

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

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Major Barbara

By George Bernard Shaw

The World of the Play

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Chris Coleman on Major Barbara

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Keep Calm and Quarrel On: Major Barbara's Great Debaters

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The Costumes of Major Barbara

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Cast and Creative Team

[-Click Here-](#)

Shaw And Film

[-Click Here-](#)

Seven Brilliant Quotes

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Plot Summary

When her daughters Sarah and Barbara are both engaged to be married, Lady Britomart decides to ask her estranged industrialist husband, Andrew Undershaft, for support. Barbara, a Major in the Salvation Army, agrees to let her father visit her mission in the East End of London. In exchange, she promises to visit his munitions factory. The clash between Barbara's philanthropic idealism and her father's hard-headed capitalism are at the heart of Shaw's witty and timely appraisal of capitalism, war, religion and politics.

Andrew Undershaft, a millionaire armaments manufacturer, loves money and despises poverty. His estranged daughter Barbara, on the other hand, shows her love for the poor by throwing her energies into her work as a Major in the Salvation Army, and sees her father as another soul to be saved. But when the Army needs funds to keep going, it is Undershaft who saves the day with a large cheque forcing Barbara to examine her moral assumptions. Are they right to accept money that has been obtained by Death and Destruction? Full of lively comedy and sparkling debate, Major Barbara is one of Shaw's most forward-looking plays, brilliantly testing the tensions between religion, wealth and power, benevolence and equality, and metaphors and realities of war.

How do you lift up a society? Shaw's deliciously witty and timely classic tackles this question with unexpected results. Barbara has dedicated her life to serving the poor and clashes with her father who amassed his fortune selling weapons for war. As Shaw explores notions of right versus wrong, left versus right, and everything in between, you'll find yourself laughing while questioning your own beliefs. "One of Shaw's brightest, slyest, most provocatively outrageous and most timeless comedies."

-New York Post



THE ARMORY

Theater Etiquette

Please share the following points with your group of students. Encourage the students to practice these points throughout the workshop. Going to see a play is very different from going to the movies. During live theatre, the audience is as important a part of the experience as the actors.

- **Live response is good!** If you're telling a story to a friend, and they really respond or listen, it makes you want to tell the story better—to keep telling the story. So, the better that an audience listens, laughs and responds, the more the actors want to tell the story. In this way, the audience (as well as the actors) can make a performance great.
- **The actors can hear you talking.** If an audience member is not paying attention, the actors know it. Have you ever had a conversation with someone and felt that they'd rather be someplace else? This is the EXACT feeling actors get when people in the audience are talking

- **The actors can see you.** Even though actors are pretending to be other characters, it is their job to “check in” with the audience in order to tell the story better. This is another way in which theatre greatly differs from the movies. Film actors can do a take over and over to try to get it right. Theatre actors have one chance with an audience and want to make sure they are communicating clearly. Imagine trying to tell a group of fellow students something only to see them slouching, pretending to be bored, or sitting with their eyes closed in attempt to seem disinterested and “too cool” for what you had to say. Think about it...

- **Cell phones, beepers, candy wrappers, loud gum smacking.** Please turn off all cell phones and do not eat or chew gum inside the theater. These things disturb the people around you as well as the actors. As much as you might be tempted to text a friend how cool the play you're watching is, please wait until after it is over to send any texts.

Thank you to Montana Shakespeare in the Parks for these excellent etiquette suggestions.

Education Programs: Stage Door

Portland Center Stage's Stage Door Program seeks to provide all young people with opportunities to experience and directly participate in the art of high-quality, professional theater in a context that supports their education. The following pages contain activities to help students explore themes found in our production of Major Barbara. We encourage you to choose the most appropriate activities for your group and adapt as needed.

GOALS:

- To encourage personal connections between the students and the major themes of the play.
- To excite students about the story and introduce the theatrical elements of the production.
- To engage students using the actors' tools (body, voice, imagination).

KEY CONCEPTS:

- Historical Context
- The Entire Value of the Dollar
- Classist Fashion Defines Behavior
- Brevity in Wit

Discussion:

Brief History of the Era and The Salvation Army

The goals of this discussion are to establish the norms of society in the era of the play, and the role of The Salvation Army throughout its history



Activity #1:

I'll Take That Dollar

Explore the topics of value beyond the monetary, and defend the utility of well-intentioned donations. Each individual will create their own standards by which they would turn down financial gain.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Standing in a circle, the group will face each other, hands out of pockets, arms unfolded.
- One by one, each person will suggest an occupation for themselves – a general field is necessary, even if an exact position cannot be named e.g. “Doctor” vs “Podiatrist.”
- Setting up a circle of commerce, the workshop leader will hold out a real dollar bill, and ask, “Who wants this dollar?”
- Initially, responses should be valued against what they’re agreeing to by accepting the dollar – many will simply clamor for the cash, without considering the consequences.
- The provisions on accepting the money can vary. Send it through a third party for a processing fee, loop in a big bank entity who has to approve the dollar transfer first (for a fee). Tax the dollar. Reinvest the dollar by purchasing the cheapest materials/labor – or the most expensive.
- The intention is to pass the dollar from profession to profession, and eventually highlight the importance of the money’s source as well as its proposed consequences.
- Finally, put \$1.00 USD into historic perspective, and raise the value to modern equivalency, appx. \$150.00 USD (2018). How does this affect their standards?

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

Describe the best imaginable source from which to receive a donation. The play assuages a charity lunch as just a “loan” to protect a man’s pride. Describe a time from your life when you’ve seen someone choose integrity over profit.

Right: The cast of Major Barbara. Photo by Kate Szrom.

Activity #2:

Threads of Importance

This activity focusses on physicality as a projection of status, and how period costuming can affect posture and limit ranges of motion.

HOW IT WORKS:

- This activity requires string – craft or kitchen string is best.
- Divide the group in thirds.
- Members of group #1 will tie on a headband of string – this is to draw the actor’s focus to an imagined hat or wig worn during the time period.
- Members of group #2 will tie a string around their mid-sections – to draw the actor’s attention to high-waisted period fashion for men or women.
- Members of group #3 will tie a string around their shoulders/upper-arms – to draw the actor’s attention to restrictive top-coats and/or gowns.
- Have the participants mill/seed throughout the space, now feeling how these imagined costumes affect their breath, movement, and attention.
- Call out chores to mime, which ask them to reach or stretch – note which string group is affected most.
- Finally, pick two or three students to where all three of the string costume pieces and note how they suddenly move more regally throughout the group.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

Describe the difference in the tension in the air when you interacted with someone from a different string/class. Where in modern day do we see class reflected through movement? Which types of activities did your string/costume best suit you for?



Activity #3:

7 Words

This activity builds on the status/sting activity, now in scene form. Brevity being the best of wit, word choice adds to the hierarchy of each scene.

HOW IT WORKS:

- This activity works best, two-people at a time
- Utilizing only seven words per line of dialogue, coach two differing string/status actors through a scene.
- Note how the focus shifts from the costume string, to the dialogue.
- Note how word choice can be affected by status difference in scenes.
- If an actor speaks more than seven words, pause the scene and swap in a new actor, this allows for variation and for many to participate.

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

Were more words needed to express what you wanted in the scene? Did you feel compelled to use all seven words, even when fewer may have sufficed? Did you feel your character was a step up or down in status from your non-character self?

