

Roundabout Theatre Company

You Never Can Tell



The Chase Family Series Production Guide

You Never Can Tell

by *George Bernard Shaw*
directed by *Nicholas Martin*

PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

The child and the parent are strangers to one another necessarily, because their ages must differ widely. . . . I myself was never on bad terms with my mother: we lived together until I was forty-two years old, absolutely without the smallest friction of any kind, yet when her death set me thinking curiously about our relations, I realized that I knew very little about her.

— G. B. Shaw

According to scholar Eric Bentley, the primary emotional relationship in George Bernard Shaw's plays is the one between parent and child. In his plays, Shaw often includes characters who intensely explore and examine the relationships within their family. Given Shaw's experience with his own family, it shouldn't surprise us that these relationships are rather complex. The children in Shaw's plays often must decide if they accept or reject their parent's ideals, while the parents are usually left puzzling over their offspring's headstrong attitudes.

The children in *You Never Can Tell* have an unusual and complicated relationship with their parents. When they were small, their mother, Mrs. Clandon took them away from their father in England to raise them in Spain according to her "modern" principles of science and independence, which she espouses in a series of books. When the play begins, the children are grown and reaching adulthood, and the family has returned to England for a seaside holiday.

While the twins, Dolly and Philip, desperately inquire about the identity of their father, Gloria, the eldest daughter, is courted by a local dentist, Valentine. Through their actions and discussion, the children demonstrate their mother's strong influence, but during the course of the play, they are forced to question these principles when confronted with changes in their lives. Several unexpected encounters occur during the four scenes of *You Never Can Tell* that depict one full day. Among the other characters that appear are a surly old man, and two rather different lawyers. A diplomatic waiter tries to keep things in control, but is not always successful.

The waiter also serves a key literary function in the play, for his relationship with his child serves as an important contrast to the main plot line. The waiter also supplies the play's title, by reminding the other characters that it's impossible to predict the future. The audiences for the play should also heed the waiter's advice, for when it comes to the relationships between parents and children in George Bernard Shaw's plays, "You never can tell."

WHO'S WHO

Mrs. Lanfrey Clandon (played by *Helen Carey*): The matriarch of her family, Mrs. Clandon has written several manuals on "modern" family life. For her, social causes and principles are more important than people. Though excessive emotional displays embarrass her, she has a soft spot for her youngest daughter, Dolly.

Gloria (played by *Katie Finneran*): As Mrs. Clandon's daughter and primary disciple, Gloria is the incarnation of haughty high-mindedness. Her formal manner is the product of a conflict between her pride and her passion.

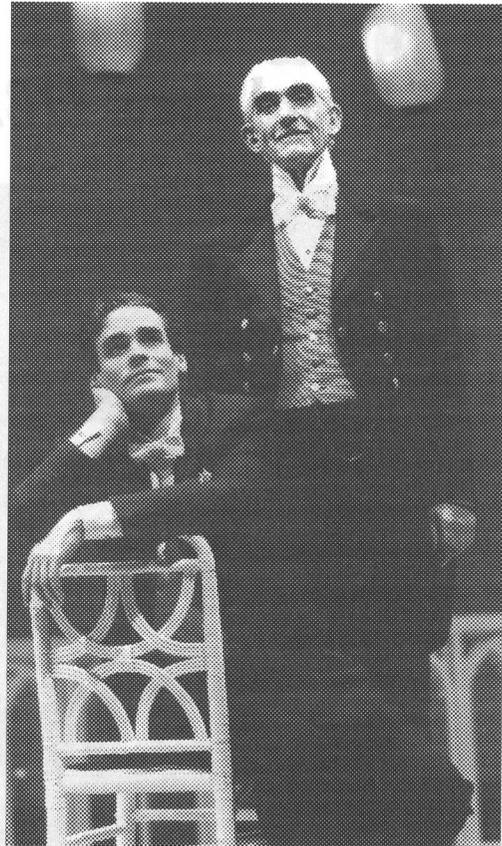
Dolly (played by *Catherine Kellner*): One of the two vivacious Clandon twins, Dolly is inquisitive and playful. She's surprised to find that her lack of inhibitions is considered impertinence or insolence. She is hopelessly spoiled by her mother's tender scoldings.

