his play *Buoyant Billions*. (Photo by Time Life Pictures/Pix Inc./The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images)

The headline of W. A. Darlington’s 1949 review declared the play “ranked among [Shaw’s] trivial works” while a notice in *The Times* called it a “superfluous postscript to Shavian drama.” One critic called *Buoyant Billions* “a piece of dramatic doodling” while another opined it “never likely to be more than a Shavian collector’s item.” Scholars and biographers too have largely either ignored or dismissed it as (in their words) “an unflattering exit from the stage,” displaying only “the remnants of a great mind.” Although consistent with the formal experimentation that characterizes his “extravagant” late period, *Buoyant Billions*’ bi-furcated structure, a collision between the mode he adopted in *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* and *Farfetched Fables* (acts one and two) and his trademark ideas play on the order of *Getting Married* (acts three and four), has been deemed awkwardly disjointed.

There was general agreement as to the high quality of the talk --- Buoyant family members exchange a wide range of views on major Shavian topics such as marriage, money, government, and even the atomic bomb. Yet, reviewers were quick to point out that most of it feels very well-rehearsed and somewhat tired; as *The Times* put it, “Mr. Shaw says nothing now that he has not said before, and said more memorably.” Joseph Wood Krutch, while conceding the talk to be as “pyrotechnically brilliant as the writing of his prime,” felt its aimlessness undermined its efficacy:

Like most of the other half-dozen last plays, it stops rather than finishes after having gotten nowhere as anything more than a series of improvisations.

The consensus was and remains that a rote, rambling lack of cohesion renders *Buoyant Billions* a wan, misguided Shavian-by-the-numbers exercise.

Shaw himself contributed to the diffident tone that dogged the play's advent. In a March 1947 newspaper interview, Shaw was already undercutting, cautioning audiences not to "expect another St. Joan" and calling it "not a very great production" but good enough to be performed at the next Malvern Festival "unless [he] burn[ed] it first." Anonymously-attributed early printed versions of the script ("by a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature") were a harbinger for an extraordinarily self-deprecating and eventually self-effacing preface that begins:

I commit this to print within a few weeks of completing my 92nd year. At such an age I should apologize for perpetrating another play or presuming to pontificate in any fashion. I can hardly walk through my garden without a tumble or two; and it seems out of all reason to believe that a man who cannot do a simple thing like that can practice the craft of Shakespear. Is it not a serious sign of dotage to talk about oneself, which is precisely what I am now doing? Should it not warn me that my bolt is shot, and my place silent in the chimney corner?

It concludes on the same note:

This is all I can write by way of preface to a trivial comedy which is the best I can do in my dotage. . . . Forgive it.

Accentuating the physical and mental infirmities attendant upon his advanced age, he frames the preface and the play itself as feeble and puerile, which is the context within which biographers, producers, critics, and scholars have tended to take it.

My adaptation seeks to excavate (from that reputation as much as from its own struggling perspicuity) all that is remarkable and novel about this experiment in Shavian fusion. To do so, I have engaged in some major fission. I discarded nearly all of acts one and two, vastly divergent in style and theme from the rest of *Buoyant Billions* and later reworked by Shaw into the first two *Farfetched Fables*. I also eliminated the redundant wheel-spinning of much of act four, the result of Shaw never arriving at a closure that contented him. My one-act version takes Shaw's act three ("The Discussion") as its blueprint, although with its dialogue re-arranged, edited, and supplemented with some additions of lines from the other acts.

Most significantly, I restored the atomic bomb discussion among the Buoyant family members that appeared in 1946 and 1947 versions of act three but was puzzlingly purged by Shaw in that last revision in October 1949, which was the version included in the authoritative May 1950 Constable edition of his plays. In its place, the son in act one makes the case that the advent of the Atomic Age actually will enable the work of world-bettering, as Shaw himself did in a 24 December 1949 piece for *The Times*. In it, he begs for "space for another cry in the

wilderness [from his] unquiet spirit, wandering among the ruins of empires” and advocates for the use of atomic energy to address issues such as the water shortage and to replace the burning of coal to generate heat:

Much of your space and time is being wasted on the subject of atomic warfare [because it is] very unlikely that atomic bombs will be used again [since] they will promptly make an end of all our discussions by making an end of ourselves. Meanwhile, they are distracting attention from the far more vital and pressing subject of atomic welfare.

With this perspective, Shaw was not really out on his own, since, as Charles A. Carpenter points out, “after Hiroshima, the promising side of atomic power was flaunted conspicuously in government press releases and mass-circulation outlets as counters to the widespread shock and horror the event produced.” In his *New York Times* review of its first American professional production in May 1959, Lewis Funke noted the “optimism” of *Buoyant Billions*: “Shaw saw in atom-splitting a great hope for the world.”

The deleted act three material about atomic weapons nonetheless exerts direct influence on the first of his *Farfetched Fables*, composed during the final revisions of *Buoyant Billions*. Restored to this play, Fiffy’s impulsive raising of the topic intensifies the stakes of the conversation in the Buoyant drawing room and extends to his audience the fears and difficult questions with which Shaw was wrangling then and with which we do seventy years later, in the shadow of much-improved weapons of mass destruction and still without any easy answers.

(The above is an excerpt from chapter seven of my book manuscript in progress entitled *Conversation Pieces: Bernard Shaw, Noël Coward, St. John Hankin, and Modern British Manners Comedy*.)

¹ The original title remains a mystery as to whether it is just phonetic nonsense or an elusive clue to Shaw’s initial vision of the play.