Major Barbara is a scathing indictment of Victorian sentimental philanthropy and a daring argument in favor of relieving poverty through economic growth, including the growth of disreputable industries such as munitions-making. Jobs and a steady income, argues Undershaft, are the best way to relieve the disease of poverty.

Background:

Lady Britomart Undershaft and her husband Andrew have long been estranged, and their three children have not seen their father for many years. Undershaft’s own background is far from aristocratic, since the fortune he has inherited can only be given to a “foundling,” someone whose claim comes entirely from talent and not from birth. With this fortune he has become immensely wealthy in the munitions business. In Act III, Lady Britomart attempts to convince him that their son Stephen, a very conservative young man, should inherit the fortune, but he resists, insisting that only a “foundling” can inherit. Meanwhile, Barbara, a very idealistic young woman, has joined the Salvation Army, trying to redeem the souls of the poor through Christian handouts. She has persuaded her fiancé Adolphus Cusins, a professor of Greek, to join her. (Cusins is closely based on the real-life classical scholar Gilbert Murray, a good friend of Shaw’s. Like the character, Murray was Australian and attained eminence in Oxford.) By the start of Act III, Barbara has become disillusioned with the Army, because it has accepted money from Undershaft, and Adolphus has fallen under the sway of Undershaft. Act III completes the conversion of all present – except for the resolutely proper Victorian Lady Britomart – to the heretical philosophy of Undershaft. The problem of finding a foundling to succeed to the fortune is solved in an unexpected way.
PART ONE: MUSIC

Extracts from Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, The Threepenny Opera (1928)
Music by Weill, lyrics by Brecht, English translation by Marc Blitzstein (1956)

This famous music-drama, loosely based on John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera (1728) offers a Marxist critique of capitalism in an appealing musical and dramatic form. Its premiere was in Berlin in 1928. By 1933, Brecht and Weill had been forced to leave Germany. Brecht remained in Europe (especially Denmark and Sweden), returning to Germany after the war. Weill first moved to Paris, but then moved to New York in 1935 and lived there until his death in 1950. He enjoyed much success in the U. S., and his wife Lotte Lenya continued to play the role of Jenny in many productions. Once he was no longer collaborating with Brecht, he became less doctrinaire. He commented to his wife that he was unable to “set the Communist Manifesto to music.”

1. “Pirate Jenny,” sung by Jajah Wu

The chambermaid Jenny imagines a fantastic tale of revenge against her class oppressors.

2. “The Barbara Song,” sung by Lynette Li

Polly Peachum declares to her parents that she has married the infamous criminal Macheath, by singing of the respectable and courteous men she has rejected and the irresistible appeal of a man who treats her badly. The song expresses the standard Marxist critique of romantic love.

3. “Army Song,” sung by Lynette Li and Martha Nussbaum

The criminal Macheath and London’s chief of police Tiger Brown recall their service in the British colonial army in Africa. Their account of British cruelty to native populations expresses Brecht’s view of the connection between capitalism and colonial oppression. The German original makes it clear that the soldiers are motivated in part by racial hatred.

4. “Second Threepenny Finale,” sung by Martha Nussbaum, with Jajah Wu, Lynette Li, and a surprising intervention

Mrs. Peachum (who, as a madam, exploits a group of prostitutes in the streets of London) reflects on the absurdity of offering moral explanations for human behavior, when economic need and selfishness drive all actions. MN has heavily revised Blitzstein’s translation of the lyrics, which, written for Broadway during the McCarthy Era, omitted Marxist vocabulary and softened the message. One part of the German I have been unable to capture is a reference to deporting people as one example of humanity’s brutal conduct – highly significant for Brecht and Weill at the time, as for us today.

Pianist: Gary DeTurck (Law School Class of 2015)

PART TWO: DRAMA

Act III of George Bernard Shaw, Major Barbara (1905)

Scene I: The Library in Lady Undershaft’s house in Wilton Crescent
Scene II: The Model Town of Perivale St. Andrews, near the high explosive sheds

Director: Paxton Williams, ‘14
Assistant Director: Stacey Petrek, ‘17

Cast:

Reader, extracts from Shaw’s Preface ............................................ David Weisbach
Barbara Undershaft ................................................................. Alison LaCroix
Sarah Undershaft, her younger sister ........................................ Jennifer Nou
Lady Britomart Undershaft, their mother .................................. Martha Nussbaum
Stephen Undershaft, their brother ........................................... Will Baude
Adolphus Cusins, a professor of Greek ...................................... John Rappaport
Charles Lomax, Sarah’s fiancé .................................................. William Birdthistle
Andrew Undershaft, father of the three, estranged from his wife ...... Richard McAdams
Merriman, a servant ............................................................... Stacey Petrek, ’17
Bilton, a foreman in the munitions factory ................................. Joel Kim, ’16
Well-fed workers in the company town ..................................... Kirstie Brenson
Devin Carpenter, Brent Cooper, Matt Enloe, Roberto Jose, Ja Yon Kim, Scott Henney and Eric Maier.

Cello Solo: Gary De Turck

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