

Theatre in England 2013

Graduate Student Composite Journal

Alison Harper is a second year student in the English PhD program at the University of Rochester. Her research focuses on medieval literature, with specific interests in manuscript study, adaptation in the afterlife of texts and late medieval reading practices.

Kyle Huskin is a second year student in the English PhD program at the University of Rochester. Her research focuses on medieval literature, with specific interests in the relationships between vernacular and scholastic literature, the formal structures of texts, the means of text production and consumption, and reading practices of lay readers.

Scott O'Neil is a third year student in the English PhD program at the University of Rochester. His research focuses on Renaissance literature, with specific interests in dramatic texts, Shakespeare, and humanist pedagogy.

12/29/2012: *The Magistrate* at The National Theatre

Alison Harper

The National Theatre, 2:00, *The Magistrate*

Arthur Wing Pinero's 1885 play *The Magistrate* is an extremely entertaining farce and was amusingly witty on the page before I saw it in performance. The production at the National Theatre added some interesting elements and was also greatly improved by the fine acting, particularly the choices of gesture and movement the actors made to bring the play to life. The staging also seemed especially dynamic, and I think all the audience was struck with the appearance of the set upon entering the theatre. I spent some time trying to analyze exactly what was meant by the opening, which consisted of concentric circles pushing outwards towards the audience, as if we were looking sideways upon a tiered cake. The structure itself seemed to represent London, as the edges of the circles were cut in the shape of the city skyline, with a much rougher version on the back of the set behind. The whole thing was lit and gave a pleasant, light-hearted impression with the addition of a red bow and a gift tag attached reading 'The Magistrate'. The bow possibly reflected the Christmas season; another indication was the Christmas tree in the drawing room, which was not in the original stage instructions. The cake-like structure of the city appeared in this respect as some kind of Christmas present, presumably for the character of the Magistrate. The 'gift' of a night out at a disreputable hotel is an ambiguous one: he does ultimately gain more insight into

his marriage and a more peaceful family unit (with Cis leaving for Canada). But the more immediate consequences of the gift are much more distressing, and his new experiences of London mostly involve being chased through its streets by angry policemen.

When the play got underway, the staging intriguingly shifted as the opening part rose into the ceiling, and the back part came forward. It presented us with another set of concentric circles, this time shaped like an enormous eye, with a black pupil in the middle. The importance of the eye as symbolizing the inevitable exposure of secrets is made clear in the song that was sung before the first scene, about the difficulty of keeping anything secret, even that which was kept 'behind closed doors'. When this part of staging came forward on the set, it folded down to reveal an elegant drawing room. This fascinating mechanism folded up and down a few times in the course of the play, and retreated at the end of the first scene, to allow another set to rise from the floor, and show the set of the hotel. I doubt this added substantially to the audience's understanding of the play, but it definitely factored into our appreciation – several people afterwards commented on the ingenuity of the set changes. I've been lucky enough to see many productions at the National Theatre over the years, and even when there was nothing else remarkable about the plays, the staging is always fantastic. Another feature in *The Magistrate* was the way the set in each scene included writing on the wall, as describing steps in the progression of the plot. The first read 'the family skeleton' (1st scene, the drawing room), the second 'it leaves its cupboard' (2nd scene, hotel room), 'the skeleton rattles' (3rd scene, the magistrate's office), 'it crumbles' (4th scene, the

drawing room again - and the legend 'it crumbles' is written over the original 'the family skeleton'). I'm not entirely sure what the point was, but I liked the way it made Mrs Posket's secret appear like something dark and terrible out of a Gothic novel. It was entirely in keeping with the rest of the play, which was full of exaggerated, enthusiastic and overtly theatrical ideas and behaviours (such as the necessity of obeying the wishes of a woman, even at the expense of a male friend's life). A final note on the staging is that all the doors and windows in the hotel room and magistrate's office appear to have been slanted at a very odd angle. This suggested instability, perhaps, or the skewed perspective through which the characters were viewing themselves and their situations (according to the lie of Mrs Poskett, Mr Poskett's too-rigorous application towards his duty, the bizarre overly conscientious chivalry of Colonel Lukyn, etc).

With respect to the actors, two of the best were John Lithgow as the Magistrate and Joshua McGuire as Cis Farrington. Both appeared to be extremely physical actors and were constantly using body language and the space of the stage to make their roles more dynamic. Cis was especially thrilling in the first scene, where he is consistently sexually aggressive towards Beatie, lounging towards her on the sofa and sprawling against the door to prevent her escape. His acting is all predatory here, and the fact that we know he is 3 years older than her makes this slightly uncomfortable to watch. However, the fact that neither of them know it, that she clearly welcomes the attentions, and that he is hilariously short and un-intimidating in his Eton jacket, makes it incredibly funny, even more so for the nagging feeling that you shouldn't be laughing at it. Cis' behaviour throughout the

play was intriguing for how it could be read as both childish enthusiasm and a young dandy's carelessness, with his activity in running everywhere, jumping over sofas and pulling people around with him. From moment to moment, it was easy to see him as either a child or an adult, depending on your perspective. John Lithgow was the darling of the audience, though, being incredibly sympathetic in his frustrated, confused inability to make any effective decisions himself. This is accomplished mainly through the wonderful variety of faces he pulls in the performance, which seemed to express volubly every single emotion he experienced, and as such, gave the appearance of absolute truth. This childish simplicity played very well against Cis' odd maturity, and the scenes they had together were some of the best in the play.

12/30/2012: *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Royal Theatre Stratford East

Kyle Huskin

Jack and the Beanstalk (2012)

Directed by Dawn Reid

Based on the book by Paul Sirett

Performed by the Royal Theatre Stratford East

I tend to think of children's plays (and children's literature, especially fairytales, more generally) as kinds of morality plays in disguise, written to teach children elementary social mores as much as to entertain. As such, I tend to see them as agents of socialization just like any other – teaching children what behaviors are acceptable in society by showing validation of their proper “performance” and disapproval of their improper “performance.” I realize that this is probably not the most common approach to play analysis, and I will stick to more literary approaches in future entries, but I find the work of sociologist Erwin Goffman fascinating for its intersection of drama and social theory within what is essentially a symbolic interactionist perspective. Especially applicable is his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* where he posits that daily life is theatrical performance – even going so far as to call individuals “actors” – and that we try to present ourselves in certain ways to control how others perceive our “character.” There is a strong connection between Goffman's work and the works of sociologists Judith Butler and Judith Lorber, who see gender as learned behaviors: children watch adults performing gender, see some succeeding and some failing to conform to social expectations, and see the successful ones rewarded and the failing ones punished, thereby learning how they will perform their own genders...on and on in a big cycle that makes changes in gender roles a very difficult and slow-moving process. Consequently, I thought today's performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* strove to fill just such a sociological function, only tailored to show modern social expectations. While I thought the performance was excellent, I would take issue with the play on a sociological level because it promoted many ideas I find troubling.

What struck me most from the very beginning of the play was its almost absolute negation of moral ambiguity. The decision to mitigate moral conflicts could be related to the audience's generally young age, but fairytales are usually intended for young audiences, and the performers made an effort to appeal to the adult audience with their ribaldry. In an obvious deviation from the original, the director of this play presented Jack as an upstanding boy trying to find his way into adulthood, almost entirely abandoning his original presentation as a trickster-hero who steals the giant's gold coins, golden egg-laying hen, and self-playing harp. The thieving aspect of his character is only broached towards the end of the play when he brings back one of Henrietta's golden eggs, but this again mitigates moral conflict because Jack attains the golden egg with Henrietta's permission and convinces the other two to come with him of their own volition. Indeed, his act could almost be seen as humanitarian, as he liberates them from their subjugation, rather than profit-seeking, as the beans seem to have magically bestowed wealth and fame upon their household immediately after being planted. Additionally, the play removed any moral ambiguity from the two burglars. Although the redheaded one shows signs of morality in his desire to open a bed and breakfast, they generally appear to embrace evil and enjoy doing it; they even change Robin Hood's trademark phrase, singing instead "we take from the poor and give to the rich," to remove the ambiguity that perhaps they are helping those in need. The most ambiguous aspect of their nature is the fact that they are working for the ogre, but the play makes it clear that they have desired evil from birth, so there is no indication that they are forced to steal to

survive and evade the ogre's wrath; indeed, they seem a part of the ogre, as both had tattooed arms and repeated some of the same phrases.

The play's apparently black-and-white approach to good and evil made me consider its stance on other issues, particularly gender roles, and the play seemed to embrace a similarly black-and-white, heteronormative understanding of masculinity and femininity – a decision that is understandable for a play where much of the audience is just at the age when children begin discovering sex and gender distinctions. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, the characters conform completely to contemporary gender expectations, and the play promotes the idea, in keeping with Butler and Lorber's theories, that acting in accordance to such expectations leads to social acceptance. Conforming to modern, more flexible standards of femininity, Lucy still generally conforms to expectations of femininity, being more emotional and open with her feelings, but she can also assume the masculine-gendered role of detective and promote self-acceptance as strength. Because the original tale included no Lucy analogue, it seems plausible that the director added her specifically to appeal to young girls who would/could identify with the values she expresses. Jack, on the other hand, conforms to more rigid standards of masculinity as rationality, stolidity, and physical strength: unlike Lucy, he has to wait until everyone else is off-stage to express his emotions and cry, he has no friends but the imaginary Dizzy when he believes in magic and does other "immature" things, and he has to defeat the ogre with physical strength before being accepted and cheered on by the entire cast praising him for "being a man." Children desire acceptance from their parents and peers, and the play certainly promotes the

idea that conforming to these roles will provide them with such acceptance. I was reminded of sociologist Michael Kimmel's article, "Masculinity as Homophobia," in which he argues that various agents of socialization encourage young boys to conform to this rigid conception of masculinity or else face the social rejection of being called a "sissy" or "baby," both of which Jack was before he "grows up" and defeats the ogre. Although showing people conforming to gender expectations is not in itself a negative aspect of the play, the gender roles do have negative impacts on individuals – particularly those like Jack who might not be able to easily conform without sacrificing a part of themselves, which is represented by his loss of Dizzy – and I wish the play had done more to show the difficulties and not focused so much on the need for social acceptance. (Lucy does have a wonderful song about self-acceptance despite rejection, but the ideas never really factor into the play, and the play ends with happy heterosexual relationships and everyone praising Jack's manly actions.)

I found the play's apparent promotion of a "culture of poverty" troubling; actually, I found its treatment of social classes in general troubling, as it seemed to suggest that becoming wealthy leads to social respectability even though nothing else about the characters has changed (aside from their costumes). Jack's mother, Augusta Evelina Trott, seemed to represent a stereotypical welfare mother because she did everything those who oppose welfare accuse people on welfare of doing: she plans on spending her money on new frocks and trinkets while Jack has had the same, now-tattered shirt for a year, she plans to spend a good amount of money on gin, and she even hints that she worked as a prostitute to make ends meet when she

gets on her knees and hesitates before saying she was in that position to “beg.” Although she remains essentially the same person after becoming wealthy – she writes terrible erotic novels with no real understanding of literature (she tries to sexualize Galahad, quite possibly the least sexual of all Arthurian knights), and she still acts as bawdy as ever (holding the golden eggs like testicles, making sexual jokes with the landlord) – the landlord develops respect and affections for her because she is wealthy, even though just days before he threw her out of her home and wouldn’t let her address him by the first name. Similarly, Jack comes out the morning after the beanstalk has grown wearing the same style of clothes as the landlord, and his costume grows increasingly elaborate as the play progresses and the beans work their magic. Although this could be an easy way to show their rising social status, it seems like something more because of the respect they gain from these superficial changes and the complete lack of change they undergo as people. In addition to costuming, the music also changed immediately after they planted the beans, as Jack and Dizzy had no more rap-style numbers, and Augusta went from singing drinking-song-like numbers to more traditional ballad-type numbers; this seemed to reiterate the idea that there are stereotypical features of lower-class life that just get eliminated once someone becomes wealthy even if nothing else about them has changed.

As my first play of the course, I thought the production itself was simply spectacular. Although I could be totally off-base with this observation, I thought I saw many parallels with the plays we read for Medieval Drama last semester. First, the director seemed to be playing with an idea similar to the Great Chain of Being in

the way she structured the set, chose the music, and used dialogue. The beanstalk “ladder” extending from the paddock to the ogre’s lair creates a visual representation of social and moral hierarchy. The ogre’s role at the top, presumably where God would be, does not make much sense in this scenario, but the rest seems to fit: society is arranged hierarchically, and the play becomes increasingly vulgar and society increasingly corrupt as one moves further down the ladder, the audience-level being the lowest when they invite members on stage and converse with others in the crowd. An aspect that especially reminded me of the medieval plays was that the level of deception also increased as one moved further down the “chain.” Everything in the ogre’s lair, monstrous as it was, was at least true to its nature, as the ogre constructed his prisoners’ physical forms to match their internal natures. Henrietta, for example, worked at a minting facility and became part of that, was a tap dancer and so continued with that, but she was a metaphorical chicken, and the ogre made her that in actuality. The deception entered the lair when Jack arrived from below. The costuming changes also suggest a level of deception on earth because their superficial appearances change but nothing internal changes. I am not sure exactly what significance this might have for the play as a whole.

The incongruity of the ogre’s being at the top of the hierarchy, at least for me, caused some confusion because I also noticed a surprising number of religious elements in his presentation that caused me to see him as an almost god-like figure – only as a definitively perverse god-like figure. First, the ogre is a creator, but he is a creator of evil, misshapen things like Henrietta, the cello-woman hanging above the oven, the spider creature, and Harpo. Additionally, the two burglars bring their

first on-stage “offering” to the ogre, they supplicate before the net repeatedly in a manner similar to Muslim prayer, and they say several times that they “worship” the ogre – a term which draws attention to the contents of their “offering,” namely gold and a cow, two standard Judeo-Christian offerings. (Although other offerings have surely been offered in the days preceding, these are the only ones we see.) The ogre’s lair also contains an altar-like oven with skulls of victims adorning its mantel. Further, when Jack enters the ogre’s lair, he finds three servants/slaves (Porridge, Harpo, and Henrietta), each of whom serves a quasi-religious function: Porridge tries to appease the ogre with offerings to avert his wrath, even if this means sacrificing “kiddies,” Harpo uses her music to try to appease him, her lullabies being not too different from hymns in function, and Henrietta is a flawed creation, the most monstrous of the three, who firmly maintains her freewill and desires only to leave the ogre’s lair. In contrast to Henrietta, the other two have to be convinced of their freewill, and they are presented as slaves earlier in the play, singing gospel music that is itself based on the Martin Luther King “I Have a Dream” speech. While the incorporations of this motif certainly reflects the director’s post-colonial multicultural background as well as an appeal to the likely audience (Stratford is an immigrant neighborhood), it also seems to tie into the religious elements with the ogre who wants his supplicants to be slaves. It is interesting that Jack uses the term “freewill” to convince Porridge and Harpo to go because this then inverts the typical notion of the “fall,” as freewill usually leads to a detrimental fall and subsequent painful separation from God rather than deliverance, and the slavery metaphor is usually reserved for Satan trying to convince the other angels to rebel. This

inversion seems to place the primary realm of action in the world because everything up in the ogre's lair is corrupt, and things are at least more coherent and moral on earth by the end of the play.

Despite these inversions of God, the earth, and the ogre, the play still retains the idea that people will be judged and either rewarded or punished based on some objective, external notion of morality. Specifically, the director chose to have "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" playing during both the intermission and the finale brought in an element of moral judgment from some higher power. Not as powerful perhaps as a "Harrowing of Hell" or "Judgment Day" performance, the song would nevertheless connect the ideas of good and evil represented in the play with rewards and punishments – and it would likely resonate with small children today more than anything overtly religious, especially at this time of year. However, with "God" being compared to an evil ogre, the play must rely on an external notion of morality. The play seems to lay down the groundwork for an objective, external notion of morality in its exploration of social, political, economic, and gender issues: the characters are essentially judged based on their acceptance into society, rewarded with friendship when they conform to expectations and punished when they disobey expectations by expulsion from society.

12/31/2012: *War Horse* at the New London Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***War Horse* (2008)**

Directed by Marianne Elliot and Tom Morris

Adapted from the novel by Michael Morpurgo

Performed by the New London Theatre and the Handspring Puppet Company

Set in the years preceding, during, and following World War I, *War Horse* seems to draw heavily on the writings of authors from that period who questioned the values that led up to two world wars – namely, authors associated with the Bloomsbury Group, such as Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Vanessa Bell, and other artists/artisans associated with the Omega Workshops. The play addresses the devastating effects of what happens when people become blinded by familial or nationalistic loyalties that have no real bearing in reality – life in the countryside essentially becoming a microcosmic exploration of macrocosmic continental cultural, diplomatic, and militaristic activities – but the play also tries to find solutions in the midst of the destruction, promoting the idea that understanding other cultures in non-judgmental ways and respecting life in all its forms, human or horse, can lead to microcosmic changes that do have a lasting impact on macrocosmic events.

In his essay, "Fear and Politics: A Debate at the Zoo" (1925), Leonard Woolf essentially argues that "barbarism begins at home" (to borrow a brilliantly applicable phrase from *The Smiths*) because the contemporary notion of "civilization" involves the social reproduction of ideological clones: "Civilization consists in acting and thinking like the ordinary man – the ordinary man being, in this connection, obviously an ordinary man or woman of the upper middle class. The more people there are who act and think like the ordinary man...the more civilization." Those who do not subscribe to "ordinary" principles must be "shut up under sentence by a judge or magistrate or under a certificate signed by a doctor and a Justice of the Peace" until they become complacent, unquestioning, barely sentient beings just like the rest of the population. The result of this "civilization" is a society values war, disregards anything new or different, ignores moral problems rather than dealing with them, vehemently opposes anything that threatens the status quo, nationalistic loyalty based on stereotypes, and participates in unrealized class warfare. Essentially, it results in a barbaric civilization that cannot recognize itself as such. In order to overcome barbarism at home, one must necessarily begin to think for oneself, to resist the dominant ideologies, and this could only begin after one develops and internationalist perspective and a revised, broader-reaching *sensus communis*.

This is a crucial idea for understanding the microcosm/macrocosm relationship in *War Horse*. It is especially powerful when coupled with Virginia Woolf's exploration in *A Room of One's Own* of the relationship between public and private spheres: she shows how there really is no distinction between the two

because the ideas that dominate in one sphere make their way back to the other, “the personal is political.” What happens in the countryside, the private sphere that has been taken over by a family feud that threatens to extend to another generation, reflects what happens nationally, the public sphere that will collapse into the worst war in history. More importantly, the ideas that take hold in the countryside are what enable things to move forward on a national scale. Albert’s father, Ted, and his uncle, Arthur, have resented each other ever since Arthur went to war while Ted had to stay home to tend the farm, Arthur accusing Ted of not doing his patriotic duty and Ted internalizing much of that criticism. They are constantly trying to one-up each other, as the scene at the auction shows where the price for colt-Joey becomes simply exorbitant because of their rivalry. Their rivalry has started to penetrate into the next generation because the fathers force their sons to get involved in their revenge plots, all of which crucially center around Joey: Ted slaps Albert in order to get him to teach Joey to plow, and Arthur has apparently convinced his son of the rivalry because his son gets furious when his father loses at the auction, not because he wanted the horse but because he wanted to deny something from Albert. The perpetuation of their feuding ideologies not-too-subtly symbolizes the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century militarism in Europe, where each country felt threatened based on past wars and kept increasing its armaments in preparatory defense for the next war – but each country then reacted to each increase with another increase, resulting in a proliferation of armaments that made another war all but inevitable. Similarly, the sons’ relatively unquestioning acceptance of the family feud represents the perpetuation of

barbarism under the guise of civilization, as no one really questions the validity of the reasons for the feud, just as no one really questions nationalistic divisions. No one until Albert, that is.

