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# Publications “Playwrights’ Progress: The Evolution of the Play Cycle, from Shaw’s ‘Pentateuch’ to Angels in America

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Julie Sparks

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PLAYWRIGHTS' PROGRESS:  
THE EVOLUTION OF THE PLAY  
CYCLE, FROM SHAW'S  
"PENTATEUCH" TO *ANGELS IN  
AMERICA*

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When asked by Oxford University Press to select one play among all his works as his "world classic," Bernard Shaw passed over the more well known candidates and chose his sprawling five-play cycle, *Back to Methuselah*.<sup>1</sup> He defended this selection not because it was his best play, but because it was a work that "came straight from the Life Force operating as an *élan vital*" through not only its writer but also the lunatic (Barry Jackson) who ventured to produce this ruinously expensive and apparently noncommercial behemoth.<sup>2</sup> In the Preface, Shaw explains his intentions by setting this ambitious work in its historical context (which he inevitably sees as "an evolution") from the Greek tragedy cycles, performed as a mode of civic self-examination and religious worship at the festival of Dionysus, to the Corpus Christi mystery plays, to Wagner's Ring cycle, which Shaw saw as a religious and political allegory expressing "the whole tragedy of human history and the whole horror of the dilemmas from which the world is shrinking today."<sup>3</sup>

In writing his own cycle play, Shaw believed he was serving the role of "artist-prophet" in the tradition of Sophocles, Michelangelo, Bunyan, Goethe, and Ibsen.<sup>4</sup> Considering Shaw's consciousness of this high purpose and these noble forebears, it is not surprising that he first took up this artist-prophet role and experimented with the play cycle format early in his career, just a few years after he wrote his study of Wagner's Ring. By his own description, the four-act *Man and Superman* was his first effort to write his gospel of the Life Force, and *Heartbreak House* was another early forerunner to his lengthier Pentateuch. However, it was when Shaw became convinced

that modern civilization was in grave peril after the “stern admonition” of the Great War, that he chose to write not just another political play, but a play cycle that began with the biblical imagery of the medieval mystery plays, ended with elements of a Dionysian festival, and stretched to such grand proportions that it requires a production in the style of the Wagnerian Bayreuth festival to succeed with modern audiences. Despite its ambitious scope and the “world classic” label Shaw later affixed to his cycle, in a less sanguine mood he confessed that he was aware of “the crudity of this my beginning of a Bible for Creative Evolution.” For a continuation of this great mission, Shaw put his hope in “a hundred apter and more elegant parables by younger hands [that] will soon leave mine as far behind as the religious pictures of the fifteenth century left behind the first attempts of the early Christians at iconography.”<sup>5</sup>

Considering the inherent difficulties in writing, staging, and producing works of this magnitude, Shaw’s wish might have seemed like a vain hope, but in fact, once one starts looking for them, play cycles can be found in abundance, both in Shaw’s time and in ours. Of course many of these, even some of those by major writers, including Ibsen, Thomas Hardy, Eugene O’Neill, and Thornton Wilder, are relegated to the role of literary curiosities or at best are considered minor works, rarely, if ever, performed in full.<sup>6</sup> While it may perhaps be too soon to judge the value of some contemporary cycle plays written by prominent playwrights, a few of the most recent play cycles have earned critical praise and even literary prizes. Among these I would place Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning two-play cycle *Angels in America*, Robert Schenkkan’s nine-part study of Appalachian history, *The Kentucky Cycle*, John Barton’s ten-play cycle of the Trojan War, *Tantalus*, Tom Stoppard’s three-play cycle about nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries, *The Coast of Utopia*, and David Edgar’s two-play commentary on contemporary American politics, *Continental Divide*. In relation to these recent works, Shaw’s much-maligned *Back to Methuselah* begins to seem less like the embarrassing anomaly some Shavians have considered it to be and more like the forerunner of a significant new direction for theater.

Furthermore, some of these recent play cycles seem to validate Shaw’s idea that dramatic form and social function are linked, and that cycle plays, which virtually require a festival format, are best suited for theater that could provide world-changing enlightenment, rather than mere fashionable entertainment. While knowing that cycle plays were not the only vehicle for serious drama, Shaw did seem to believe that they offered something unique: perhaps a certain air of sanctity and gravitas inherited from their early sacred associations, perhaps a broader canvas to explore multiple dimensions of complex human issues. Spurred by his belief, Shaw promoted the kinds of plays and staging that would allow modern theater to serve its ancient function. To some degree, at least, it seems that he was successful.

Among the play cycles that followed Shaw's *Pentateuch*, some can be seen as direct inheritors of Shaw's vision, not only adopting the play cycle format but also combining, as Shaw did, the apocalyptic imagery and stern admonitory tone of the Old Testament prophets with a utopian hopefulness that looked past the immediate peril of modern civilization toward a better future age. In the play cycles of these Shavian inheritors, one can also see echoes of images, themes, and even historical and literary allusions that Shaw wove into his *Pentateuch* and its forerunners, *Man and Superman* and *Heartbreak House*. Like Shaw, his inheritors adapt the religious iconography of earlier ages to their own purposes, trying to awaken their audiences to a sense of greater social and political responsibility. To better understand the relationship between Shaw and current cycle plays, I will first examine Shaw's early motives for reviving the play cycle format, trace the influence of some of his models, show how he made the cycle play format serve his purpose, and then discuss how some contemporary playwrights seem to be taking up Shaw's project, particularly Tony Kushner, who seems most clearly to be working in Shaw's vein. This comparison uncovers the riches this ancient form of theater can offer to modern "artist-prophets" of the stage and to their audiences.

## The Modern Cycle Play Defined

First, some definitions: In its broadest sense, the term "play cycle" can be applied to any group of plays that are seen, by either the writer or a director, to be unified by theme, whether or not they ever were or will be performed as a unit. For example, Shaw, among others, argued that Ibsen's last twelve plays form a cycle that should be experienced in full, in the order in which they were created, to get the full impact. A more recent example is the projected ten-play cycle by August Wilson that chronicles the African American experience with one play set in each decade of the twentieth century. More narrowly defined, a play cycle comprises two or more plays that are meant to be performed as a unit, either in an unusually long single performance or over a few days. These plays are usually connected in theme, style, and plot, usually with at least some of the characters appearing in two or more of the plays or being represented in later plays by their descendants. These cycles often focus on the history of an extended family, as do the *Oresteia* and the *Theban* plays, or they represent more broadly the history of a culture or of the human race, as do the medieval mystery plays.

