Hobson’s Choice

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INTRODUCTION

HOBSON’S CHOICE – PROGRESSIVE AND CONSERVATIVE

Harold Brighouse (1882-1958) was the author of over twenty plays, of which only one is still regularly performed today: Hobson's Choice. He was, along with writers such as Stanley Houghton (author of Hindle Wakes) part of a group of writers known as the 'Manchester School'. The theatre producer Anne Horniman who was based at The Gaiety Theatre in the early years of the twentieth-century encouraged these writers to produce work inspired by local themes and issues. The British premiere of Hobson’s Choice was at The Gaiety Theatre in 1916 and it has been produced regularly throughout England ever since. It was filmed successfully with Brenda de Banzie in the role of Maggie and John Mills as Willie.

When modern audiences watch the play we interact with it in three times simultaneously, the time the play is set (1880), the time it was written (1916) and the time we are watching the play (the present day). One of the reasons the play is still regularly produced is that these three times continue to resonate with each other in fascinating ways. In 1880 many of the most cherished beliefs of the ‘Victorian age’ still held sway in the lower middle-class society the world depicts. Many men like Hobson believed in the central role of marriage and family life; that marriage and child-rearing was the only proper occupation for women; that material and social advancement would only be gained by hard work, and the absolute obedience was due to the father of the house.

By 1916, however, many of these beliefs were being questioned at all levels of English society. Emily Pankhurst and the suffragettes were campaigning for votes for women; and Marie Stopes had started to distribute information about birth-control techniques. By the time the play was premiered women were doing jobs in factories and the public services their mothers would never have contemplated because so many male workers were away fighting in World War One. The emerging socialist movements across Europe were questioning the idea that one individual from the very bottom of society could ever progress through merit and hard-work alone in a society that seemed designed to reserve the best jobs and educational opportunities for the sons of those in the upper and middle classes.

In the present day many of the characters’ concerns and beliefs strike us as belonging to a bygone age. The idea of a father forbidding his daughters to marry because it will cost too much would not work in a middle-class family in
Salford today, because the dowry or ‘marriage portion’ has fallen out of use. The idea that a shopkeeper would face social and professional ruin for coming home drunk and falling into a cellar would similarly not work. However, the central conflicts in the play are as valid for us today as they were a hundred and twenty years ago. Authoritarian fathers and independent-minded daughters still quarrel. Children have to decide what to do with aged relatives who need to be cared for.

Brighouse dramatises these issues superbly in the characters of Hobson and Maggie. His basic structure is very conventional; the revolt of independent-minded offspring against their overly restrictive parents. This has been the basis for drama since well before Shakespeare. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, the four young lovers are brought by their parents before the ruler of Athens for disobeying their parents’ marriage plans. Hobson represents the ‘Victorian parent’ in all his most traditional and dictatorial conduct. Maggie, by contrast, represents the new age and the new role women were starting to claim for themselves at the start of the twentieth century. They believed they should be able to make their own choices about marriage; about having an education equipping them not just for child-rearing but for a career, an equal partner in a marriage rather than a dutiful and obedient wife.

In its treatment of the relationships between men and women, between families and business, Brighouse comes down firmly on the side of the progressive. Maggie’s marriage and business both prosper in a relationship based on equality and trust: Willie does the washing-up as well as the boot making. Characters such as Vickey and Alice, who depend on men for their income, are criticised. Willie’s hard work is held up as far more manly than Albert (who is a lawyer) and Fred (whose money is inherited rather than the product of his own efforts). Hobson himself is punished for his reliance on his daughters and Willie to do the hard work of keeping the business afloat. Education is seen as the key to getting on: without the ability to read and write Willie can never own his own business, but will always be working for someone else.