Albert (and, of course, Joey) represent change. They collectively call into question the values that have led to war and provide a means of overcoming nationalistic divisions. Albert is contrasted with his cousin when he is prevented from joining the army because he is too young and must instead remain on the farm with Joey. His cousin joins the army early on just as his father tells him to, symbolically taking on the role of every “civilized” young man in every “civilized” generation when he accepts the war dagger that has been passed down their family for generations. The fact that his cousin dies in battle shows that World War I took militarism to a new level, to the point of no return, because the father explains that the dagger has kept alive its past bearers, but nothing can withstand the death and destruction of World War I – at least nothing that embodies the militaristic values that created the problem in the first place. Albert eventually lies about his age and enters the war to find Joey after his father sells him to the army for £100. He risks his own life in order to preserve life. In so doing, he goes against the cultural values that promote militarism because he values life for life’s sake (not as a commodity as his father does), and he sees universal human qualities in Joey, a creature regarded as less than human, showing that he can see through the propagandistic dehumanization of other cultures to respect human beings as human beings. The audience only briefly witnesses Albert’s cousin’s experiences in battle – the only scene being when he is captured by the Germans, shot while trying to protect the

dagger, and killed in his struggle to preserve the militarist patriarchal tradition symbolically embodied in the dagger. Albert's experiences prove very different. In the letter, Albert explains the French words for horse and the phrase, "je cherche Joey," revealing that he has made an effort to learn about another culture despite the prevailing warzone us-versus-them mentality. Significantly, the director decided to leave the carnage of the first battle on stage when his mother reads the letter aloud back in England. Symbolically, this suggests having a non-judgmental awareness of other cultures draws attention to the fact that "barbarism begins at home." The reality of war has suddenly been brought full-force back to England, and this realization actually prompts changes in the characters: Ted and Arthur have tea together at the mother's behest, making an effort to mend the situation that has cost them their sons by placing familial ties above political differences.

On the battlefield, Joey inadvertently becomes the agent of change because he brings people from all sides together for a common purpose *other* than war. Admittedly, he is not a rational creature and does not actually decide to do what he does for ideological reasons; nevertheless, he is portrayed in such a human way that he becomes an extension of these values. First, Joey brings together the German soldier and the French family of a widowed mother and her daughter. Although the two are initially afraid of each other, they come together around Joey; as with Albert's letter, they discover commonalities by learning each others' language, the most obvious yet superficial barrier to recognizing sameness across nationalistic divides. At least on a small scale, the relationship between German and French becomes not that of occupier and occupied but rather that of mutual caretakers. It

also shows that the Germans, too, are capable of compassion no matter what wartime propaganda has claimed. Further, in the English army, Albert's search for Joey brings the soldiers together so that they are eventually fighting to save an innocent life rather than to kill as many Germans as possible. Although the general makes fun of Albert's idealism, he also clings to the possibility that the two could be reunited, and he even tries to help the search continue after Albert has nearly given up. Similarly, the other soldiers come to recognize Albert and Joey's relationship as equivalent to their own romantic relationships (David, his comrade in the trenches, exclaims that "I have my Flossie, and you have your Joey" as they prepare to go "over the top"), showing a general respect for life, both human and animal. Finally, Joey shows no concern for nationalistic divisions, "volunteering" to help the German army pull ambulances off the battlefield and eventually becoming part of their plow team. It seems significant that the director chose to use in the next scene the same plow as part of the trench wall that served as Albert and David's shelter: a disregard for nationalist divisions can save lives on both sides.

In addition to the ideological connections to the Bloomsbury Group, *War Horse* also seemed to draw on the group's artistic theories, which promoted handmade, organic-inspired, eclectic items and architecture, a style that was in direct opposition to the competing avant-garde, minimalist, "heroic" style typified in the works of Le Corbusier (Christopher Reed, Introduction to *Bloomsbury Room: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*). While followers of Le Corbusier sought to remove the home from "the 'sentimental hysteria' surrounding the old-fashioned 'cult of the house'" by bringing in industrial elements, Bloomsbury artists sought to

make the home warm, cozy, and decorative in order to make “the condition of domesticity its standard for modernity, projecting the values of home life outward onto the public realm in both its aesthetic and socio-political initiatives.” Essentially, they saw architecture as another part of the “personal is political” schema, and Lytton Strachey went so far as to declare in his essay “Art and Indecency” that aesthetics formed the basis for ethical development. These ideas are significant with respect to *War Horse* because the director and puppeteers made a clear distinction between the puppets’ construction – delicate, bamboo, curved frames and completely realistic organic movements – and the armaments’ construction – massive, harsh, black metal frames that dominate the stage. Obviously, the props and sets have meaning in themselves, and the distinction between the natural and industrial props is evident just from seeing the production. However, the director and puppeteers’ specific choices gain added significance when seen in the broader context of modernist aesthetic debates that directly link architectural style to prevailing sociopolitical ideologies.

In terms of the production itself, I thought that the play was absolutely brilliant. I was particularly struck with the puppeteer work simply because it was so skillfully done that I really did not notice the people governing the horses’ movements after a while. I also thought it was interesting that they used people to guide miniature, puppet-like ships across the stage and puppets to represent about half of the wounded-soldiers because it drew attention to the fact that human actions are behind all of the death and destruction of World War I. Additionally, during the intermission, several of us were confused about the decision to have

skeletal, inhuman wounded soldiers march across the stage when there had been nothing remotely similar to that visual scene before. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like the perfect way to signify the psychological impact that World War I must have had on people. The scene was completely shocking, as those five soldiers managed to capture the deaths of millions; I had no way of understanding what I had just seen, momentarily no way of coping; I can only imagine what those who actually lived through the destruction must have felt.

12/31/2012: *Phantom of the Opera* at Her Majesty's Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Phantom of the Opera* (1986)**

Directed by Harold Prince

Based on the novel by Gaston Leroux

Performed by Her Majesty's Theatre

Having seen the film version of this play several times, I was somewhat (and unreasonably) disappointed in the play version, though it was fantastic in its own right. I know now that this production was essentially the same as the one that inspired the film version, so I have a much greater respect for what the directors were able to achieve here. Still, one benefit to having seen the film first was that the play made me focus more on the play as art, not merely a plotline with musical

accompaniment. I was particularly struck by the production's juxtaposition of light and dark, day and night, angel and demon, heaven and hell. I began early on in the production to see parallels with the ideas expressed in William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790), and I wonder if the play, despite being published nearly 120 years before the novel, was influenced by Blake's aesthetic theories. Even if Blake's influence cannot be established, exploring similarities between the two works seems like a useful way to explore one of the play's motifs in depth.

The main parallel between Blake's *Marriage* and Prince's production of *Phantom* comes in their reliance on "contraries" and especially in their similar distinction between Good and Evil. For both artists, Good is associated with rationality and superimposed limitations while Evil is associated with creativity and eternal, energetic artistic production. Blake describes these principles in "The Argument": "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. / From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. / Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell." Prince incorporates similar principles into his play through his persistent use of dichotomies, which above all separate Christine's Heaven-like, aboveground world from the Phantom's Hell-like subterranean world. Christine is associated with everything light and airy, pure and controlled: she almost always wears a simple white gown, she seems to have no aspirations beyond being a supporting actress, and when she does get the lead role, her voice lacks the excessive alternations between registers and the impassioned vibrato characteristic of Carlotta's voice. It is

symbolically significant that the company's first production is *Faust*, the story of an overreaching necromancer who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of god-like powers. One feature of Blake's *Hell and Devils* (authors or artists) is that they advocate overreaching, as his "Proverbs of Hell" reveals: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity," and "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." Specifically in her lack of ambition, Christine seems as though she is the only character not connected to Evil in any way.

If Christine symbolizes Good, then Erik, the Phantom, symbolizes Evil. He is malformed, wears a black suit, and is frequently overcome by uncontrollable passion. As Christine's voice instructor (ironically but significantly referred to as the Angel of Music at the beginning), the Phantom also embodies the energetic passion of artistic creation embodied by the Devils in Blake's work. The underground chamber in which he produces his operas is also strangely reminiscent of Blake's "Printing-House in Hell," which consists of a series of cave chambers occupied by fantastical creatures or abstract forms, each of which represents a stage in the artistic process, from imagination to printed work. By means of clever set manipulation, Prince manages to have the Phantom's boat traverse the stage in such a way that it appears to weave in and out of countless caverns before arriving at their final destination, the podium-area where he composes his operas. Additionally, his operas embody an energetic, uncontrolled, devilish passion. Their sets are highly elaborate (the banquet table overflowing with food, thick curtains, rich colors), no one (except Christine with much difficulty) in the opera company can achieve the

range they require, and the final staged performance includes a scene (apparently unscripted) of intense passion when Erik murders one of the actors behind the curtain.

Beyond their mutual reliance on contraries, however, both Blake and Prince also show how the distinctions between seemingly dichotomous principles breaks down to create an essentially unified vision of art and perhaps the world. For Blake, Good and Evil are never really separate, as God makes an appearance in “Proverbs of Hell” and some of the Angels get converted by the Devils. It becomes clear as the play progresses that Christine may have some connection to Evil after all, as intensely passionate emotions, pain over the death of her father, motivate her to seek Erik’s tutelage in the first place. She is also one of the few (possibly the only) singers who can reach the registers demanded by the Phantom’s opera. Further, she appears to feel great conflict when she has to choose between Erik and Raoul, although her decision becomes easier once Erik actually commits murder and allies himself with Evil in a way that extends well beyond the eternal creative passions. However, although the Phantom disappears and Christine departs with Raoul at the end of the play, there are indications that the Phantom has, in fact, become a part of Christine. At least two of the songs suggest that Erik and Christine are united: “The Phantom of the Opera” at the beginning includes the refrain “the Phantom of the Opera is here / Inside my heart,” and “The Point of No Return” at the end includes lines like “In your mind you’ve already succumb / To me, dropped your defenses, completely succumb / To me, now you are here with me, no second thoughts, / You’ve decided, you’ve decided....” The final scene, in which Christine physically

escapes with Raoul but cannot mentally leave behind the Phantom, also breaks the dichotomous black-and-white color scheme that has dominated the entire play by introducing the red noose, a shift that suggests some new element forged from both Good and Evil.

01/01/2013: Tour of Westminster Abbey

Scott O'Neil

I began the first day of the new year by heading to Westminster Abbey with Kyle and David. At Kyle's suggestion, we first went into the church next to the Abbey, St. Margaret's. It turned out to be a fantastic idea—I was thrilled to get a chance to see the grave markers of Olaudah Equiano and Sir Walter Raleigh (whose plaque contained an inscription that I just loved: "Reader—Should you reflect on his errors / Remember his many virtues / And that he was a mortal."—It strikes me that this would be a fun quotation to use in place of the standard book disclaimer that "the following should be thanked, but all errors are my own." haha). From St. Margaret's, I continued on to the Abbey tour—Kyle and David ultimately decided that it was too pricey for their tastes.

While the entire tour was worthwhile, I was engrossed by two particular sites—Poet's Corner and the Tudor burial wing. I've never seen anything quite like the ceiling of the Tudor burial wing, and the choir, complete with knightly insignia,

created a sense of going back in time. I was somewhat surprised to see Cromwell buried in that section—I wasn't sure how contemporary English society viewed his legacy, but I didn't think it was on the same level as those with whom he shares a burial wing. Poet's Corner was more of an expected thrill—that was my main initial motivation for going on the tour. While I was excited to see the monument to Shakespeare, Dickens' stone and others, it was the tomb of Chaucer that I found most moving. I apparently have a tactile personality—touching something just seems to make it more real to me. I couldn't believe that I was actually able to touch the tomb of Geoffrey Chaucer (more on this when we get to the Stratford trip).

I dutifully kept my camera sheathed during the main tour (though it was difficult, particularly when I saw how many people were sneaking photos of things I would have *loved* to capture). The camera came back out in the courtyards, however. This led to the photo below—I was looking at a lush, green courtyard, only to look up and see a towering piece of English architecture in the background. That photo kind of encapsulates the entire trip for me. Right up until the 13th when we left, I would be walking along, paying attention to street signs and the like, and I would glance up, see some beautiful building, landmark, or monument and just have to stop and take it in. It's almost as if I would perpetually forget where I was only for London to remind me in the most wonderful ways.

I met back up with Kyle and David after the tour, and we took in part of the New Year's parade. We were somewhat surprised to see that one of the largest statues in that area was of Abraham Lincoln—that just stuck us as odd, as we

couldn't think of what Lincoln had done that would make him statue-worthy to the English.



Photo of Westminster Abbey—the palace-like tower in the background contrasts with the simplicity of the courtyard in the foreground—this contrast between pedestrian and transcendent happened over and over during my experience.

1/2/2013: *Hansel and Gretel* at the Cottesloe Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Hansel and Gretel* (2012)**

Directed by Katie Mitchell and Lucy Kirkwood

Adapted from the Brothers Grimm

Performed by the Cottesloe Theatre

The play had much to commend it, but overall I found it disappointing. The directors and cast tried to do so much with the production, and many elements were indeed brilliant, but I feel like they never really “came together” properly. It was aesthetically off-putting because the acting was nothing extraordinary compared to that in the other plays, the puppetry was poorly done to the point that it distracted from the rest of the action on stage (though I could be biased because of the fantastic puppetry of *War Horse*), and the music, fun and visually entertaining as it was, sounded one-dimensional and lacked decent volume regulation. I was most annoyed by the decision to have every character speak in rhyming couplets, which were fun at times for a while but grew tedious the more forced they became (rhyming “bravado” with “dozy avocado” or “traitors” with “mashed potatoes”). Still,

aesthetic issues aside, the play included as a framing device some very interesting commentary on the nature of fairytales and modern adaptations.

I absolutely loved the beginning when the Grimm brothers were trying to catch the story and put it into the “confabulator,” a machine that processes “live” stories, puts them into a written format, and finally publishes them in a book, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. This seemed to me a direct commentary on the nature of fairytales, which have a kind of independent existence but which are ultimately the products of society and human imagination. The story that the brothers “catch” is this little wadded-up ball of black cloth that gets thrown across the stage and flung about in nets and jars to make it seem like a vicious creature barely able to be captured, let alone shaped, by the storytellers. However, the fact that the story-animal is obviously being made to seem fierce shows – aside from the fact that it would be impossible to have it move about on its own – that it is really people, the storytellers, who give life and meaning to these stories. This concept is reiterated in the scene when the brothers attempt to put the story-animal into the confabulator but keep dropping things in, such as the killing jar and a hat, or forgetting that they are not supposed to sit on the confabulator for fear of their falling into the story itself. Instead of processing the story-animal alone, the confabulator processes something that includes sociocultural “artifacts” from their own time as well as elements from the storytellers’ imaginations, an observation made even more apparent in the fact that the confabulator only works when one of the brothers is hooked up to it via a headset that draws on his own brainpower/imagination for fuel.

The confabulator and its symbolism closely mirror the actual publication history of the fairytale. Although the Grimm brothers did gather the story from an unknown oral source, the *Hansel and Gretel* fairytale that they recorded seems to have emerged primarily from the storytellers' own imaginations as a commentary on actual conditions during pre-modern famines. For example, Maria Tatar explains in her "Introduction" to *Hansel and Gretel* that Wilhelm Grimm changed the original story, which "featured a biological mother who conspires with her husband to abandon the children," to feature instead a filicidal stepmother either because he wanted to make the tale better resemble nineteenth-century familial structures or "simply because he could not bear to pass on stories about mothers so intent on surviving a famine that they are willing to sacrifice their own children."

The play's inclusion of the confabulator also turns the play into a kind of *ars poetica*: it allows the audience to see from the very beginning that the fairytale is a work of art, the product of human imagination, and consequently, that the play is also a work of art commenting on a work of art and the process of artistic creation. Just as the Grimm brothers shaped an oral version of *Hansel and Gretel* to better articulate nineteenth-century fears, anxieties, and expectations, so Katie Mitchell and Lucy Kirkwood shaped the Grimm brothers' version to better suit their twenty-first-century audience. In a society where obesity poses a greater threat than starvation, it might be understandably difficult to portray to modern children the once-real horrors of famine and threat of abandonment. So, instead of treating the topics seriously, Mitchell and Kirkwood turn them into pure physical comedy. The

wicked stepmother, Marta, is cast as a man whose only “feminine” features are a dress, an exaggeratedly large bust, and a falsetto

In the production, she is still nominally wicked because she plots to kill the children by abandoning them in the woods, but she is so comically portrayed that her threats are meaningless and there can be no doubt that Hansel and Gretel will thwart them. The witch, who should pose the real threat of cannibalism, is portrayed even more comically as a near-sighted old woman constantly running into scenery, and her threats of cannibalism are mitigated by her ridiculous song that compares children to any other delicacy, though perhaps a bit stranger than most. Even her bat, Stuart, who aids her cannibalistic habits, turns out to be a Russian ballet dancer. (In reality, Stuart is perhaps the most evil because he is just a transformed human, not a non-human witch, who helps the witch murder children in the hopes of gaining his own freedom.) Again, there is no doubt that Hansel and Gretel can overcome her threat with just a bit of clever thinking. I feel like the comedic elements minimize what should be the plays’ strongest feature – the children’s cleverness, especially Gretel’s, in thwarting serious threats from the adult world.

Having read reviews that declared Mitchell and Kirkwood’s production a feminist triumph, a masterful retelling akin to an Angela Carter short story, I admit that I found myself somewhat disappointed with its portrayal of gender. Gretel is an intelligent girl with a realistic, pragmatic, pessimistic worldview, and she has talents that extend beyond the domestic realm (in addition to household chores, she is also quite “good with an axe”). But her strengths are specifically juxtaposed with Hansel’s weaknesses: he maintains a naively optimistic worldview and is rendered

intellectually deficient by his appetitive nature (when locked in the cage to be fattened up, he explains to Gretel that starvation caused his stomach to eat his brain). I did appreciate Gretel's strong characterization, and while I was initially disappointed that the directors merely reversed the gender expectations instead of creating more nuanced characterizations of both (as perhaps Angela Carter would have done), I realize that they needed to keep the rational/appetitive, pessimistic/optimistic dichotomies somehow for the sake of the fairytale's message. Further, I was confused by the decision to cast Marta as a man. It added an obvious comedic element that helped to mitigate her original wickedness, but it also seemed to function on another level to show the unnaturalness of her behavior and, consequently, to reinforce stereotypical gender expectations of women as submissive and nurturing. She is juxtaposed with the children's loving yet effete father who tries to convince her to start acting like a real mother ("you're a mother now, you've got to stop trying to kill the children"), but he does absolutely nothing to stop her from killing them (Marta even lectures him about "putting his foot down" and stomps on his own in her enthusiasm for domineering).

The decision to cast men as women seems intended to show mothers assuming an unnaturally masculine role to compensate for the lack of strong father figures and the disorder that results from their doing so – just as Augusta Trott's male casting in *Jack and the Beanstalk* emphasized the absence of Jack's father, who had presumably kept them out of poverty when alive, and Lucy's father, who was supposed to restore order to the town. A father figure is at least present in *Hansel and Gretel* even if he does not properly fill the role in the beginning. The restoration

of order here occurs even before the children return because the father finally takes a stand and Marta begins to feel guilty, a transformation that occurs in part because a fox bites her and she grows a tail, a visible mark of her unnatural behavior. The tail serves as a benign substitute (the children declare it attractive) for her exaggeratedly feminine behavior, which is all but gone now that she has truly become a "mother." Compared to the original tale in which the mother or stepmother must die before order can return, I suppose Marta's physical and moral transformation offers the opportunity for a positive rewriting of her role, providing one of the few instances where she is "rehabilitated." But the issue seems a bit more complicated than just that, as it is the male characters' unassertive or appetitive natures that lead to problems in the first place. I am still unsure what to make of the play's presentation of gender, though I am inclined to see it as generally positive the more I think about it. On the one hand, it shows women as strong and intelligent primarily in contrast to men who are weak and appetitive. On the other hand, both genders see that their actions are problematic and revise them accordingly so that the whole family can live "happily ever after," neither conforming completely to stereotypical gender expectations. In that context, Marta's tail seems less a punishment for her assuming an unnaturally masculine role than for her filicidal inclinations.

