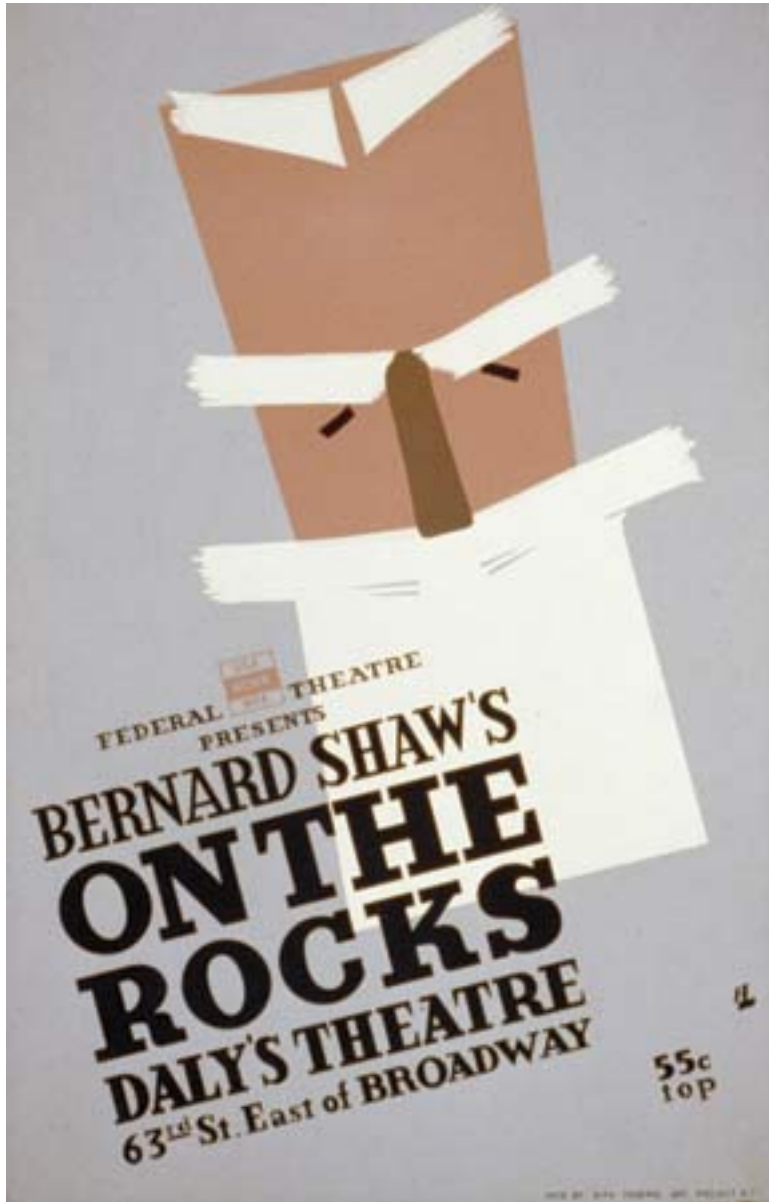


Theatre Review: 'On the Rocks'



The Mermaid Theatre has revived Bernard Shaw's play *On the Rocks*, written in 1933 and given an up-to-date ring by the present depression. It is Britain that is on the rocks, with the unemployed protesting and the Prime Minister at his wits' end. Enter an ancient left-winger who tips off the Premier about Marx, and a lady homeopath, who prescribes a rest in which he reads all Marx's works.

Act two: Prime Minister, converted, is announcing the nationalization of practically everything thereby winning approval from financiers, landowners, police etc. and the disapproval of the working class. Defeated by a Tory-Labour alliance, he retires from politics, accepting the left-wing sage's (Shaw speaking) view that a dictator is the solution.