Philip (played by *Saxon Palmer*): As Dolly's twin, Philip tries to keep Dolly's indiscretions in check. Despite his youth, he is prompt, decisive, and displays perfect manners.

Valentine (played by *Robert Sean Leonard*): Valentine is a bachelor dentist who is in search of amusing adventures. He's not a frivolous man, but he thinks he knows the way to a woman's heart.



Katie Finneran and Robert Sean Leonard Photo: Joan Marcus



Robert Sean Leonard and Charles Keating Photo: Joan Marcus

Waiter (played by *Charles Keating*): Maintaining an encouraging presence and unflappable demeanor, the waiter impresses all whom he serves.

Mr. Fergus Crampton (played by *Simon Jones*): A shipping magnate who is also Valentine's landlord, Crampton can be ill-tempered and dogmatic. Despite his apparent prideful manner, he is secretly grateful for the disrespectful attitude Valentine shows him.

Finch M'Comas (played by *Nicholas Kepros*): M'Comas is a well-intentioned lawyer of "more than average professional capacity" from London.

Bohun (played by *Jere Shea*): He is a lawyer who possesses a powerfully menacing voice, impressively articulated speech, strong inexorable manner, and a terrifying power of intensely critical listening. In cunning and logic, he is a ruthlessly sharpened man.

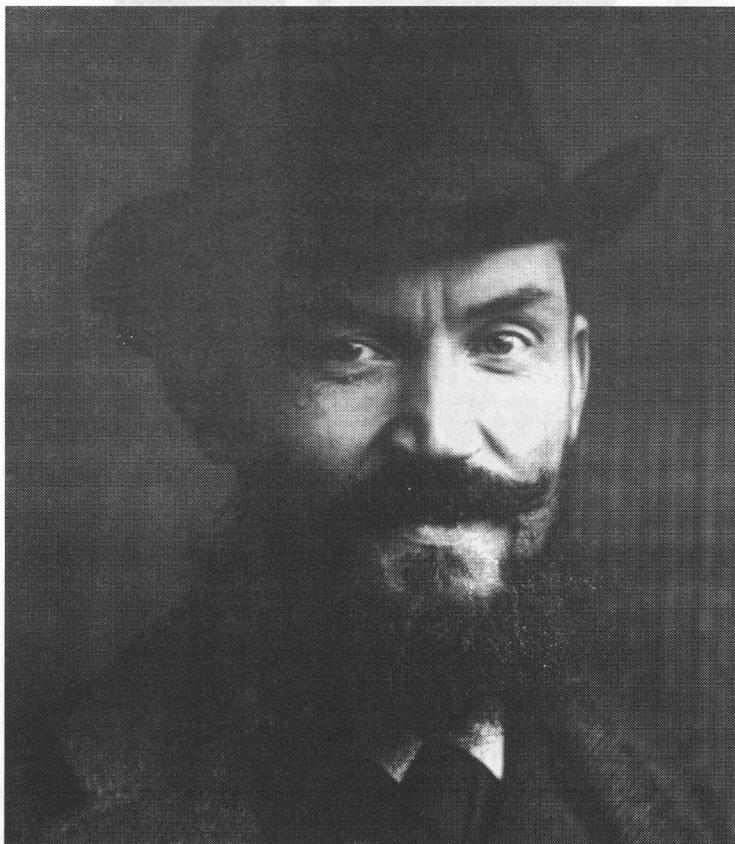
Parlor Maid (played by *Sarah Rafferty*).

Jo (played by *Greg Keller*) a waiter.

Louis (played by *Phil Tabor*) a waiter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)



It is an instinct with me personally to attack every idea which has been full grown for ten years, especially if it claims to be the foundation of all human society. I am prepared to back human society against any idea, positive or negative, that can be brought into the field against it.

— G.B. Shaw, 1896

The roots of George Bernard Shaw's argumentative views on family life, politics and art can be found in the experiences of his early life. Born in Dublin on July 26, 1856, George Bernard Shaw was raised by a father who was a down-at-the-heels aristocrat and a mother who was an aspiring singer. Shaw's father, who was an alcoholic, once pretended to throw young George into a

canal, and almost succeeded. Shaken, the young Shaw reported the incident to his mother and confided, "Mama, I think Papa's drunk." She replied, "When is he ever anything else?" Having once believed, like all young children, that his father was flawless, the discovery that his father was far from perfect had a strong impact on George Bernard Shaw's controversial views of family.

