

O Candida!



—Forrest Bard photo
MORELL AND BURGESS
... fatherly advice

The Citadel Theatre's current production is Bernard Shaw's *Candida*, a domestic tragi-comic melodrama of 1895 vintage.

The plot concerns the domestic life of one Reverend James Morell and his wife Candida. Morell is a Muscular Christian with socialist leanings, an honest and eloquent man.

He lives a life of exuberantly ordered routine, spending eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, in such useful activities as preaching to the Hoxton Freedom Group, the Communist Anarchists, and the English Land Restoration League. He and his wife get up early in the morning, put in a refreshing hard day's work, retire at ten in the evening, and are beloved of all.

In this idyllic household comes a young man of noble birth and poetic imagination, Eugene Marchbanks. Marchbanks is physically weak, overflowing with the highest of high-minded ideals (especially on the subject of women), and about as able to get along in the world as a two-year-old child. He is, in fact, what Molesworth would have called a "weedy wet".

He is a guest in Morell's home—Morell having found him alone and destitute, sleeping on a river bank—and he has in the course of his acquaintance with the Morells fallen madly (but purely) in love with Candida, a perfect mother-figure.

The action consists entirely of conversations held between every conceivable permutation of the abovementioned people plus the three minor characters, Morell's secretary Proserpine ("Prossie" for short), his curate Alexander ("Lexie" for short), and his father-in-law ("Burgess" for short, red-faced, and windy).

It comes out in the course of two or three of the Morell-with-Marchbanks scenes that Marchbanks despises Morell as an insensitive windbag, and doesn't see how Candida could possibly love him, and that Morell despises Marchbanks as a weak-livered and pettish adolescent. (The thought that Candida could ever love Marchbanks sends Morell into a fit of laughter which lasts about seven minutes.)

The plot thickens like spilt blood. And it is

here that the strength of the play lies. The basic situation—the rivalry of Morell and Marchbanks for Candida—remains constant, but the point of view changes incessantly. With each scene we learn more about each character, and his relationship to the other characters.

The whole thing is a complex game of one-upmanship, with each rival in turn launching a verbal attack on the other, savouring his triumph, being put down, marshalling his strength, waiting for an opening and returning to the attack again.

Twist follows twist in the plot, and at each step the screw is tightened another notch. Morell must fight his growing sense of insecurity, as Marchbanks shows him time and again that he understands neither his wife nor himself. And Marchbanks struggles against the fear that Morell is right about him: that there is more to life than poetry, transcendental love and dying falls.

When Candida herself finally enters the picture significantly, she enters not with a bang, but with an air of quiet and really intimidating assurance. She immediately takes control of the situation. She is an archetypal Shavian knowing and understanding woman: ambivalent and not a little frightening.

The situation is finally resolved in a manner which is perhaps quite as hair-raising today as it was in the 1890's, but which, given a certain amount of willing suspension of disbelief in the spectator, is effective enough.

As Morell, Peter Donat (of practically every major dramatic medium in Canada) is quite magnificent. Shaw gives Morell some of his best long-sentenced, orchestrated prose, and Donat's years of Shakespearean acting stand him in good stead here. He has everything—stage presence, physical dominance, a very good voice, and the polish that comes of experience.

Michael Learned's Candida, too, has all that it should have. She is completely unspectacular, but exudes the sort of motherly-wifely hypnotic power that she must have if the play is to make sense.

The Marchbanks of Montgomery Davis, while not quite of the virtuoso calibre of the other two leads, is extremely competent. Davis manages to be convincingly sulky and impressive at the same time, and this, plus the fact that Marchbanks gets most of the really juicy lines, results in a very



—Forrest Bard photo
DONAT AS MORELL
... the stronger?