Although the connected theme and multiple-play format are the chief identifying characteristics of the cycle play as a genre, contemporary cycle

plays tend to resemble their historical precedents in other ways as well. For one, like the traditional epic, cycle plays tend to focus on key figures in the culture's history and employ imagery from its sacred texts, mythology, and folklore. For example, Shaw's play cycles use imagery and characters from the Bible, Greek mythology and drama, and European history; Wagner's Ring cycle uses figures from Norse mythology; and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Robert Shenkkan's *Kentucky Cycle* make American history resonate with imagery from the Oresteia. Such allusions serve different artistic and didactic purposes in different plays, but they tend to indicate that the playwright is reaching beyond temporal "agit-prop" concerns toward something of more universal significance.

This effort to grapple with timeless human concerns is another characteristic that contemporary play cycles share with ancient ones. Although they often include elements of comedy, these contemporary cycle plays have a serious civic purpose, as did Shaw's. They are not intended merely to entertain but also to enlighten—often to exhort. They force an audience to examine its society's collective actions in relation to its ideals—that is, to evaluate core institutions such as the church, the state, the family, or the military—in light of the culture's core values. Often, however, play cycles go beyond temporal, political issues to reach for an existential truth. J. Percy Smith has explained this tendency of Shaw's in his book *The Unrepentant Pilgrim*: "For [Shaw], too, the theater was a temple of civilization, providing measurement, guidance, and impulsion. In his mature opinion, as in Wagner's, the quality of every work of art depended on two things, aside from technical excellence: an ordered, meaningful theory of the cosmos and man's place in it, and a conviction about that theory so strongly felt by the artist that its expression becomes a passionate necessity to him."<sup>7</sup>

Although, of course, Shaw's "ordered, meaningful theory of the cosmos and man's place in it" lies behind many of his plays, the cycle plays were his most deliberate effort to create what he called "religious iconography" for humanity's evolving understanding of Providence, or as Shaw preferred to call it, the Life Force. In modern cycle plays, as in their historical precedents, the multiplay format and serious cultural purpose set them apart from conventional plays, and Shaw believed that the format was necessary to fully achieve the purpose.

This leads to the final link between the ancient and the new cycle plays: performance. Because the contemporary cycle plays, like their historical precedents, tend to be longer, more serious, and more intellectually challenging than other types of drama, they often require a special type of performance—something resembling the theater festivals of Dionysus or the Corpus Christi mystery play festivals of medieval Europe—to achieve their aims. Shaw returned again and again to this point in his efforts to elevate the theater of his time above merely commercial fare. Using the

Bayreuth festival as a model, Shaw advocated similar theater festivals, not only for performance of Ibsen's Realist play cycle but also for uncut versions of Shakespeare's plays, and for Shaw's own.

## Early Influences on Shaw's Cycle Plays: Ibsen and Wagner

In the 1890s, when Shaw began agitating for more theater festivals to provide the proper setting for the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and, of course, his own, Wagner's festival at Bayreuth, inaugurated in 1876 to host his four-part Ring Cycle, supplied the model for this kind of drama and this kind of festival. Although Shaw's treatise on Ibsenism, first published in 1891, preceded his treatise on Wagner, first published in 1898, both Ibsen and Wagner seem to have exerted a strong influence on Shaw's conception of the Bayreuth-type theater festival as a sort of religious experience for modern people of advanced views. At the end of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw argued in frankly religious terms for the founding of an Ibsen festival along the lines of Bayreuth. In the final chapter of that treatise, "Needed: An Ibsen Theater," Shaw declares that Ibsen's realist play cycle should, "like Wagner's Ring, be performed in cycles; so that Ibsen may hunt you down from position to position until you are finally cornered." He continues, "The larger truth of the matter is that modern European literature and music now form a Bible far surpassing in importance to us the ancient Hebrew Bible that has served us so long. The notion that inspiration is something that happened thousands of years ago, and [. . .] that God retired from business at that period [. . .] is as silly as it is blasphemous."<sup>8</sup> He adds, "Ibsen has proved the right of the drama to take scriptural rank, and his own right to canonical rank as one of the major prophets of the modern Bible" (187). Shaw ends the exhortation with a call for an endowment for a Bayreuth-like Ibsen Theater, which he believes would succeed only if the petitioners "promise that our endowed theater will be an important place, and it will make people of low tastes and tribal or commercial ideas horribly uncomfortable by its efforts to bring conviction of sin to them" (188).

Shaw also seems to have had Wagner's Ring cycle in mind when, having established his reputation and made his fortune with what he saw as lesser plays, he embarked on his own first "parable of Creative Evolution," the four-part *Man and Superman*. In a letter from 1903, when the play was nearing completion, he remarked to Janet Achurch that he had been attending

a performance of the Ring at Covent Garden. One might expect that such exposure to this favorite work of his old hero might have encouraged Shaw to aim high and write large. Instead, Shaw tells Janet that the performance only made him realize that “the more I try professional art, the greater becomes my horror and weariness of it.” And he adds, “That is partly why I made the new play impossible in point of length and subject.”<sup>9</sup> Years later, when he was working on *Heartbreak House*, he makes a similarly dispirited remark in a letter to Lillah McCarthy. “The new play isn’t any use commercially, I am afraid. I have cut it down to the bone; and the result is that if it were very impetuously played (which it wouldn’t be) it could begin at eight and end with difficulty at half past eleven. I wrote it without regard to circumstances.” But then he adds, “I suppose if I got an offer for a sort of Bayreuth production I should have to entertain it.”<sup>10</sup> His discouragement over the lengthy *Man and Superman* might have been reasonable in 1903, but by the time he despaired over *Heartbreak House*, he had already seen *Man and Superman* triumph in a full-length, five-hour production by Esme Percy in Glasgow in 1915.

