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: William Leach (left) and Jody Barrett in *Misalliance*, 1991.
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Synopsis: *Misalliance*

In the garden pavilion of his father’s house, Johnny Tarleton is lounging comfortably, when his sister Hypatia's fiance, Bentley Summerhays, arrives with an offensive air of superiority. Threatened with a beating, Bentley throws himself on the floor and screams, bringing Mrs. Tarleton and Hypatia to his help. They lead him away, while Johnny, to relieve his feelings, smashes a punch bowl with full approval of Lord Summerhays, Bentley’s father, who has just arrived.

Mrs. Tarleton and Hypatia have a long talk, in which the girl expresses her concerns whether members of the aristocratic Summerhays family are laughing at them behind their backs. She has agreed to marry Bentley because, though he is “a little squit of a thing,” he has brains, which the rest of her suitors lack.

Returning with the elder Tarleton, Bentley jokingly calls him his “adopted father.” He explains that his college friend, Joey Percival, had three fathers his own, a tame philosopher living in his house, and an Italian priest. This, in Bentley’s opinion, has broadened Joey’s outlook.

Hypatia is left alone with Lord Summerhays, who on a previous visit had proposed to her, despite their difference in age. She tells him she is sick of her humdrum, lady-like existence; as her father says, she “wants adventure to drop out of the sky.”

This is precisely what happens when an airplane makes a forced landing in their garden, smashing the greenhouse glass. Its pilot is the much-fathered Joey Percival. His passenger turns out to be a woman, Lina Szczepanowska, member of a famous Polish family of acrobats. The elder Tarleton, who is a notorious womanizer, tries to seduce her. She spurns him, but they shake hands and she takes him off to the gymnasium for some much needed exercise.

A peculiar young man, brandishing a pistol, enters the pavilion and conceals himself in a portable Turkish bath which is awaiting installation in the mansion. Here he sees Hypatia pursuing Joey with most unlady-like alacrity. Tarleton comes in just in time to catch a glimpse of the two running off when he is held up by the new arrival, who accuses him of having, years ago, seduced and abandoned his mother, Lucinda Titmus. When Tarleton denies all knowledge, the man prepares to shoot him, but Lina enters and neatly disarms him.

Joey and Hypatia run in, and Joey catches her just inside the pavilion. Joey is about to throw “Gunner” out, when Mrs. Tarleton recognizes the photograph of Lucy Titmus, whom she had befriended long ago. She immediately takes the stranger under her wing.

Hypatia, obviously taken by Joey, denies her engagement to Bentley, which sends him off in another screaming fit; but Lina picks him up and carries him off to the gymnasium, while Mrs. Tarleton takes Gunner for a meal and a rest. Asked about his “intentions,” Percival admits that he cannot afford to marry Hypatia; he must first have a settlement of 1500 pounds a year. Hypatia asks her father to “buy the brute” for her, and Tarleton eventually submits.

Lina comes back and insists on getting the airplane repaired, as she cannot bear the stuffy house, where people think of nothing but love-making. Already she has had proposals from Tarleton, Lord Summerhays, Bentley, and finally Johnny Tarleton. Since Joey refuses to fly again that evening, Lina decides to handle the airplane herself, taking the terrified Bentley who is now in love with her as her passenger. At the entreaty of Lord Summerhays, however, she puts off the flight until the next day. The play ends with Hypatia exclaiming her great relief that there is nothing more to be said.
Characters: Misalliance

JOHNNY TARLETON: “an ordinary young business man of thirty or less,” son of John Tarleton, Sr., working his way into his father’s underwear business

JOHN TARLETON, SR.: father of Johnny and Hypatia Tarleton, “has made a great deal of money out of Tarleton’s Underwear,” a great supporter of “free libraries.”