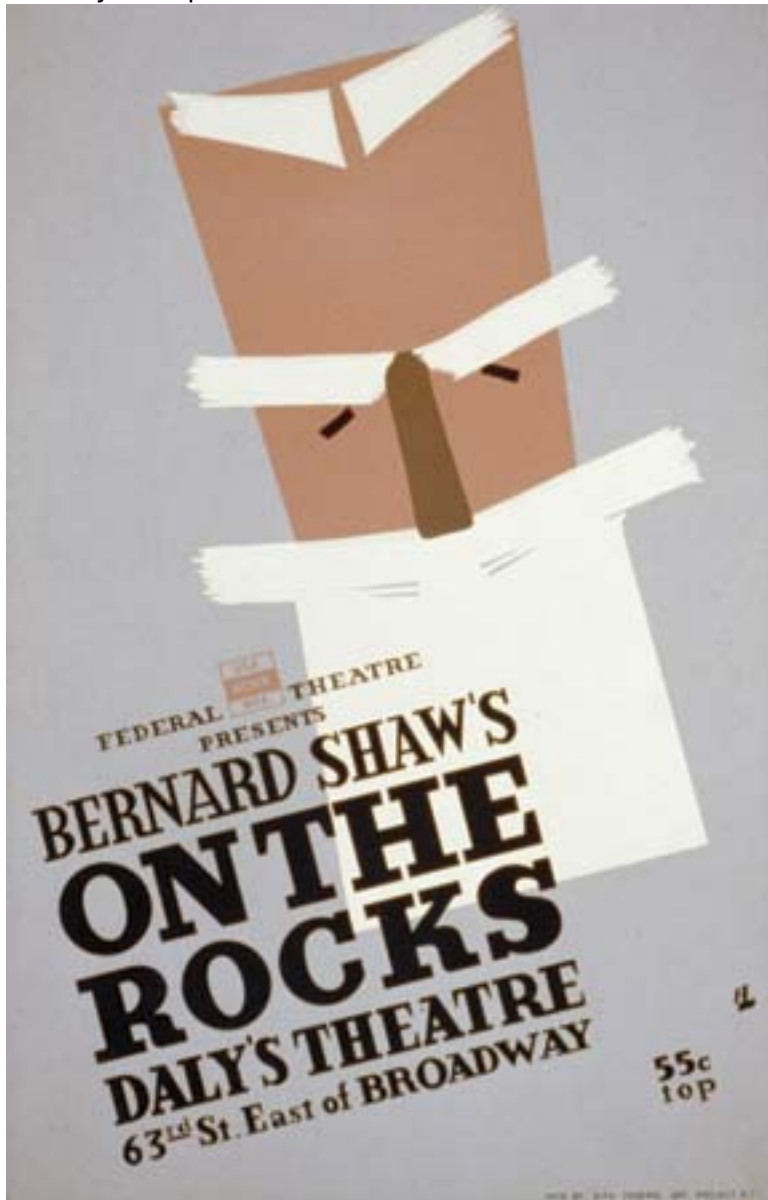
It is excellently performed by a capable cast; much of *On the Rocks* is great fun. The types — trimming Prime Minister, choleric Tory, working-class representatives fiery and intellectual and stolid — are as recognizable as the situation, and Shaw's digs and quips are highly enjoyable. Who could resist the diagnosis that the Prime Minister ails not from overwork but because his brain is unoccupied?

The trouble about it is, of course, the message. For the sake of the play, overlook the idea of Marx's economics being absorbed in a fortnight; be charitable, and let pass also the allegation that nationalization is Marxism. What Shaw argues in this play is that democracy is no good. It had led nowhere and the working class has had enough of it. What they want is to be told what to do by a strong man who not only knows the answers but has the will to enforce them.

Shaw was speaking post facto, apparently without realizing it. Mussolini and Hitler had established themselves by 1933. Shaw expressed his admiration of them; *On the Rocks* contends, with the voice of one who has seen everything else tried, for more of it. Their rise was for the reason given, that democracy had failed. Yet how had it failed? The European countries had had one or two generations of full or partial suffrage: during which Labour and social-democratic reformism, for which Shaw was a spokesman, had promised the earth and produced only misery. As a result, large numbers of working people thought democracy useless, and were ready to listen to the demagogues who said so.

It is Shaw's Fabianism that is shown on the rocks and waggishly saying it needs a strong man to rescue it, regardless of expense. An evening at the Mermaid can be recommended — good theatrical entertainment, and food for thought.

Robert Barltrop
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