He refers to this later in a discussion of why Shakespeare should always be played at full length: “Either we do what nobody else will do for Shakespeare: that is, what Bayreuth does for Wagner, or else we do something worse for him than Commerce and Martin Harvey do already,” that is, mutilate the Bard’s text until it loses all appeal in the interest of brevity.<sup>11</sup> Shaw argues that the public *would* bear the strain of a full performance, citing Percy’s Bayreuth-style production of *Man and Superman*. “No doubt the people suffered agonies,” Shaw concedes, but “no matter: they paid their money; came; saw; and I conquered. They did so because the play was presented as a masterpiece of dramatic art by a great author, demanding sacrifice and endurance. That is exactly what we must do in the case of Shakespear. [. . .] The tour should be a pilgrimage: its visits a festival. That is how Bayreuth has succeeded.”<sup>12</sup>

Shaw wrote this exhortation on behalf of Shakespeare in 1919, when he was already engaged in writing his second play cycle, what he called his “second parable of Creative Evolution,” *Back to Methuselah*. When he found it stretching to four plays, he began referring to it as his Ring, and the connections to Wagner are obvious. When he added the fifth play, he dubbed it his Pentateuch. However, perhaps even more significant than the Ring is the influence of Ibsen’s play cycle, not the celebrated Realist Cycle but the more obscure and neglected *Emperor and Galilean*, a two-play cycle written in 1873, just before Ibsen began his realist plays. In Shaw’s discussion of that work in the *Quintessence*, we can see the germ of the ideas that Shaw develops later in *Back to Methuselah*, particularly in the first play of the cycle. For example, in this passage from the *Quintessence*, Shaw describes a key theme of Ibsen’s that becomes central to his own play *In the Beginning*:

In this work we find [Ibsen] at first preoccupied with a piece of old-fashioned freethinking: the dilemma that moral responsibility presupposes free-will, and that free-will sets man above God. Cain, who slew because he willed, willed because he must, and must have willed to slay because he was himself, comes upon the stage to claim that murder is fertile, and death the ground of life, though, not having read Weismann on death as a method of evolution, he cannot say what is the ground of death. (68)

This passage might be seen as the outline for *In the Beginning*, wherein the first humans are working out their first steps down the path of evolving into Godhood.

Another passage in the *Quintessence* prefigures the last play of Shaw's cycle, in which the humans of the far future are much closer to the goal of reconciling the demands of the flesh and of the spirit. In explicating *Emperor and Galilean*, Shaw states:

Maximus knows that there is no going back to "the first empire" of pagan sensualism. "The second empire," Christian or self-abnegatory idealism, is already rotten at heart. "The third empire" is what he looks for: the empire of Man asserting the eternal validity of his own will. He who can see that not on Olympus, not nailed to the cross, but in himself is God: he is the man to build Brand's bridge between the flesh and the spirit, establishing this third empire in which the spirit shall not be unknown, nor the flesh starved, nor the will tortured and baffled. (73)

Another similarity between Ibsen's two-play cycle and Shaw's five-play "Pentateuch" is that each writer considered each to be his masterpiece, and both were nearly alone in that view. Judging by Ibsen's stated intention for the play, however, his goals were much like Shaw's in writing both of his play cycles—*Back to Methuselah* and *Man and Superman*, his two "parables of Creative Evolution." Ibsen wrote that in his *Emperor and Galilean*, "The positive Weltanschauung [or the overall philosophy of life] which critics have long demanded of me will be found here."<sup>13</sup> One critic has described this expression of Ibsen's Weltanschauung as "the enunciation of such ordering principles as would help to clarify the problem of Man's evolutionary career, of his path through history, of the role of the individual in the inscrutable processes of the universe."<sup>14</sup> Again, this could also describe Shaw's project in *Back to Methuselah*.

Although Shaw's Pentateuch resembled Ibsen's underappreciated and as yet unperformed play cycle in many ways, Shaw must have been animated with the hope inspired by the performance of the Ring in its entirety at



Bayreuth, even though Shaw initially never expected *Methuselah* to be performed in his lifetime. In a letter to Siegfried Trebitsch in 1920, Shaw writes, "As you say, *Back to Methuselah* is my Ring; but [. . .] As to translating them, wait until you read them: you are not likely to be troubled by an application from Bayreuth; and the Burg will hardly devote five nights to them. . . . [ellipsis Shaw's]."<sup>15</sup> However, as Shaw later describes in the Preface, the same Life Force that inspired him to write the colossal play cycle inspired Lawrence Langner to produce it in its entirety at New York's Guild Theater in 1922, and Shaw was right in characterizing his play cycle as anything but "a commercial job." That first Broadway production lost the Theater Guild \$20,000, but it created a theatrical sensation, and when the play finally premiered in London, it actually turned a small profit (£20). More important, however, the full performance of Shaw's immense play cycle vindicated Shaw's belief that the kind of serious theater that once graced the Festival of Dionysus and the medieval Corpus Christi festivals could be reestablished in modern times. The impulse in the playwrights would call forth the theaters to produce them and attract the pilgrims to see them.

Writing exultantly after his victory in 1922, when he was at work on *Saint Joan*, Shaw declared this causal relationship to be proven:

Wagner, after composing operas for the old opera-houses, composed the Ring for a theatre that did not exist, and thereby forced it into existence. But this Bayreuth theatre would be of no use to me for my chronicle play, which I am writing for a theatre that does not yet exist in New York, but which the Theatre Guild will have to design and build for the purpose. Whether my play will have the compelling force of the Ring I do not know, but at least if my New York congregation will not provide the Guild with funds for the theatre, the play shall be there to tantalize them.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, this "chronicle play" proved even more successful than his *Pentateuch*. It earned him his Nobel Prize, and by 1929 Shaw's own English Bayreuth, the Shaw festival at Malvern, was established to provide the pilgrimlike experience he had tried to secure for Ibsen and Shakespeare.