Innovative as it was, I just did not find Mitchell and Kirkwood's adaptation of *Hansel and Gretel* very effective. The confabulator was a brilliant addition, especially as an insight into the process of adaptation, but when it came to the adaptation itself, the play fell short. While it is true that children probably (hopefully) do not

fear starvation and abandonment as they used to, it is still possible to create children's stories with dark, macabre elements in them because children do still face frightening things like neglect, bullying, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. *Hansel and Gretel* is a tale that could be adapted to touch on such issues in a way that would resonate with a modern audience. Instead, the directors turned the tale into something of a panto – a wonderfully entertaining genre and good for children's plays, but not really appropriate for the subjects that should have been addressed given some of the other elements they brought in at the beginning.

1/2/2013: *Dance of Death* at Trafalgar Studios 2

Kyle Huskin

***Dance of Death* (1900)**

Directed by Titas Halder

Adapted by Conor McPherson from the play by August Strindberg

Performed by Trafalgar Studios 2

I had trouble giving this play a thorough analysis because I was not familiar with Strindberg's original production (I admit that I had never even heard of Strindberg before this play), but I am quite familiar with Edward Albee's *Who's*

Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Ingmar Bergman's films, just some of the many authors influenced by August Strindberg. I think I had less appreciation for the play than I should have simply because I have seen similar elements put to similar effect in other productions, namely Ibsen and Bergman's. However, after reading more about the original play and engaging in discussion with those who were familiar with the original, it became obvious that Conor McPherson and Titas Halder changed nearly everything about the play after the first act.

One major change seems to have come from increasing Alice's power over Edgar to the point that their marriage seemed almost egalitarian. In Strindberg's original, Edgar torments and abuses his wife verbally, emotionally, and physically, for no apparent reason – except perhaps for the fact that this was an acceptable, even common, model of marriage. In this production, Edgar and Alice abuse each other and take measures to sabotage each other's lives, though they go about this in different ways. Alison and I were discussing this change back in the hotel room, and we came to the conclusion that it probably reflects McPherson and Halder's attempts to adapt Strindberg's turn-of-the-century play for a twenty-first-century audience. Women have much more social, political, and economic power and independence in today's society than would even have been conceivable in 1900 when first-wave feminism was in its beginning phases, women not even achieving the right to vote for another twenty to thirty years in most countries. After skimming a biography of Strindberg, it seems as though he himself had conflicting views about women's rights: he encouraged lawmakers to grant women suffrage as early as 1884, but he later renounced this view in a misogynistic tirade. From what I

gather, his original play encourages the audience to sympathize with Alice, the abused wife. Although McPherson's adaptation complicates Alice's character and makes it more difficult to be sympathetic towards a woman who also torments her husband and contributes to the ever-escalating cycle of abuse, I think it also does a good job of exploring the complexities of the issue by showing how women might cope with their inferior social status – and in doing so, McPherson perhaps addresses some of Strindberg's own conflicted feelings towards women.

As disturbing as I found Alice's portrayal (and realistically, who couldn't find all of these characters disturbing?), I also appreciated that McPherson tried to remain faithful to what routes to power would have been accessible to women in 1900, especially since time and place were one of the few things he opted to keep the same. Writing more than a century before Strindberg but before any substantial structural changes regarding women's rights had taken place, Mary Wollstonecraft describes how women deprived of autonomy in society and marriage will turn to the only source of power they have – their sexuality and excessive emotionality, which they have been taught get men to respond to their needs. A former actress of modest talent (she would disagree), Alice went from having perceived independence, a professional future that she could control, to being emotionally trapped in a marriage with Edgar that also leaves her physically trapped on a small island in a small, close-knit military base community from which they are excluded (thanks to a combination of their actions). In this situation, with little or no recourse to the law, it is understandable that Alice tries to wield whatever power she can. She embraces her physicality and sexuality, which offered her independence as an

actress in the first place, and she uses these “skills” to keep Edgar feeling vulnerable and to seduce Kurt to gain an ally against Edgar. While her affair never really amounted to much in terms of power, the actress playing Alice (Indira Varma) carried herself in such a way that Alice’s physical presence dominated the stage no matter what her action: she always moved gracefully around the room, had unnaturally, almost aggressively precise movements, and gave the impression that she was completely unfazed by twenty-five years of marital hell. Alice’s real power derived, of course, from her witty ripostes and her cunning plots, but her physical presence on stage gave the impression that she truly dominated the domestic sphere, the only space in which she actually has some socially legitimated authority. Indeed, her efforts to rid herself of Edgar through legal means, when she goes to the colonel to accuse him of attempted murder (referring to the time he tried to push her off the dock), prove utterly ineffectual, as the court marshal boat she tries so hard to stop turns out not to be for Edgar after all: no authority cares about her plight – possibly because she has ruined all her ties with the military base, possibly because she is a woman, or possibly both.

Another element of the production that struck me – and probably everyone else in the audience – was the incredibly small size of the theater, which couldn’t have been more than thirty feet across and twenty feet in depth, with absolutely no barrier between the stage’s edge and the audience’s seating. I think the audience’s physical proximity to the stage increased both the sense of uncomfortable involvement with what we were witnessing. For me personally, I found it disturbing to be so close to a stage on which an abusive, alcoholic husband was freely

expressing his anger and despair because it felt like being back in my childhood home with my abusive, alcoholic father. Based on what I heard from others afterwards, I was not the only one who found the staging uncomfortable, though my reasons were probably more subjective than theirs. Of course, the staging also had more objective effects. First, it created the feeling that the audience was somehow colluding or complicit with the characters: we were so close that we could smell smoke from the candles, catch props that were tossed just inches too far, and even see the emotional reactions of audience members sitting across from us. Although the cast did a remarkable job of not breaking the “fourth wall” given the venue’s size, there was one moment when Alice looked out into the audience and said something about how the ghosts of those executed in the cell below were living in the jailhouse walls, watching them, and Kurt suggests later that it is the jailhouse that is driving them crazy. We are clearly supposed to imagine that Alice is speaking to the walls (there is only the one anterior wall actually present), but the more subtle effect is to transform the audience members into the ghosts watching them and contributing to their turmoil.

Paradoxically, the close proximity to the stage also created an increased sense of acceptance towards scenes of abuse that would otherwise seem completely abhorrent. The whole theater was so compact that it felt as though we, the actors and the audience, inhabited an isolated world, so that the action we were witnessing started to seem mundane after just a few scenes because there were no external examples to contradict Edgar and Alice’s. Further, so many of the more horrific elements are presented in a nonchalant, comic manner that it becomes difficult to

take the situation seriously. For example, Alice dismisses Edgar's first enraged verbal outburst with a simple but impeccably timed, "This is nothing," that encourages the audience to see them as just a run-of-the-mill dysfunctional family. Edgar is almost laughing himself when he recounts how he tried to push Alice into the sea, admitting that he was trying to kill her but speaking as though it were nothing more than a practical joke. And at the end, the two of them laugh about the story of a husband who cut off all of his wife's left-hand fingers and so has to wear her ring on the wrong hand, a scene which again makes it seem as though their marriage is actually pretty good. I wouldn't say that our closeness to the stage made these scenes funny, per se, but it created just the right level of *unheimliche*-ness to distance ourselves from the social mores of the "world outside" so that the tragicomic absurdity of it all could come through unimpeded by our immediate value judgments. In this way, I can see how Strindberg influences later authors like Edward Albee, Eugene O'Neil, Tennessee Williams, Ingmar Bergman, and Henrik Ibsen. I think the only thing I have seen before this play that produced a similar effect on me was Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which shows a similarly dysfunctional family and makes efforts to obscure the more disturbing elements by inserting comedic lines, my favorite being: "We always kept our eyes on the children – all three of them, Martha being a Cyclops." Albee relies more directly on comedic lines, I think, but the general effect of being simultaneously pulled into and distanced from the serious physical and psychological violence is about the same.

I think one of the most remarkable effects of the play was that it was still possible to feel immense sympathy for the characters, flawed as they were. In many

ways, they seemed like victims of circumstance – Alice trapped in an unhappy marriage, Edgar dying of an incurable heart condition, even Kurt plagued by some serious psychological disturbances he just cannot overcome. Perhaps this is another ramification of the intimacy-distance paradox. In reality, they all choose to make bad decisions, and they are fully aware of the consequences before making them – yet, they seem unable to comprehend the personal implications of those consequences, unable to change themselves now that they have been set on this trajectory for mutual destruction. But what has set them on this trajectory? By separating the world of the play from the world outside, the play creates something of a new reality, and in this reality, their decisions seem reasonable if not rational.

1/3/2013: *Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and *The Orphan of Zao* at the Swan Theatre

Scott O'Neil

More than anything else, I was looking forward to the trip to Stratford upon Avon. As a Shakespearean in training, it was something I had *always* wanted to see. I mentally tried to prepare myself for the likely reality that the town could never actually live up to my imagined expectations, but it wasn't easy. Ultimately, the trip both lived up to my worst fears *and* exceeded my greatest expectations. Things started off remarkably well. Immediately after we departed the bus, we were greeted by a statue of a Shakespearean fool (my main area of interest in

Shakespeare is his use of the stage fool). For me, this seemed almost like a sign.

Then, we went into Shakespeare's Birthplace.

I want to preface the following comments by stating up front that I'm thrilled that we got to go through the birthplace and see everything that we could see. That said, it seemed...manufactured. I had been expecting a site with roped off remnants of 16th century furniture and such. I had *not* been expecting freshly painted and artificial looking rooms, plush rats and animatronic exhibit rooms. It seemed as if every room we went into at the beginning of the tour was designed for the casual tourist. The first room highlighted a ring on a mannequin hand, mentioning that it had been found in a field nearby and "might have been Shakespeare's ring." The next room highlighted a 16th century book of common prayer and suggested that "this might have been Shakespeare's book of common prayer." By the time we arrived in the third room, where the exhibit was telling the story of Shakespeare's rushed marriage to a pregnant Anne Hathaway, we jokingly looked at each other and murmured, "this broken condom was found in a trash can nearby. It might have been Shakespeare's broken condom." This artificiality extended to some of the other parts of Stratford as well. I was surprised to see that the swans—notoriously nasty birds—of Stratford really *were* sweet. All that being the case, the artificiality obviously didn't deter me from having an amazing time (as my credit card bill from the gift shop clearly attests, haha) and, as has been the theme of this trip, the things I *hadn't* been expecting to see were the things that I most enjoyed.

The first "delightfully unexpected" moment came in the Birthplace. The "Birthroom Window" was absolutely intriguing—though my interest in it was more

due to its commentary on the Victorian obsession/worship of Shakespeare than anything to do with Shakespeare himself. The window was almost like a shrine—a slew of famous names were etched on the window as people, including the likes of Dickens, attempted to attach their names to a piece of “Shakespeare’s birth history.” The most intriguing fact about all of that was that the window itself dates only back to the late 17th century—well after Shakespeare’s death. I was also taken in by the little details about the town that managed to escape its reinvention as “Shakespeare Land.” Calling their dollar store “Poundland,” having fun little shops (like one that had Harry-Potter themed magic and another that featured hipster fashions called “Old Guys Rule”), and all of the Christmas decorations served as a reminder that, despite all of the effort made to (both authentically and artificially) stage the town as a shrine to its most famous son, Stratford couldn’t quite escape its identity of a small town in the countryside.

My favorite destination on this part of the trip was definitely the journey to Holy Trinity Church. Again, I went with the goal of seeing one thing (Shakespeare’s grave) and left with a sense of awe over something else (the Shakespeare baptismal font). I did enjoy seeing the grave—I wasn’t aware that so many of Shakespeare’s relatives were arrayed in a line with him in front of the altar. The velvet rope keeping us a respectable distance away from the grave, however, brought me down a bit. As I mentioned before—I have a bit of a tactile personality. To have made it that close and yet not be able to touch the stone in the same way that I had been able to touch Chaucer’s tomb—it probably sounds stupid, but it felt like a big deal at the time.

We took the time to have a conversation with the docent, who finished his talk by pointing out what seemed to be a planter (it was filled with flowers) near the velvet rope. He told us that this was the same baptismal font that was in the church in the 16th century, and thus, was the font that baptized baby Shakespeare. On the one hand, I had some odd misgivings—my first thought was to doubt that story (I went right to Google upon our return to the Harlingford to verify the story) and also to wonder how a town that had preserved everything from rings to books to nails because they *might* have a connection to Shakespeare would effectively turn his baptismal font into a glorified Chia Pet. Those qualms lasted about 2 seconds, however—after which, Kyle, Alison and I took turns posing with the font. The font was on the happy side of the velvet rope, and so in my picture, I can be seen touching it, which provided that missing tactile connection that I had wanted. If you noticed that I was practically bouncing with excitement when we passed you (when you were going into the church as we were leaving it), that was the reason why.

We did in fact see a couple of plays in Stratford as well (haha), one of which was the play I was looking forward to more than any other on our agenda—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I wrote the majority of my MA thesis on *Merry Wives*, and this was just the second time I had a chance to see it performed live. My argument in the thesis was that *Merry Wives* (contrary to most of its critical heritage) was not a bad play with a watered down Falstaff, but rather a play about boundaries and authority. I made the argument that “Garter Inn” Falstaff was just as much of a discursive triumph as the fat knight of the Henriad, and it was only “domestic space”

Falstaff that was diminished¹. I likened it to the Bruegel painting “The Battle Between Carnival and Lent” where Falstaff’s festive lord of misrule ventured too far into the Lenten world of domesticity and thus had to be punished.

I thought that the Stratford production supported many of those ideas—portraying Falstaff as every bit of a man out of place as I had seen him—in a production that featured modern dress and technology, Falstaff is the one character clearly out of place. His costume seemed to be of an older generation than the other characters and (in a brilliant scene) he was unable to work the audio remote to turn down the music during one of his attempted trysts. I enjoyed the modern dress and performance choices, particularly the carefully added material (the “Candle in the Wind” number at the Garter, the “Let’s Get it On” number in the previously mentioned audio remote scene, etc). They used the rear of the stage remarkably well—there was no clear horizon point for the backstage in the Ford’s house scenes. As such (particularly in the scene where Falstaff tries to escape as the fat wife of Brainford), the stage felt deeper. I also loved the way they utilized the stage technology (particularly in using the trapdoor to create the illusion of being in Falstaff’s upstairs room). Ultimately, I really enjoyed the show, but there were two small things that kept it from being at the top of my list—the complications of the ending, and the almost complete lack of directorial cuts.

The lack of cuts was problematic solely because of the fact that this was a *long* show. Before the show, I mentioned to Kyle and Alison that I hoped they

¹ There’s a LOT more to it than this, including a theoretical framework involving Bakhtin’s speech genre theory, Natasha Korda’s work on domestic space, and references to the Schwarzenegger film *Kindergarten Cop*.

wouldn't cut the Latin lesson scene where Parson Hugh quizzes young Will Page in the street. When the show first opened and Will Page was on stage in the first scene (something I thought at the time was a really creative addition, as it set the stage for just who Will is when he shows up later), I was thrilled, because I doubted they would cast a Will without intending to do that scene. By the end of the play, I couldn't figure out why they *didn't* cut that scene. It just wasn't necessary for their modern interpretation, and if I felt like the play was dragging a bit (as a huge fan of Shakespeare in general and this play in particular), I can only imagine what the undergrads were thinking. Ultimately, it just felt like the play could have lost some lines and scenes without losing anything.

The ending of the play was also a bit problematic for me. So much of the show was modernized, but the ritual shaming of Falstaff wasn't really adapted for a modern interpretation. The play's ending really makes more sense if the audience is familiar with the tradition of skimmington and communal ritual shaming—two things that aren't really used much in modern society. It seemed as if they tried to “modernize” that scene by dressing Ford and Page as Superman and the Hulk, but rather than modernizing that scene, it just further confused it. I heard the undergrads talking about it afterwards, and they had no idea what was going on (they were asking each other if the last scene was supposed to be Halloween or something). I enjoyed the scene, but I can understand how it would feel flat to audience members who didn't already know what the end of the play was supposed to accomplish.

One of my favorite moments of the play came at the very end. After everyone else goes to the Ford house to rejoice the restoration of proper order in Windsor, Falstaff settles into the grave-like pit on stage with a bow to the cuckold's horns and a single, haunting chime. I felt like this was a nod to *so many* things going on in this play—from it being the last farewell of Falstaff (this being the last of his three Shakespearean appearances) to it being an acknowledgement that Falstaff (as an early 15th century character in the history plays) had no place in a restored late-16th century Windsor. I just felt like that little moment was an elegant tip of the hat to the Shakespeare nerds in the audience.

The other play we saw in Stratford was *The Orphan of Zhao*—ostensibly the “Chinese Hamlet.” I was in the minority of our group in that I quite enjoyed *Zhao*. A bunch of us had an extended debate during the intermission about the realities of Venue and Authenticity. Liv in particular seemed upset that the play wasn't trying hard enough to be “authentically” Chinese. I tried to convince her that the play wasn't being performed in Stratford to reach an audience of people *looking for* “authentically Chinese” theater. The audience they are playing to would be looking for the Shakespearean parallels. This was nowhere more obvious than in the intentional pauses (at one point Tuangu is discussing how it is better to be feared, and he has an extended pause after saying the words “to be,” getting an expected laugh at the transparent though artificial *Hamlet* reference).

Ironically, though I made that argument to Liv at the time, I found those artificial connections almost distracting. Frankly, I don't see much of a similarity between *Zhao* and *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy, features all of the revenge

tragedy tropes. *Zhao* does not. Yes, there is a ghost, but the ghost haunts the doctor rather than the revenger. Yes, there is a moment where one character considers assassinating another but decides not to because the victim was engaged in prayer. In *Hamlet*, it is the revenger who restrains himself because killing Claudius at that point would (he thinks) send him to heaven with a newly clean soul. In *Zhao*, the assassin is a minor character, sent to kill the man who is ultimately the cause for the “revenge plot” in the play. Witnessing Zhao in prayer serves to *convert* the assassin, who then sacrifices himself. Basically, while there are one or two structural similarities, the two plays are almost nothing alike (frankly, I thought Tuangu’s unchecked ambition and descent had more in common with *Macbeth* than *Hamlet*).

The Orphan of Zhao left me with the same kind of feeling that I had after reading David Wroblewski’s *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*—a book that attempts to offer a modern take on the *Hamlet* story. In the book, a boy named Edgar raises and trains dogs. The material that *doesn’t* try to fit into the *Hamlet* mythos was actually far more interesting to me than the heavy-handed *Hamlet* inspired moments. Likewise, the things I loved most about *The Orphan of Zhao* were those moments where the play stopped trying to nudge-nudge-wink-wink remind the audience of its *Hamlet* connection and started thinking about how they could stage this story in a creative way. The strongest elements of the play to me were in its use of the theatrical space. They utilized the tiered balconies to great effect, creating moments where characters could simultaneously observe and be observed, highlighting the sense of hierarchy within that society and the dangers it could pose. The scene where the barrier between the mortal world and the afterlife was conceived of as a

wall of rain was particularly inspired. The moments where the characters would enter, introduce themselves and tell their story almost reminded me of the structure of *Elektra* from last semester's Stratford trip. I had never seen anything like the "babies" being visibly on stage or the "blood" falling from the heavens whenever a character would die. The play's aesthetic, while not "authentically" Chinese or even very "authentically" Shakespeare, struck an intriguing balance between a beauty and simplicity that seemed inspired by Asian art and philosophy, and an ingenuity that fits in the world of Shakespearean drama.