BENTLEY SUMMERHAYS: son of Lord Summerhays, fiancee of Hypatia, great annoyance to Johnny, “one of those smallish, thin-skinned youths, who from 17 to 70 retain unaltered the mental airs of the latter and the physical appearance of the earlier age”

LORD SUMMERHAYS: a former colonial governor, father of Bentley, at on time proposed to Hypatia, a very proper Englishman

HYPATIA: daughter of John Tarleton, fiance of Bentley, “a typical English girl of a sort never called typical: this is, she has an opaque white skin, black hair, large dark eyes with black brows and lashes, curved lips, swift glances and movements that flash out of a waving stillness, boundless energy, and audacity held in leash”

MRS. TARLETON: wife of John Tarleton and mother of Johnny and Hypatia; “shrewd and motherly old lady who has been pretty in her time, and is still very pleasant and likeable and unaffected”

JOEY PERCIVAL: friend of Bentley and part-time aviator, a splendid specimen of humanity, later courts Hypatia

LINA SZCZEPANOWSKA: member of a famous Polish family of acrobats who make it a point of honor to risk their lives at least once a day; receives proposals from Johnny, Mr. Tarleton, and Lord Summerhays, but later pairs off with Bentley

JULIUS BAKER (“GUNNER”): a peculiar young man who accuses Mr. Tarleton at gunpoint of, years ago, seducing and abandoning his mother, Mrs. Tarleton later takes him under her wing
About 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.
Misalliance and Shaw: Extraordinary
From Insights, 1991

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was, of course, much more than a playwright. He had been in his earlier years a music critic and a drama critic, he was an essayist (writing impressive treatises on social, political, economic, and literary matters as prefaces to each of his plays), a philosopher, and a political agitator who often in his young manhood stood on a soapbox in Hyde Park and tried to propagate a philosophy called Fabian Socialism which is what the Labor Party of England came to stand for and to execute seventy-five years later.

Shaw wrote Misalliance in 1909-1910, and it, of course, is more than an ordinary play. It is a continuation of some of the ideas on marriage that he expressed in 1908 in his play, Getting Married. It was also a continuation of some of his other ideas on Socialism, physical fitness, the Life Force, and “The New Woman” i.e. women intent on escaping Victorian standards of helplessness, passivity, stuffy propriety, and non-involvement in politics or general affairs.

Shaw beat critics to the punch by subtitling his play A Debate in One Sitting, and in the program of its first presentation in 1910 inserting this program note: “The debate takes place at the house of John Tarleton of Hindhead, Surrey, on May 31, 1909. As the debate is a long one, the curtain will be lowered twice. The audience is requested to excuse these interruptions, which are made solely for its convenience.”

This may have ruffled Shaw’s critics, but latter-day critics have not minded. Of the highly successful 1953 production in New York, Walter Kerr in the Herald Tribune described the play as a “wandering conversation-piece, but an unalloyed joy.”

Misalliance is an ironic examination of the mating instincts of a varied group of people gathered at a wealthy man’s country home on a summer weekend. Most of the romantic interest centers around the host’s daughter, Hypatia, a typical Shaw heroine who exemplifies his life-long theory that in courtship women are the relentless pursuers and men the apprehensively pursued.

Though Hypatia is engaged to a young aristocrat as the play starts, and has even had a scandalous proposal from her intended’s debonair father, she is restless. She acknowledges that her fiance is clever, and is the most interesting man she’s had a choice of, but she is impatient with his having brains and little else to attract her. She longs for some adventure to drop out of the sky. And drop it does.

An airplane crashes through the conservatory bringing two unexpected guests. One is a handsome young man who immediately arouses Hypatia’s hunting instinct. The other is a female dare-devil of a circus acrobat whose vitality and directness inflame all the other men at the house-party. It turns out that it is customary for her to rouse men wherever she goes, and in the second act she makes a note of having received her fifty-eighth proposal.

All told there are eight marriage proposals offered for consideration in the course of one summer afternoon. The question of whether any one of these combinations of marriage might be an auspicious alliance, or a misalliance, prompts one of the prospective husbands to make the famous Shavian speculation that has shocked many theatre-goers: “If marriages were made by putting all the men’s names into one sack and the women’s names into another, and having them taken out by a blind-folded child like lottery numbers, there would be just as high a percentage of happy marriages as we have now.”
Misalliance: A “Discussion” Play

From Midsummer Magazine, 1991

George Bernard Shaw’s literary career spanned the first half of the twentieth century; his first play, Widower’s House, was written in 1892, his last, Shakes Versus Shaw, in 1949, a year before his death in 1950 at the age of 94. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925. Although he was born in Ireland, Shaw spent most of his adult life in England, and most of his work was produced on the English stage. His best-known plays continue to be widely performed: Man and Superman, Major Barbara, Pygmalion (from which the highly successful My Fair Lady was adapted), and St. Joan. Less well-known, Misalliance (1910) falls chronologically in the middle of these plays.