The political environment that surrounded Shaw in his youth also had a profound effect on his adulthood. Growing up in an era of vast social and political upheaval and rapid technological advancement, Shaw was exposed to radical thought which would inspire much of his unconventional philosophy, including socialism, feminism, and criticism of the church. As an adult, Shaw joined the Fabian Society, a socialist group who believed in changing society through education rather than revolution, and as a writer Shaw chose to address many socially controversial issues in his plays.

Shaw's early readings of the Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Bunyan were crucial to his education, and trips to the theatre and the National Gallery of Ireland were great influences on his artistic beliefs. At age 23, Shaw began his writing career, trying to publish novels but achieving little success. Eventually he turned to criticism, writing first about art and music, then about theatre at a later time in his life.

It was only after a few years as a theatre critic that Shaw began writing plays. Perhaps it is not surprising that, given his interest in challenging people's ideas, his early plays met with some controversy. Once established as a playwright, Shaw turned out an impressive body of work including more than 50 plays. Some of his better known plays include *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), and *Pygmalion* (1912), which later was turned into the musical *My Fair Lady*. In 1923, at the age of sixty-seven, Shaw wrote *Saint Joan*, which was almost immediately proclaimed as his masterpiece, and two years later he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. By the time of his death in 1950, George Bernard Shaw, the man who liked "to attack every idea," had been hailed as one of the greatest playwrights in the English language.

Tell the actors [rehearsing You Never Can Tell] with my compliments that they may laugh as much as they like at the rehearsals, but when the curtain goes up, if they play for the laughs instead of playing for a sincere representation of life and character, the laughs will not come. . .

— G. B. Shaw, 1912

Light comedy was the staple of London's theatre throughout most of Shaw's lifetime, and though he usually disdained popular tastes, Shaw would accommodate its patrons on occasion. When he wrote in the popular forms, he did so to prove the commercial theatre could be improved. In the preface to his anthology of *Plays Pleasant*, in which *You Never Can Tell* was first published, Shaw wrote that

...far from taking an unsympathetic view of the popular preference for fun, fashionable dresses, a little music, and even an exhibition of eating and drinking by people with an expensive air, attended by an if-possible-comic waiter, I was more than willing to show that the drama can humanize these things as easily as they, in the wrong hands, can dehumanize the drama.

Being a life long theatre-goer, Shaw was very familiar with the conventions of several dramatic forms, including the stock situations of farce and melodrama. *You Never Can Tell* contains many

elements of farce: parents who are lost and then found, twins who exist merely to have fun and make obnoxious remarks, barely believable coincidences, and — a particular favorite in Shaw's day — a comic waiter.

As Michael Holroyd points out in his biography, Shaw did not want the play billed as a farce, "fearing that this label would pack it off to the dehumanized world of mechanical comedy." To the extent that *You Never Can Tell* is not a mechanized plot-machine, Shaw succeeded in creating his own kind of farce. In fact, he didn't call it a play or a farce. In a letter to a friend, Shaw described *You Never Can Tell* as "a poem and a document, a sermon and a festival, all in one."

PRINCIPLE WORKS:

1892	<i>Widower's Houses</i>
1893	<i>The Philanderer</i>
1894	<i>Arms and the Man</i>
1895	<i>Candida</i>
1896	<i>You Never Can Tell</i>
1897	<i>The Devil's Disciple</i>
1898	<i>Caesar and Cleopatra</i>
1903	<i>Man and Superman</i>
1905	<i>Major Barbara</i>
1908	<i>Getting Married</i>
1909	<i>Misalliance</i>
1912	<i>Androcles and the Lion</i>
1912	<i>Pygmalion</i>
1919	<i>Heartbreak House</i>
1920	<i>Back to Methuselah</i>
1923	<i>Saint Joan</i>
1931	<i>Too True to Be Good</i>
1933	<i>On the Rocks</i>
1936	<i>The Millionairess</i>
1946	<i>Buoyant Billions</i>

THE ENGLISH IDENTIFICATION WITH THE SEA

George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)

As an island nation, England has had a long obsession with the sea. Part of this preoccupation is due to the might of the British navy. From the defeat of the invading Spanish Armada, in Shakespeare's time, to the defeat of Napoleon in the early 1800s, the British people shaped their world and their character around the sea.