Beyond the apparent battle/symmetry of Shakespeare and Chinese culture, I felt that the ultimate theme of the play was focused on the roles of suicide and honor. Nearly every dead character dies by his own hand, and those suicides are spurred on by a sense of honor. Only two characters (if I'm remembering correctly) die by someone else's hand—Tuangu and the doctor's biological son. In class, people seemed confused by the Orphan's highly emotional reaction to his killing of Tuangu. I would argue that his reaction was *not* to the fact that he killed his foster father, but rather the fact that his foster father lacked the honor to kill himself. It was the last collapse of a man who had meant a lot to the Orphan. In the final scene, where we see the reunion of the doctor and his biological son, the doctor is forced to justify his role in his son's death. Only through the doctor's death (an almost Christ-like death, where his heart's blood reveals his true character, anguish and love for his biological son) can he offer his biological son the honor that was deprived of him.

Ultimately, our trip to Stratford left me with a LOT to think about. I was still processing *The Orphan of Zhao* days later, still giddy over the experience at the

church, still laughing about some of the tourist-y details at the Birthplace and still smiling about Falstaff's turn in *Merry Wives*. When the experience continues long after the trip has concluded, that's the mark of time well spent.



A photo of the Fool that greeted us immediately after our arrival.



Photo of “might have been” Shakespeare’s ring.



Tame Swans.



A photo of the Birthroom Window in Shakespeare's birthplace.



Alison and I at the baptismal font in Holy Trinity Church.



The set of Merry Wives.

1/4/2013: *Sauce for the Goose* at the Orange Tree Theatre and tour of the Tower of London

Scott O'Neil

Initially, I had planned to use the open afternoon time on this day to take a group out to the Globe Theatre. Most of the undergrads had other plans, however, so Kyle, Alison and I did a quick plan adjustment and decided to take a tour of the

Tower of London (since we were already going in that direction to retrieve Kyle's wayward cell phone from the bus company, haha). I fully admit to being a bit daft and thinking that the "Tower of London" was going to be a singular tower. That said, I don't feel TOO bad about it, since most of the people who have looked at my trip photos have immediately asked, "wait, I thought the Tower of London was, you know, a tower." We managed to see most of the component parts of the Tower, though we did miss the White Tower and the Armoury.

The Tower was an odd sort of place that seemed staged in such a way to market its various component parts to vastly different audiences. It seemed to constantly shift from museum exhibit to children's play area to tourist trap and more. From the moment we entered, where an ice-skating rink was set up next to a rather large catapult in what used to be the moat, this contrast was evident. Every room was a surprise waiting to happen. After walking through a room that was very clearly staged in the milieu of a museum to display medieval coins, we found ourselves in a room staged to look as if it were a current residence, complete with a man dressed as a "medieval priest" copying out a manuscript and answering children's questions. There were other rooms staged for smaller children (the bestiary exhibit, the soldiers' quarters), and others staged for history or literature buffs (the Bloody Tower, the execution site, the room where Clarence may have been murdered). There were also areas that were filled with an air of seriousness (the Crown Jewels exhibit, the exhibit with the surviving royal hats). Overall, it was an exhilarating, though jarring, experience. The three of us had quite a bit of fun, but it was also like wandering through a place without a fixed identity. Just a few dozen

feet from the execution site (a muted glass memorial with a call for contemplative thoughts about those whose lives were lost) we found ourselves in the Bloody Tower (with interactive voting booths where we were asked to vote on things such as Richard III's likely guilt in the murder of the young princes and whether certain executions were justified or not).

After our sightseeing of the day, we set out for our evening play, *Sauce for the Goose* at the Orange Tree Theatre. The play, another in our string of farces, had the most dynamic staging yet of the plays we had seen. It wasn't so much that the staging was impressive—at least not in the way that *The Master and Margarita* and *War Horse* had impressive staging—what struck me was the various ways that they were able to re-arrange the few set pieces to represent distinctly different spaces. It reminded me of when I was a kid in Cub Scouts and we had to do the Tom Watt kit (every scout received a cardboard box of assorted debris, and had to craft something interesting out of it—everyone started with the same materials, but we all did drastically different things with those materials).

Moving props in and out of a theatre in the round is always going to be difficult. When I first saw the set, I had assumed that the play would take place entirely in one room (like *12 Angry Men*). That assumption was largely based on the thought that the props/scenery were just so hideous (the stools, tables and benches were all so garishly painted—they struck me as something that a tacky aunt would put in her den) that they couldn't possibly be rearranged. I was dead wrong. Tables and chairs became a hotel bed. The hotel bed broke apart to become a sitting room sofa. Over and over again, they reconfigured these simple pieces to create the

illusion of a new space. Perhaps the most interesting stage scenery was the one that wasn't there—the exterior doors, whose sound effects were provided by a character who operated in a booth that placed her as gatekeeper, observer and audience member of sorts. She was perpetually on the stage throughout and seemed to occupy the same kind of liminal space as a balladeer or a fool, though she didn't offer any such narrative structure. At one point in the play, she offers a character a “key” to the hotel room—yet she is also present in all three settings of the play—which places her within the play while oddly outside of it. I'm still not quite sure what to make of that (or whether I'm over-thinking it).

I did think the play dipped into the same well a few too many times, particularly in later scenes. There didn't seem to be a very heavy plot—it basically just existed to create an environment within which the ongoing gags of misrecognition could take place. Those gags were still funny, but the more often they pulled them, the less amusing they became, particularly in the third setting. In the first segment, Lucienne's rejection of Pontagnac and the awkwardness of the combination of the would be Lothario, his attempted conquest, her hapless husband and her frustrated man on the side created a series of wonderful moments. When the play moved to the hotel room, the army doctor and his wife added a new dynamic. It was really the third movement, to Redillon's apartment, that fell flat for me. While there were some moments that seemed fresh (particularly the butler's lines—“He's just a boy! He's only two and thirty!”) it ultimately just felt like a rehash of the gags from the first movement. This seemed even more exaggerated by the act break, which really had me confused. Act one was quite long, while the

second act was only about 20 minutes or so in length. To come back from the intermission to the same comedy bits just seemed odd.

While I did enjoy the play, particularly the creative use of the simple staging and the innovation of the sound effect actress, it didn't hold up to the other farces we'd seen to this point—both of which seemed to have more going on plot-wise than *Sauce for the Goose*.



A photo of the "Medieval priest" in the Tower.



An “execution” pose photo. Alison was a little upset that I looked “too cheerful” for an execution.



Kyle, hamming it up with one of the wire statues in the Tower.

1/5/2013: *Billy Elliot* at the Victoria Palace Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Billy Elliot* (2005)**

Directed by Stephen Daldry

Book and lyrics by Lee Hall, music by Elton John

Performed by the Victoria Palace Theatre

Like the *Jack and the Beanstalk* production that we saw, *Billy Elliot* is a bildungsroman that follows a young boy's entrance into adult society. However, it is a far more complex play because it ignores issues of black-and-white morality and instead focuses directly on sociopolitical and gender issues. Rather than becoming incorporated into society, as is typical for a bildungsroman and was the goal in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Billy learns to rise above the destructive environment of his upbringing. Further, his individual development influences members of his entire community so that they, too, seem to have a coming-of-age experience. The play's themes resonate with sociologist R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that there is within society a hegemonic ideal governing masculine behavior – hegemonic because it does not necessarily conform to any single identifiable group, is impossible for any single individual to live up to, and yet is perpetuated by individuals, both men and women, by the complicit acceptance and conformity to its ideals. Because the hegemonic level is impossible to attain, individuals fall within three sub-categories: 1) complicit masculinity, occupied by those who accept the hegemonic ideal and can embody some aspects of the hegemonic ideal, 2) marginalized masculinity, occupied by those who accept the hegemonic ideal but cannot conform due to some kind of disadvantage, and 3) subordinated masculinity, occupied by those who cannot fulfill the hegemonic ideal and make no effort to conform.

The most important sub-category in the context of *Billy Elliot* is marginalized masculinity because the workers in Billy's hometown are forced into this position by their socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged position. The men are

unable to fulfill the ideal role of provider because the mines are being shut down and they are out of work with the union strike; their status as strong, independent men is also threatened by the “scabs” or alternative workers who are brought in to work the mines. More than having its own independent social expectations, hegemonic masculinity conceives of masculinity as not-femininity. This frequently places the two groups in direct conflict with one another, as the greatest insult to one’s masculinity would be being identified with femininity – and they play uses everything from dialogue to costuming to choreography to portray this underlying gender hostility. As the play progresses, however, we see a breaking down of the rigid, superimposed gender hierarchy, a transition that begins with Billy accepting his love for ballet. The dialogue, costuming, and choreography transform alongside Billy, and it ultimately becomes clear that the community has begun its own transformation to become more accepting of diversity: they realize that class and gender divisions are not as definitive as they once thought, finding points of commonality with people like the audition manager and the ballet dancer from Glasgow. The play ends with a message about the importance of individuality – a theme present throughout the play in the mother’s letter – although the discovery of self is dependent upon one’s understanding of other people and their interactions with social structures.

While the class divisions dominate the play, there are clear indications that gender issues are intimately connected with class. For example, all of the characters use crude dialogue that includes derogatory terms when they address groups they perceive as Other – such as the scabs, Margaret Thatcher, the middle- and upper-

classes – and one of the worst insults is calling someone a “puff,” the British term for homosexual. This is significant because homosexuals, who typically adopt a position of subordinated masculinity, are the only group in a more compromised position than they are, so the psychological need to distance themselves from anything homosexual (feminine) is even greater. Rather than building on this imagined distinction, however, the play shows the two groups as similar; their differences are merely socially constructed, as is the supposed threat of femininity. For example, when Billy’s father and brother discuss the labor disputes at the beginning of the play when the strike has just begun, their position is undermined by the indications that their not working places them in a socially degraded, marginalized, feminine role, as the father attempts to cook breakfast while wearing a bikini apron, and the brother walks around in just his underwear. The play does not show femininity as negative, but the scene reveals that this is the position they have been forced into, and the tensions arising from their lowered position drives much of the conflict that ensues. The real threat is the maintenance of a rigidly hierarchical gender order through the grandma’s song, which occurs between her and Billy alone. She begins with what appears to be a reminiscent, nostalgic song about her husband and an earlier era, but it soon shifts into a condemnation (notably just after she sings the lines “Women were women / And men were men”) because her husband was also a disadvantaged miner who used drinking and physical violence as coping mechanisms, presumably for his feelings of marginalization and perceived emasculation. The grandmother desires to reject social and gender conventions, and she seems happy about the possibilities this entails (she only really lacks the

resources to never be sober and do what she pleases). However, the scene immediately transitions to Billy's boxing lesson where all of the gender issues touched on previously come to the forefront, as the teacher derides the boys for being weak (like girls) as a means of motivating them to beat up on one another.

When Billy fails to beat Michael at boxing – a particularly humiliating defeat because Michael is a boy half his size with homosexual and transvestite inclinations – he is told to stay behind to give the key to Mrs. Wilkinson, who teaches dance lessons just after the boxing lessons. She makes him stay for the lesson, at first out of what seems like spite or a desire to humiliate him, but she soon sees that he has real potential. She is the only one able to see his talent at this point, in part because she is separate from the masculine hierarchy as well as less involved in class disputes. Yet gender and class disputes never leave. In fact, they become more prevalent than ever in this first lesson because the police officers and workers/scabs enter and show the strike happening in the midst of the ballet lesson. Significantly, the three groups never interact here: the girls either appear huddled and trapped in middle or form a circle on the periphery, and the police and workers/scabs just circle around each other or start to confront each other and then retreat. Billy likewise remains on the periphery but is separate from both the men and women. A similar scene where the strike invades the ballet occurs during each of Billy's subsequent lessons, but the choreography changes to reflect Billy's own transforming acceptance of his love for dance in spite of gender expectations.

The three groups interact more and more each time, and the last group lesson shows them dancing almost as one group: they form circles around one

another and pass through the other groups to make each central and peripheral at different times, and the workers/scabs and police form a line that alternates police-worker-police-worker, and the little girls help them transfer the police hats and hardhats so that both groups can (symbolically at least) see the situation from the others perspective and realize that their positions are not so different. Additionally, like the grandmother's song, the choreography also shows the negative impact of rigid gender hierarchies. The police officers, who represent either hegemonic or complicit masculinity, begin in the first lesson moving very mechanically, making absurdly repetitive motions that achieve nothing; the workers/scabs are not much different, though their movements are more harshly, violently organic than mechanical; the girls just have no coordination (they are almost too organic), but they do provide a kind of counterpoint or complementation for the men. Billy still remains on the periphery in the final scene, but he dances there, leaping from chair to chair, weaving in and out of the two groups, adding flourishes to his movements; he becomes a kind of hybrid of the three groups, a model of controlled organic beauty, showing the potential that arises from accepting oneself regardless of social expectations. Indeed, Billy confronts these issues directly during a solo dance where he repeatedly rams himself against a wall of policemen forming a barrier with their plastic shields, a scene symbolizing the sociopolitical obstacles standing in his way: even though he does not succeed in breaking through the actual barrier, he is the only community member to directly confront these issues, and his recognition of class and gender divisions as obstacles (rather than passively accepting and conforming to them) allows him to overcome them later through his dancing.

The play ends with a reiteration of these themes when the entire cast returns to sing the “individuality” song, as the characters all dance together in a unified choreography, and more and more characters don tutus as the song progresses, showing their new “solidarity” Billy’s decision and their abandonment of rigid gender hierarchies. The song is in many ways a culmination of characters’ choices in the second act. Billy’s father makes the most significant choices towards accepting his son’s love for ballet: he overcomes his deeply ingrained sense of class division when he talks to Mrs. Wilkinson about what it would take for Billy to go to the Royal Ballet School, not going quite so far as to enter her home but making for the first time an effort to engage in civil conversation, he decides to put his son’s needs before the strike when he becomes one of the loathed scabs, and he does his best to support Billy during the audition even though he knows nothing about ballet, an act which shows that his transformation centers solely on Billy. Further, he meets with individuals not unlike himself at the audition, exposing him to the idea that sociopolitical and socioeconomic divisions are largely social constructs that dissolve when groups meet to see each other as people, not stereotypes. First, he meets with an upper-class man with whom he cannot actually communicate because their accents are both comically exaggerated, but the man is still perfectly amicable and they see that they both have sons interested in ballet. Second, he meets with an adult male dancer from Glasgow who offers him a cigarette (the father is still too homophobic to approach the man, but he eventually gets close enough to grab it and pull away), and in their short conversation, the man makes it clear that the father-son relationship will be ruined if he refuses to accept ballet, as he is estranged from

his own father. Finally, the father realizes that members of the middle- and upper-classes are not all working against the working classes when the woman managing the audition wishes him luck with the strike on their way out (the audience also gets a glimpse of her working-class sympathies when she continues to smoke the cigarette that she has told the father he cannot have during the audition). His transformation becomes obvious during the interview when he is too nervous to say anything but “yes” (about twenty times at that) to the question of his support for Billy’s dancing. In addition to the father, members of the community show their support for his ambition by donating money to pay for his audition, and Billy’s brother even becomes one of his most enthusiastic supporters. Significantly, the final song and dance represent Billy’s return to his hometown. He has not ended up like the older dancer who resents his upbringing, and he has defied Mrs. Wilkinson’s advice to make a new life for himself and never return, showing that his one small act of social and gender transgression – one small boy thrusting himself against the police barrier – *has* made a difference.

In this way, *Billy Elliot* is a bildungsroman unlike any other we have seen so far because Billy has to learn to rise above the social expectations of the destructive adult world and forge his own path. *Jack and the Beanstalk* made a point of showing Jack’s conformity to the hegemonic ideal, as my journal entry for that play hopefully shows. Even *War Horse* shows Albert immersing himself in the hegemonic ideal (embodied in WWI) even though he does not hold the same destructive values, a decision that in some ways makes the war a positive, transformative force; in *Billy Elliot*, his individual choices precipitate the transformation, not some external event.

The staging contributes to the sense that Billy must rise above his upbringing in the way they created his bedroom as a structure that rises slowly from the stage and sits directly above the family's kitchen and main living space, domestic spaces that perhaps symbolize his ability to separate from the socialization that would normally begin in the private sphere.

His individual separation is crucial because the surrounding adult world seems nothing but destructive prior to his transgressing actions, as they are learning the same prejudices and hatred of their elders even though they have no understanding of *why*. The most obvious indication of their socialization comes in the miners' Christmas Pageant where everyone is dressed up in costumes with underlying sociopolitical significance, including the children who probably have no idea who Margaret Thatcher is. The youngest child there (who cannot be more than three or four years old) is dressed the Grim Reaper, but an adult removes his cloak hood midway through and replaces it with a police hat; the child, a *tabula rosa*, becomes a mere *tabula* for the adults' perpetuation of destructive values. In a similarly disturbing scene, Debbie offers to show Billy her vagina, revealing that she is fully inculcated in the adult world but apparently lacks any understanding of its hazards. In some ways, then, *Billy Elliot* offers a reverse bildungsroman because the transformation comes in the return of childhood innocence and acceptance: the adults have to go back to a *rosa* state when they lacked their current prejudices in order to rejoin the adult world in a productive way. Although we do not see much time elapse in the community, the final dance/song scene seems to show that the community has changed into a more productive, nurturing environment because

everyone is more open to social and gender transgressions – something that will hopefully make the coming-of-age process easier for other nonconforming characters, Michael in particular.

The play does maintain some superficial similarities with *Jack and the Beanstalk*, as both protagonists must say goodbye to “imaginary friends” to achieve maturity – Jack to Dizzy Rabbit and Billy to the ghost/memory of his mother. Even with this motif, though, the plays present two very different scenarios. When Jack says goodbye to Dizzy, he says goodbye to the world of imagination and nonconformity, opting instead to “be a man” who conforms to the hegemonic ideal of rationality, physical strength, and compulsory heterosexuality. Although he gains self-knowledge when he kills the ogre and Lucy encourages him to be himself regardless of what others think, there is no indication that he internalizes her message because he becomes a burgeoning hegemonic (or at least complicit) ideal. In contrast, when Billy says goodbye to his mother, he is able to do so only because he has internalized the message of individuality and self-acceptance in her letter. Billy’s transformation seems more complete than Jack’s because we see his child-Billy dancing in perfect tandem with his adult-Billy to the *Swan Lake* theme, another ballet that centers on the protagonist’s transformation. Additionally, his mother does not go away completely, returning to take an active role in the final song/dance scene. This seems to reflect the play’s general understanding of individuals as products of their circumstances who are not ultimately governed by them because Billy has broken free from his past, and yet he maintains beneficial elements of it without “relapsing.”

1/5/2013: *In the Republic of Happiness* at Jerwood Theatre Downstairs and *Constellations* at the Duke of York's Theatre.

Scott O'Neil

When I initially looked into some of the plays on our syllabus, I won't lie—I was kind of dreading January 5th. Both plays, *In the Republic of Happiness* and *Constellations*, seemed to belong to a category of drama that I generally can't stand. I read over the descriptions and the reviews, and I couldn't help thinking "Oh great, an entire day with nothing but post-modern theater so impressed with itself that it can't be bothered with a real plot." By the end of the day, I was reminded once again why I generally defer to Dr. Peck's taste in drama.

