

QUOTATION

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW ON "HAVING" A PLAY

When I take my pen or sit down to my typewriter, I am as much a medium as Browning's Mr Sludge or Dinglas Home, or as Job or John of Patmos. When I write a play I do not foresee nor intend a page of it from one end to the other: the play writes itself. I may reason out every sentence until I have made it say exactly what it comes to me to say; but whence and how and why it comes to me, or why I persisted, through nine years of unrelieved market failure, in writing instead of in stockbroking or turf bookmaking or peddling, I do not know. You may say it was because I had a talent that way. So I had; but that fact remains inexplicable. What less could Mr Sludge say? or John Hus, who let himself be burnt rather than recant his "I don't know. Instruct me"?

When I was a small boy I saw a professional writing medium, pencil in hand, slash down page after page with astonishing speed without lifting his pencil from the blank paper we fed on to his desk. The fact that he was later transported for forgery did not make his performance and his choice of mediumship as his profession less unaccountable. When I was an elderly man, my mother amused herself with a planchette and a ouija, which under her hands produced what are called spirit writings abundantly. It is true that these screeds might have been called wishful writings (like wishful thinkings) so clearly were they as much her own story-telling inventions as the Waverly novels were Scott's. But why did she choose and practise this senseless activity? Why was I doing essentially the same as a playwright? I do not know. We both got some satisfaction from it or we would not have done it. (pp. 891-892)

From the preface to *Buoyant Billions* (1947). *The complete prefaces of Bernard Shaw*. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965, pp. 891-893. Compare with B. F. Skinner. (1999). A lecture on "having" a poem, pp. 391-401. *Cumulative record: Definitive Edition*. Acton MA: Copley Publishing Group. See also the Quotation, Igor Stravinsky on the Composer as a Locus, *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 1993, 60, 202.

Contributed by Victor G. Laties, Department of Environmental Medicine, University of Rochester Medical Center, Rochester, NY 14642.

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