The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: A. Bryan Humphrey (left) and Brian Vaughn in You Never Can Tell, 1999.
You Never Can Tell

Contents

Information on the Play
Synopsis 4
Characters 5
About the Playwright 6

Scholarly Articles on the Play
Cotton Candy and Soda Pop 7
A Challenge to Conventional Drama 9
Synopsis: You Never Can Tell

At a seaside resort, the young dentist, Valentine, extracts a tooth from his first patient, the voluble Dolly, who has just arrived with her family from Madeira. Her equally voluble twin brother, Philip, appears, and at once they invite the dentist to lunch. They are joined at the dentist’s office by their mother, the famous Mrs. Clandon, authoress of social-reform treatises; and by their elder sister, Gloria, who is her mother’s haughty disciple. Valentine promptly falls in love with Gloria, though she initially seems to have no interest in him.

Believing she has no need of a husband and her children have no need of a father, Mrs. Clandon, though pressed by Valentine and the children, refuses to tell her children who their father is (she separated from him when the children were very young, and they haven’t seen him since); and she leaves. At that time, Valentine’s landlord, the ill-tempered Fergus Crampton appears, wanting an aching tooth pulled. Valentine bets the six weeks rent that he owes Crampton that he can extract the tooth without Crampton feeling it. Crampton agrees, and Valentine pulls off the feat, surreptitiously using a bit of anesthetic. The twins immediately invite Crampton to also join them for lunch.

Later in the day, on the terrace of the resort hotel, Mrs. Clandon and her three children meet with her solicitor, Finch McComas, before lunch. McComas is an old friend of Mrs. Clandon and at one time a suitor, but is now simply her efficient solicitor. Mrs. Clandon has invited him to lunch to tell her children about their long-lost father. However, they quickly learn of the coincidence that Valentine’s landlord, Crampton, is none other than the father they can’t remember. Their dismay at such a discovery is somewhat allayed when they learn he is wealthy. At that time Valentine and Crampton arrive, and Crampton is greatly upset by the unexpected meeting with his family. The luncheon party threatens repeatedly to blow up, and is saved only by Walter Boon, the “perfect waiter,” who diplomatically smooths everyone’s feelings and tells them of his son, a distinguished attorney for the queen. After lunch, Gloria infuriates Crampton with her cold rationality, but is herself completely thrown off balance by Valentine’s “sensible and scientific” courting methods.

Later in the day, the wild-spirited twins explain to their mother that Gloria’s recent emotional and out-of-character behavior is due to her having fallen in love. Valentine adds that he has won Gloria by using “thoroughly modern” scientific methods in the “duel of sex.” However, when Gloria hears that Valentine has loved other women, she furiously rejects him. McComas, in the meantime, reports that Crampton is demanding custody of the twins and observes that, though Crampton is uncouth, he is a kind man who has been unfairly dealt with in the separation deal. He further convinces Mrs. Clandon to agree to arbitration by the waiter’s attorney-son, who is soon to visit.

That evening, during a masked ball, the visiting attorney expertly brings about a friendly reconciliation between the members of the family—and between Valentine and Gloria. It appears that Gloria, too, has had a number of romantic relationships, a fact that shocks and enrages Valentine but also opens the way their peacemaking and engagement. As all dance the evening away, Valentine, “the defeated Duellist of Sex,” ruefully observes that he feels like “a married man already.” The waiter, Walter, comfort him about marriage: though his wife, like Gloria, “was of a commanding and masterful disposition,” his marriage turned out very well. “I’d do it again, I assure you,” he tells Valentine. “You never can tell, sir.”
Characters: You Never Can Tell

Dorothea (Dolly) Clandon: The daughter of Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon and twin sister of Philip Clandon, Dolly, eighteen years old, has “a rapidly clearing cloud of Spartan obstinacy on her tiny firm set mouth and quaintly squared eyebrows.”

Mr. Valentine: A young dentist, Valentine, about thirty years of age, has tried a number of other occupations, as the mood has struck him over the years. “His professional manner evidently strikes him as being a joke, and is underlain by a thoughtless pleasantry which betrays the young gentleman still unsettled and in search of amusing adventures.”

The Parlor Maid: Working in Valentine’s office, the parlor maid appears infrequently.

Philip Clandon: The son of Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon and twin brother of Dolly Clandon, Philip, 18, is handsome and decisive. “Suavity and self-possession are points of honor with him” and he possesses “perfect manners and a finished personal style which might be envied by a man twice his age.”

Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon: The mother of Dolly, Philip, and Gloria, Mrs. Clandon is the estranged wife of Mr. Crampton and the author of a number of modern feminist tracts. “She is distinctly old fashioned for her age in dress and manners. But she belongs to the forefront of her own period (say 1860-80) in a jealously assertive attitude of character and intellect, and in being a woman of cultivated interests rather than passionately developed personal affections.”

Gloria Clandon: The attractive daughter of Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon, Gloria, in her early twenties, has been raised to be like her mother. However, “unlike her mother, she is all passion; and the conflict of her passion with her obstinate pride and intense fastidiousness results in a freezing coldness of manner.” She does, however, fall in love with Valentine and is engaged to him at the end of the play.

Mr. Crampton: Valentine’s landlord, Mr. Crampton is soon revealed as Mrs. Clandon’s estranged husband and Dolly, Philip, and Gloria’s father. “His capacity for suffering acutely from all the dislike that his temper and obstinacy can bring upon him is proved by his wistful, wounded eyes, by a plaintive note in his voice, and painful want of confidence in his welcome, and a constant but indifferently successful effort to correct his natural incivility of manner and proneness to take offence.”

Walter Boon: The head waiter at the resort hotel, Walter is probably the most level, rational, and understanding of the entire play. He is the father of Walter “Bohun,” an important attorney for the queen. “He has a certain expression peculiar to men who have been extraordinarily successful in their callings, and who, whilst aware of the vanity of success, are untouched by envy.”

Finch McComas: A former close friend and suitor of Mrs. Clandon, Finch McComas is now her solicitor, helping her in simple business and legal matters, including explaining to her children who their father is. “He is about fifty, clean shaven, and close-cropped, with the corners of his mouth turned down purposely, as if he suspected them of wanting to turn up, and was determined not to let them have their way.”

Cook

Jo: A waiter at the resort hotel, Jo works under the supervision of Walter Boon.

Walter Bohun: The son of Walter Boon, the waiter, the younger Boon has changed the spelling of his name and distanced himself from his father. He is now an attorney for the queen. “When he speaks, his powerful, menacing voice, impressively articulated speech, strong inexorable manner, and a terrifying power of intensely critical listening raise the impression produced by him to absolute tremendousness.”
The Playwright:
George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw is perhaps one of the most prolific writers of the modern era. Though he is best known as a playwright, Shaw was also a respected critic, journalist, novelist, and essayist. A noted social reformer, Shaw wrote plays which dramatized social commentaries, and in 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his achievements. Today, his works are studied in literature classes worldwide and are considered classics of modern drama.

Born July 26, 1856, in Dublin, Ireland, Shaw was given a Protestant upbringing by his father, a civil servant, and his mother, a music teacher and a vocalist. Through his mother, Shaw gained an appreciation for classical music that he later credited as the base interest which led to his eventual successes.

The young Shaw disliked organized education; at age fourteen, he decided the whole schooling system was valueless and promptly dropped out. But he had a passion for learning, so Shaw gave himself an informal education. He read voraciously, and he frequented the National Gallery of Dublin, where he studied art and history.

At age twenty, Shaw made the trip to London to begin a literary career. He made a name for himself as a music critic, and soon he was writing criticisms of art, literature, and drama. By 1890, Shaw had been published in nearly every major London publication, including The Pall Mall Gazette and Saturday Review. During this time, he also wrote five novels, published mainly in socialist papers, which were never as successful as his plays and essays.

By this time, Shaw was an active member of the socialist movement. He had read Marx's Das Kapital, and by 1884 he had joined the Fabian Society, an influential group dedicated to establishing a socialist democracy in Britain. As a Fabian, Shaw learned to articulate his ideas and philosophies. He quickly became a spokesman for the Fabians and their ideals. This gave him his first opportunity to express his beliefs in a public forum, and brought his name to the public as his writing never had.

Shaw was greatly impressed by Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen's plays represented a social realism that Shaw hadn't known was possible. For the first time, Shaw saw that the stage could become a platform for the communication of ideas. He despised the sentimental melodrama being produced in London theatres, and so he began writing plays of his own.

In 1898, Shaw published his first six plays together in a volume titled Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant, which included the play You Never Can Tell. The plays were produced to great critical acclaim by independent and experimental theatres in London. Several plays followed, including such classics as Man and Superman, Major Barbara, and Pygmalion. Soon Shaw's plays were being published and produced on both sides of the Atlantic.

With each play, Shaw began to place more emphasis on social commentary and less emphasis on story or plot. That's not to say that Shaw's plays were not good theatre; to the contrary, Shaw was a master of wordplay, paradox, and character, and audiences were entertained by his works even more than they were enlightened. But entertainment was not Shaw's intent. To him, the world was an imperfect place desperately in need of change, and theatre was his forum for presenting the evils he saw to the public. Whether the cause was ending poverty, reorganizing government, or removing sexual stigmas and limitations, Shaw sought to confront audiences with issues of social and political importance.