The dramatic structure of the play is also caught between the Victorian tradition and more modern styles of drama. The setting of the play in a lower middle-class world of work, the Lancashire dialect speech employed by the characters, and the introduction of social issues into the action all place Brighouse in the movement of ‘realistic drama’ which was revolutionising drama across Europe between 1880 and 1914 though authors such as Zola, Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw. Plays such as Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, first seen in England in 1881, had put the domestic and business lives of ordinary characters on stage in realistic domestic settings to explore issues, which authors believed audiences needed to be made aware of.
This theatre reacted against more melodramatic forms of theatre, which had dominated the nineteenth-century. These were populated by lurid plots, which depended on extreme twists and turns, stage spectacle and sentimental endings. One of the most popular melodramas in mid-Victorian England, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, demands the burning of a barn on-stage and climaxes in the unmaking of the heroine as a scheming adulteress by a previous husband she has tried to murder. She then goes insane and dies in the course of her final speech.

Hobson’s Choice is, however, not able to free itself completely from the influence of more melodramatic forms of theatre. In particular the climax to Act One, with Hobson’s whipping of Willie and Willie’s sudden change of heart in agreeing to marry Maggie, would not seem out of place in a Victorian melodrama. The stage direction at the end of Act Three seems to hark back to another dominant form of Victorian theatre, farce. The plot device whereby Maggie is able to trick Hobson into giving Vickey and Alice the money they need to marry by the invented law suit appears to strain credibility, though we can well believe Hobson’s fear of being the subject of a lawsuit in which his drunkenness would be made public.

John Savident as Hobson
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO HOBSON’S CHOICE

CHANGES IN WOMEN’S ROLES

Mid-Victorian England had a very clear view of what the ideal role for women was in society. Their place was in the family home while the man went out to work. She should run the house, offer the necessary support to her husband and fulfil her destinies as a mother by being wholly concerned with pregnancy, childbirth and childcare.

This view was reflected in the legal status of women. Not only could they not vote, they could not hold property independently from their husband. Their husbands had the right to beat and even rape a disobedient wife. If women ran away they could be returned to the family home by force. In the event of divorce the court would always award custody of the children to the father, even if it was the husband’s adultery that had split the couple. Lastly, in the event of the husband’s death, the wife had no right to the husband’s inheritance. He could leave it to whomever he pleased.

From 1870 onwards a succession of new laws reflected a huge shift in society’s view of women. For the first time a woman such as Maggie could:

- Hold, manage and dispose of her own property and earnings from employment.
- Gain custody of their children in the event of divorce and act as their guardian without the consent of the husband.
- Divorce her husband and gain maintenance for her children in the case of assault or her husband being sent to jail without the blame falling on herself.
- Have violent assault by her husband treated as a criminal offence.

However, there were other factors, which ran contrary to these changes. Rising affluence at all levels of society meant women were increasingly expected to remove themselves from the work place. Far less working class women worked in 1890 than 1840. Though exceptional women might gain access to university or the girls’ grammar, the roles that men and women were taught were getting more conservative in mass education:
'Boys needed instruction in 'courage, self-control, hard-work, endurance and protection of the weak', wrote one prominent educationalist in 1911; girls, by contrast, needed to be taught 'gentleness, care for the young and helpless, interest in domestic affairs, and admiration for the strong and manly character in men'.

Maggie was untypical of women of her class at the end of the nineteenth-century in working: and even more so in choosing to for reasons other than the need for income to ensure the family’s survival. In 1871 just over 31% of English and Welsh women were recorded as working. The trend was downwards, and by 1891 the figure had dropped to 27%.

By the time the play was written many campaigners for greater equality for women had focused on the right to vote as a key barrier. Emily Pankhurst and the suffragettes were campaigning through direct action in public (most famously when one threw herself under the King’s horse at a race meeting).
WORK

Work was the overwhelming indicator of social status and economic prosperity in Victorian England: having a job was far more important to a man’s identity than the right to vote or owning a property. It was also a moral duty and a psychological passion: though women and children were restricted by law, the right of the Victorian working man to work as long and as hard as he wished was cherished. From the top to bottom of society men regularly worked a ten-hour day and a six-day week. Authors such as Samuel Smiles regarded ‘hard work’ as an essential virtue. By hard work men would not only earn money for themselves and their family, they would also become morally improved as they relied on their own resources rather than charity or the Poor Law.