## Contemporary Cycle Plays in the Shavian Line

But what of the "hundred apter and more elegant parables by younger hands" that Shaw hoped would follow him? The play cycle format has been tried by many modern and contemporary playwrights, some famous and

significant, some less so. Among the most impressive recent examples of this form include Tom Stoppard's three-play cycle about the failed Decembrist movement, *The Coast of Utopia*, which Clive Barnes called "the most ambitious British drama since Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methusalem*."<sup>17</sup> Another impressive recent play cycle is David Edgar's two-play cycle about American politics, *Continental Divide*. The 1992 and 1993 Pulitzer Prizes for drama recognized two other recent examples of the play cycle form, Robert Schenkkan's nine-play *Kentucky Cycle*, and Tony Kushner's two-part *Angels in America*, which has also been adapted for the screen in an award-winning TV miniseries, and an operatic version was recently staged in Paris.<sup>18</sup> Although all these works exhibit certain important similarities to Shaw's cycle plays, I believe Kushner is the playwright most clearly taking up the role of artist-prophet working in a Shavian vein, adapting the ancient and medieval cycle play to fit contemporary theatrical conventions and contemporary American concerns. Kushner's play cycle, *Angels in America*, and some of his more recent works, *Slavs!* and *Homebody/Kabul*, show Shaw's influence in purpose, form, and theme.

## Kushner, the Artist-Prophet

Kushner, like Shaw before him, is not known as a conventionally religious person. In fact, his work would offend many religious people in its decidedly unconventional use of religious imagery and explicit sexuality, particularly gay sexuality. However, in commentary on his own work, Kushner, again like Shaw, states that he creates art not merely to entertain but to articulate the moral failings of society as he sees them and to point the way toward a better world, which would qualify Kushner for the role of Shaw's "artist-prophet."<sup>19</sup>

This aspiration can be detected in Kushner's preface to an anthology of his work called *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*. Although he begins with a disclaimer, "I'm a playwright, not an essayist or a poet or a preacher," he clearly has a preacher's purpose to publicly expose evil where he sees it: "As Judaism teaches, you have to be worried about everything evil, all at once, all the time. That's what God expects of you."<sup>20</sup> Instead of delivering his sermons from behind a podium, however, as Shaw often did, particularly in his younger days, Kushner admits, "I prefer to pontificate from behind my characters and the fictions through which they romp and argue. But it's probably a healthy thing, revealing the man behind the curtain." Then he acknowledges, "I believe that the playwright should be a kind of public intellectual,

even if only a crackpot public intellectual: someone who asks her or his thoughts to get up before crowds, on platforms, and entertain, challenge, instruct, annoy, provoke, appall.”<sup>21</sup> In his essay “American Things,” Kushner explains further that in his youth, his political ideas were inextricably linked to his religious training:

One of the paths down which my political instruction came was our family Seder. Passover, too, is a celebration of Freedom in sultry, intoxicating heat. [. . .] Our family read from Haggadahs written by a New Deal Reform rabbinate which was unafraid to draw connections between Pharaonic and modern capitalist exploitations; between the exodus of Jews from Goshen and the journey towards civil rights for African-Americans; unafraid to make of the yearning which Jews have repeated for thousands of years a democratic dream of freedom for all peoples. It was impressed upon us, as we sang “America the Beautiful” at the Seder’s conclusion, that the dream of millennia was due to find its ultimate realization not in Jerusalem but in this country.<sup>22</sup>

Considering this belief, it is appropriate that Part I of *Angels in America*, *Millennium Approaches*, begins with a rabbi delivering a funeral oration for a character named Sarah Ironson, whom he deems “not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania” (10).

This idea that America offers the best hope for finding a safe haven and establishing a utopia—or, to use biblical imagery, the Millennial kingdom of God on earth—is in keeping with the mythology of the American immigrant’s dream. In Kushner’s play cycle, different visions of an American utopia are called up by various historical and contemporary groups, in addition to the European Jews fleeing pogroms: the Mayflower Pilgrims and the early Mormons, each seeking to establish their version of God’s shining city, and modern Reagan Republicans hoping to reestablish America’s “sacred place in the world” (26). Politics, religion, and the American dream of utopia are also explicitly linked in the final scene of the play cycle, which shows Prior Walter sitting at the fountain of Bethesda in New York, musing about the religious symbolism of the fountain and its relationship to the Millennium—“not the year two thousand,” he explains, “but the Capital M Millennium” when God’s kingdom will come on earth and “anyone who [is] suffering in the body or the spirit [. . .] would be healed, washed clean of pain.”<sup>23</sup> As some of the other principal characters discuss hopeful developments in world politics—the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians—Prior delivers a sort of Shakespearean aside to the audience

about his hopes for healing and acquiring "more life." His final words contain a blessing for the audience and a call to action: "The Great Work Begins" (148).

Throughout the play, intertwined with the personal struggles of the characters, there is much discussion of America's political sins, past and present. The worst of these sins, from the authorial standpoint, are incarnated in Roy Cohn. Cohn, while fighting a losing battle with AIDS (which he refuses to acknowledge is AIDS, just as he refuses to define himself as a homosexual), continues to dwell on past glories of the vicious McCarthy era and to enlist recruits for the Reagan project while fighting with the ghost of his old nemesis, Ethel Rosenberg. But the politics are always personal, and the personal struggles among the characters—friends, enemies, spouses, lovers, and ex-lovers—are also reflections of political and religious divisions that yield personal visions of utopia balanced by fearful visions of apocalypse.

The two characters who experience the most elaborate visions are Harper, the young Mormon woman from Utah transplanted to New York, who retreats into a valium-induced wonderland to escape the fear that her husband does not love her and might be homosexual, and Prior Walter, whose lover abandons him when he begins to die of AIDS. While Harper envisions both a cool, clean, Antarctic haven and a frighteningly disintegrating ozone shield, a torn heavens, Prior is assailed by visions of an angel who calls him to be a prophet of the coming Millennium. Like an epic hero, Prior travels to both heaven and hell to find answers to his own and the universe's imminent peril.

## A Gay Fantasia in the Shavian Manner on American Themes

It might be hard to see a Shavian influence in these very American, very contemporary references, but Kushner's techniques and themes in *Angels* are similar to Shaw's in both *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*. The first hint to a Shavian influence, of course, is in the play cycle's subtitle: "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," which echoes Shaw's subtitle to *Heartbreak House*, "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes." Just as Shaw was acknowledging a Checkhovian influence on his *Heartbreak House*, Kushner seems to be tipping his hat to both the Russian and the Irishman.<sup>24</sup> The Shavian influence on the play cycle's form and imagery is unmistakable and significant.

