Harley Granville Barker

Agnes Colander

An Attempt at Life

Revised version by Richard Nelson
Agnes Colander

An Attempt at Life

A Comedy in Three Acts
Harley Granville Barker was a playwright, director, producer, actor, essayist and theatre visionary. Born in London in 1877, he had little formal education and joined his mother in her recitals from an early age. His first recorded appearance as an actor came in Yorkshire, aged thirteen. In the same year he attended the Sarah Thorne theatre school at the Theatre Royal, Margate. His breakthrough as an actor came eight years later when he played the title role in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. By this time he had co-authored plays with a fellow actor, only one of which was performed, and he was branching out on his own as a writer.

In 1900, he began directing for the Stage Society, a non-commercial play-producing body, and appeared for the Society as Marchbanks in the first London production of Shaw’s *Candida*. For the Society, he also directed the first production of his own play, *The Marrying of Ann Leete*, in 1902 and created the role of Frank in Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Along with Shaw, Barker was a member of the Fabian Society and was deeply involved in the theatre reform movement, co-writing the pioneering book, *A National Theatre: Schemes and Estimates*, with William Archer in 1904.

Barker took the opportunity to test his theories when, in conjunction with the business manager J.E. Vedrenne, he ran groundbreaking repertory seasons at the Royal Court Theatre, in London, from 1904–1907, then moved to the Savoy Theatre. During these seasons, he married the leading actress Lillah McCarthy and later went into theatre management with her. He directed the first production of his own play, *The Voysey Inheritance*, at the Court in 1905, and would have directed the premiere of his play *Waste* at the Savoy Theatre if the play had not been banned; it eventually appeared in a production he co-directed in 1936. Barker tried to mount repertory seasons at other theatres in London before World War I, notably at the Duke of York’s, where he staged the premiere of his play *The Madras House*.
in 1909, and the St. James’s. His three Shakespeare productions at the Savoy Theatre – *The Winter’s Tale*, *Twelfth Night* (both 1912) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1914) – were considered revolutionary. In 1915, he directed a repertory season in New York, produced with McCarthy, and on tour in the US he staged innovative open-air productions of Euripides.

The war broke Barker’s attempts to establish a repertory theatre in Britain and also saw his divorce from McCarthy. A new future, artistically and personally, beckoned with his new wife, Helen Huntington, a poet and a novelist, whom he married in 1918. Barker now dedicated his life to writing. As well as translating Spanish plays with Helen, he completed two new full-length plays, *The Secret Life* and *His Majesty*, numerous essays, articles and reviews, a major book on the theatre, four others based on his lectures, and his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. He died in Paris in 1946.

**Richard Nelson’s** plays include the play cycles, *The Gabriels* and *The Apple Family*, which were both produced by The Public Theater in New York, filmed for Public Television and toured internationally. He has received numerous awards including an Olivier for Best Play (*Goodnight Children Everywhere*) and a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical (*James Joyce’s The Dead*). He is an Honorary Associate Artist of the Royal Shakespeare Company.
Agnes Colander: Introduction

A Young Barker and Agnes

Sometime in early 1900, at the age of 22, H. Granville Barker (as the young man called himself) began to write *Agnes Colander*. He had been writing plays at least since the age of 15; for a few years, he had collaborated with fellow actor, Berte Thomas, and then in 1899 he wrote on his own *The Marrying of Ann Leete*. The first of his plays to be produced was his and Thomas’ *The Weather Hen* or *Invertebrata*, which received a matinee performance on 29 June 1899 at the Comedy Theatre and transferred for a three-week evening run at the same theatre. It was favourably reviewed by the young playwright-critic St John Hankin. Barker most likely was the director, in what was probably his first effort at directing.

During the writing of *Agnes Colander*, H. Granville Barker was a very busy young man. As a jobbing actor of a few years’ standing, he toured with Mrs Patrick Campbell’s company in two Arthur Pinero plays and remained with her company in London; created a role in a Gilbert Murray play; played Richard II in a matinee performance for William Poel’s Elizabeth Stage Society while understudying in a West End play in the evening; at the Vaudeville Theatre, he played Erik Bratsberg in Ibsen’s *The League of Youth* and Robert in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Coming of Peace*; played Marchbanks in the first London production of Shaw’s *Candida* and Captain Kearney in the premiere of Shaw’s *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion*; and appeared with Marie Tempest in *English Nell* for five-and-a-half months.

As a theatre activist, he was a member of the Actors’ Association and joined the managing committee of the independent play-producing Stage Society (along with Murray, Shaw and William Archer) as well as the Socialist Fabian Society; he also joined a joint committee (with Murray and Archer) to establish a national theatre. This association would culminate in Archer and Barker’s book *A*