The character of the respectable working man became a key mid-Victorian figure, who created social harmony by working for the good of all both at work and at home. Though he might be fiercely independent and critical of fools, he would never question the established order.

Our image of the Victorian working man, for example in the paintings of Salford life by the artist LS Lowry, is of huge mills and factories. These did employ vast numbers of workers in the new industrial centres of the north, the West Midlands and South Wales. However a man was just as likely to work in a small business such as Hobson’s shoe shop.

There is no question that Willie earns a working class wage at the start of the play. We know that Hobson pays Willie eighteen shillings a week, which gives him an annual income of just over forty-six pounds. However, this was less than a fifth of the income that Hobson himself, when running the business successfully, or Doctor MacFarlane, could hope to earn around three hundred pounds a year.

Everyone in the play is very conscious of how their status in society is defined by their job. Mrs Hepworth is clearly a wealthy upper class individual who has no need to work. She has her own horse-drawn carriage and she has the spare capital to loan to Willie and Maggie. Albert as a lawyer is clearly respectable middle class. Hobson’s status as local businessman enables him to be a respectable pillar of the community: the vicar’s warden at St Philip’s. Willie, Tubby and Ada are all working class.
THE BOOT AND SHOE INDUSTRY

Hobson’s workshop of 1880 is a very traditional shop in which Tubby and Willie made all the shoes, boots and clogs sold in the shop by hand. Shoe-making was a complex and skilled craft, and thus unlike other industries such as cotton, iron or coal it was not affected by the industrial revolution of the first half of the nineteenth century. To make a shoe or boot Willie would have cut the pattern for the ‘upper’ from a leather skin. The various parts of the ‘upper’ would then have been stitched together before being moulded onto the last – a wooden model of the foot. Wealthy customers such as Mrs Hepworth would have had a unique last made which copied their feet exactly. After lasting the sole and heel would be stitched on, and finally the shoe would be ‘finished’ to make it waterproof, and presentable. Willie would have learnt all these skills during a seven-year apprenticeship in which he would have worked at Hobson’s for very little while learning the trade and doing all the odd jobs required in the workroom. He may even have lived in the workroom and slept on the floor.

The shoe and boot industry was changing very rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century. The traditional workshop in which boots were hand-made by master craftsmen was facing competition from factory-made American products and with the invention of sewing machines that could stitch soles and uppers. By the time the play was written only the wealthier customers, such as Mrs Hepworth, would have their soles and boots hand-made. Ordinary customers would buy boots and shoes made at the new factories such as Clarks or Manfield, and only come to Mossop and Hobson’s to get them repaired. The Mechanised manufacturing process required a much lower level of skill and Willie’s successors would have had a brief training period rather than the long apprenticeship.
POVERTY AND THE WORKHOUSE

The 1834 Poor Law was meant to prevent the working classes thought work-shy and idle from depending on charity ‘outdoors’ – i.e. in their own home. The government believed the able bodied could always find work if they tried. The new law with its ‘workhouse test’ meant that if applicants for poor relief were deemed ‘able bodied’ they could only have Poor Relief ‘indoors’ by entering the workhouse.

Workhouses were also meant to be unpleasant; to provide a safety net against death but without the possibility of living conditions which were more pleasant than the poorest independent labourer could provide for his family. In practice families of such labourers could not be colder, worse clothed, dirtier, more malnourished etc. inside the workhouse than outside. The harshness instead came in the prison-like regime.