One important similarity is that like Shaw, Kushner appropriates and reinterprets biblical imagery to show both a connection and a disconnection with traditional religious values. Like Shaw, Kushner reinterprets Genesis, particularly the Creation and the Fall, bringing in visions of the Apocalypse, as Shaw does at the end of his Pentateuch. More significant for Kushner's play are the stories of Lazarus and of Jacob, particularly Jacob's wrestling with the Angel. However, like Shaw, Kushner returns often to visions of a fiery Apocalypse, which for Shaw were first inspired by the devastation of the Great War and which for Kushner reflect contemporary fears of a nuclear holocaust. Another significant, and related, biblical theme for both writers is the problem of Cain—the destructive, murderous impulse in humanity. Kushner introduces the Cain theme in a brief reference in the *Angels* cycle: after a physical fight with Joe, a self-castigating Louis refers to the resulting wound on his forehead as the “mark of Cain.” However, the motif becomes more important in his later works, the *Angels* offshoot, *Slavs!*, and *Homebody/Kabul*, and takes on a very Shavian cast. We can see the similarity in the two writers' use of these images in the following pair of quotes. First, this from Kushner, from the afterword to *Homebody/Kabul*: “In the preface to his verse drama, *Cain*, Byron tells us: ‘The world was destroyed several times before the creation of man.’ That makes a certain sort of sense to me, the history of revolution and modern evolutionary theory lend credence to Byron's breathtaking assertion, but how frightening! Are cataclysm and catastrophe the birth spasms of the future, is the mass grave some sort of cradle, does the future always arrive borne on a torrent of blood?”<sup>25</sup> Now compare this with these lines spoken by Shaw's Lillith in the final scene of his Pentateuch:

Is this enough; or shall I labor again? Shall I bring forth something that shall sweep them away and make an end of them [. . .]? [. . .] I had patience with them for many ages: they tried me very sorely. They did terrible things: they embraced death, and said that eternal life was a fable. I stood amazed at the malice and destructiveness of the things I had made: [. . .] cruelty and hypocrisy became so hideous that the face of the earth was pitted with the graves of little children among which living skeletons crawled in search of horrible food. The pangs of another birth were already upon me when one man repented and lived three hundred years; and I waited to see what would come of that. And so much came of it that the horrors of that time seem now but an evil dream. (244–45)

While a great many modern writers have given us pre-visions of a nuclear holocaust, few have linked fiery global destruction with the rebirth of humanity and the triumph of hope, as do Shaw and Kushner in their cycle plays.<sup>26</sup> I quote here only two passages, but Shaw also depicts a world

destroyed and created in a cyclical pattern (as in the Byron image that Kushner quotes) in his miniature play cycle, *Farfetched Fables*, written in 1949–50, very near the end of his long life, and Kushner uses similar imagery not only in *Angels* but also in *Slavs!* and *Homebody/Kabul*, which many critics have called “eerily prescient” in its pre-9/11 depiction of a British family coming to grief in a ravaged, Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

In the afterword to *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner says:

I was moved by the fact that the city of Kabul was Cain's resting place. In the play I suggest that he was, perhaps, murdered there. [. . .] God warned the human race to leave the murderer unharmed. He who killed Cain would be punished sevenfold. Did Cain die violently in Kabul? Is the city in some sense cursed? What is the genesis of evil, how far back does one have to go to find it? Isn't the abandonment of the futile and fatal search for lost causes one place at which a distinction can begin to be made between justice and revenge? (149–50)

Kushner continues this meditation with another twist on the legend, that Cain founded the city:

This legend has a resonance with the passage in the Holy Scriptures in which we are told that Cain's sons, Jabal, Jubal and Tubalcain, were the human race's first musicians and metalsmiths. There is attached to this destroyer, this hunter, this solitary, desperate, cursed figure of ultimate barrenness, some potential for that renewal of life which is human creativity. Cain is the founder of a city as well as a fratricide, the father of the arts as well as the first person to usurp God's power of determining mortality, the first person to usurp the role of the angel of death. (150)

This is consistent with Shaw's depiction of this ambiguous figure in *Back to Methuselah*. However, although Shaw's Cain has some vitality and charisma, Shaw emphasizes Cain's more dangerous and contemptible qualities: he is vain, lazy, and destructive, a wife-batterer, the first to conceive of war, slavery, and cannibalism. Unlike Kushner, Shaw does not specifically credit Cain for fathering the biblical inventors of the arts. In the second act of *In the Beginning*, Eve says that when she is weary to death of the “diggers” and “fighters” who continue in the professions of Adam and Cain, respectively, she derives hope from other sons and grandsons: those who are founding the arts and sciences—storytelling, music, sculpture, painting, mathematics, and astronomy. She specifically mentions Tubal as the inventor of the wheel,

removing the second half of his name, "Cain," which would link him to his father. She also praises Enoch, an early prophet, although she does not mention that he is Cain's first son. Her final comment on her firstborn is this: "Through him and his like, death is gaining on life. Already most of our grandchildren die before they have sense enough to know how to live" (31).

Shaw's indictment of Cain "and his like" is reinforced later in the cycle in the figure of Cain Adamson Charles Napoleon, Emperor of Turania, whose appearance and career suggest the original Napoleon, although he rules in a far future age when the capital of the British Empire has moved to, ironically enough, Baghdad. The ghost of the original Cain reappears in the final scene of the play only to acknowledge that "[t]here is no place for me on earth any longer" because although he "invented killing and conquest and mastery and the winnowing out of the weak by the strong [. . .] now the strong have slain one another; the weak live for ever; and victory is deadlier than defeat" (243). Of course, this is wishful thinking on Shaw's part, but clearly he and Kushner evoke the image of Cain both to challenge the glamorization of warfare and to offer hope that out of death and destruction can spring life and creativity.