The earlier play, *In the Republic of Happiness*, was broken into three distinct acts. The first act immediately dispelled any of the misgivings I had had about the production. It began far more like traditional show, depicting a clearly (and delightfully) dysfunctional family sitting down to Christmas dinner. My first impressions of the show were that it seemed like a ribald comedy, full of dirty/inappropriate jokes (discussions of grandpa's masturbation habits, sibling rivalry being the crux of an abortion debate, a song about the murder and mutilation of future imaginary husbands, etc). The humor was fresh and edgy and, contrary to what some of my classmates said, I thought the acting was excellent as well

(particularly Hazel, whose countercultural younger sibling performance was evocative of a young Helena Bonham Carter).

By the time the second act began, I was more prepared to give the post-modern part of the show a chance, and I'm glad that I did. I knew from listening in on the undergrads pre-show discussion that there would be an act with lines, but no attribution. I had initially expected that to seem clumsy on the stage—more like an experiment than a performance. This acting ensemble, however, were just superb in the improv² act. They used the personalities that they established for their characters in the first act to add to the performance of the improv scenes in the second. One example—the father, who was so passive in the first act, was extremely deferential in the second. When he and another character would both start delivering a line, he would almost *always* back off and let the other actor finish it. The aunt, Madeleine, was absolutely perfect in her comic timing, which made it difficult to believe at first that this really wasn't pre-scripted. It was the opposite side of the experience I had at *One Man, Two Govners*—this time, I was SO impressed with the skill with which they were performing this experiment that I nearly doubted the veracity of the actual experiment!

I wasn't quite sure what to make of the third act. I was honestly almost disappointed when I realized that there was going to *be* a third act, because I didn't want anything to ruin the experience I had had so far during the show. When the white room rose from the floor, we saw that Madeleine and Uncle Bob were going to finish off the show. Bob kept asking where something (the river? It was some sort

² I know it isn't "improv" per se, but I'm not quite sure what to call it. I've never seen nor heard of anything like this before.

of natural feature) was, and got more and more anxious that Madeleine would leave him. Even now, I'm not entirely sure what was going on in the third act. As is the case with post-modern work, I'm not certain that I'm *supposed* to know what was going on in the play as a whole. I do however have one idea, and it grew out of the title.

At one point, I believe in the third act, Madeleine asks Bob "Do you have anything in your head/mind/thought?" This seems to be the eternal question that the play addresses—mankind's questioning whether or not we are alone or unique. Are we isolated in our own thoughts? Do other people think the same weird things we do? I thought that the play, particularly in the second act, was showing us the voices inside of a person's (maybe Uncle Bob) head. The comments and things joked about are either absurd (I am angry at my sexual partner's cat) or downright offensive (joking about the rape and kidnapping of children, the holocaust, etc etc etc). There were frequent moments where the actors, panto-like, delivered a line (well ask me if I like my boss) or performed an action (the entire group holding their mikes out to the audience after singing a song that was very "sing-a-long' esque) where it might have seemed appropriate for the audience to fulfill a Panto-audience's role. There was no real threat of that however, as the topics were so awkward and inappropriate that the audience would never say out loud the kinds of things that are showing up in this metaphorical head. My interpretation of the play was that it was putting on display the kinds of internal monologues that go through everyone's heads at some point, whether a joke that is too offensive to say out loud, an insult thought but never stated, a fear that is kept hidden or, as in the second act,

even a goofy song that one might sing in the isolation of his car or empty house. I thought that the first scene, the depiction of the family, showed the kinds of voices in our heads—the idea that we internalize the voices of our loved ones isn't exactly new. The “republic” mentioned in the title could be the collective voices speaking inside of any person's head (in a healthy way, haha).

On a final note about the play, I thought the staging was extremely interesting. It was almost boring in the first act (though I became more interested in its use of color after speaking with Nate). The second act was far flashier, with a talk-show style set and the frequent song numbers—I also thought it was interesting that in the second act, the performers regularly broke the fourth wall via eye contact—the grandmother looked directly at me on a few occasions when delivering her lines. I was particularly intrigued by the changes in light from one act to the next. Act one was marked by a lack of light (due to the frugal use of light bulbs). Act two was brighter, but the light was decidedly artificial in nature (studio lights and spotlights during the songs). Act three featured “natural” light, as they created the effect of sunlight streaming in through the picture window. I'm not sure what to make of these changes, but I thought them worth noting.

Our evening production was *Constellations* at the Duke of York's Theatre. This was the only show I saw on the trip that received a standing ovation from most of the crowd (I considered joining in, but my knee was killing me at that point). The actress playing Marianne nearly broke down in tears, which really drove home how rare a standing O is in London.

While I enjoyed *In the Republic of Happiness* a bit more than *Constellations*, both were excellent productions. I think I just appreciated the former play's more detailed plot. The staging for *Constellations* was brilliant, particularly the use of the balls/balloons as lighting and the way they used those balloon lights to signify the shifts and resets in space/time and tone. I also liked the fact that everyone seemed to have a different idea as to what the balloons represented. Some of the undergrads thought they were stars or universes. I wondered whether the lights were supposed to represent Marianne's brain—the "electrical pulse" lighting effects later in the show coincided with a gradually increasing number of balloons falling from the heavens at the back of the stage—perhaps an indication of brain cells lost/damaged due to her illness? The balloon lights were also used to signify a change in tone—darkly tragic moments were signaled by the balloons taking on a lower, yellowish light, which made the details to come feel even more ominous.

While the set was beautiful and simple at the same time, it was the acting that really made the show so successful. I haven't been acting for long, but I know how difficult it can be just to maintain ONE character type through a performance. Sally Hawkins (Marianne) and Rafe Spall (Roland) spent more than an hour of uninterrupted stage time shifting between *dozens* of subtly different takes on the same character. One moment, one of them would be giving an outraged look, and in the split second flash of the balloon lights, they would need to adjust their blocking, and shift their emotional register from outrage to flirty, or joyful, or grief. This was particularly true during the "re-set" scenes, where Spall and Hawkins had to find

various ways to deliver, and re-deliver, and re-re-deliver the same lines—all while keeping those lines fresh and interesting.

The movement of Hawkins and Spall also caught my attention. There was no wasted movement in this production. I remember thinking at the time that the shifts in blocking during the blinking light re-set was almost evocative of a ballet—both actors had to move naturally, move quickly and move together, all in the space of a second. Of all the shows we saw on this trip, I think Spall and Hawking put in the best performance.

Ultimately, as I said at the outset, *Republic* and *Constellations* aren't my kind of show. I prioritize plot over everything else. I like to see how directors and actors apply their skills/interpretations to a play-text. These two plays almost seemed to start with a clever concept and then fit a plot onto that concept. That said, I very much enjoyed both shows, as they were phenomenal productions of the kind of show I don't usually like.

1/6/2013: *People* at the Lyttelton Theatre

Scott O'Neil

People occupies a strange place for me on this trip. It wasn't my favorite play (that came on the very last day of the trip), but it *was* the play that had the biggest impact on me. My journal's loose focus on staging grew out of my thoughts on this play, and my new WRT 105 course for next year is based on this play as well (I started designing a course on adaptation vs. originality vs. authenticity—I'm hoping to find a way for my students to read this play). I think part of the reason that the play occupied my thoughts for so long was the fact that I felt conflicted while watching it. On the one hand, I thought it was hilarious when the National Trust brought the tour through the restored mansion at the end of the play. On the other hand, I couldn't help but see myself in those tourists roaming through that mansion. Most of our group very much fit the mold of that sort of voyeur into sites of English history and, even when those sites were set up in such an artificial way, we ate it right up.

The play also reminded me quite a bit of one of my favorite short stories, "The Real Thing" by Henry James. In the story, an artist is hired to paint covers for a series of novels about the aristocracy. Initially, he uses his regular models for his covers (a one-eyed dock worker and a prostitute). After the first few covers (which were wildly popular), the painter is approached by a pair of actual aristocrats, heavy on title but low on cash. They offer to pose for future covers under the premise that his work will be more authentic when based upon "the real thing." The covers based on the actual aristocrats end up being far less popular, leaving the reader to wonder what is most important—reality or our imagined sense of "reality."

People played into that notion of real vs. the imagined real. It was strange in a way—early in the show, it seemed to feel more like a British sit-com than a dramatic play. The humor, the pacing—it all just felt more appropriate for television. As the play progressed, however, it developed the depth expected from the stage. The three sisters seem to embody the very conflict going on with the house. In a way, the sisters are a metaphor for the house, which is being cast as a metaphor for England. The sisters are all known by their titles—the Recluse, the Companion, and the Deacon. I thought it was particularly interesting that the half sister (the Companion) refers to the deacon as THE sister—we don't find out until the end of the show that the Companion *is* one of the sisters, and that revelation adds a tone of mocking discontent to her calling the Deacon “THE (ie: singular) sister” (particularly in light of the fact that she was far more of a sister to Dorothy than the Deacon). All three sisters identify themselves by their roles and relations to the property. For Dorothy, the house isn't English history, but rather a place where residents have hidden from history (one example is her frequent mentions of the mining that came right up to, but never inside of, the terrace). Dorothy isn't English history; she's a recluse from it, just like the house. The half sister is a personal and familial companion to Dorothy, and serves the same role for the house. She is a resident within it, but holds no formal, legal, or visible title over it. In the church, a Deacon's role is defined as a servant—specifically in charitable concerns. The Deacon-sister is seemingly in conflict between familial service (duty to her sister), religious service (duty to the church—one of her two intended recipients of the house) and service to her country (duty to the National Trust). Her complicated

relationship to the house parallels her complicated relationships in her professional, personal and spiritual lives—there is only one house, and she can only bestow it upon one of her three worlds.

If the sisters were embodying the house in various ways, the would-be stagers of the house were paralleling each other in an equally interesting manner. There were four potential recipients of the house—the pornographer, the National Trust, the Consortium man, and the Church. The Bishop seemed completely oblivious to the events going on in the house altogether, while the other three all wanted to use the house as a blank canvas of sorts to paint differing pictures of England. The Consortium man wanted to move the house to a more desirable neighborhood in order to use it as a status symbol—someplace where the upper crust could segregate themselves from the common people (who, as per his mantra, spoil things). He wanted to use the house as a hiding place from the people, but he wanted it moved to a neighborhood where more people would *know* that the upper crust was hiding inside. The hiding alone wasn't enough; others had to know about it.

The other two potential recipients of the house were frighteningly alike. The pornographer at one point makes a comment along the lines of “let's fake real passion.” The National Trust wants to do just that with the house AND the sisters. In the interests of preserving England's “real” history, the National Trust man actually re-writes history to his own purposes, re-filling the chamber pots with employee urine, cutting down trees to show how forward thinking the family had been (a fiction that was concocted after the revelation of the long hidden bastard

daughter), and on and on. Both men wanted to use the house as a means of crafting an artificial narrative. The National Trust man and the pornographer could be the same person. The two worlds even collide, with the porn film being shown on the National Trust tour. One (the National Trust) has access to millions of dollars, while the other (the pornographer) is flat broke. It forces the audience to consider why we value one kind of pornography and not the other.

The most touching moment in an outrageously funny and bawdy play was Dorothy's act of giving the most significant historical artifact—the crucifix of Henry VIII—to the wardrobe manager from the porn film. She gives English history to the English in her own way—hiding something from the people by giving it to a person. This double notion of “people (abstract)” vs. “people (literal)” is particularly interesting in that the individual person upon whom she bestows this gift is one of the very few authentic people in the entire play. The wardrobe manager treats the half-sister with respect and decency. She says that she will visit Dorothy, and she does just that. As such, the gift of the crucifix isn't a gift of an historical artifact to a greedy recipient, but rather a gift of a bauble to a true friend.

That gift, I think, brings home one of the main themes of this play—that true interpersonal connections are more important than imagined historical ones. I think the other major theme of the play is connected to the value (or lack thereof) of the cat's bowl. Dorothy and the Companion believe it has value because they are told it holds value. This highlights the notion that value is tied to the narrative surrounding an object, even when that object is nothing more than a pet's food dish.

Alison Harper

Lyttleton Theatre, 3:00, *People*

As was said in class, most English theatre-going people are familiar with Alan Bennett plays, though his wide popularity may be largely owing to the fact that there is very little in his plays that people can really object to. His plays are always a little controversial, a recent example being his sympathetic treatment of paedophilia in *The History Boys*, and through this they maintain a sense of being art, and therefore 'above' normative ethics. However, the tone of his plays, and especially the tone given by the kind of characters delivering this content, tends to defuse any real discomfort. Most of his characters, or at the very least the protagonist, have a very detached, cynical perspective and the most witty and entertaining voice in the show, by which anything like a serious moral or political issue of the play has all the import drained out of it, through being too 'earnest'.

Pornography might have been a controversial topic, but in this play it serves mainly as a metaphor, to symbolize what the National Trust plans on doing with the house and by extension, with Dorothy. As she protests at several points, though, she is 'not the house', or England, or anything else they want to fit her to be and in this respect the pornography is a risqué escape from her life, as well as a convenient trip down memory lane, the director being a former flame of hers. It thus has two purposes, one being to cynically outline what the National Trust is doing, and provide an ironic binary opposite between the 'dirty movies' (as the sisters keep referring to them) and the squeaky-clean job later done on the house, which

incorporates the movie itself. It also represents for Dorothy's character a kind of independence and freedom, a third way out of her financial difficulties which would, in its lack of respectability, be more fitting to the personality she identifies in herself. Pornography is therefore never dealt with in any real way, it is used to titillate the audience and then deflated to the status of metaphor, just as Dorothy complains is being done with her life. When such a serious subject is discarded, all topics follow suit, and issues like the state of faith in this country and the Church of England naturally become both a source of humour and part of the broader metaphor.

I think it is worth asking where the tragedy is located in this play. For most people, it seems to be at least semi-tragic that Dorothy does not get what she wants, and ends the play with more resignation than satisfaction. So what does she want? For things to be left as they are, to be taken for granted, yes, but in a more prosaic sense, for her house to be used as a pornography studio. Although she inclines to Bevan's plan of taking the place up brick by brick and placing it elsewhere, the only option that she comes up with herself (unusual, it seems, in a life which she otherwise describes as simply waiting for things to happen to her), is the one she pitches to Theodore. This appears to be the ending that the audiences is led to expect will happen, as the play begins with a brief scene in which Dorothy and Iris are knitting in their chairs while a porn scene is being shot in the next room, a scene which does not seem to be easily folded into the rest of the play following, and therefore is loaded with a sense of expectation that it is the scene on which the play will end. Is this the happy ending we are looking for? And does the ultimate failure

to achieve this mean that the play can be considered tragic? Yet both endings are the same. Not so much with respect to the pornography, but with respect to Dorothy. In both versions she ends up in the tattered and shabby layers of clothing, sitting in a filthy room doing very little, and apparently this is precisely what she wants. But would this make it a happy ending? I wouldn't say that it's necessarily socialistic dogma, the houses of the upper classes opened up to public scrutiny as the 'right thing to do', since this is cant rejected by the show. But the underlying premise is not rejected, that things have progressed from the 'Dark Ages' to a better society (which I believe the references to Henry VIII were getting at), and the kind of change which is not objected to is the degradation of the class system. The conflict of the play is not between the 'people' as the middle/lower classes and Dorothy as a peeress, but between tourists to National Trust properties and Dorothy as a human being. I think it assumes a very democratic way of thinking, to see the personal fulfilment of the character as the best outcome of the situation. The play is shown as a tragicomedy because Dorothy does not get what she wants, but I see this as a choice to privilege the personal idiosyncrasies of the human being and their own 'right' to do what they want, over any kind of external rules or ideas as to what 'is' right. What 'is' right is only ever treated as a joke.

Professor Peck asked the class why this play was so popular; to support evidence that it was, he mentioned that the play was being performed in the National Theatre and that it was a sold-out performance. I would venture to suggest that the two things have a great deal to do with one another. I doubt this play would have done as well in other locations, or anywhere else that was not so profoundly

associated with the middle classes and their habits and tastes in theatre-going. My objections to the play are not so much that Alan Bennett has chosen to degrade the upper classes, but that this play is a rather crude and cynical way of going about it. Surely it can't be ignored that very thing the National Trust wants to market, the 'human' story behind the house, the scandalous, funny, pathetic story of the last decaying inhabitant, is precisely what Alan Bennett is marketing to the theatre audience. The upper classes are a persistent source of interest for the English, the more so as they are actually dying out, as the number of TV programs in recent years seems to suggest (such as the bizarrely popular *Downton Abbey*, the revival of *Upstairs Downstairs*, the adaptation of *Parade's End*, *Gosford Park* and everything else Julian Fellowes has ever written). We like hearing about, reading and watching the lives of the aristocracy as our 'rich and famous' but preferably not as happy or prosperous as they used to be. The final scene of *People* was packed with instances of closure and speeches which rounded everything off nicely; one of the most important, I thought, was where Dorothy talks about how her role is to reassure people. Through the experience of viewing the house and being in her presence, they feel better about their own lives. They like seeing 'the lofty brought low' much as they are reassured by the 'Death of Diana' and the sense of personal tragedy in the lives of the privileged. Isn't this exactly what the theatre audience are enjoying as well? For us it is a more complex picture, not just the edited National Trust narrative but the broader sense of a person that comes across, yet it is for all that the 'person behind the title' that we are fascinated by.

Mrs Peck made the point that Dorothy is actually 'not at all snobbish', and I believe she meant it as a positive aspect of her character. I think it reads as a flaw. It's true, Dorothy is not really snobbish, she is merely cynical and detached about things like the suffering of the miners in the way that many educated and elitist middle class people are. When her sister first mentions the tragedy of the coal mine disaster, she says something to the effect that June doesn't really care, but 'that's what people say', an interesting reference to the title not as a mass of any particular people but as a general discourse, the governing set of ideas today. It is a dialogue that I can easily imagine coming from the kind of people who attend the National Theatre, as it combines the requisite class-conscious indignation on behalf of the poor and the awareness of how shallow that response really is. It was one of the moments which strongly took me out of the play, as I felt that Dorothy was not a representation of anything substantially different, just 'us', the theatre audience reflected back: not too snobbish and not too earnest or moralizing. No wonder we liked the play, the protagonist was echoing ourselves most of the time. And I think this was a flaw and a pity, that Bennett did not actually maintain any kind of conflict between people like us and the 'real' aristocracy, who would probably be a lot less sympathetic if their views were aired onstage. It may be repulsive or abhorrent, the belief behind the existence of an aristocracy (even though this is barely touched upon in this text) that they are naturally superior to other people by the sheer distinction of birth. It may be a total affront to modern moral and political sensibilities for Dorothy to say to Theodore that the difference between them is that she is a 'peeress', and for that to actually mean something beyond an aspect of her

characterization or part of a metaphor, for it to be an actual reality that some people are born better than others. It is not a point of view that I, for one, would want to see in anyone holding any real power over others. But it would be a pity if it were washed from existence, by being folded back completely into the past as one of the things we've simply outgrown. For the sake of diversity alone, it is more interesting when many perspectives are kept alive and thriving, instead of being steam-rolled out by the common, educated, sensible, humane way of thinking, and I think that is exactly what happened in this play.