Britons have flocked to the seaside for hundreds of years. When the wealthy began traveling to ocean resorts in the 1700s, their primary concern was health care rather than recreation. At that time, most believed a bath in the cold sea water could cure many ailments, and drinking sea water was thought to be the cure for asthma, cancer, tuberculosis, deafness, rheumatism, and insanity, among other afflictions.

For many years, the sea side resorts were the domain of the rich. In the 1820s, the Prince Regent built an exotic, opulent pavilion in the seaside town of Brighton, where it remains a major tourist attraction to this day. Major tourist cities developed along Britain's coast, such as Brighton, Weymouth, Clacton, and Blackpool. These towns were the model for the seaside resort that the characters in *You Never Can Tell* visit.

With the increased availability of rail travel by the mid-1800s, the resorts grew more popular. By the end of the century, as the working classes earned greater incomes, resorts actively worked to attract lower class customers. Seaside towns, most featuring a "pleasure pier" on the waterfront, offered a variety of entertainments like ice cream

shops, military brass bands, puppet shows, souvenir shops, and photographers to preserve memories of one's trip.

The original audiences for *You Never Can Tell* would have been familiar with maritime themes on the stage as well. Nautical melodramas, featuring sailors and orphans of unknown parentage, became popular in the mid-1800s. These dramas, which often included heavily patriotic themes, were continued by Dion Boucicault, in plays like *Jessie Brown* (1858), set in India. In Shaw's time, theatre-goers might have attended performances of Gilbert and Sullivan maritime operettas, like *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *Ruddigore*. Whether in the theater or on holiday, British audiences have looked to the ocean as a source of identity and amusement.



Weymouth Beach 1896

ACTIVITIES:

Before the Play: Reacting to Unexpected Events

Your family, like the one in *You Never Can Tell*, might be taking a vacation this summer.

Write a list of all the activities you plan to do, or would like to do, on vacation. Then imagine, during the middle of your vacation, meeting a stranger who claims to be a long-lost relative.

How would you react?

Would other members of your family react differently?

How would your vacation plans be affected?

Would you still be able to do the activities you'd planned?

Who would decide what course of action your family would take?

As You Watch the Play: Examining Interpersonal Relationships

The relationships between the characters in *You Never Can Tell*, as in all Shaw plays, are fluid and malleable—they frequently change and develop in unexpected ways. During the course of the play, ask yourself the following questions as a way to keep track of the assorted relationships between the different characters.

When we first meet the characters, who has the power in the relationship—the child or the parent, the man or the woman, the family member or the lawyer?

Does this relationship change in the following scenes?

How does it change?

Does it change several times?

How does Shaw use humor in this situation?

After the Play: Writing About Family Secrets

You Never Can Tell uses a common device to create tension and intrigue within the play, a secret. Some of the characters in the play withhold information from other characters. These secrets are kept hidden for a variety of reasons, and they are revealed through different techniques, such as through a character's confession or by accident.

Write a story or a play in which a character has a secret about his or her family. As you write the story or play, keep these questions in mind:

What are the character's reasons for keeping the secret?

Why does the character eventually reveal the secret?

How does that character reveal the secret?

When your play or story is finished, send it to Roundabout!

mail to: Roundabout Theatre Company, 1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036

or email: margies@roundabouttheatre.org

WEBSITE:

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

FOR FURTHER READING:

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Welcome to The Chase Family Series at Roundabout!

***You Never Can Tell* : Saturday, July 11 or Sunday, August 9, 1998**

Show begins at 2:30pm

Preshow reception begins at 1:30pm

Your family subscription includes:

- a production guide for you to review as a family before coming to the theatre;
- admittance to our pre-show reception for family subscribers only, scheduled to take place before the show in the lobby;
- participation in a post-performance discussion with members of the cast.

Remember to come early **Saturday, July 11** or **Sunday, August 9, 1998 at 1:30 PM** to enjoy refreshments and participate in a discussion with our Education Director before seeing the show. Please note that all discussions are reserved for young subscribers and their adult guests.

***The Roundabout Theatre Company gratefully acknowledges
The Chase Manhattan Bank for its generous support of this important program.***

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