The aspect of the regime most feared and dreaded was the rigid separation of the sexes and age groups. On entering the house, families were automatically broken up, wives were separated from husbands, and mothers from children; this happened to the aged as well as the able-bodied, and in some houses members of a family literally might not see each other again until they discharged themselves and resumed an independent life. Alongside the misery the other features of workhouse life seemed much less repulsive. The drab workhouse clothing, deliberately intended to destroy individuality, and the standard workhouse haircut, which made paupers instantly recognisable if they went out in public; the strict hours compulsory chapel, silent periods, exercise periods, and the largely pointless labour for the fit and not so fit in stone-breaking or oakum-picking: all these were regular features of institutional life. To the authorities they added up to conditions, which sustained life in physically adequate and morally satisfactory rigorous fashion, while discouraging all but the genuinely destitute from applying. To the poor they added up to punitive conditions, punishing them for their poverty.
HOUSING

In late Victorian England, as today, the size of a family's income and social status determined the number of rooms in their house. The poorest labouring families lived in one-room lets, within the courts or back-to-back housing. The first step on the rung of respectability was a terraced house with your own front door: the tiny 'two up, two down' with sometimes just a ladder instead of stairs to connect the upper and lower rooms. The growth of high-density urban housing in cities such as Manchester/Salford meant that Victorians became obsessed with access to clean water, fresh air and sanitation as necessary to fighting infectious diseases. The water closet and private mains water was slowly being introduced into newly built working-class housing from 1850 onwards to replace communal privies and water pipes.

The cellar-room was much the lowest status form of housing: in an era before electric light it received little natural light. It would be damp and dirty. Maggie, in particular, is making a huge sacrifice in living standards to set up home with Willie in the Oldfield Road cellar.
MANCHESTER AND SALFORD

Harold Brighouse was born and brought up in Manchester, and many of his plays are set in the cities of Manchester and Salford. Though they are legally separate cities, Manchester and Salford have been one urban environment since the industrial revolution.

Manchester/Salford was the ‘shock city’ of the world in the first half of the nineteenth century: the city in which the coming of the factories and mills of the industrial revolution had not only transformed industry and employment, but created a totally new form of society. A new class of workers lived in crowded terrace housing next to the factories and mills they worked in, while the city centre was being cleared to become a commercial and civic centre. Outside the slums new suburbs were being built for the middle classes who for the first time ever commuted in to the city centre by rail or tram. Social commentators from around the world, most famously the German political and social writer Frederich Engels, came to look and write about Manchester to see the way city life was heading. The unsanitary conditions, poor housing and cramped living conditions led many commentators to deplore the harshness of the new city life.

In the famous Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) Manchester statistics were put beside those of Rutland. This was hardly intended as a compliment.

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By 1880 Manchester/Salford was no longer the world’s newest and most
shocking city, the baton having been passed to Chicago. To audiences across
the world in 1916 it would still have been associated with industry and mass-
produced goods (as for example Taiwan is today). Manchester was also the
base of a school of political thought (‘the Manchester School’) which stressed
the importance of free trade and competition as being in the best interests of
everybody in society, however vulnerable or weak.

Phrases such as ‘Man must be the architect of his own fame’, ‘Each man for
himself’ and ‘Your bad weather, and your bad times, are my good ones’ were
frequently heard at public meetings and in the newspapers. John Bright, one
of the school’s most famous thinkers, is referred to by Jim. In the play we see
that free trade and competition have enabled Maggie and Willie to build up
their business through hard work and dedication, at the expense of the
drunken Hobson.
Act I
It is late Victorian Manchester. Henry Hobson, the owner of a boot-making business, is a wealthy widower with three unmarried daughters, Alice, Vickey and Maggie. They run his shop and his home whilst he spends much of his time in the Moonraker’s Inn. Hobson lectures his daughters on their “uppish” ways and claims that they are trying to control him. He complains that if Alice and Vickey continue to act in this way, he will marry them off. Hobson considers Maggie, the eldest, to be too old to marry and needs her to be at home to care for him and run the shop.

Mrs Hepworth, one of Hobson’s most esteemed customers, enters the shop searching for Willie, the boot maker. She claims her boots are the best ever made and instructs him to tell her if he ever leaves to work at an alternative shop.