01/06/2013: *Sleeping Beauty* at Sadler's Wells Theatre

Alison Harper

Sadler's Wells, 7:30, *Sleeping Beauty*

I have no background in dance and cannot give a very informed impression of Matthew Bourne's *Sleeping Beauty*, but, perhaps because I was coming to it without knowledge of dances or dance moves, I was struck with what seemed to be strong stylistic differences between dances in different parts of the ballet. It was not only that dances represented different personality types (or perhaps functions), as when the different fairies danced before Aurora's cradle in the beginning, but also

how the changing dances could reflect a shift in mood, or even time period. The distance of a hundred years between the beginning and the end of the story is a conventional part of *Sleeping Beauty*, but Bourne's production brought the story to the present day. The dancing shown by Caradoc and his retinue of 'bad fairies' consequently seemed much more like something you could find in a nightclub, if highly stylized.

Speaking of the changes in historical context that Bourne made to the story, I felt that the Edwardian setting was valuable to the show with respect to the way it played with the sexual dynamics. Stereotypically, we tend to consider the Edwardians as a highly refined and physically repressed people, at least in the upper classes. In itself, it seems like something of an odd choice for such a wildly romantic ballet as *Sleeping Beauty*, but I think that the 'prim and proper' impression given by the costumes and setting, especially in the garden scene, are useful in providing a contrast with the darker, far less repressed world of the fairies, who were shown far more as an abruptly disconcerting force than as something natural to the culture of the story's background. For example, when the good fairies first come to Aurora to give her gifts, they don't arrive in the traditional manner, which is public and ceremonial and reaffirms the loyalty or alliances held between the court and the fairy realm. The public nature of gift-giving cannot be other than terribly political, when the recipient is the daughter and heir to a king, and in the original version, the king's neglect of Carabosse is a political act, affecting her reputation and requiring her to seek redress in revenge. However, in Bourne's version, the fairies arrive by night, while everyone else is sleeping, and are not seen by any human other than the

baby princess herself. It thus appears less of a public statement, and more out of personal interest in the princess herself. Their motives were largely unclear, but overall the 'good' and the 'bad' fairies did not seem to be hugely separable from each other, and both sets seemed to have a strong interest in playing with the lives of humans because they had the power to do so. It might be more helpful, then, to view the fairies as indicative of the 'other', ambassadors from a world that is less constrained by human rules and civilization. Bourne's Edwardian setting therefore places them in the most direct contrast with the human world, and allows us to see the whole story as a narrative of how the fairy world complicated and threatened the peace of the humans until order was finally reestablished.

One of the main ways in which the fairies acted as disruptive forces to the plot, was found in the wilder, more physical, and more intensely sexual movements they brought to the stage. A strong example is found in the garden scene at the end of the first act, when the princess and her cohort enjoy a day out in the gardens. Dressed uniformly in white, with uniform ties and boots and carrying tennis rackets, the dance they first engage in is unmistakably derived from the movements of tennis playing. Their motions here were economical and refined, possibly even overly prissy, and give the sport more the air of a childish game than a serious match. Such a dance fit well with the general setting, of a cultivated Edwardian garden complete with tea trays and doilies. Consequently, there was a greater sense of contrast when Caradoc entered and began to slink towards Aurora, showing an entirely different kind of movement and focus, which for the first time (despite a previous scene where she clandestinely met her lover), introduced a note of sexual

energy into the show. In this dance, I noticed that the music and the motions were far more languorous than the previous dance had been (wherein the movements had seemed a lot like healthy exercise than anything else). Caradoc and Aurora were physically touching much more, and appeared more seductive towards one another.

This contrasted not only the dance immediately before, but that immediately after, where Aurora dances with her lover, the gardener. Here, the music was light and the dance corresponding playful. Since he is at first sulking by the rosebushes after a perceived slight, it is she who has to prod him into responding to her, an interesting reversal of the sexual roles with the female as the one pursuing the man, but in a way which was humorous rather than alluring. The two sit on a bench for a significant part of the dance, taking turns to look at each other, brush fingers, and in general behave like children in love, rather than adults. It is very similar to their first scene together, where the gardener climbs through her bedroom window when her maids are absent, but instead of being sexually thrilling, the scene is comedic. He constantly has to duck under the bed to avoid being spotted and at one point dances between two curtains in a style that mocks the movements of the officious lady's maid. The charming innocence of the two, despite Aurora's other-than-conventional behavior (which itself is a gift from the fairies), fits neatly into the Edwardian setting and associated ideas about the innocence of childhood. The role of the fairies, by contrast, is to promote wildness whenever they are onstage, and disrupt such peace. As such, I did feel that they stole the show. The princess and her faithful lover, even once turned vampire-fairy so that he could wait for her for a hundred years, seemed a little pale and uninteresting beside the fairies' extravagance, and the ending, which

showed the happy couple picture-perfect with a child, returned the drama to the banality of the nuclear family's restoration.

1/7/2013: Trip to the Globe Theatre and Southwark Cathedral

Scott O'Neil

The day of the 7th opened with one of the most anticipated destinations of our trip for me—the Globe Theatre reconstruction in Bankside. Initially, I was supposed to lead a group of undergraduates on the trip, but I ended up going by myself (the undergrads wanted to see the Globe, but not any of the other stops on my Shakespeare day itinerary—the original Globe site and Southwark Cathedral). I first went to Southwark Cathedral, where I was greeted by a charming old English woman who was just delighted to hear that I studied literature. She told me that I had to go to the Globe and see where they would fly flags so “those tossers driving the ferry would know to hurry up and get those customers across the river.” She also mentioned that there were certain parts of the Cathedral that had been damaged due to the great fire of 1666 and also during “that unpleasantness in the 1940s.”

Once I got into the main cathedral, it was like a literary playground of sorts. The Shakespeare statue and stained glass were magnificent—I particularly enjoyed the fact that London was carved behind Shakespeare's prone body. It almost

seemed to be making a statement about the correlation between London's growth and Shakespeare's reputation. I was even more impressed by Gower's tomb—I loved the fact that the head of Gower's statue was resting on his best-known works. It seemed to tie into the notion of written works as a source of immortality, and Gower could rest his head on those works in death, assured of the continuance of his name. One of the custodians let me into the Choir (which had been blocked off for cleaning) to see the adjoining flagstones commemorating the Southwark burials of Philip Massinger, John Fletcher and Shakespeare's youngest brother, Edmond (who may or may not have been a bastard, haha). I thought there was a certain irony that Edmond, the almost unknown actor-sibling of a greater brother, was buried in London amongst two great playwrights while his brother was buried back home amongst family in the countryside.

After the cathedral, I made my way over to the Globe reconstruction. I was impressed with the tour guide, who had some information about the reconstruction and general Shakespeare trivia that I hadn't known before. Apparently, the Globe reconstruction was spearheaded by an American actor, and was built without any public money. I also learned that the second Globe (the one built after the original burned down) was built with a *tiled* roof rather than a thatched. I particularly liked the M*A*S*H styled sign (picture below) showing the direction and distance to a number of different locations, highlighting the wide-reaching influence of Shakespeare's works. Even more amusing was that one of the locations was Belo Horizonte, Brazil (a tiny Brazilian town only famous for being the site of the embarrassing victory of the USA over England in the 1950 World Cup of Soccer).

After the tour of the Globe reconstruction, I ventured over to the original site of the Globe, marked by a small semi-circle with a few signs about the excavation and a floor-plaque of sorts inlaid on a contemporary parking lot. Apparently, important bits of English history have a duty to be buried beneath parking lots (assuming Monday's announcement reveals that the skeleton found *is* Richard III). After my sight-seeing in Bankside, I walked across the Millennium Bridge, past St. Paul's and back towards the hotel for our evening play, *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky* at the Almeida Theatre.



Photo of Shakespeare Statue at Southwark Cathedral

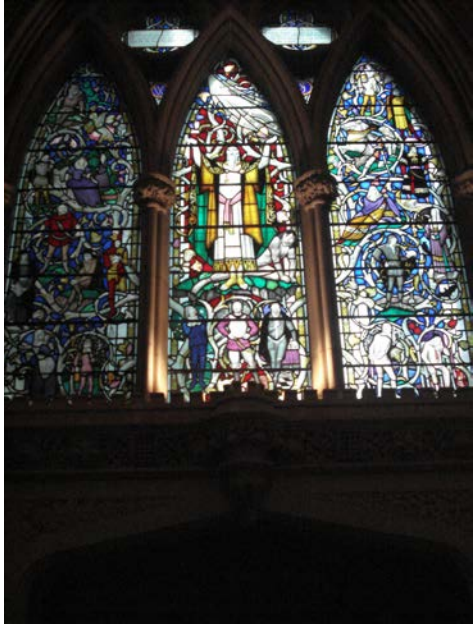


Photo of Shakespeare stained glass at Southwark Cathedral



Photo of Gower's Tomb at Southwark Cathedral

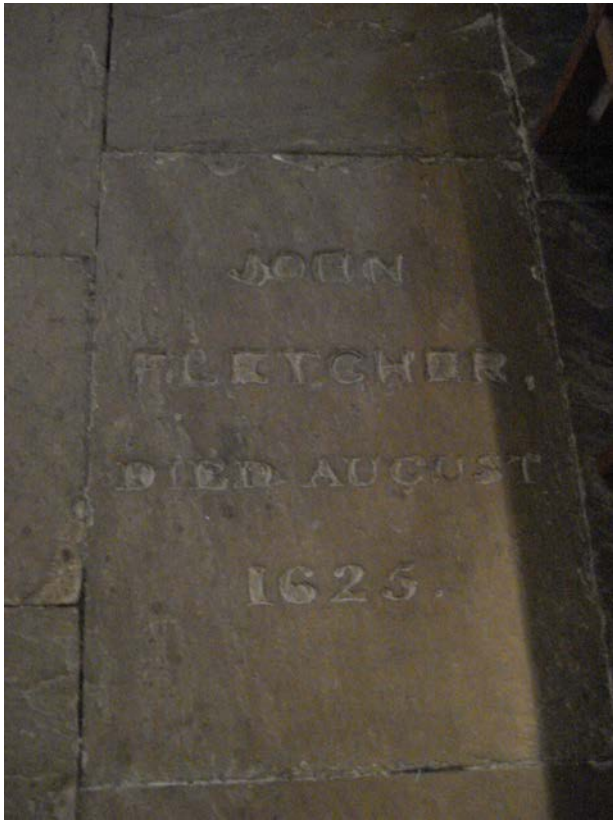


Photo of John Fletcher's stone at Southwark Cathedral



Photo of M*A*S*H style sign at the Globe Reconstruction



Photo of the Globe Stage



Photo of the site of the original Globe



Photo of the Millennium Bridge

1/7/2013: *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky* at the Almeida Theatre

Alison Harper

Almeida Theatre, 7:30, *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky*

This was a very moving play, unusually so in the experience of the trip so far. Possibly this is more the material under discussion than anything else: plays about the First World War are usually tearjerkers of one kind or another. This was

certainly an unusual take on the war story, looking at it through the lens of the life of Edward Thomas. At first I thought this was going to be similar to *Regeneration* or other pieces of literature which focused on the war poets as having the most easily articulated experience, but apparently Edward, though frequently called a 'war poet', never actually wrote about the war. This oddity seems to be one of the many questions that the play brings up and then leaves unanswered, as it is mentioned by Frost when quoting one of the rare bits of poetry in the production. Possibly a central theme of the play is then the relationship between poetry and war, why it was rejected as a suitable subject, whether this was owing to Edward's character (as far as the play can identify this), and what the discourse of war ends up becoming. I can't speak for those brought up in American schools, but I doubt anyone who went to school in England could have avoided classes on the British war poets, and history lessons on the First World War in which poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Julian Grenfell and Arthur Graeme West are seen as more important figures than generals and kings. We are so used to seeing the war through poetry, it is odd to see a play in which the two are separated.

The language of war in this poem appears to move on very different lines, being much more associated with ideas of masculinity and where one's place is in the world. The class this morning seemed to focus very much on Edward's supposed 'desire for death', and how obscurely this was communicated in the play. I can see that suicide is a motif in the play, and that some of the poetry of his which does get quoted seems to indicate a desire for self-annihilation of one kind or another, but I felt that the play was dragging us away from 'death' as the only answer, and more

towards the notion of being 'other', the potential for change. Throughout the play, when asked, Edward tells people that he dislikes himself, that he is a bad person, and more specifically, that he is a failure. He believes, for most of the play at any rate, that he has failed as a writer, he knows he is failing as a husband and father, and he is constantly assured by his father that he is failing both as a son and as a man of society, in shutting himself off in the countryside and not getting a proper job. Everything Edward does that tends towards his own happiness, such as go for walks along the roads and sheep-tracks (which are, besides Helen, the only things that he says he loves), fail in giving him any long-term satisfaction. The trajectory of the play appears to move along his attempts to fulfill his desires, which he only begins to do in his writing, and then in joining the army, and finally in getting sent to the front line. The end result of this is death, but that does not mean that it was the only and ultimate goal. As he says in his last letter, he doesn't want to die, but he doesn't want to not die either - he'll accept what comes to him, since he's achieved everything he wanted to do through his own power.

The 'other man' is a very intriguing feature in the play, as it is not explained or put into any context, but we understand from some of Helen's remarks that she is aware of him, and worried that her husband thinks he is a real person. Professor Peck suggested in class that the final scene where Edward asks 'has anyone seen the other man?' and thinks that he is gone, suggests that the other man is his physical self, and that it is a Edward divided physically and spiritually who is communicating with himself in these passages. I think that the loss of the other man after death indicates that he has at last achieved what he'd wanted, to find his own place and so

losing the possibility of the man he might be. Before the war, he did not have a place, being unsuccessful as a writer and fleeing the home because, as he said, he felt useless there. Writing could have been a means of fulfilment, but the play denies this through setting Edward in a kind of opposition with Robert Frost, who does believe in the purpose of being an artist for art's sake, having devoted his life to becoming 'a man of letters'. This is a choice Edward is offered and refuses, because he wants a different purpose, to be useful in some capacity and to defend the country that he loves. This can feel like a clichéd statement, and the play nicely counters the possibility of patriotic sentiment by having Helen give the strongly pacifist viewpoint that soundly mocks such language. Although this section is a bit heavy-handed, the use of Edward's father also allows another interpretation of this choice to be brought up and then demolished. Edward is exculpated of any kind of aggressive desires through opposition to his father's irrational bloodthirstiness towards the entire German people.

By having his choice to take part in the war questioned by all the other characters in the play (with the exception of Eleanor, who, as Mara pointed out, is tragically underused in this play), Edward's decision takes on a distinctively individualistic tone that we need to puzzle out. I don't think the play lets us entirely work this out either, as the use of manifold and unreliable narrators keeps us guessing about his character motivations. However, I think his decision to enlist, and to go as far as he does in following this decision is not only a means of regaining his masculinity (questioned by his cowardice in front of the gamekeeper), or out of a desire to be useful, but through the impassioned love that he consistently maintains

in the play, not for his wife or any other character but for the land itself: 'I love mud', he says, 'roads and sheep tracks'. I think this declaration is given particular weight in the production, not only because it is one of the very few times he ever openly asserts his love for anything, but because the play is staged in literal earth. The ground the characters stand on is not an illusion of the play but real, visceral soil, which stains the characters' hands and clothes and is actively used by them, giving them a connection with it that transcends metaphor. I think it is this which the production wishes us to pay strictest attention towards as a possible answer for some, if not all, of the questions of the play.

1/8/2013: *Old Money* at the Hampstead Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Old Money* (2008)**

Directed by Terry Johnson

Written by Sarah Wooley

Performed by the Hampstead Theatre

The first thing I noticed in this production was all the symbolism bestowed upon the set and props. The set design was minimalist regardless of scene location, consisting only of sparse furnishings (usually a couch, a table, some other small

accoutrements like a coat rack or record player), and a backdrop screen onto which they projected patterns and images to show scene changes (fall leaves for the park, 1960s-style wallpaper for Joyce's house, modern flower patterns for Frankie's apartment, a nondescript street image for the pub). Because there was so little on stage, everything acquired a symbolic significance – especially the light fixtures and Joyce's red coat, the most vibrantly colored prop of the play.

Above the main staging area hung a cluster of light fixtures, and although the whole cluster remained suspended there for the entire play, one fixture descended to show the scene transition to another character's house. As more of the characters' lives were revealed in the play, I started to notice that the light fixtures symbolized aspects of each characters' life. For example, Joyce's mother has a dated 1930s- or '40s-style fixture with a worn, gold/brass frame and six small, mauve, fringed lampshade covers that coordinate perfectly with her faded floral-patterned mauve wallpaper. She remains stuck in the past, clinging to values of "old money" respectability that are crumbling from beneath her, as the newly widowed Joyce rejects them outright and Frankie strives only for the appearance of moneyed respectability. Consequently, the last scene in which she appears is in the hospital, pitifully frail and mute after her stroke, when Joyce lectures her about how pointless "respectability" is, the lighting changed from the warm glow of her fixture to the glaring, industrial harshness of florescent lighting. In keeping with her role, Frankie has a garishly modern, bright white, porcupine-looking fixture that looks like the "latest thing" listed in a home decorating magazine. It represents her obsession with having the latest name-brand fashion items – she claims she needs to dress

fashionably for work even though she is a telemarketer, calls the designer purses she buys every month her “treat” to herself for all her hard work – but also her propensity for squandering money, usually not her own, on superfluous things for the sake of conspicuous consumption. Finally, Joyce, like her grandmother, has a dated 1960s- or ‘70s-style fixture with individual lampshade-covered fixtures, but despite its apparent simplicity, her fixture is the most complex of all. On one level, its dated appearance represents the forty years’ worth of entrapment and emotional stagnation she experienced in her coerced marriage. On another level, its glow is not warm like that from her mothers’ fixture but rather bright and pure like florescent lighting – a detail that could symbolize her pre-marital freedom and youthful love for London’s “bright lights,” or possibly her own association with hospitals, as she threatens to have her committed if she does not agree to a “respectable” but passionless marriage to an “unusual” man nearly thirty-five years older than her, and Frankie threatens to have her committed if she goes through with donating the house and money to Candy.

The other symbolic prop was, of course, Joyce’s red coat. The coat represents her new-found freedom from marriage and confining “respectable” values, as she bought it within a week of her husband’s death, in direct defiance of socially acceptable mourning attire, and, as she explains to the man in the park, she bought it at a store that was not her “usual place” for more money than she was used to spending on herself. Just as she tentatively explores her new social position, Joyce is uncertain about showing off her new coat and still seeks approval from others, asking the man in the park if he likes it, then becoming visibly more confident when

he says that he loves it and even makes a pass at her. The coat also serves as a focal point around which other characters reveal their condescending, manipulative attitudes towards Joyce. Her mother chastises her for wearing something so bold shortly after her husband's death, showing how she treats Joyce like a child who needs to be held captive by social expectations to maintain the appearance of family respectability. Frankie disapproves of the coat mostly because the freedom and self-confidence that it represents does not cohere with her conception of her mother as a woman she can manipulate into saving her from her own self-made disasters (getting her to provide unpaid childcare, mooching money off her, moving in to her house). While the man in the park does not behave negatively towards her, the same actor plays the man who propositions and possibly assaults her outside the stripper pub, perhaps suggesting that both had malevolent intentions or that both men would threaten her new-found freedom regardless of their own actions. Only Candy – the person who at first appears to take advantage of Joyce most explicitly by going around the pub asking for donations to help out her and another stripper, Mandy, even though both are in good health and have jobs – turns out not to be taking advantage of Joyce. Candy's indifferent reaction (it is nice, but it doesn't quite seem like *her*) to the coat is the first indication that she will be honest to Joyce and appreciate her for who she is inside, beneath the coat. In this context, the coat also seems like an extension of her "mask" – something she puts on to make her look like she belongs in a particular role before she can actually fulfill the role. In her brilliant monologue, Joyce explains: "Every day I've worn a mask. You won't have noticed...But then one day it began to chip..." Just as the mask of respectability

eventually chips away completely after her husband's death, she eventually stops wearing the red coat once she becomes accepts herself, finally moving to Argentina where a coat will no longer be necessary.

