

Widowers's Houses

G.B.Shaw

March 5-6, 2017

This is a somewhat more coherent and livelier play than the confusing 'The Philanderer'. There is a clear Shavian social theme, namely slum-lords. The whole story and plot seem rather contrived and absurd. There is no way it could be turned into a believable short-story its only success is on the stage. In fact its effectiveness as an entertainment hinges on the ability of the actors to give the characters their due. So we have two friends, the young Dr. Trench and his companion Cokane traveling on the continent, finding themselves at a hotel at the Rhine. There they meet the forbidding widower Sartorius and his beautiful and lively daughter Blanche. Cokane a social climber is desirous of getting in contact with them and manages, but it transpires that Trench and she have already met and for all intents and purposes have become lovers. Trench wants to marry her, but of course needs the consent of the father which seems a forbidding proposition. He manages though to have an interview and the father sets as a condition that Blanche will be well received as an equal in Trench's family, which involves a Lady Aunt. What is needed is to get letters from his relatives welcoming the match. How to get about it? He enlists the help of Cokane to draft a letter for him to copy. Cokane is a bit lost as to information and has to enlist the help of Sartorius, who is very obliging, volunteers that he is a gentleman, but refuses to be more specific. He gets wind of Cokane ghost-writing a letter for his prospective son-in-law, is not fazed by that, on the contrary gives suggestions and reads and approves of the draft. That is the end of the first Act.

At the second Act we find ourselves in a holiday home of the Sartoriuses. The requested letters have arrived, there are no obstacles for the match. In a lull the two companions meet a certain down-an-out character Lickcheese who gets the rents for his boss Sartorius but has just been sacked because he is not ruthless enough in his collecting. Sartorius is in other words a slum-lord getting his money in the most unsavory way. Trench is getting cold feet, so when he meets Blanche again he confesses that he cannot out of pride accept any money from her father. Blanche is aghast at the thought of having to live on 700 pounds a year, the double would be a minimum. She cannot understand his motives but suspects that he is trying to wrangle out of the situation, gets furious and calls it all off and removes herself from the stage. Instead her father arrives, asks what is the trouble, reminds him that she has a terrible temper but will come around in a day or so. Trench confesses that the problem goes deeper and indicates what it is. Sartorius has a fatherly talk with him and reveals that he is only an intermediate in the chain, the bottom line is that much of the money he extracts must go to pay the mortgage to Trench's Lady Aunt, so in fact his hands are as sullied as his own. Trench lets himself be persuaded by the argument, but alas too late, Blanche has announced that she wants no more of the engagement. That is Act two.

As to the final Act it takes place in the London home of Sartorius and his daughter. Some time has passed apparently because Lickcheese makes a visit and is hardly recogniz-

able, well-shaven, well-dressed, comporting himself with dignity and self-assurance. In the interim he must have come up in the world and has a business proposition that is too good to turn down. Apparently the issue is to refurbish Satorius slum buildings so he can get much more for them when the city is going to request their demolition for its new plans of urban design, something he has conveniently found out from a leak. In order to go through the deal they somehow need the assistance of Trench. So he and his companion Cokane are brought in by Lickcheese on a short errand, but Trench refuses to be part of it. There is a suggestion that he would do it if he could marry Blanche. This is out of the question and Trench retreats to the living room while the others linger on in the study where all the negotiations have taken place. In the living room Trench plays something on the piano, finds a photo of Blanche on it, takes it in his hand and is about to kiss it, when she turns up. She is aghast and turns him out, but when he tries to oblige, she refuses to let him pass. He realizes that it is all part of an erotic game, and gets quite excited. More follows, and in the end he agrees to marry her and all his qualms about shady deals seem all to be gone. End of play.

So one sees that there are some characters that could be played to the hilt, Sartorius and his daughter, and that there is a scene, that could become memorable, the erotic game at the end. A play is structured as an opera, the plot is inane, its only purpose is to set the stage for a few memorable arias, how to get from one to another is of less concern. The same thing here, a few striking scenes and the evening is saved for the paying audiences. Shaw, who had failed as a novelist, made a splash as a playwright.

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