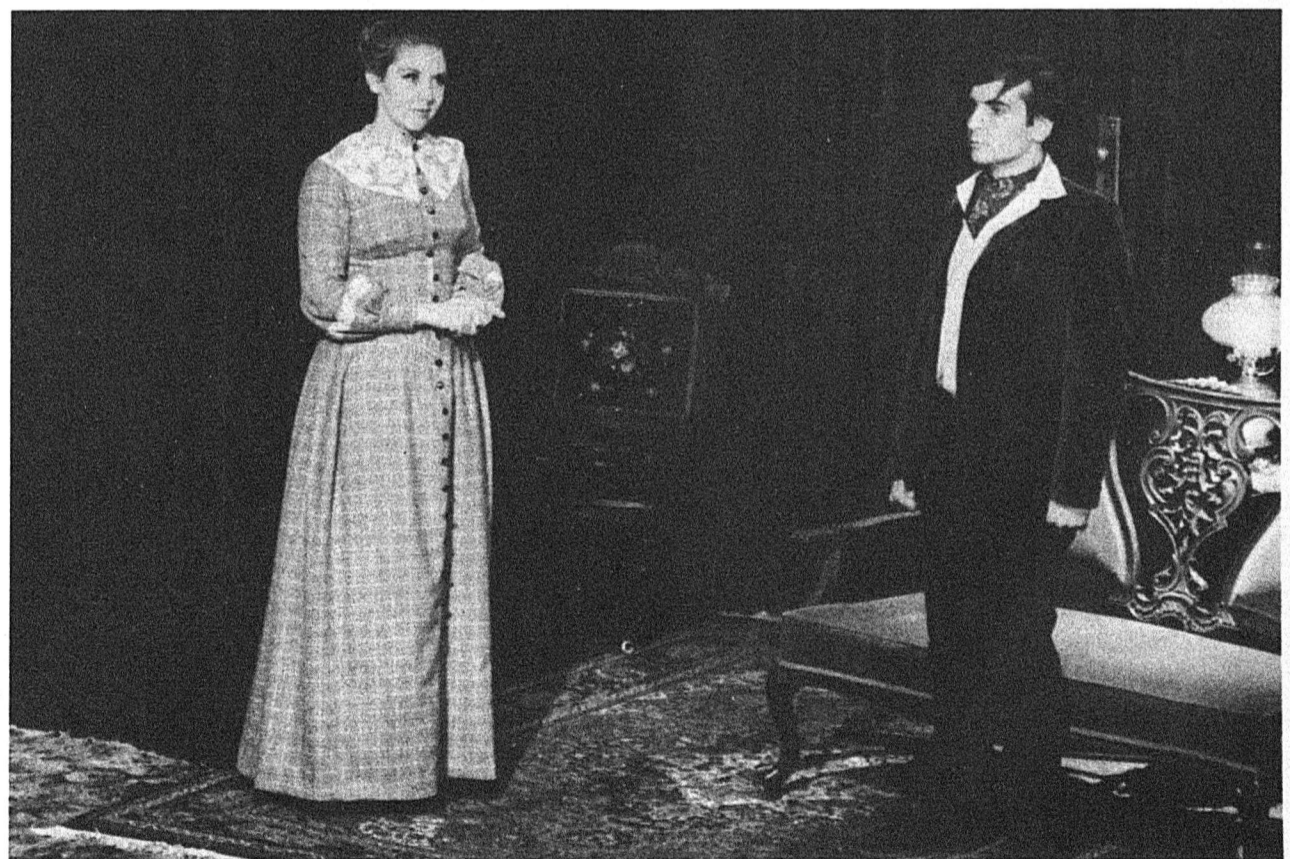
interesting reading of the part.

Anne Anglin, as Prossie, is nearly ideal, and Jay Bonnell (Lexy) makes as much of his small role as it is possible to make. John Wardwell as old man Burgess, struggles manfully with a Cockney accent, and wins by a decision.

The set and costumes are as good as I've seen anywhere (not that I've been anywhere important, but they are still pretty good).

After a good but flawed *Threepenny Opera* and a clump of mediocre plays, the Citadel has finally hit a winner.

—Bill Beard



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CANDIDA AND MARCHBANKS
... ambivalent and not a little frightening