01/08/2013: *The Judas Kiss* at The Duke of York's Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***The Judas Kiss* (1998)**

Directed by Neil Armfield

Written by David Hare

Performed by the Duke of York's Theatre

David Hare's play, *The Judas Kiss*, presents the scandalous relationship between Oscar Wilde and his young lover, Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), which resulted in Wilde's losing a major lawsuit, most of his financial resources, and eventually his ability to live in England. In this respect, the play, like Nick Dear's *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky*, has to confront issues of historicity – how to portray historical figures accurately while still creating an entertaining drama. I don't know much about Wilde and Bosie's actual relationship, or the factors that led to the scandal (and apparently each would construct his own version, making it difficult to separate objective and subjective accounts when reconstructing it as drama), so it is

hard for me to judge how well Hare's play remained faithful to the historical reality. However, critic Michael Billington wrote in *The Guardian* that "This is the most convincing dramatic portrait of Wilde that I have come across – one that captures him as both romantic individualist and tragic victim." Assuming that Billington's assessment is correct, this claim suggests to me that David Hare manages the remarkable feat of remaining true both to the objective historical record and to Wilde and Bosie's subjective experiences.

Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of the play was its ability to capture the emotional struggles of each character, especially Wilde, in the face of personal betrayal and heartbreak, as well as the general betrayal by a society that would not and could not accept their lifestyle. Merlin Holland, grandson of Oscar Wilde, explains in the program how he first learned of the scandal from an old article of his father's, which was in a file containing various others on homosexuality scandals, and how he continued to add articles to the file: "I kept that file going through the next thirty years, adding cuttings which dealt with prejudice rather than imprisonment, as well as another element which seemed just as relevant – high profile libel cases. Looking back through it recently, it came as no surprise to see how little has changed over a century whenever fame, sex, pride, and libel are shaken up into their intoxicating cocktail of human weakness. The outcome is as predictably fascinating for the onlookers, as it is invariably disastrous for the participants." This description is particularly fascinating in light of another play we have seen on this trip – Alan Bennett's *People*, which suggests that the public shows the same voyeuristic fascination it shows towards pornography towards stories of

upper-class scandals and tragedies because they are reassured of their own lives when they see “the lofty brought low.” As a play that details some of the most sordid details of Wilde and Bosie’s lives, *The Judas Kiss* could easily turn into a display of voyeuristic fascination for both Hare and the audience. However, even though the topic is unavoidably sexual – and Hare does not shy away from this fact, including several scenes in which male characters appear before the audience stark naked – I thought that the play remained well above the level of voyeurism, in part because it focused on Bosie’s personal betrayal and Wilde’s tragic heartbreak, giving the impression that they were not so different from other lovers who have had a falling out, not that the audience was being given an exclusive glimpse into the secret lives of two privileged celebrities. Though based on historical specifics, the play’s themes were universal.

The play’s title obviously alludes to the story of Judas Iscariot, who sold Jesus Christ to the Pharisees for thirty pieces of silver, betraying him with a kiss. The play itself is somewhat ambiguous about whether who is supposed to represent Judas and who Christ, although it necessarily settles unequivocally on the judgment that Bosie, like Judas, betrayed the tragically Christ-like Wilde whose love was pure. In the beginning of the play, there are several references to the blackmail Bosie faced at Oxford threatening to expose him for being homosexual and having a relationship with Wilde (as well as many other young men of questionable employment), and to the lawsuit filed by Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, which accused Wilde of sodomy in the hopes of preserving the family’s reputation, albeit at the expense of both his son and Wilde. Although there were two blackmail incidents, the

more serious of which would seem to be the one settled for £100, the play only references the one settled for £30, perhaps to draw on the biblical parallels. In these situations, Bosie is shown being betrayed by society and his own father – essentially exploited for monetary gain, as Christ was – although the fact that Wilde buys off his blackmailers, “pays his ransom,” associates Wilde with Christ more than it does Bosie. The allusion turns entirely in Wilde’s favor when Bosie accepts his father’s offer that would allow Bosie to return home and pay Wilde £200 to terminate his contact with Bosie. The two have been living in Italy on limited funds, and Bosie, used to an aristocratic lifestyle, can hardly cope with the requisite frugality, making the offer to return home is a temptation he cannot refuse. In this scene, Armfield brilliantly incorporates the allusion to Judas by manipulating the lighting so that Bosie casts a gigantic shadow on the farthest wall as he leaves. On the wall hang two items – a crucifix and picture of a young man sprawled nude across a bench, arms outstretched – and as Bosie leaves, the shadow spreads first over the crucifix, situated where his heart would be, but then spreads to include the picture as well. By leaving Wilde, it seems, Bosie has betrayed both Wilde’s friendship – he helped him with his university work and saved him from blackmail – and his sexual love.

01/08/2013: *Arabian Nights* at The Tricycle Theatre

Alison Harper

Tricycle Theatre, 7:30, *Arabian Nights*

I very much enjoyed this production, although it is a little difficult to say whether I enjoyed it on its own merits, or whether I was impressed with it despite the handicaps of what looked like a limited budget, limited special effects and relatively average acting performances. It certainly was not as polished as what we'd been used to seeing in the West End. When the audience first sat down, we were treated to the use of a fog machine and possibly another device which let off a sickly sweet, cloying smell, with the speakers playing electronic melodies. The effect was probably meant to be somewhere in the realm of 'mysterious' or possibly otherworldly, to fit the general setting of the play in the Middle East. However, it was a little overwhelming, and not a little reminiscent of 90's discos. The costumes worn by the actors were similarly simple and indistinguishable, though not in a minimalist way. Many of the articles of clothing looked like they could come from somebody's wardrobe, or were part of a general dressing-up set, good for all occasions. The acting, moreover, while none of it was bad, did not exactly blow us away. Much of the time, the actors seemed mostly to be reciting lines and doing nothing more interesting with their voices than project clearly enough to be heard across the room. Nonetheless, these handicaps did not substantially affect the play, and may even have aided it in its design. The story was a compressed version of Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights*, and therefore was not as concerned with portraying real characters or situations as much as being versatile with narrative, and in this it succeeded admirably.

One of the best things about this performance was the use of the character Shahryar the King, as both listener to and participant in the stories. It being a small stage, with

no wings for the actors to wait in without being seen, all the characters tended to be onstage at the same time, and the king could always be seen reacting to the story being told (except on the one occasion when he became an actor himself). Although all of us were at least a little familiar with the story, and thus Scheherazade's success in keeping the king spellbound by her stories for 3 years, our ability to watch the king's reactions meant that we could see when he was displeased, and feel a tension that her plan might go awry. At the beginning of the second story, for example, he asks her for a moral story, and it is clearly her intention from the outset to disobey, possibly out of a desire to slowly wean him from his dictatorial control. The story she tells is the most bawdy of any in the play, and though amusing, we see the king frowningly pacing behind the characters, getting more and more irate to the point that he nearly attacks Scheherazade, putting his knife to her throat. At that point in the story, though, the characters petition King Haroun-Al-Rashid (who is himself a foil for the King Shahryar throughout the play) to tell a story in the hopes of saving their own lives. Haroun answers 'it is permitted', the exact same phrase the king used when he allowed Scheherazade to tell her first story the night he was to kill her, and Shahryar relents with the same kind of interest in hearing the new story.

This kind of mirroring is found many times in the play, as when Haroun meets Sympathy the Learned, and conceives the same kind of fascination for her and her clever answers that Shahryar is developing for Scheherazade. The character of the king continues to interact with her and even with the characters in the stories (in the first story-within-a-story, he physically attacks the Ugliest Woman in the World), showing the success of her plan in how he is kept enraptured by them. The

play also shows us character of the king changing through these experiences, in the countenance and behavior of the actor, Sandy Grierson, and in how he is paralleled with other characters. Most frequently, he is paralleled with Haroun-Al-Rashid, the good king, which indicates how much better he might be if he allows himself to be changed by Scheherazade. Much later in the play, though, he is given another parallel character whom he plays himself, Haroun's 'Other'. In this story, Sandy Grierson meets Haroun acting as a character who has been impersonating him, and when asked why, tells him that it is ultimately because of heartbreak. The story this man tells does not match up perfectly with what we know of Shahryar's backstory, but it carries very similar themes: profound love for another, infidelity, and grief at loss. By having Sandy Grierson play this role, the production seems to be showing how the experience is as therapeutic as it is didactic, allowing him, in the tragedy, to express his sadness for the loss of his first wife (and possibly, for the loss of all the other wives since), and then in releasing that part release the grief as well.

The way the characters interacted with the various levels of stories-within-stories, and continually swapped over roles, was an enduringly interesting and often very humorous way of performing *A Thousand and One Nights*, and the best feature of this play. There were also a number of other minor points which bear mentioning as well, that added to the enjoyment of the evening. The staging was simple, but effective. At the end of the first act, the characters all left the stage to reveal a single flower blooming out of the floor, a clear sign of the king's growing attachment for Scheherazade and the animation of his heart. By the beginning of the second act, the stage was entirely covered with grass, communicating how full of life the king has

become. At the same time, the lights hanging from the ceiling lit up again, also symbolic of life (in the scenes where the king was killing his former wives, a light went out each time one of them died). I also liked that the characterization and costuming did not try to make the entire thing consonant with an 'Arabic' setting. Most of the costumes were in that style, and many of the accents they used sounded vaguely Middle Eastern, but there were a lot of discrepancies as well. The actor playing the king, also one of three white actors in the cast, had a strongly London accent, and dressed in a plain T-shirt and sweatpants. Others in the cast wore furs, or scuba gear, or clothes that looked like the style of the American Wild West, and spoke in accents ranging from American to Italian to Russian. This diversity of nationality helped to avoid any explicit political overtones to the setting in the Middle East, and headed off any issues about whether it was played authentically or not, but emphasized instead the universality of storytelling.

1/9/2013: *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* both at the Apollo Theatre

Scott O'Neil

For a day devoted to Shakespearean drama, the 9th was far more Dickensian, as it was truly "the best" and "the worst" of times. I had very strong, conflicting reactions to both plays that we saw on this day, and after having a few weeks to

process those feelings, I stand by my initial reaction. After returning to the Harlingford that evening, I posted the following to Facebook:

“What an odd day. We saw what was (to me) the best play yet on the whole trip. Three hours later, we saw what was (to me) the worst play yet on the whole trip. Both plays were performed by the same company at the same theatre with the same actors.”

The “best play” that I was referring to was *Twelfth Night*, which I thought was absolutely amazing. I loved everything about it—and my only “complaints” were that the actors I thought would astound me (Stephen Fry and Mark Rylance) were upstaged by even better performances from actors I had never heard of, specifically Paul Chahidi (Maria) and Peter Hamilton Dyer (Feste). What impressed me most about *Twelfth Night* were the little details—there were moments that would only be appreciated by hard-core Shakespeare fans/critics, and they were included so flawlessly. It took every ounce of willpower *not* to be the “tacky American” and give a standing ovation at the end of the show, if for no other reason than to applaud director Tim Carroll’s effort.

I wasn’t sure why they were getting dressed on stage at first, but the program detailed the theatre’s emphasis on authenticity, particularly regarding wardrobe. It would seem that the pre-show dressing is a way to showcase this to the audience.

So many of the little details I enjoyed were related to the role/position of the stage fool. For instance, the two doors at the rear of the stage opened automatically

for every character *except* Feste—he and he alone had the ability to open and close doors. When the doors *didn't* open for other characters, they were locked out. Only Feste had the authority to go where he pleased, which I thought was a wonderful nod to the stage fool's authoritative license.

I also loved what the actors did with the space between the words. They were able to add humorous moments through carefully timed pauses and silences. I just about lost it when Olivia turned midway through saying Malvolio's name (Malvoli—OH!). I also appreciated the fact that Carroll worked some of his interpretations into the *performance* of the lines. I've never seen Olivia played as such a delightfully sex-obsessed character before—coy, yes, but not desperate--and I thought it worked wonderfully with the lines in the text. They also did a lot of great visual interpretation, particularly in the scene where Orsino and Viola/Cesario were confusingly falling in love.

I was particularly impressed with how skillfully the actors incorporated the on-stage seating area. When Sir Toby kept retrieving various bottles of booze from the audience to subvert Maria's attempts to put him on the wagon, it almost evoked classic slapstick comedy. I wouldn't expect to laugh at the same gag more than once, but Colin Hurley's Sir Toby was timed just so perfectly that it got funnier with each new bottle of booze retrieved. The audience was also skillfully used in the scene where Aguecheek and Viola were trying to escape their duel by trying to climb into the opposing audience areas.

Some of the undergrads didn't like Rylance's "doll walk" when he was playing Olivia. I actually thought it was very interesting, particularly the long loops he made

while doing it. Rylance rarely walked in a straight line as Olivia, but rather would make graceful and precise curves, almost like he was a figurine on a music box or an ice-skater making a figure-eight, following a pre-set pathway. This sense of Rylance's Olivia being on a pre-set track also came through with the entrances and exits, as he (and other characters) would often exit through a door, but immediately turn and face the audience as the door was closing. The exits were very much part of a choreographed motion, which struck me as an intriguing mix of grace and artifice. I don't think it was an attempt to make Rylance ape the movements of a woman as much as it was a portrayal of feminine grace—within the limits of masculine actors.

Finally, I was delighted when the whole cast came out singing and dancing at the end of the play. This was another moment where I felt that the director had *really* done his homework and decided to end the comedy in the traditional manner—festivity and song and dance. I couldn't stop smiling or talking about *Twelfth Night* afterwards, both with the undergrads on the way out of the theatre or at dinner with you, Mrs. Peck and the alumni. My experience with our afternoon play made me all the more excited for our evening play—and I was totally unprepared for what I was about to see.

After *Merry Wives*, *Richard III* was the play I was most looking forward to seeing. I seem to have made a career out of seeing *Richard III* over the last year. I saw it in Stratford the trip before last with the wonderful female lead. I also saw it twice last summer, as both the Rochester *and* the Buffalo Shakespeare in the Park featured *Richard III*. The two summer shows were good, and the Stratford

production was excellent, but I couldn't wait to see what London could do with a history play (probably my favorite of Shakespeare's genres).

In the interests of being positive in some way, I should say that I thought the acting was very good. I was particularly impressed with Rylance. I didn't like the interpretation, but I respected the performance. Not only did he have to memorize two concurrent lead roles (especially difficult considering the number of lines Richard has), but he had to affect a convincing stutter and have pinpoint comic timing. I also thought the stage fighting was decent, particularly when Buckingham's ghost walked between Richard and Henry Tudor.

I just couldn't get past the interpretation, however. Everything that impressed me about Carroll in *Twelfth Night* was lacking here. It honestly seemed as if he just didn't understand the play (and I almost never take a tone this negative. I can almost always find *some* redeeming feature about a play). Richard is frequently played as a vice-figure or a Machiavellian fool, but Carroll seemed to cast Richard as a natural fool. His stutter and random cackling were distracting, particularly when they just destroyed the rhythm of some of his greatest speeches. Alison (the undergrad Alison) had a great point that this interpretation would have worked if it were limited to Richard's asides to the audience—thus showing the fragmented nature of his mind, without making that part of his outward personality. But it wasn't limited to his asides, so it really didn't work. Richard is a Vice, not an idiot, and he came across as more foolish than anything else.

It seemed as if Carroll wanted to portray Richard as an innocent figure—someone whom others would underestimate due to the simple nature of his

personality. I had a long discussion with Jason about this play, and that's exactly how he viewed it—he wasn't familiar with the play beforehand, and he was arguing in favor of it as a good production based on that interpretation. The problem with that interpretation for me is that *Richard III* is not a stand-alone play. Three plays precede it and before Richard utters a single word of his opening speech, the characters in the play are already well-aware that he is a dangerous and ruthless murderer. No character makes that point more clearly than old Queen Margaret, which is likely why she was cut entirely from the play. I have never seen any production of *Richard III*, on stage, screen, or anywhere else, that has cut Margaret. She's a key character in the play, and she seems to have been cut to make Carroll's interpretation seem more believable. It just seems to me that if you have to cut an important character to make your interpretation work, then there is probably a problem with your interpretation.

Painting Richard as a harmless simpleton also devalues the political themes of the play. If the characters in the play were suckered in by Richard's seeming childish personality, then that makes his ascent to the throne almost a pitifully ridiculous feat. When Henry Tudor finally defeats him (in a really poor killing stroke where he couldn't seem to find the slot for his sword in the back of Richard's armor), he's not killing a tyrannical usurper. He's killing an idiot simpleton. It just seems to make the victory less of an accomplishment. The whole point of Shakespeare transforming Richard into a mustache-twirling super-villain was to highlight the significance of Henry VII's defeat of such a man.

There were some other minor issues that I had with the production. I was particularly upset that EVERYONE in *Richard III* seemed to be interacting with and speaking to the audience. Carroll showed such a wonderful grasp of the stage fool tradition in *Twelfth Night* and having anyone *but* Richard interact with the audience seems to diminish the point of having him as a Vice figure. I was also very let down by the ghost scene. I literally said during intermission that “a good ghost scene can salvage this entire production for me.” They came out in bed sheets, alternating doors and delivering their lines in a flat monotone. The production of *Richard* that we saw in Stratford showed how wonderful that scene can be. In that production, the ghosts not only came out and truly menaced Richard, but they got involved in the final battle. When the ghosts entered, the battle went into slow-motion. With every killing stroke that Richard had, one of the ghosts deflected his sword. Finally, when Richmond had a killing stroke and Richard was falling, the ghost of Prince Edward (the rightful heir) removed the crown from Richard’s head and placed it on Richmond’s, adding a sense of legitimacy to Henry VII’s claim. After seeing something like that, I was floored by flat acting in bed sheets.

Lastly, I was completely shocked that the actors came out with a song and dance again. This is a tragic history, not a comedy. It just seemed like misplaced festivity. I do want to stress again that I was generally impressed with the acting—I just feel like the director’s vision for the show was just completely incompatible with the play itself, and most of the problems I had with the production stemmed from that dissonance.

1/9/2013: *Richard III* at the Apollo Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Richard III* (c. 1592)**

Directed by Tim Carroll

Written by William Shakespeare

Performed by the Apollo Shaftesbury Theatre

I have to confess that I initially hated this play because of the decision to cast Richard as a villain playing a fool, which went completely against my understanding of Shakespeare's play – and even further against the actual historical reality, as the recent discovery of his body have shown. The more I thought about the play, the more I had to consider issues surrounding “interpretations” and “adaptations” of well-known, often-performed plays: what liberties do directors get to take with the original work? to what extent should historical context influence their reproduction? where does “interpretation” end and “adaptation” begin? None of these questions have easy answers, and I cannot even begin to explore all of them with respect to this play. However, based on my assessment of the play with respect to Shakespeare's original work, the historical context in which it was produced, and the problem of remaining faithful to the dynamic and message of Shakespeare's

other history plays surrounding *Richard III*, I am still of the opinion that this production failed as both an interpretation and an adaptation for several reasons.