## Tanner in Hell, Prior in Heaven

Another similarity between the religious imagery of Kushner's and Shaw's cycle plays involves visions of heaven and hell. Like *Man and Superman*, Kushner's play involves a dream sequence that gives the character a vision of the afterlife, although, unlike Tanner, Kushner's Prior Walter spends more time in heaven and sees only a glimpse of hell, where the Mephistophelean Roy Cohn is offering to defend God from a charge of abandonment for His having left both heaven and earth, to the dismay of the angels. (Unfortunately, this glimpse of hell was cut from the filmed version.) Just as Shaw uses Jack Tanner's dream sequence to deplore the hypocrisies of British middle-class values, expose the peril of what we now call the military-industrial complex, and introduce his gospel of the Life Force, Kushner uses his heaven and hell sequence to remind us of certain contemporary perils (his description of the Chernobyl disaster, also cut from the filmed version, is particularly vivid), while also expressing a stubborn, stalwart hope in humanity's will to survive.

Kushner's heaven scene also contains an echo of Shaw's version of the Fall. Just as in Shaw's *In the Beginning* the conflict is between Adam's fear of change and Eve's will to conceive and preserve life, in Kushner's heaven scene the conflict is between the leaderless angels' wish to stop change

from happening, in order to keep humans from moving, and Prior's insistence that humans must strive and will and seek more life, no matter how awful the human experience can be. Another pair of passages, first from Shaw, then from Kushner, shows the similarity. In the postscript, written in 1944, to *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw writes this about the conflict between the desire for stability and the need to change:

All this faces us with the dilemma that civilization means stabilization; and creative evolution means change. As the two must operate together we must carefully define their spheres, and co-ordinate them instead of quarrelling and persecuting as we do at present. We must not stay as we are, doing always what was done last time, or we shall stick in the mud. Yet neither must we undertake a new world as catastrophic Utopians, and wreck our civilization in our hurry to mend it. (259)

Kushner outlines the same conflict and delivers a similar warning (using imagery from Shaw's Eden story) in the beginning of the second play of his cycle, individually entitled *Perestroika*. This title helps prepare us for the first character who speaks, Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelasarianov, the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik. As a voice announces in the beginning of the play, the Bolshevik speaks in the Kremlin, January 1986. From behind a podium, he says, "The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us? The Great Question before us is: Can we Change? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come" (13). But then later in this speech, the ancient Bolshevik adds a warning: "If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. Have you, my little serpents, a new skin?" (14).<sup>27</sup> This character was cut from the filmed version of the play (although he is given a larger role in Kushner's later play, *Slavs!*), but his message about the danger of precipitous change is repeated by the angel who commands Prior Walter to spread the gospel of stasis.

This angelic visitation is related by Prior later as if it were just a weird dream, but the scene is also acted out as he tells it to his friend Belize.<sup>28</sup> Between the formal, poetic/archaic utterances of the angel and the more prosaic speech of Prior, we learn that the universe was set into a dangerous forward motion when humans were created to compensate for the dullness of the angels, who lacked imagination and thus could not innovate or surprise. While angels had been created as hermaphrodites, the angel explains, "Seeking something New [. . .] God split the World in Two [. . .] And made *YOU*: Human Beings: Uni-Genitaled:



Female. Male.” In this, too, there is an echo of Shaw’s version of Genesis, although it is Lillith, not God, who splits herself in two to create Adam and Eve. Prior explains further that in creating people, “God apparently set in motion a potential in the design for change, for random event, for movement forward” (49). But according to Kushner’s angel, the trouble began when God decided to emulate his new creation: “Bored with His Angels, Bewitched by Humanity, In Mortifying Imitation of You, his least creation, He would sail off on Voyages, no knowing where,” until finally, on the day of the Great San Francisco Earthquake, God left and did not return (50–51). So the angels decide that to bring God back, they must urge humanity to cease moving: “Forsake the Open Road: Neither Mix Nor Inter marry: Let Deep Roots Grow: If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress: Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle Logic: You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy, You do not Advance, You only Trample. Poor Blind Children, abandoned on the Earth, Groping terrified, misguided, over Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain: HOBBLE YOURSELVES!” (52). But of course, Prior refuses. He believes, like Shaw, that in humanity’s desire to strive forward toward “more life” lies not only our only hope of survival but our very reason for living.

Although the exchanges between Prior and the angel, both in this early scene and in their last confrontation in heaven, contain the clearest statement of the conflict, it reappears in several forms throughout the cycle. The fearful characters resist change, settling for a stifling stagnation, while the braver characters accept the sometimes excruciating changes life forces on them, winning revelation and release through their struggle. In Shaw’s *Pentateuch*, Adam and his kind represent the conservatives who fear change, whereas Lillith and Eve represent those who accept change to conceive and foster more life. In Kushner’s cycle, the distinction is not so stark, as some characters initially fear change but eventually embrace it, wrenching though it is to them. The conflict is expressed in love relationships, especially between the anguished, visionary Harper and her miserably closeted husband, Joe; it appears in the ideological conflicts between conservatives and liberals in America, and between rigid dictums of traditional fundamentalist religions and the fluidity of modern secular values. However, in Kushner’s plays—not only the play cycle but also the offshoot from it, *Slavs!*—there is a tentative hopefulness amid the terrible anguish and fear of modern times that seems in keeping with the Shavian stance. One character in *Farfetched Fables* asserts this defiant optimism by finding her purpose and placing her faith in human aspiration: “The pursuit of knowledge and power will never end.”<sup>29</sup>

Of course, one significant difference between Kushner and Shaw is that Shaw had an organizing political principle, socialism, that he believed

would solve the most significant problems of modern times. His faith in it might have been shaken in the wake of Stalin's fall, but he never entirely abandoned that faith, even if he did look beyond mere political solutions toward the spiritual dimension in his cycle plays. In contrast, Kushner, like the character of the ancient Bolshevik in his play cycle and in *Slavs!*, does not seem to have a specific solution to the social and political problems that his plays expose.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, we can see some optimism in his conclusion to *Angels in America*, particularly in Prior Walter's continuing call for "more life!" However, by the time Kushner finished *Slavs!*, this optimism is replaced by a sort of dour perplexity. The last scene is set in heaven, where we see a little girl who died of environmental poisoning in her native Russia playing cards with the ancient Bolshevik and a more recently deceased Russian politician, a progressive named Upgobkin. Upgobkin tells her of a sad young Lenin, whose brother had just been executed by the czar's secret police for sedition:

