



CLOSE SHAVIAN
Staller picks Shaw's
mighty brain.

Shaw business

David Staller's Project Shaw offers GBS from A to Z. By **Adam Feldman**

David Staller seems to find self-reinvention a necessity. Born in Illinois, he moved to New York in the 1970s to dance with an apprentice company of the Joffrey Ballet; shortly thereafter, he moved to Los Angeles to study cello with Rostropovich. As a thespian, Staller has trained with Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Uta Hagen; he has also acted on and off Broadway, performed a cabaret show at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel and written scripts for the intros on Turner Classic Movies. As he summarizes his helter-skelter career: "I've been all over the place."

The latest rebirth for this quintessential Renaissance man is Project Shaw, his series of free monthly readings of all 50 or so plays by the matchlessly inflammatory social dramatist George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950). "The impetus began when Bush was elected," Staller says of his ambitious undertaking, which he has produced and directed since January. "I mean, I personally seem to represent almost every group that Bush and his administration hate. I was just so mortified—politically, socially, humanistically, intellectually—at

their loathing of the people that they've been hired to look after." Lacking money to contribute to liberal-democratic causes, he decided to stage the complete works of English theater's wittiest freethinker. "I thought that rather than making an overt political statement, it would be an opportunity for people to be entertained, and subliminally absorb the energy put out by Shaw's sensibility and his Fabian ideals," he says. "It's about having courage to forge one's individual path in life, while taking responsibility for one's place in society: Every one of his plays deals with those issues."

Now 48—though his transatlantic charm and Dennis Quaid-ish grin make him seem considerably younger—Staller first discovered Shaw when, as a child visiting his expat father in London, he heard an archival interview with the playwright on the radio. "He began talking about his philosophies so simply, like a great priest or rabbi, with quotes like, 'Life isn't about finding yourself, life is about creating yourself,'" Staller recalls. "I froze and stared at the radio, like you see pictures of people doing in the '30s. And as soon as the broadcast was over, I ran to the library. It was almost cathartic for me, that somebody so revered was such a humanist."

Held at the 250-seat Players Club in

Gramercy, Staller's readings have attracted starry casts eager to dig into Shaw's meaty language. Fritz Weaver, Charlotte Rae, Tovah Feldshuh, Marc Kudisch and Brian Murray are among those who have participated; Alec Baldwin, Cherry Jones and Rosemary Harris have expressed interest in future installments. (Less high-profile participants have included *TONY*'s own David Cote and yours truly.) And audiences have been no less enthusiastic. "The Players starts taking reservations at 10am on the first Monday of every month," Staller

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says. "By 4:30pm we're booked. And that's before the cast is announced, sometimes before people even know what the play is." (Would-be audiences should therefore circle September 5 on their calendars; this week's reading of the obscure *John Bull's Island*—Shaw's only Irish play, written at the behest of Yeats—is sold-out, and no reading is scheduled for August.)

There are challenges, Staller concedes, to tackling some of Shaw's lesser-known works: "Back to

Methuselah—I have no idea how I'm going to do that one. It has 44 speaking parts, and it lasts almost that many hours. I'll tell people to bring sleeping bags and lock the doors." And there are practical pressures as well. "I haven't been able to work as an actor, because this is a full-time job," he blithely admits. "So I've been temping at night, and selling off my paintings and silver and stuff." But the Project Shaw readings are just the first step in a larger mission for Staller and his Gingold Theatrical Group. "Our plan is to find a theater space, produce two Shaw plays a year and also commission new plays," he explains. "I'm hoping that we'll interest mostly younger writers to write according to the Shavian precepts."

Meanwhile, he's glad when Shaw's works get full productions—as in last year's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (in which he appeared) and the upcoming Broadway revival of *Heartbreak House*. "Individual thought is dangerous, and that's what Shaw most encouraged us to do: to create ourselves in a responsible, unique way and live our lives as fully as we can," he says. "It sounds simple enough, but it's a lot."

Project Shaw: John Bull's Island is at the Players Club on Monday 17. See Off Broadway.