Misalliance is one of Shaw’s “discussion” plays, a dramatic genre that was introduced and perfected by the playwright. He has been both lauded and criticized for his emphasis on dialogue over plot and action, that is, for his emphasis on discussion. In fact, even one of his own characters, Hypatia herself, the locus of sexual vitality in Misalliance, becomes a stalwart critic of “talk, talk, talk!” (Misalliance [New York: Bretano’s, 1914], 134. All future quotations from this play will be referenced by page number in this text.)

Yet, Shaw was a playwright with a purpose. And even though he was among the first to seek a wider audience for his plays by publishing them for a reading as well as a viewing public, admirers and detractors alike know very well that Shaw had a keen knowledge of the stage and dramatic action, as well as a fine sense for comedy. Clearly, his plays carried a message, or rather, several messages, most of which stemmed from his quarrel with the ills wrought by capitalism and his fervor for socialism. Nonetheless, his best plays reveal that a discussion can evoke dramatic tension as effectively as plot complications and conflicts.

It would be incorrect, therefore, to confuse the discussion play with the “closet drama,” a genre intended for a reading audience only. Rather, Shaw presumes that “ideas can be as dramatic as love-making or murder on the stage; for action to be dramatic, it need not be overt (Eldon C. Hill, George Bernard Shaw [Boston: Twayne, 1978], 66). He takes on a variety of topics, or discussions: sexuality, marriage, the parent-child relationship, social classes, gender all of which fall under the super heading of capitalism.

Yet, while the idea takes precedence over the plot, Shaw’s flair for the dramatic prevents his plays from becoming static. A plane crash on stage and a gun-wielding clerk, both of which occur at precisely the moment the audience has begun to agree with Hypatia about “talk, talk, talk,” and both of which replace the old complications with new ones, reveal, for example, Shaw’s theatrical instinct in Misalliance.

The misalliance suggested in the title is specifically that of the engaged couple: Hypatia, the vital daughter of the wealthy middle-class Tarletons (he has made his fortune in men’s underwear, or rather, by producing a line of men’s undergarments) and Bentley, nicknamed Bunny, the weak, simpering son of the aristocrat, Lord Summerhays.

The play involves the breaking up of this misalliance via the complication of the plane crash (no one is injured) and the subsequent entrance of the pilot, Joey Percival (coincidentally a school chum of Bentley) and his passenger, Lina Szczepanowska, a Polish trapeze artist and acrobat, for whom risking one’s life is not only a daily occurrence, but a creed to which she strictly adheres.

On a grander scale, however, everything is misallied. Early in the play, when Johnny Tarleton reminds Bentley that the elder Tarletons are evaluating his fitness to be their daughter’s spouse, Shaw introduces a number of his themes: “The match isn’t (in quoting from
Misalliance, I am adhering to Shaw’s unique spelling style, in which he eliminated apostrophes except where the practice might create confusion) settled yet; don’t forget that. You’re on trial in the office because the Governor [Johnny’s and Hypatia’s father] isn’t giving his daughter money for an idle man to live on her. You’re on trial here because my mother thinks a girl should know what a man is like in the house before she marries him” (6). The close association of money, marriage, and parental control in a speech fairly early on in the play sets the stage for the development of these themes as the work progresses and the rest of the characters are introduced.

Through the male characters especially, Misalliance “examines the various social classes to reveal that no existing group is worthy to take over the country, or capable of doing so” (J. L. Wisenthal, Shaw’s Sense of History [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 145). As representatives of their respective social classes, they all possess dubious qualities, from the aristocratic Summerhays to the proletarian clerk, Gunner. Not one class in this play stands out as a shining example to the others. It is not that they’re morally bankrupt; rather, their superficialities and pettinesses, along with (Gunner excepted) their high regard for money, render them vacuous and clearly ineffective members of society.

