

# The Shavian

The Journal of The Shaw Society  
AUTUMN 2010 VOLUME 11 No 4

## SHAW AND HITLER

A production of Shaw's *On The Rocks* in Nazi Germany is the subject of a one-woman show in October.

Phillip Riley has been investigating the play *LILIA!*

Lilia Skala was the first woman architect in Austria. But she left the profession to become a leading lady in Max Reinhardt's theatre. She played Lady Chavender in the 1934 Munich Kammerspiele production of *On The Rocks*.

(She also played Catherine Petkoff in the 1948 American Wing Theatre production of Shaw's *Arms And the Man*, having emigrated to New York in 1939 – where she started work in a zipper factory and gradually fought her way back into the theatre and Broadway. She also appeared in television and films, winning an Academy Award nomination for *Lilies of the Field*, opposite Sidney Poitier).

Her remarkable life is the subject of a one-woman show by her granddaughter Libby Skala. Called *LILIA!*, it will play at the Pentameter's Theatre in Hampstead from October 26 to November 13.

*On The Rocks* is one of Shaw's most contentious plays. Rarely performed in Britain, it argues that democracy is a failure and that it would be better to embrace Fascism and dictatorship wholeheartedly. The Preface condemns "ridiculous hotheaded attacks on Germany" and says much in favour of the Communist experiment.

It also begins with a somewhat chilling defence of extermination by Shaw:

**"In this play a reference is made by a Chief of Police to the political necessity for killing people: a necessity so distressing to the statesman and so terrifying to the common citizen that nobody except myself (as far as I know) has ventured to examine it directly on its own merits, although every government is obliged to practise it on a scale varying from the execution of a single murderer to the slaughter of millions of quite innocent persons."**

(This was at a time when many Western intellectuals were unaware of the horrors of Communist and Fascist states. At a time when Stalin's bloodbath was at its height, Sidney and Beatrice Webb had written *Communism: a New Civilisation*, having been duped into regarding it as a noble and progressive experiment.)

But the interesting thing about *LILIA!* is that it depicts the production of *On The Rocks* actually in Hitler's Germany. It was running during the famous Night Of The Long Knives, when Hitler discovered an assassination attempt against him and caused the conspirators actually to be shot in Munich, where the play was being performed.

Clearly, any play with political content ran a serious risk at the time and Lilia Skala's enacts some of her grandmother's experiences while appearing in the production. The play ends with a mob of the unemployed breaking into Downing Street, where the police are awaiting them with clubs. Sir Arthur Chavender, the Prime Minister, discusses the scene with his secretary:



**Hilda: But can't the police let them run away without breaking their heads? Oh look: that policeman has just clubbed quite an old man.**

**Sir Arthur: Come away: it's not a nice sight.**

There is discussion of whether the whole of Britain might rise up, to join the unemployed in their protests. But the play ends with merely a song and the stage direction: *Unemployed England can do nothing but continue to sing, as best it can, to a percussion accompaniment of baton thwacks.*

(Details from [www.Pentameter.co.uk](http://www.Pentameter.co.uk) or [www.LiliaThePlay.com](http://www.LiliaThePlay.com))