Not everyone embraced Shaw's work as great theatre. His many critics argued that art was a means of communicating human experience, and not a forum to teach or preach. Shaw's
plays, they contended, were seriously flawed because of their wordiness, their excessive argument, and their lack of interesting story. “Primarily, they are not plays,” one critic wrote. “They are tracts in dramatic forms.” But Shaw strongly disagreed, arguing that “social criticism is the most important function of all art,” and that “literature should imitate life so that we might act on it rather than on some misinterpretation of life.”

After winning the Nobel Prize, Shaw continued to write plays until his death in 1950. His later works never enjoyed wide success. Still, Shaw stands as one of the great playwrights of the modern era. For better or worse, he changed the way the world viewed drama and theatre. With plays like Rent, Chicago, and Angels in America, Shaw’s influence on modern theatre continues to be felt.

**You Never Can Tell:**

*Cotton Candy and Soda Pop*

By Lynnette L. Homer

*From Midsummer Magazine, 1999*

An encounter with George Bernard Shaw’s *You Never Can Tell* reminds me of what it might be like to feast on cotton candy and soda pop. The initial experience seems to be expectedly sparkling and frolicsome; but underneath there is an uneasy feeling that the outcome is not necessarily what you expected or wanted.

*You Never Can Tell* is Shaw’s first attempt at writing a play dedicated to achieving commercial success. In it he uses elements of traditional commedia dell’arte stock characters: the young lovers, Harlequin and Columbine, Pantaloon the crabbed father, and servants who sometimes play the fool, but speak words of wisdom, combined with elements of the “well-made play.” But if *You Never Can Tell* were simply a one-dimensional, high-spirited formal comedy of manners, it probably would not have been written by Shaw. We must begin peeling back the layers to understand why this play walks a knife edge between entertainment and social comment.

A brief look at events that shaped George Bernard Shaw provide insight into the layers of this work. Shaw was the product of an unhappy middle class union between his mother, an aspiring singer and music teacher, and his drunkard father. In his youth, George’s mother removed her daughters from the influence of their father, left Ireland, and moved to London to pursue her musical dreams. George lived with his father until the age of twenty when he joined his mother in London. Although George’s father was a wastrel, he instilled in George a keen sense of the ridiculous and an irreverent disregard for social convention.

In London, George joined many philosophical and intellectual organizations and was one of the first members of the Fabian Society which held strong Socialist sentiments. His attitude about women was complex. He embraced no romantic notions of love. As his renown grew, he enjoyed women’s flattery and conducted many flirtations, often pitting one woman against another. However, his Socialist leanings and own childhood experiences lent him sympathy for the battle for independence and equality for women. He was a great admirer of Ibsen and was inspired by his statements attacking society’s idealization of the patriarchal standard. We see the feminist theme of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* echoed in *You Never Can Tell* played as formal high comedy rather than dramatic social comment. Shaw experienced feelings of ambiguity regarding this emerging feminism throughout his life. Intellectually, it made sense to him. However, he feared the power women would have if given the right to vote.
Thus, we see in You Never Can Tell a battle that pits intellect against emotion and feeling. It is a quick-witted battle of the sexes in which it is difficult to tell who “ensnares” whom. It is a delicately balanced play of the sadness of the human condition offered up as sparkling, formal comedy. In so doing, Shaw humanizes the experience by creating characters that are noble and fallible, foolish and wise, admirable and self-deprecating; in fact, very much like ourselves.

The parallels to Shaw’s experiences are apparent. Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon is a high-minded woman. She is the mother who takes her children and escapes from the patriarchal (tyrannical) influence of her husband. She pursues her passion of rational thought, intellectual pursuit, and twentieth century treatises. She raises her children according to the scientific method. Shaw writes her with humanity and dignity; yet, there is a poignancy about her inability to love anything passionately except her cause—even her own children.

Gloria, Mrs. Clandon’s beautiful daughter created in her own image, is the love interest of Valentine, a “five shilling dentist,” who is smitten at first site. Shaw’s ability to perceive the ridiculous even in himself is apparent in the self-satirization of Valentine’s character. His pursuit of Gloria is an irresistible concoction of charm, cunning, and romantic fencing. His feelings are no less sincere for being the umpteenth time he has fallen in love. He is a lighthearted master at the game, until he goes over the slippery side of the matrimony hill, which he greased himself. We are left wondering, “Who set the trap here?” Gloria is no less sincere in her quest to follow in her mother’s footsteps, but discovers chinks in her armor as she falls under attack from Valentine’s ardor.