Lord Summerhays and Bentley are true representatives of the English aristocracy. The lord is a philanderer and has used his high rank and political position to seduce women. Bentley is, in the words of Mrs. Tarleton, “overbred, like one of those expensive little dogs” (19). The bourgeois Mr. Tarleton generously contributes money to his causes, particularly the free lending library, but is utterly astonished to find that someone could get an idea or two from the books therein. Well read himself, it has never occurred to him that the content of such books can actually influence the way one thinks and acts. His constant admonition to others to read Jefferson, read Ibsen, read Mill reveals that he has little understanding of what he has read and is completely incapable of making a link between life and literature. The son Johnny is the prototypical “all brawn and no brains” and proud of it.

Gunner, whose name is an expedient invention and reference to the weapon he brandishes, is at once the most comic and the most pitiful. His feeble and anguished attempts to right the wrong done to his mother by Mr. Tarleton’s dalliance with her reveal the total inadequacy of the Marxian proletariat to revolt against the classes that control them. Gunner is caught between affirming his manhood by saying “damn,” and being so frightened by Percival’s feigned gesture of violence that he threatens to call the police. His final acceptance of the nurturing offered by Mrs. Tarleton suggests that the proletariat could be soothed by a bit of mothering, by being treated as human beings.

The women in Misalliance fare better, as they usually do in a Shaw play. That is, women are generally the challengers of the status quo, and often, by challenging their gender roles, manage to cut across and through other barriers as well. Of the three (they are outnumbered by the men two to one), Mrs. Tarleton appears the most conventional. She is the only one, however, who empathizes with Gunner and calls to a halt that chiding he has received from the other men. The link between one human being and another is motherhood, clearly a missing link among the men, Shaw suggests. Gunner’s mother had come to Mrs. Tarleton when she was “in trouble.” Remembering the incident, Mrs. Tarleton says to Gunner “(with an effusion of tenderness) And you here being treated like that, poor orphan, with nobody to take your part! Tear up that foolish paper, child; and sit down and make friends with me” (83). Thus, although Mrs. Tarleton challenges social convention less than the other two women, her character remains strong: she is totally responsible for reversing the volatile situation with Gunner and restoring a modicum of equilibrium among the men.

The daughter, Hypatia, or Patsy to her family, is, as I have said, the locus of sexual vitality in the play. Even so, it is a bit difficult to comprehend what Shaw meant when he created this character. Her plea is to live a life of action, to have experience. She is bored by the constant “cackle, cackle, cackle” of her elders. She boldly seduces Joey Percival while she is engaged to Bentley, and cares nei-
ther for the fact of the engagement or for Percival’s protests of impropriety. When Percival fends her off by protesting “Give me the blessed protection of a good stiff conventionality among thoroughly well brought up ladies and gentlemen,” she responds:

Hypatia. Another talker! Men like convention because men made them. I didn’t make them: I don’t like them. I won’t keep them. Now what will you do?

Percival. Bolt. (He runs out through the pavilion.)

Hypatia. I’ll catch you. “She dashes off in pursuit.”

The curious part of her character, however, is that once she has caught him she reverts to the middle class standards by which she has been raised and implores her father: “Papa: buy the brute for me” (95), which he does, much to the satisfaction to all involved. Thus, by challenging her gender role, Hypatia gets her man and is saved from what would have been a dreadful marriage to Bentley. But she does not reach beyond the values of her class. Even though she is irresistibly to both Percival and the audience alike, the question remains: is her “buying” the man of her dreams a reversal of gender roles or a regression back into the bourgeois society she has challenged?

If Hypatia represents the sexual vitality of the play, Lina Szczepanowska is clearly emblematic of the Shavian life force. By the time Lina enters the play, Shaw has already demonstrated that impossibility of change and revitalization from the men and from within the system. Her entrance onto the stage, dressed in the attire of a flyer, confuses both the characters and the viewers about her gender. It is naturally assumed by all that she is a man; she has been involved in a man’s pastime, flying, and she is dressed like a man. As she removes her helmet, however, she is revealed to be a very beautiful woman, as well as a physically strong one; she spends a good deal of the play displaying this strength by rescuing herself and Percival from the crash, for example, and carrying Bentley around over her shoulder. Her literal strength symbolizes the infusion of new life from without, from, that is, a woman and a foreigner. Lina presents her own tirade against English social customs as an interesting counterpart to Hypatia’s “purchase”: “I am strong; I am skilful; I am brave; I am independent; I am unbought. . . . And this Englishman [Johnny Tarleton]! this linen-drape! he dares to ask me to come live with him in this rrrrrabbit hutch, and take my bread from his hand, and ask him for pocket money, and wear soft clothes, and be his woman! Sooner than that I would stoop to the lowest depths of my profession” (103).