[Great Lenin] decided to read his brother's favorite book: a novel, by Chernyshevsky, the title and contents of which asked the immortal question; which Lenin asked and in asking stood the world on its head; the question which challenges us to both contemplation and, if we love the world, to action; the question which implies: Something is terribly wrong with the world, and avers: Human beings can change it; the question asked by the living and, apparently, by the fretful dead as well: "What is to be done?"<sup>31</sup>

"What is to be done?" repeats the little girl, and then "What is to be done?" repeats the ancient Bolshevik. No one answers, and the play ends on that quizzical note, as if dropping the weighty question in the lap of the audience. However, in the afterword to *Perestroika*, written in 1993, Kushner sounds a more optimistic, more Shavian note when he says:

The world howls without; it is at this moment a very terrible world [. . .] [Yet] I have been blessed with remarkable friends, colleagues, comrades, collaborators: Together we organize the world for ourselves, or a least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery; and we help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace, and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected [. . .] From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. And also plays. (158)

This might not have the sort of ringing certainty that the world likes to hear from our prophets, but it echoes the defiant hopefulness of one of

Shaw's most characteristic pronouncements: "Defeatism is the wretchedest of policies."<sup>32</sup>

## Staging Contemporary Play Cycles: A Return to the Festivals of Dionysus?

To end where we began, with Shaw's idea that the modern cycle play should be revived along with a theater festival staging that would provide the proper setting to attract "pilgrims" and rededicate the theater to the role it served in ancient Athens: Does this seem at all plausible? The evidence suggests that just such a revival is beginning, although such festivals will probably necessarily be rare and are likely to be supplemented by modern technology such as film and television miniseries versions.

*Angels in America* has recently shown the viability of adapting a play cycle to the small screen, thereby assuring a wider audience than the play would be able to attract in a live production. Although this inevitably changes the nature of the viewing experience, removing the sense of communal participation and weakening the impact of the churchlike seriousness that Shaw was aiming for in his advocacy of theater festivals, a quality production of a miniseries can still foster a sort of communal self-examination, as America saw with the production of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1977.<sup>33</sup> It is not surprising that some of the more successful of the contemporary cycle-playwrights have tried their hand at adapting longer literary works for film or miniseries treatment. Tom Stoppard, fresh from a successful staging of his *Coast of Utopia* cycle, has been hired to write the film adaptation of Phillip Pullman's young-adult novel trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, which has been described as *Paradise Lost* for adolescents. Stoppard's work will build upon playwright Nicholas Wright's stage adaptation of the novels, produced last January in London by the National Theater as a "lavishly ambitious, sold-out, \$1.4 million, two-part, six-hour" production.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Robert Schenkann wrote miniseries adaptations of his own *Kentucky Cycle* and of Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus*, and he adapted Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* for the big screen. Although the latter two projects both received critical praise, unfortunately the *Kentucky Cycle* miniseries, which was scheduled to be filmed in 1996 with Kevin Costner as director, was shelved when Costner decided to devote his time to another film, *The Postman*, yet another example of the questionable priorities of Hollywood.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the popularity of contemporary play cycles might be facilitated by the availability not only of film adaptations but also of newer technology such as DVD format and the marketing

innovation of Netflix, which can bring "art house" cinema formerly available only at film festivals to people living in remote regions, extensions of what Shaw hailed as a boon of the film industry when it was still in its infancy.<sup>36</sup>

More in keeping with Shaw's hopes, however, are the contemporary theater festival productions, which suggests that the ancient form of theater might yet be revived, perhaps encouraging other contemporary writers to attempt ambitious cycle works. Meanwhile, festivals persist in staging the works of Shakespeare, Shaw, Wagner, the medieval mystery plays, and the Greek cycle plays, and sometimes the grander of these works even find their way to conventional venues such as Broadway.<sup>37</sup> But there have also been other ambitious productions of the newer play cycles in theater festival format that resemble Barry Jackson's gamble on Shaw's *Methuselah* cycle. One recent example is the production of British playwright John Barton's *Tantalus: A Modern Myth for a New Millennium*, a ten-play cycle about the Trojan War and its aftermath. This mammoth work was first produced by the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, in association with England's Royal Shakespeare Company and directed by Sir Peter Hall and Edward Hall. The Denver production was supported by the University of Colorado at Boulder. The Classics Department hosted a symposium of scholars and subsidized student attendance at the play, which at \$250 per ticket would otherwise have been prohibitively expensive.<sup>38</sup> Of course, this academic setting is not quite what Shaw had in mind for his modern Bayreuth-like festivals, as it might seem to weaken the reverential aspect of the theater experience by over-intellectualizing it, but the *Tantalus* plays were apparently accessible to—and popular with—the nonacademic audiences as well. Improbably enough (but again following the pattern set by the first *Methuselah* production), after its American debut, Barton's play cycle crossed the Atlantic, where it garnered further popular success and critical praise. Despite its unwieldy size, immense expenses, and intensely serious subject matter—it is the story of a ruinous war, after all—the *Tantalus* cycle was staged in five sites in London in 2001, again to great critical acclaim and popular success.<sup>39</sup> After the terrible disaster of 9/11, perhaps audiences were in exactly the right mood for it, just as they were to receive Kushner's most recent work, *Homebody/Kabul* when it opened in New York just months after the terrorist attacks.

Given the magnitude of such festivals, it seems inevitable that this type of theater will remain rare, as the artist-prophets who produce the grand works for them will always be rare, even more so than the quixotic producers of such expensive spectacles. But considering our civilization's continuing need for the unique experience that such theater provides—a chance for our civilization to reexamine its history and purpose in light of its gravest flaws and its highest ideals—these contemporary play cycles will

help us remember what theater at its best can offer, just as Shaw had hoped, just as his works do.

## Notes

1. More obvious choices might have included *Saint Joan*, for which he won the Nobel Prize, or *Pygmalion*, which is probably the most famous.

2. Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiologic Pentateuch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 252. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

3. Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), p. 25.

