The Review

Theatre review

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In the first 2 years of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson passed civil rights legislation, Medicare, and Headstart, the early childhood education programme for low income families, before he got lost in the swamps of Southeast Asia. Despite being counselled to go slow because his Southern mentors and Southern voters would resist his programmes, Johnson said he was committed to doing it all. As he said *'Well, what the hell is the presidency for?'* It may do the Democrats and President Obama a great deal of good to emulate Johnson on this point and ask themselves and their advisors the same question.

The president has been emphasising the increasing gap between the wealthy and the majority of the country as a problem that must be fixed for the US to succeed. The ACA, by providing support for all Americans to obtain health insurance and paying for it through taxing higher income citizens, is one of the most important efforts in 50 years to level that playing field a bit and create a more just country. Why not run on that?

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THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

**The National Theatre London,
17 July-12 September**

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), playwright, Nobel Prize, and Oscar winner, wrote *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) to meet the challenge of writing a tragedy.

The play opens with newly knighted physician Sir Colenso Ridgeon receiving notable colleagues while basking in the glory of his new anti-TB treatment. The self assured surgeon, convinced that everyone has 'blood poisoning' and if only he could remove their 'nuciform sac' they would be cured. The 'rich GP' who made a fortune offering 'cure guaranteed' even though admitting that the majority of illness is self-limiting, contrasted with the impoverished GP who has 'forgotten all my science' but poignantly remarks on the importance of clinical experience. Finally, two eminent and pompous physicians who pontificate hilariously.

We are then introduced to Mrs Dubedat, a beautiful woman who has sought out Ridgeon to treat her brilliant but immoral artist husband, who is dying from TB. Ridgeon only has the capacity to treat 10 patients, so is faced with the dilemma of whether 'to kill another man for his sake'. The other man in question turns out to be Ridgeon's impoverished GP colleague. We are invited to debate this ethical dilemma of rationing finite resources, with Ridgeon

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and his colleagues making an assessment based upon the morality of the proposed patients. The hypocrisy inherent in this is further exposed when we learn Ridgeon's desire for Mrs Dubedat has influenced his decision, in effect condemning her brilliant but flawed husband to death.

The play itself is wonderfully staged in this high quality National Theatre production. A medical audience will find the opening parody of hierarchy and quackery among physicians, surgeons, and GPs particularly entertaining. While the comedic moments are enjoyable, the 'tragedy' towards the end did not quite feel believable, and some of the characters lacked emotional depth. However, some of the problems of rationing, particularly within a private and competitive healthcare environment, enhance the relevance of this play to today's audience. I wonder what Bernard Shaw would make of the current healthcare reforms and whether he would still think that doctors are 'not a profession, we're a conspiracy'.

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