The successful ending of the play has Lina giving Bentley a hearty slap on the back as she plans to show him daring, adventure, and terror in the world beyond the stuffy English estate. As the strongest, Lina, enfolds the weakest, Bentley, then there is the sense that all the lives in Misalliance have been changed.

As Robert F. Whitman tells us: “If politics and religion and morality and even reason have proved sterile and corrupt, if they have brought us down the wrong road, or if they have simply become the tools of selfish men, the solution is not to throw them on the dust heap, but to make them work for the good of humanity. He speaks to us in tones not of despair or lamentation, but of anger and renewed vigor. A man [or, in the case of Misalliance, a woman] with an idea and a conviction possesses the strength of ten, Shaw never minds telling us; and he was not one to be caught short without an idea. (Shaw and the Play of Ideas [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977], 24).

It is thus that the play Misalliance concludes. Having challenged and satirized relationships on all levels of a capitalist society, Shaw realigns his characters to the satisfaction of all, audience included. The play of ideas, the discussion play, has entertained and sustained and will continue to do so as long as the social and relational problems he criticized remain.
Misalliance: The Entertaining Gospel

By Brian S. Best

From Souvenir Program, 1991

Reviewing a performance of Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, Bernard Shaw wrote: “It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or bustled into it.” Obviously, Shaw does not deal just in amusement.

Still, nearly everyone has heard that Shaw’s comedies are brilliant, witty, and outrageous; and this is true. It is also true that audiences and directors and actors as well were slow to grasp the nature of Shaw’s comedy. They were used to mindless nineteenth-century farces and melodramas with stock characters playing typical roles in traditional ways; and Shaw haunted rehearsals of his plays for years trying to make clear the new conceptions of drama and of acting that his plays required.

Like most of Shaw’s comedies, Misalliance is difficult to describe. It is a wonderful play. Audiences love it and rejoice in its marvelous comedy. Yet the plot and Misalliance uses up a lot of plot is scarcely more than a gorgeous farce which brings together a group of highly opinionated, articulate people who then proceed to talk. And that, of course, is the key. The talk is the true drama. The interplay of ideas is Shaw’s dramatic conflict. And the ideas are so provocative and honest and the characters so delightfully energetic in asserting their opinions that comedy results.

The play is a continuous, witty, delightful, ever-varying discussion, or debate, about many things all the way from women’s rights and socialism to prayer and Bible reading but mostly about difficulties in the relationships of parents and children. Of course there are enticements to get us to listen to the discussion. An attractive, vigorous young woman is shopping for a husband and longing for excitement. She is bored by all the talk her elders and her very conventional brother subject her to. She wants to be an “active verb”; she wants something unusual to drop out of the sky and it does. An airplane crashes into the greenhouse, bringing her an intelligent Adonis and bringing all the men an amazing, enticing female Polish acrobat. Before long, multiple romancing is underway (interrupted briefly by an attempted murder), and all the while the characters, including now the would-be murderer, talk about many things, provoking one another exceedingly as they do so, and provoking and challenging us as well.

Part of our challenge is to discover Shaw’s own perspective. Since no single character is his mouthpiece, we must listen actively and weigh intelligently the claims of the various voices. Yet Shaw does have strong opinions, and if we want to know for sure what they are, we can read his preface entitled “Parents and Children,” which is only slightly longer than the play itself and in which he discusses all the issues the play raises and a good many it doesn’t. Shaw is always willing to explain himself.

As he readily admits, he is a preacher and a world-betterer, and the theatre is his pulpit. The gospel of St. George Bernard Shaw, fundamentally, is “think, ponder, and repent of your sacred stupidities if you want this absurd world ever to become a fit place for human habitation.” Surely, there are few provocative preachments more delightful than Misalliance. We leave the theatre not fearing eternal damnation for our sins, but feeling the embarrassment of having our conventional wisdom thoroughly laughed at.