4. *Ibid.*, p. lxx.

5. *Ibid.*, p. lxxiv.

6. Others could be cited here, but a representative sample includes Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean* (1873); Hardy's *Dynasts: An Epic-drama of the War with Napoleon*, in three parts, nineteen acts, and 130 scenes (1903–8); Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), plus a projected eleven-play cycle, *A Tale of the Possessors, Self-Dispossessed*, of which only two were completed: *A Touch of the Poet* and *More Stately Mansions*; Thornton Wilder's *The Seven Deadly Sins* (begun 1957, fully published 1997) and *The Seven Ages of Man* (unfinished, begun 1960, fully published 1997).

7. J. Percy Smith, *The Unrepentant Pilgrim: A Study of the Development of Bernard Shaw* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 200.

8. Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism: Now Completed to the Death of Ibsen* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 185–86. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

9. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1898–1910*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), p. 323.

10. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1911–1925*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), p. 498.

11. *Ibid.*, 602.

12. *Ibid.*, 603.

13. Quoted in Henrik Ibsen, *The League of Youth/ Emperor and Galilean*, ed. James Walter McFarlane and Graham Orton (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 10.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Collected Letters, 1911–1925*, p. 688.

16. Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Theater*, ed. E. J. West (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958), p. 183.

17. "Utopia Should Cross the Pond," *New York Post*, 11 August 2002, p. 48.

18. A *Guardian* review of the opera performance by Tim Ashley, dated 26 November 2004, called the work by Peter Eotvos "a disappointment."

19. Kushner seems to earn the title of "prophet" in a more traditional sense when he has Prior say, as he sits in a hospital in Manhattan nearly a decade before 9/11, "I feel like something terrifying is on its way, you know, like a missile from outer space, and it's plummeting down towards the earth, and I'm ground zero." *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992, 1993), p. 98.

20. Tony Kushner, *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness: Essays, a*

*Play, Two Poems and a Prayer* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), p. ix.

21. *Ibid.*, p. ix. This statement also shows the influence on Kushner's thinking of Melville, whom he acknowledges as a literary forebear. The line echoes from a sermon in the beginning of *Moby Dick*: "Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appall!" (New York: Tor, 1996), p. 50.

22. Tony Kushner, "American Things," in *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, pp. 4–5.

23. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992, 1994), p. 147.

24. Another interesting explanation of the "fantasia" label is offered by Alisa Solomon in "Wrestling with *Angels*: A Jewish Fantasia," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 118. Solomon notes that Kushner, son of a conductor, would have known that in fantasias "the composer's imagination takes precedence over conventional styles and forms, often allowing for a number of themes to develop contrapuntally."

25. Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), p. 150. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

26. For a lengthier discussion of this aspect of Kushner's work, see Stanton B. Garner Jr.'s "Angels in America: The Millennium and Postmodern Memory," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on "Angels in America,"* pp. 173–84.

27. The images of a snake shedding its skin, or of the world cracking open like an egg hatching, are other leitmotifs in Kushner's cycle, and he seems to be working with imagery Shaw uses in his Eden myth, for the first creation of humans and in the last play of the Pentateuch, *As Far as Thought Can Reach*, to depict the creation of a later race of humans.

28. The first appearance of the angel at the end of the first half of the cycle might have been inspired by Shaw's similar stunt in *Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, but in Kushner's play the angel is spectacular, whereas in Shaw's the angel deliberately undercuts his own impressiveness, acknowledging that he is not perfectly designed for flight. Another difference is that in Shaw's play, the angel scene adapts the medieval mystery plays that depict Judgment Day, whereas Kushner's angel's arrival is more of an Annunciation.

29. Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Their Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1962), 6:511.

30. This is considered a serious ideological flaw in Kushner's cycle by one critic, who acknowledges the Brechtian influence on Kushner's work but decries the "absence of programmatic" in *Angels*, the substitution of "a kind of liberal pluralism tinged with despair." Janelle Reinelt, "Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on "Angels in America,"* p. 243.

31. *Slavs!* is printed in *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, p. 185.

32. Bernard Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1949), p. 107.

33. According to an article on the Museum of Broadcast Communications Web site:

During the last week of January 1977 the first *Roots* miniseries was aired by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). Its phenomenal success surprised everyone, including [Alex] Haley and the network executives who had 'dumped' the program into one week, fearing the subject matter would not attract an audience. Instead *Roots* garnered one of the largest audiences for dramatic television in the U.S. history of the medium, averaging a 44.9 rating and a 66 share.

The success of *Roots* went far beyond attracting a large audience, however. The miniseries and Alex Haley, became a *cause célèbre*. In a cover story, *Time* magazine reported that restaurant and shop owners saw profits decline when the series was on the air. The report noted that bartenders were able to keep customers only by turning the channel selector away from basketball and hockey and tuning instead to

those stations carrying *Roots*. Parents named their newborn after characters in the series, especially the lead character, Kunta Kinte.

The airing of *Roots* raised issues about the effects of television.

For further discussion, see

<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/H/htmlH/haleyalex/haleyalex.htm>.

34. Sarah Lyall, "Staging the Next Fantasy Blockbuster," *New York Times*, 25 January 2004, Arts & Leisure section, pp. 1–5.

35. Eric Grode, "Stage to Screen: Pulitzer's Film Effect and *The Guys*," 14 April 2002 Playbill Web site: online <http://www.playbill.com/features/article/76144.html>.

36. For more discussion of Shaw's hopes for the film industry, see Shaw's essay "What the Films May Do to the Drama," *Bernard Shaw on Cinema*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), pp. 13–20.

37. For example, theater critic Ron Rosenbaum, among others, praised the 2003 production of both *Henry IV* plays as a single three-hour, 45-minute performance at Lincoln Center in New York. "Corrupt Buffoon or Joyous Inspiration?" *New York Times*, 9 November 2003, Arts & Leisure section, pp. 1, 6, 8.

38. For further details on the symposium, see <http://www.colorado.edu/Classics/classic-news/Dec2000/>.

39. For more information about the English production sites and dates, plus some reviews, see the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Tantalus* page, at <http://members.aol.com/xtralinks/gh/tantalus.htm>.