

Gallivanting in Canada: Fall Break at the Shaw Festival

In October 2019, I spent my fall reading days in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, a cute little town hugging Lake Ontario with one main attraction: the Shaw Festival. Named after playwright Bernard Shaw, the Shaw Festival produces eclectic seasons of great breadth and with impressive quality. The Shaw's cast and crew members are very similar to triathlon athletes, juggling multiple shows in one season and often performing two plays a day. Especially as a performer myself, I was drawn to the Shaw's ambition and chose its 2019 season as the subject of my rising fourth year award.

I chose five plays to read and then see at the Shaw Festival: *Rope* by Patrick Hamilton, a reverse who-dun-it when you start knowing the culprits; *Sex* by Mae West, an autobiographical play about sex work in the 1920s; *Brigadoon* by Alan Jay Lerner, a musical set in the Scottish Highlands; *The Ladykillers* by Graham Linehan, a comedy about an old lady with several murderous tenants; *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand, a drama about a gifted poet with an unfortunately big nose; and *Man and Superman with Don Juan in Hell* by George Bernard Shaw, the focal point of my project. The Shaw made it easy for me to build a catalog spanning vastly different genres and styles. My time in Canada felt like a survey course of modern drama.

Out of these selections, *Man and Superman* was the most unorthodox and—as a result—the most exciting. Billed by Shaw as “a comedy and a philosophy,” the play unfolds as an early 20th century retelling of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*. But, Shaw twists the Romantic tale. Instead of Shaw's Don Juan, John Tanner, being a womanizer, he swears off romance of any kind. As an additional turn of the screw, Shaw gives us the controversial third act of *Man and Superman*: “Don Juan in Hell.” The Shaw describes Act III as “a grand opera in the middle of a musical comedy.” “Don Juan in Hell” is a seventy-seven-page-long dream sequence in *Man and Superman*. In this act, Lord Byron's Don Juan and Doña Ana enter a battle of wits with the Devil himself. It is a long-winded meditation on philosophy. You miss nothing about the plot by skipping the diversion, and yet, the interlude adds so much to the experience if you view/read it. Typically, theatre productions omit Act III or perform it as a stand-alone play, but not the Shaw Festival. They presented the entire, full-length play without any cuts, resulting in a **five-hour runtime**. Once I learned about *Man and Superman*'s premise and infamous third act, I resolved to build my time at the Shaw around this striking production. I can profess that every minute was worth it.

I appreciated the other productions as well, using each experience to sharpen my script analysis skills. For each show, I read the play first and outlined the inciting incident, the climax, and major themes. While watching the show, I paid particular attention to how the physical space, casting, and direction brought the play to life. Due to my unfamiliarity with the theaters, physical space played an important role in how I interpreted the live productions. For example, *Sex by Mae West* was performed in the Shaw’s studio theater in the round. The claustrophobic seating aroused discomfort, much like the social discomfort around the topic of sex. To me, the environment elevated West’s criticism of society for making a social taboo out of a natural act. It forced you to feel the presence of everyone in the room watching *Sex* together, making each viewer keenly aware of their voyeur status. All in all, the Shaw Festival reinforced how staging adds new meaning to plays for me.

Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Shaw Festival will always hold a special place in my heart. As I write this in March 2020, I know the Festival perseveres through a great setback having cancelled all of their performances until May 25 due to the coronavirus. Since the town depends on the festival for their economy, I can only imagine the anxiety and heartbreak gripping the town. I hope and pray that the Shaw Festival, and other theatre companies across the globe, will survive this trying time. I am thankful to have this experience before the coronavirus outbreak, and I hope more patrons will experience the magic of Niagara-on-the-Lake in the near future. Thank you to the J. Sanford Miller family for making this adventure possible and for supporting my endeavors for the past three years.

Expenditures

Finished a little under budget due to the generous exchange rate.

Item	Cost
Lodging	811.13
Tickets	583.51
Flights	602
Meals	257.14
Niagara Falls Visit	94.03
Total Spent	2347.81
Amount Allotted	2550

Script Analysis Example

*For each play, I outlined the inciting incident, climax, and several themes before watching the staged production. I tweaked my analysis after watching the play and then created a playwriting prompt. Here is my *Man and Superman* analysis.*

Man and Superman by Bernard Shaw

Inciting Incident: introduction of Whitefield's will, pg 48

Whitefield's will serves as a catalyst for the *Man and Superman*'s overarching plot. The will reveals Whitefield's dying wish to appoint both Ramsden and Tanner as his daughter's (Anne Whitfield) guardians. This decision sparks an immediate conflict between Ramsden and Tanner, two men with diametrically opposed theoretical perspectives. At first, the reader may think that their conflict is the play's main issue; however, the true conflict lies in Tanner and Ann Whitfield's relationship. Ann Whitefield has chosen Tanner for her "destined prey" (as Tanner puts it), her future husband, but the free-thinking bachelor wants nothing to do with marriage.

Climax: Tanner says "I love you" pg 108

At last, Tanner gives in to Ann's machinations and professes his love for her. His sudden, unjustified admission feeds the satire. It is unclear if the two really love one another, which is Shaw's point. While some may interpret Tanner and Ann's relationship as a textbook example of belligerent sexual tension (i.e. Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*), in fact their marriage actualizes Tanner's depiction of marriage as a vapid, social construct lacking in passion. By falling victim to an institution he hates, Tanner proves his own theory true.

Marriage Plot

Man and Superman satirizes the nineteenth century marriage plot. It is in conversation with novels like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Middlemarch* and like these novels, crafts satire out of romance to tackle issues of gender. Violet and Ann are perplexing figures. Shaw grants them agency; they act on their own accord and dismiss men. Yet both women use their intellect to attain domestic goals.

Don Juan

Shaw wrote *Man and Superman* as a *Don Juan* play turned on its head. Tanner runs from women instead of running to them. The conqueror becomes the conquered. This role reversal supports a feminist reading of *Man and Superman*, especially in consideration of Ana's searing lines in Act Three. At one point she says to Don Juan, "I daresay you all want to marry lovely incarnations of music and painting and poetry. Well, you cant have them, because they don't exist. If flesh and blood is not good enough for you, you must go without: that's all. Women have to put up with flesh-and-blood husbands...and you will have to put up with flesh-and-blood wives." Ana takes Don Juan's sexist rhetoric and uses it against him. She forces Don Juan to consider women on an equal basis with men by illustrating their shared failure to live up to expectations.

Prompt: Write a story based on a classic hero/damsel tale with the roles reversed.

Photos

Left to Right: The Shaw's Royal George Theater where I saw Cyrano de Bergerac and Rope; the set for Sex; the natural eighth wonder of the world, Niagara Falls