Hobson seeks advice with his tradesmen friends on how to handle his daughters. Jim Heeler suggests he gets them off his hands and wed as soon as possible. Hobson’s decision is to keep Maggie at home whilst Vickey and Alice are less useful to him. However, he is soon made aware of marriage settlements, a subject matter that has not occurred to him before. He is somewhat averse to parting with his money and discards the idea of weddings. When Hobson returns, Maggie astonishes him by saying that she intends to marry without a settlement.

Maggie questions Willie on his future aspirations. She learns that he intends to stay in her father’s business since this is where he learnt his trade so well. Maggie suddenly proposes to Will; she believes that with his boot making skills and her excellence in managing the shop, they could make a successful business and life together. The staggered Will is already engaged to Ada Figgins, his landlady’s daughter. Maggie insists that Will moves out of his home and puts an end to his relations with Ada immediately.

Maggie tells her sisters of her intentions to marry Will. They are horrified to hear that Maggie plans to wed so much lower than her own status; he is after all their employee. When Hobson returns, he is also informed of the situation. Although he is against the match, Maggie stands her ground. Hobson calls Willie to the shop floor threatening to beat him but he too manages to hold fort. When Hobson goes to strike him, Will quickly kisses Maggie declaring that if Hobson intends to beat either of them again, they will immediately leave the shop for good. Hobson is bewildered by such incredulous behaviour and stands undecided on what to do next.
Act II
A month has passed. Maggie and Will have left Hobson’s. Alice and Vickey are left to manage the business but without Maggie’s help they are struggling. Will and Maggie’s wedding day has arrived.

Meanwhile, Hobson has been spending more time at the Moonraker’s Inn. In a state of inebriation he has managed to somehow fall into the cellar of the local corn merchant, by the name of Beenstock.

When he finally shows up, he is served with a summons for trespassing, spying, and damaging Beenstock’s property. A ‘fine’ will have to be paid in order to keep the case from going to court.

Act III
It is Maggie and Will’s wedding dinner, they are enjoying the company of Vickey and her suitor Freddie Beenstock, and Alice and Albert Prosser, in the cellar of their lodgings. Hobson arrives, so Maggie quickly ushers all her guests into the next room. He is in desperate need of her help in dealing with the court summons; terrified of the public scandal that would come with it. Albert Prosser comes out from his hiding place and it is eventually settled that £500 will be paid to stop the case from going any further. Hobson eventually realizes this money has intended to be used to set up Alice and Vickey’s marriages. Maggie has clearly been instrumental in manipulating the entire situation. He is disgusted by his daughters and declares that he is disowning them and looks forward to his own freedom whilst predicting a desolate life for their future husbands.

Act IV
A year has passed. Hobson has been drinking to the extreme and caused himself a breakdown. As a result, the business has suffered greatly and there is little to do since there are no customers. Doctor MacFarlane visits and recommends abstinence and Maggie to return to live in the house to look after him.

Maggie is insistent that the decision on whether to return must be made by Will. Both Alice and the now pregnant Vickey are used to their sophisticated lifestyles and refuse to look after their father assuming it to be their elder sister’s role. Vickey and Alice are a little concerned that by not helping their father they will lose out on their inheritance. However, when Willie arrives, he examines their stock and informs them that in fact, the business is worth very little. Hobson makes Willie an offer saying that he can come back and be a boot-hand again. Willie explains that he already has most of Hobson’s customers and is only prepared to come back if Hobson allows him to become an equal partner in the business and he himself accepts the role of sleeping
partner. Willie also states that the shop is to be called ‘Mossop’s’. Maggie who is startled by Willie’s assertive nature insists on ‘Mossop and Hobson’. Hobson has no choice but to agree to the terms and asks Albert Prosser to sort out the legalities. He has become a successful and confident businessman. Hobson has learnt his lesson.
HAROLD BRIGHOUSE

The son of a Manchester businessman and his wife, Harold Brighouse was born in Eccles, Lancashire in 1882 and was educated at Manchester Grammar School before leaving at the age of sixteen to work in the cotton trade.