Finch McComas, a fellow-radical from Mrs. Clandon’s youth now turned respectable, observes that today’s radicals become tomorrow’s old fogies, and cautions Mrs. Clandon that even though her children have been carefully raised in an “enlightened” manner, she should not hold too high hopes that they will carry on the cause. Mrs. Clandon’s “heir apparent,” Gloria, proves him right as she falls victim to Valentine’s scientifically formulated antidote for overcoming the education of the modern young woman.

Shaw uses the characters of Gloria’s slightly younger siblings, the twins Philip and Dolly, as his “childlike” voice. In the tradition of The Emperor’s New Clothes, Dolly and Philip are the unspoiled voice of truth. Youthful, unmannered, often giddy and foolish characters, Shaw uses them to reveal insights into other characters by their guileless though often cheeky observations. Valentine confides to the twins that he has been rejected soundly by Gloria. Philip’s off handed response, “Never mind: you’d never have been able to call your soul your own if she’d married you,” is a foreshadowing of the kind of union Valentine is unwittingly pursuing.

But the heart of our dilemma as to why the resolution of this story makes us a little uneasy is in the title itself “Well, sir, you never can tell. That’s a principle in life with me, sir, if you’ll excuse my having such a thing sir. Yes, sir, you never can tell. There was my son sir! Who ever thought that he would rise to wear a silk gown sir? And yet today, sir, nothing less than fifty guineas, sir. What a lesson sir!”

This is spoken by William, a waiter at the hotel where Mrs. Clandon and her children are staying. William attempts to console Mr. Crampton, the unloved ex-husband and estranged father, after reuniting with his children after eighteen years’ separation, only to find they remain strangers. This seeming message of hope, “don’t despair, things may not seem as bad as they appear,” comes back to mock us as we witness a reunion of William and his own son, Mr. Bohun. William is so obviously intimidated by his son blazing intellect and climb up the social ladder that he can hardly bear to be in the same room. And Mr. Bohun, so obviously impressed with his own intellect and rise on the social scale, barely
tolerates his waiter father. *You Never Can Tell* becomes enigmatic. Is it a message of hope? “Don’t despair, things are probably better than they appear now”? Or, is the message, “Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it”? Or, is it merely G. B. Shaw toying with our inferior intellect, “Don’t take yourself too seriously”? *You Never Can Tell.*

**A Challenge to Conventional Drama**  
By Brian Best

In the preface to his famous biography George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, Archibald Henderson tells how he began “the greatest intellectual venture and spiritual adventure” of his life. On February 24, 1903, a friend invited him to attend a performance of *You Never Can Tell,* by a dramatist he had never heard of. Reluctantly, he went—and was quickly converted. “I sat through that performance,” he recalls, being moved to “gales of laughter, feeling as if I were being subjected to some sort of mental electrification.” In consequence, he spent much of the next fifty years writing and updating his biographies of Bernard Shaw—endeavoring “to record and appraise this great life” (New York, Appleton-Century Crofts, 1956, xiii, xiv).

If *You Never Can Tell* could have such an effect on one (initially skeptical) viewer, the play must have something going for it. Yet it was a troublesome play for Shaw. Though it was mostly written between April and July of 1895, on 8 July a letter to Janet Achurch lamented, “the new play is not coming.” Nearly a year later (10 June 1896) another letter pronounced the play only just finished.” To Ellen Terry on 5 July 1896, Shaw commented wryly, “I have finished a new play, of such extraordinary cleverness that an eminent London manager . . . writes, after reading it, ‘When I got to the end, I had no more idea what you meant by it than a tom cat.’” On 8 September 1896, the play finally had a name—*You Never Can Tell*—and another letter informed Ellen Terry that “Harrison, Cyril Maude & Co. . . . appear to be making up their minds to ruin themselves with it.” On 7 May 1897, with the play several months into rehearsal and the scenery . . . in hand,” Shaw confided to a fellow critic, Golding Bright, that “two of the leading parts proved too much for the resources of the Haymarket”—that “the lady could not possibly have got through without strong support from the gentleman; and the gentleman . . . was hopelessly beaten by his part.” The play was withdrawn, and Shaw feared that it was “not likely to be seen until it [was] published” (Dan H. Laurence, ed., Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1874-1897 [London; Max Reinhardt, 1965]).