His writing career was prolific, resulting in over seventy plays, most of which were comedies about the people and events of his local Lancashire. He was one the first dramatists of the twentieth century to turn away from metropolitan and upper-class subjects to write about provincial life and the working and middle classes. Brighouse's dominant mode was realism, and he was associated with the Manchester school of realistic drama that also included W S Houghton and Allan Monkhouse.

Brighouse's long association with Manchester's Gaiety Theatre, which opened in 1908, included productions of 'Lonesome-Like' (1911), one of his many one-act plays; 'The Odd Man Out' (1912); 'The Northerners' (1914), a play about the Luddites; and 'Zack' (1920).

'Hobson's Choice' (1915), his most well known work, is about an irascible, self-pitying owner of a Salford shoe shop. Its energy and comedy animate Brighouse's portraits of the Lancashire people. The play was initially meant to be set at the time it was written, but with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 he decided to change it to 1880, which he later considered added to the play's depth.

Brighouse continued to work throughout his life as a theatre critic for the Manchester Guardian. His autobiography, 'What I Have Had', appeared in 1953. He died in 1958.
AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR, JONATHAN CHURCH

Why has this particular play stood the test of time? It was written over 100 years ago.
There are a number of reasons. It’s got a perfect blend of social commentary and comedy and many of the plays which have survived from around that period – Oscar Wilde for instance, have exactly that. I mention Oscar Wilde, because this feels like Brighouse’s Importance of Being Ernest. Of the plays he wrote, it was the most perfect. There is something about the mechanism that absolutely works. I think that the other reason it has survived is that it’s structure and the story are both very influenced by Shakespeare. There are King Lear parallels, a father with three daughters who have to make a choice about how they look after him. As we get deeper into the rehearsal period, we come across references to Taming of the Shrew, Twelfth Night. I think that there is something genuinely classic in its structure – the blend of pathos, romance and comedy have led to its popularity and its endurance. I have read a few other Brighouse plays and none of them quite get the balance right.

Do you think that when he wrote the play, he would have been likely to have had those Shakespearean references in his mind?
I just don’t see how he can’t have had King Lear in his mind. The point at which Hobson says ‘I’m not blind yet’ to his daughters, it feels to us like he knew it and I have half a hunch that I read a long time ago that was the case.

This is the second time that you have directed the play. How has the previous time influenced your experience this time? What do a different set of actors bring to it?
A show is only as good as the group of people you bring together to work on it. As a Director there is something quite scary about directing a play for the second time because if you don’t do it as well, you inevitably question why the pieces haven’t fit together this time and why my skills as a Director haven’t improved. The great thing it gives you is an in depth knowledge of how the play works because you know the play so well, so that when you are casting, you get a much clearer picture of who you are looking for in the characters. Also, I wasn’t as aware first time around of the depth of social commentary as I was this time in terms of setting up the class structure and therefore in the casting of Willie Mossop and Ada Figgins and Mrs Hepworth who are the extremes in the play, I was much clearer about what I was looking for this time.

The other thing I discovered from re-visiting the play and in order to make it really work one needs, on some level, Hobson to be domineering, violent, difficult to live with, alcoholic - all of those things and I think that through working on the play, I as a Director, have found it much easier to articulate those things in the rehearsal room.
AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SAVIDENT

What challenges does an actor face when he is playing a very well known role like Hobson, which has been played many times before him?

The same question could be put to an actor in a Chekhov or a Shakespeare play for instance and it’s the mark of a great play when different actors can put their own different slant on the play and the play still works.

I believe that this is a play of depth and quality. I believe that an actor should research thoroughly before tackling a role. I have looked in detail at the period in history in which the play is set, the woman’s suffragette movement of that time, the laws of the country which come up a couple of times in the play, even shoe making which at the time was a craft as there was no machinery involved in making either shoes or clogs. There are so many avenues which can be explored because it is such a rich play.