The play was finally performed at the Strand Theatre in London in 1899, but Shaw withdrew it after the six mandatory matinees. On 12 June 1900, he wrote to Mrs. Mansfield in New York that she “would find the play difficult to cast.” Why? “Not that the parts are hard to fit separately,” Shaw explained, “but when you have got a capital Dolly and an excellent Mrs. Clandon, you find that they are not a bit like mother and daughter. The Clandon family is the difficulty.” The Mansfields decided not to do the play (Henderson 448).

Shaw’s comment about the “Clandon family” is instructive. Even though the play seems much like other domestic farcical comedies—with a dominating mother, mischievous children, a clever waiter, two young lovers falling in and out of love, etc.—in fact, the play is only superficially conventional. The Clandon family really is a family. The mother is more than a type; she is also a caring and sensitively distinct individual with a history, an occupation, a philosophy, and her own believable psychology. The twins, Phil and Dolly, if mischievous at all, are so in atypical, unexpected ways. They are unique and complex, the product of their personal responses to Mrs. Clandon’s rational, progressive philosophy. Gloria, the elder daughter, seems at first largely a mirror of her
mother; yet she is the stronger of the two women, and her overt rationalistic rejection of sentimentality is complicated by a covert passion, which her mother lacks. Gloria is also her father’s daughter and embodies some of the same traits that resulted in the breakup of her parents’ marriage eighteen years previously. Consequently, any successful production of the play has to create not only believable and effective characters, but characters that fit properly within the peculiar milieu of this genuinely interconnected family.

In addition, the family, and most of the other characters, are wonderfully articulate, witty, intellectual—and intellectually self-aware. They instantly detect slight nuances of speech and attitude in themselves as well as in others, and much of the delight the audience experiences results from the interplay of this rapid intellectual awareness within and between characters and from resultant swings of emotional current. At the same time, the characters have their pet illusions challenged at every turn and suffer the painful process of changing their minds—experiencing a kind of “conversion” to a truer vision of themselves. With all this going on in the play, Henderson’s term, “mental electrification,” conveys just about perfectly what happens in performance when the cast is sufficiently expert and the audience is sufficiently alert and responsive.

The problem Shaw faced in 1897 was that both the actors and the audiences available for his plays were largely products of the conventional theatre of the time and found it extraordinarily difficult to perform or experience at the level Shaw’s plays demanded. They were used to type-cast, “well-made” plays, in which the humor depended almost wholly on ludicrous situations into which the characters were manipulated by various kinds of accidents and other stage trickery.

As a drama critic during the nineties Shaw frequently pointed out the triviality and conventionality of many popular playwrights and their plays. For instance, he accused one dramatist of creating an “ordinary play” with “an air of” novelty and of being a “character actor,” which means being “a clever stage performer who cannot act, and therefore makes an elaborate study of the disguises and stage tricks by which acting can be grotesquely simulated” (Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties [London; Constable, 1932], 1:60). He said of The Girl I Left Behind Me: “It’s fun runs too much on the underclothing of the ladies” and “the characters, instead of being consistent and typical, are patched and rickety” (95). He called Delia Harding “the worst play I ever saw,” explaining that the author’s “plan of playwriting is first to invent the action of his piece, and then to carefully keep it off the stage and have it announced merely by letters and telegrams” (97).

When Shaw complicated his characters by adding realistic human individualities and motives, complicated their relationships by having them function within a framework of social issues and genuine ideas, and in addition challenged beliefs and values held by typical British playgoers, he was breaking new ground and stretching both actors and audiences in ways they had not been stretched before.

His own comment on plays that he wrote in the nineties sums up well the difficulties he knew he was creating for conventional actors and audiences: “I have not hesitated on occasion to tax [the average playgoer’s] intelligence very severely, making the stage effect depend not only on nuances of execution quite beyond the average skill produced by the routine of the English stage in its present condition, but on a perfectly sincere and straightforward conception of states of mind which still seem cynically perverse to most people, and on a good humoredly contemptuous . . . attitude towards ethical conventions which seem to them validly heroic or venerable” (732).
Shaw’s challenge, of course, was to keep writing highly entertaining plays that would gradually force the quality of drama, actors, and audiences up to his own demanding level. That he succeeded—and more quickly than even he dared to hope—is demonstrated by his success at the new Vedrenne-Barker Independent Theatre, which between 1903 and 1907 produced eleven of his plays. Of the 988 performances which occurred during those years, Shaw’s plays accounted for 701. You Never Can Tell was one of the three most popular (Michael Holdroyd, Bernard Shaw, Volume II, 1898-1918, The Pursuit of Power [New York; Random House, 1989], 173).

More than any other playwright, Shaw, with scintillating plays such as You Never Can Tell and with intelligent, hard-hitting dramatic criticism, effectively challenged conventional dramatic expectations and propelled British theatre into the twentieth century.