Although there are amusing incidents in the play I don’t see it as a light-hearted piece of writing. When I first encountered the play I thought it was a comedy, but it has such a depth in the relationships between the father and the girls and in Maggie’s relationship with Willie. We talk about women’s lib and the way women behave in today’s society and women who are very career minded and all these relevant subjects can be found in this play, which was set in the 1880’s and written in 1915.

Maggie, this extraordinary young woman who moulds this wonderful young man, Willie Mossop so there you have the archetypal career woman

How much sympathy do we have with Hobson and the way the three daughters behave towards him?

Hobson is a man of his time. He is not used to being questioned and used to being obeyed. I don’t see him as the brightest of man, although he has a good business which is respected in the time. He is a widower and in those days, if your wife died, it was custom and practice that the eldest daughter would take her place, running the house, taking the responsibilities, and that’s what happened then. At the end of the working day, the husband would go to the local pub and the wife would continue with the household chores. It wouldn’t have been uncommon for the wife to meet the husband outside the factory gates on payday to make sure that the weekly pay packet wasn’t wasted on drink that very same evening.

Hobson is not that bad. He doesn’t want to give a wedding settlement to the daughters – not because he is a miser, but that he is a Northerner of that period who is careful with his money.
Do we know from the text whether he built the business up from scratch or whether he inherited it from his own father?

It’s not stated in the play, but I am playing him as if he has inherited the business. If that in fact would have been true, then the implication would have been that Hobson didn’t have the business acumen to build a business up from scratch, nor indeed did he have the pride in the business that would have seen him continue to work hard. At the time when the play starts, Hobson has been resting very much on his laurels. He leaves his daughters to run the show. He is British middle class and proud of it.

We have painted quite a negative picture of Hobson – but despite being stubborn and difficult, at least he must have been somebody who had a big heart being prepared to give Willie Mossop an apprenticeship in the business. We ought to remember that Willie’s father was a ‘workhouse brat’ and it would have been very difficult to drag yourself up in those days being the son of a man who had spent his whole life in a workhouse.

John Savident as Henry Hobson
AN INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN BACKHOUSE

Do you think the issue of Women's Lib is at the heart of the play?

Despite its age I think the play has a really contemporary feel. I think it’s an extraordinary play of its time. Certainly with the material that I have as Maggie, the frustrations that woman have in the world today are often questioned. But writing in 1914/15, it was a remarkable thing for a male playwright to pick up and use as a substantial theme running through the play.

There is a great deal of modern feminist thought in the play and reading into it more and more, I have no doubt that Brighouse was attempting to champion the importance of the women's role in the workplace, woman voting, woman having a substantial role to play in the world.

Maggie dominates Willie and doesn’t appear to show him any affection. Is this Maggie’s ruthless side – is Willie a means to an end for her or do you think she has feelings for him?

My feeling is that Maggie does have a tenderness for Mossop. She has been watching him for six months before she launches her ‘assault’ on him and she doesn’t know how else to do it because she would have lived a very sheltered life. Maggie behaves as she does because of her circumstances. She has never had a boyfriend, she has never been kissed by a man, her mother died when she was very young, she has been working in the shop since she was ten, she has had to look after her father as well as bring up her sisters almost as a surrogate mother being 8 years older than Alice and probably 10 years older than Vicky. So Maggie had to grow up very quickly. She has probably barely had a moment in her life to think about men. One imagines that 6 months before we meet the characters at the beginning of the play, Maggie has an awakening. She realises that she has no future apart from the shop. Her two sisters will get married and leave her looking after both the shop and her alcoholic father for the rest of her life. The only man she comes into contact with on a regular basis is Willie Mossop who is downstairs making shoes. Gradually over a period of time she realises that he is more than just an excellent shoemaker and that’s what we are trying to play in this production.

Dylan Charles as Willie with Carolyn Backhouse as Maggie
INTERVIEW WITH SIMON HIGLETT

Like Jonathan, you have worked on the show before, 18 years ago. What similarities and differences have you come across this time?

Yes, last time I designed the show was at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and I encountered similar problems with the WYP being a thrust stage and Chichester also being a thrust. In truth it’s not really a three-sided play, it sits more comfortably in a proscenium arch where the scenes can be played to an audience out front. The fact that this production embarks on a national tour after Chichester compounds the problem further because we need to make the play work for four weeks here before moving into pros arch theatres.

At the time I was asked to do the play this time, I was lucky enough to be in Salford so I went to Chapel Street where the fictional shop was set and indeed to the Lowry museum – both of which gave me a great inspiration for the set. I found books on Salford ‘then and now’, which were tremendously useful in formulating my ideas. When you see the set, there is a street running around the edge which started me off and there was a particular painting with a shop on a corner and combining these two ideas, I thought it would be interesting to learn something of the exterior of the shop as well as the necessity of being inside the interior for the most of the scenes of the play.

Because the show is touring and it takes place in three locations, I have tried to combine the three locations into two and what we have ended up with a big pivoting truck which hopefully will work.

One of the problems which any designer encounters when looking at this play, is how to represent the cellar. In Chichester, there is a sub stage so one can actually use a trap door set in one position, but as the stage floor is cut for the Chichester run of the play, it wouldn’t be possible to accommodate all the different positions of the traps doors in the other regional theatres and in fact, some theatres don’t have a trap door at all. We have come up with a solution which is to use the shop counter as a screen for an imaginary trap door and to hide the two actors in the counter until they appear. Let’s hope the actors get on because it will be very cramped down there!

In terms of the costumes, as a designer you have to make early decisions whether to hire or whether to buy. The problem we found with the ladies costumes is that the hires were a little too smart and because they are hired, you can’t distress them. Other than that it’s been pretty straightforward. Quite often, large or short people need to have costumes made for them but there are some amazing wardrobe stores – the most notable of which is called ‘Angels’ in London where you can find almost anything. Many of the film costumes end up back at Angels so that they can be rehired in future.
What other problems does one encounter when designing a set to tour?

Most designers work in the same way in the first instance. They get a ground plan from each of the theatres that the play will be touring to. Then they produce a ground plan for the set, which will fit all venues but most importantly the smallest venue, so that the mechanics of the play don’t change from theatre to theatre. The space around the outside of the set will vary, but the space within the set must remain constant.

Set and Costumes by Simon Higlett
ESSAY QUESTIONS

1) In act one Maggie is viewed as an "old maid". How does the author convince you to change your mind?

2) 'Hobson's Choice' chronicles a shift in the balance of power between the generations and the sexes – show how this occurs in the course of the play.

3) At the end of the play, Maggie says to Will, “You’re the man I made you and I’m proud.” How far is this true?

4) Compare and contrast the behaviour of Will Mossop in Act 1 and 4.

5) Discuss the character of Will Mossop. What advice would you give to an actor playing Willie’s role in a stage production of the play?

6) Discuss the characters of Maggie and Hobson in their dramatic context. Comment on how they illustrate and highlight the roles of men and women in their Victorian social context.

7) What have you found interesting about the ways Brighouse presents the character of Maggie in act 1?

8) To what extent do you sympathize for Hobson? How much is alcohol to be blamed?

9) Why do you think Hobson’s Choice still has relevance to an audience today?

10) Hobson is a “domineering patriarch, who treats his three daughters as slave labour and disposable assets”. To what extent do you agree with this description of the protagonist?

11) “Simply mild period charm”. Do you think there is more to Hobson’s Choice than this?

12) “Hobson’s Choice is both comic and poignant”. Discuss this quotation with reference to specific moments in the play.

13) The saying ‘Hobson’s Choice’ is said to translate as “No choice at all – the only option being the one that is offered to you”. What relevance does the title have to the play?
CREDITS:

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