First, the decision to portray Richard as a fool is not consistent with original work in which Richard is “determined to prove a villain” (I.i.30) and succeeds in terrifying those around him with his tyrannical methods of accruing power. He is brilliantly cunning, relying on nothing but “the plain devil and dissembling looks” (I.ii.236). Indeed, the Introduction to *Richard III* in the *Riverside Shakespeare* describes him as a kind of “lesser Iago,” someone who will not only do anything to achieve his goals but who also enjoys harming others – and much of his brilliance comes from his ability to deceive those around him. For example, the first two acts contain numerous asides in which Richard articulates his true intentions, which are often the exact opposite of what he has just said convincingly to another character. He convinces Clarence that he will defend him (“I will deliver you, or else lie for you” [I.i.115]), just before he explains his malicious intentions to the audience: “Go tread the path that thou shalt ne’er return: / Simple plain Clarence, I do love the so / That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven, / If heaven will take the present at our hands” (I.i.118-20). As with this scene, so much of the play’s dramatic tension derives from Richard’s ability to deceive those around him, to get them to do his bidding, and to continue his rise to power despite his crimes. By making Richard a fool, it becomes difficult to see this component of the play: one is left wondering how other characters can be so stupid as to follow a king who hobbles across the stage, cannot climb on the throne without tripping over his robe, and bursts into cackling laughter

at the thought of achieving his true intentions, which the original Richard manages to conceal behind a complex psychological mask.

The visiting alumni's suggestion that the director was drawing on Shakespeare's distinction between "natural fools," who are often simply mentally deficient and bring much-needed comedy to tense dramatic scenes, and his "artificial fools," who are witty and bring to the forefront issues of moral conflict and psychological turmoil, added an interesting component to this adaptation that might have some grounding in the original play. However, if the director was drawing on these stock characters, he seemed to combine them in Richard, as he could be witty, and he clearly was not mentally deficient when he spoke, but his actions certainly did make him seem deficient. Similarly, the comparison of Richard with Vice figures of morality plays adds another more interesting component, especially since he refers to himself as Vice personified halfway through the play ("the formal Vice, Iniquity" [III.i.82]), a statement that reiterates to the audience his self-proclaimed status as "villain" (I.i.30). This seems to me a closer representation of his function within the play, as he does embody all of the qualities associated with a "sinful" tyrannical monarch, deceiving his subjects and murdering all those who could oppose him. Like Vice figures, he is also able to make sin and corruption entertaining and appealing through his witty, articulate asides. If he is, in fact, Vice personified, then Shakespeare's representation could serve an additional, didactic function, as Vice figures typically do: Richard teaches other monarchs and nobles how not to behave when in powerful positions, and it teaches everyone in the audience to be wary of deception that is not immediately apparent. Richard's

representation as a fool is less problematic in this view because Vice figures in morality plays were frequently comical in a way that relied on physical humor, although I still have trouble seeing how physical comedy fits into a character whose substance derives so heavily on psychological complexity.

I think that the director recognized that this decision was not consistent with the original play because, despite the troupe's stated goal of remaining as close to the original productions as possible, the director decided to cut Margaret of Anjou, one of only four female characters in the play, the other three being Cecily Neville, Anne Neville, and Elizabeth Woodville. Because *Richard III* is Shakespeare's second longest play (after *Hamlet*), it is not uncommon for directors to cut entire characters and scenes. However, I would imagine most limit their cuts to minor characters and scenes that do not seriously alter the plot or the audience's perception of the plot. Although Margaret is absent for most of the original play, her speech brings crucial issues to the forefront, as she reminds Richard of his crimes in plain, gory detail: "Richard yet lives, hell's black intelligencer, / Only reserv'd their factor to buy souls / And send them thither; but at hand, at hand, / Ensues his piteous and unpitied end. / Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray, / To have him suddenly convey'd from hence. / Chancel his bond of life, dear God, I pray, / That I may live and say, 'The dog is dead.'" (IV.iv.71-8). Had the director included this speech, which continues in the same vein for more than one hundred lines, after several acts of Richard's bumbling about the stage, the audience would have had either a hard time taking the speech seriously because Richard comes across as relatively harmless in his incompetence or a hard time making sense of the disparity between the two

Richards presented. The necessity of cutting Margaret to preserve the coherence of this production reveals that something about this director's interpretation does not work with the rest of the play – and that something is his representation of Richard as a fool. So, while I could accept the director's taking some liberties with Richard's representation, especially in moments of physical comedy because they are not scripted in the original, I have trouble accepting as mere interpretation a play that has to eliminate a crucial figure and a crucial speech in order to maintain the production's internal coherence.

In addition to issues of internal coherence, the decision to present Richard as a fool is inconsistent with *Richard III's* function in the sequence of Shakespeare's other history plays, most of which concern the transition from Plantagenet to Tudor. Although he did not write the history plays in chronological order, the order in which the history actually precedes is: *King John*, *Edward III*, *Richard II*, 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, 1-3 *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Henry VIII*. As the second-to-last play, *Richard III* is the culmination of Shakespeare's War of the Roses cycle, and as such, Richard III has to embody the corruption and political disorder that characterized the latter part of the Plantagenet reign, most notably in the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) and the War of the Roses (1455-1485). Further, Richard's deposition by Henry Tudor (Earl of Richmond, later crowned Henry VII) at the Battle of Bosworth Field has to represent a cathartic political transition, a final scourge by God for the deposition and murder of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV). Although Shakespeare shows Richard II's reign dominated by misrule, he struggles to define what circumstances can legitimize the overthrow of a

legitimate monarch: even though Bolingbroke proves a better leader, his actions cannot be justified simply on the basis of Richard II's failed policies. The implications of this for *Richard III* are fairly obvious. In order to legitimize Henry Tudor's overthrow of Richard III, Shakespeare has to make it perfectly clear that Richard III was not just an incompetent ruler, like Richard II, but a ruthless, godless, tyrant whose reign was no longer sanctioned by God. By turning Richard III into a fool, Carroll's production completely changes the play's function within the history cycles because it emphasizes Richard III's incompetence over his actual moral corruption, though his actions remain the same: it once again complicates the issue of what constitutes a legitimate monarchical overthrow, and this has the presumably unintended consequence of calling into question the Tudor dynasty's foundation.

Finally, looking beyond *Richard III's* place in Shakespeare's own canon, Richard's representation in this play is not consistent with the larger historical reality in which the play was produced. I don't mean that the play did not accurately represent the actual Richard III: it is generally accepted that Polydore Vergil and Thomas More's descriptions of Richard's physical appearance, which seem to be Shakespeare's sources, were Tudor propaganda based on stereotypical features of the monstrous and functioned to reinforce the divinely-proclaimed legitimacy of their dynasty. Indeed, the extent of Tudor propaganda has become more apparent with the discovery of Richard's body because we now know that Richard had severe scoliosis and not a hunchback, a feature that increases his badass status, as he managed years of military success in spite of the untreatable chronic pain that riding must have caused (that alone would probably make me cranky enough to kill

a few nephews). But that is really neither here nor there. I am concerned here with the historical context of the play's original production in Tudor England.

Shakespeare was writing the plays under the patronage of Elizabeth I, one of the most successful monarchs of the Tudor dynasty, so his job was to promote the idea that their dynasty's founder, Henry Tudor (Henry VII), had "God on his side" in ousting Richard III. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the decision to portray Richard as a fool implicitly compromises the Tudor's claim to power. It also has the more immediate effect of diminishing Henry VII's accomplishments because he defeated in battle someone too clumsy to mount his throne let alone his horse – why would he even need God's help to achieve that?

1/10/2013: *Uncle Vanya* at the Vaudeville Theatre, Alumni Reception, and *Matilda: The Musical* at the Cambridge Theatre

Scott O'Neil

As the trip entered its stretch run to the finish line, the plays just seemed to get better and better. While I enjoyed the early plays a great deal, the plays that turned out to be my favorites seemed to come one after the other during the last week (*Old Money*, *Twelfth Night*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Matilda*, *The Magistrate*, and *Julius Caesar* were all amongst my favorites of the whole trip). I wasn't sure what to expect from *Uncle Vanya*. I had read and enjoyed some of Chekhov's short stories,

but I wasn't familiar with *Vanya* at all. I was concerned at first when the curtain lifted and the play began. While the set was a very realistic-looking country porch, the almost boring conversations between the characters made me mistakenly assume for a moment that I was in for another modernist "conceptual" play (I had flashbacks to the production of Pinter's *The Homecoming* from two Stratford's back, and while that play was well done, it REALLY wasn't my kind of play).

I was very quickly drawn in by the absolutely phenomenal acting work of this cast. I loved the stark, psychological realism of this play—every character was a fully realized figure. The characters who weren't speaking in a scene were frequently more interesting than the ones who were. Vanya's niece was particularly impressive with her non-verbal performances, especially in the opening scene. Her looks of excitement, hope, longing, etc were very convincing. This was a particularly refreshing change of pace as well—the last few plays we had seen featured, in one way or another (conceptual, performance, etc) "over the top" acting styles. It was nice to see actors going for a more natural/realistic performance.

The actor playing Vanya was amazing—I honestly feel that his performance was the most impressive acting performance I have ever seen live. His scene where he explodes on his brother in law was so realistic and unexpected. It's like he had bottled that anger up for years, and his cork just blew at that moment (anger about all of the things he DID say, and anger at his erroneous belief that the woman he loved was willing to cheat on her husband—just not with him). Once that anger was out, Vanya was just an empty shell. He had fueled himself on that resentment for so many years, and when he finally let it out, he had no more fuel. This brings us back

to the idea of the wonderful non-verbal acting in this play. Vanya after the outburst even *looked* like a different person. Having spent the majority of my acting debut standing silently in the background, I can imagine how difficult it would be for an actor to play a *lead* role and convey that character's conflict nonverbally.

Aside from the acting, I thought the "mini-intermission" in each act was also interesting, mainly in a "John Cage" kind of way. People in the audience—especially the first time it happened—seemed to be confused when the screen came down midway through the act. I saw a number of people checking cell phones and talking amongst themselves. The set changes that were done during this time were very impressive (the various sets were elaborate and painstakingly detailed), though I do wonder if they could have found a way to make those changes without the odd pause.

I love that the play didn't have a happy ending. From the point that the doctor sexually assaulted Yelena, it would have felt very awkward if EITHER of the women had wound up with him. The actual ending was far more powerful to me. The play opens and closes with tranquil, almost boring scenes (tea on the porch at the beginning, and working on the books at the close). Even though the two scenes are similar in a way—both dealing with everyday events of little seeming importance, we can't view the two scenes the same way. The "boring" simple life at the cottage has lost its innocence. Norman Rockwell (well, the Russian Norman Rockwell) might have painted the opening scene. The final scene is quite a bit darker because Vanya's explosion has exposed the roiling emotions churning beneath the surface.

After seeing the phenomenal production of *Uncle Vanya*, we attended a reception that was about as far from the Vanya-esque simple country life as possible, living it up at the W Hotel in the EWow room. The room is apparently a celebrity destination, used in the past by such musical names as Nikki Minaj (I admit to having to ask the undergrads who this was, haha). The room was huge and quite impressive. It overlooked a huge block party for *Django Unchained*, and we got a glimpse of celebs such as Samuel L. Jackson and Quentin Tarantino. I admit to being very much out of my element—growing up in a poor farming community, I’m not used to rubbing elbows in a setting like that, and I found it difficult to mingle. I think I offended the server at the door. He asked if I wanted white wine or red. I asked what the difference was (not being a frequent drinker of wine, I had no idea what distinguished the two). He looked at me, raised an eyebrow, and said “one is white. The other is red.” I chatted briefly with the Provost, and spoke with Don, Mara and a few other people, but I was very ready to move on to the next play when it was time to go. It was a much-appreciated reception, but I guess I still have some of that “small town” class-based insecurity.

From the reception, we headed over to *Matilda: The Musical*. I’m almost reluctant to try and “analyze” a show like this. It was just so much fun to see. I was immediately struck by the amazing Scrabble-inspired set. We were looking for words during intermission (English nerd set Boggle). We spotted malice, joy, maggot, beautiful, tragedy (but no comedy—we looked specifically), acrobat, escape, beastly, burp, phenomenon, monster, fear, and star/stunt (sharing the same S—I thought this was interesting, because I read “stunt” in the sense of stunting one’s

growth—a child can be a star or be stunted, all depending on formative influences—I thought it was also interesting that the play critiqued both extremes of parenting, opening with a song exposing the ridiculousness of helicopter parents, and following with the opposite scenario with Matilda’s family).

The show had amazing choreography, especially from those kids—I was almost surprised they were allowed to do some of the numbers that they did considering the potential risk of injury to such young actors. I loved the blocks in the fence dance number—the timing was so precise, and the risk of screwing up seemed high. If they erred in their timing once, it would be hard to hide.

I’ve never read any of Dahl’s work, so I can’t really speak to how closely the musical followed the novel. Generally, I loved the mixing of the humor (some aimed at younger audience, others aimed at older audience) and I thought the villain was just excellent—cartoony yet fun. My only minor critique was that it was sometimes difficult to understand the lyrics to the songs. I feel like I should have more written on this play, but my primary reaction after the play was just that it was a really fun show. It wasn’t particularly deep—just a good, high energy romp.

1/10/2013: *Uncle Vanya* at the Vaudeville Theatre

Alison Harper

Vaudville Theatre, 2:30, *Uncle Vanya*

With Scott and Mara, and several other people in the group, I was very much taken with the staging in this play. The house filled nearly every corner of the stage and loomed over the audience in a fairly menacing way, with its tall dark wooden walls and heavy rafters. Although walls were taken down over the course of the play, and the back of the stage retreated as we moved further into the house, the effect of the house still felt all-encompassing. I found this a particularly interesting aspect of this play in particular, as two of the major themes are concerned with the land around the house: the destruction and deforestation of the countryside, and the work to maintain the estates attached to the house. The former is the particular interest of Doctor Astrov, whose concern for the environment and social management of the peasants elevates him above many, if not all of the other characters. The latter is the main occupation of the title character Uncle Vanya, who sacrificed his life and personal chances of happiness in order to keep the estate active and profitable. These two characters are arguably the best of the family, and consider themselves to be so as well; at one point Vanya remarks upon how they were the superiors of their company. The lands around the house are therefore very important to the context of the play, and for motivating the plot - when Vanya has his breakdown in the third act, it is because of his years of tireless work on the estates for which he has never been given any recognition.

It must be significant then, that for all their importance, the land is not portrayed onstage, nor is there any opportunity of imaging it, since the house takes care to block it all out. Possibly the producers wanted to emphasize the sense in which the characters are trapped in their lives, being trapped in the 'choking

atmosphere', as one character says of the house. The set does allow the audience to feel physically choked by the claustrophobic closeness: in the first act when one character is smoking a pipe, the smell wafts out over the audience in an unavoidable manner. It may also be a reference to the way the characters are specifically changed by the arrival of the professor and his wife Yelena, for since they'd arrived, Astrov and Vanya had stopped planting trees or working on the lands, and stayed inside the house instead. Given the importance of the land as a means of elevating the characters, its absence may signal the loss of hope. Disappointment is a strong theme in this text: Vanya used to be happy, or at least content in resigning himself to endlessly working on the estate, as long as he cared about helping his academic brother-in-law. It is only after he has become disillusioned with him and his ability to say anything valid about art, that he becomes unhappy. Sonja is the only happy character at the beginning of the text because she still has hope that Doctor Astrov may love her back, though by the end of the play she has recognised the futility of this desire.

It is subtly suggested by Chekhov that it is better to live in uncertain hope than certain disappointment, in Sonja's comments on the matter. The play ends with a monologue from her on how happy they will be after death, in heaven, and by this time, even that possibility has the light of a futile dream that may turn out to be as disappointing as everything else. The audience's inability to see the lands around the house, then, might be reflective of such hopes and potential for happiness being ultimately denied to people. This interpretation is strengthened by the use of light in this play. Scott also noticed, after the last act, that there is a lot of warm, sunny light

in the play. Although each act takes place to some extent within the house (the first act being in the porch), there is often a great deal of light coming in through a window, especially in the last act, when Sonja and Vanya sit for their work in a literal halo of light coming in from the window immediately adjacent to them. It seems evident that the light represents hope, or life or a sort, yet it is not accessible for any of the characters.

1/10/2013: *Matilda: The Musical* at the Cambridge Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***Matilda* (2010)**

Directed by Matthew Warchus

Based on the novel by Roald Dahl

Performed by the Cambridge Theatre

I was skeptical when I heard that they had made a musical version of this play because I grew up loving Roald Dahl's original short story version of *Matilda*. Barred by my parents from most "real" fairytales, I think this story came to fill the same role for me that fairytales do for other children – I dreamt of being "saved" through books (and in many ways I was), dreamt of discovering some secret powers

that would help me change my situation (sadly those never came), dreamt of having a teacher like Miss Honey care about me in ways my parents apparently could not (mostly because they were both working something like sixty hours a week to make ends meet). Having had such a strong attachment to the book probably made me a little biased against a production that differed drastically from the novel, but I found the changes to seriously detract from the qualities that made the book so wonderful. Dahl is famous for writing excellent villains, who often have a particularly menacing antipathy towards children, and for situating these villains not in some othered or liminal space (like the dark woods or a castle floating in the sky) but within the very social institutions meant to protect children, such as schools and families. (His short story, *The Witches*, is probably the best example of this, but *Matilda* comes in as a close second.) While the play did not eliminate all of the darker elements of Dahl's work, it seemed to simplify and exaggerate them to the point that they seemed simply absurd. I think others experienced a similar sense that the play was lacking in substance, in part because it seemed to rely so much on spectacle – something that is surprisingly lacking in both the book and movie, considering Matilda's powers.

Don't get me wrong! I found the play wildly entertaining, largely because of its skillful use of spectacle. Some of the spectacular elements were connected to the play's major themes, though they did little to add to it. For example, the whole stage was framed by letters, like those one would find in games like Scrabble or Boggle, and some of the letters were arranged to spell words that reiterated themes and symbols, such as "destiny," "acrobat," "escape," and "scarf," among countless others.

Some of the words even seemed to influence the plot, or at least the audience's perception of the play. Specifically, "tragedy" appeared on one side of the stage, and I was expecting "comedy" to appear on the other because some of those words were juxtaposed ("destiny" and "menace" on the left, "escape" and "love" on the right), but "comedy" was nowhere to be found anywhere on stage; indeed, the only other genre-related term there was "revenge," possibly meant to connect with "tragedy." I'm not quite sure what to make of this because the production itself played up the comedic elements, and yet the production seems literally to frame itself in the revenge tragedy genre. Other spectacular elements – even when they were completely connected to the plot, such as the music and lighting – were often done in such an exaggerated way that they detracted from the plot and the ability to enjoy the play. The lighting was so bright at times that it was almost physically painful, doing nothing to help the headache I had going into the play. The music was also so loud that I could hardly make out the lyrics, which is a shame because the lyrics that I could understand were so good and nuanced. I think they sacrificed a lot of the original story's substantive complexity in its efforts to entertain.

And rather than just being a criticism, I think this raises an important question: Why do theatrical productions make such an effort to simplify worldviews, mitigate moral ambiguity, and eliminate anything frightening? I found myself wondering this after the two other children's plays we have seen so far. As the presence of dark, gruesome elements in so many fairytales throughout the ages suggests, children are attracted to stories that portray (what they perceive to be, and what may actually be) the unstable, sordid world around them so that they have

a way of articulating their own fears, rational or not. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the director tried to remove any complicated moral issues by exaggerating the dichotomy between good and evil: Reid apparently had no qualms about including a giant ogre puppet and Frankenstein-ed characters, even though these were clearly scary elements (the children in the row in front of mine gasped and cuddled up to their mother when they appeared). In *Hansel and Gretel*, the focus was on making any dark elements comedic, probably because it's hard to have much moral ambiguity in a story of infanticidal parents anyway – as just one example, Kirkwood decided to have the “how to identify a witch” part include not only terrible eyesight (in Grimm's original), also a hacking cough and an itchy arse. I suppose there could be a purely practical reason for doing this, since nobody wants kids screaming and crying and having to leave the theatre because they are frightened – especially since parents have paid a lot of money for theater tickets compared to movie tickets (our tickets for *Matilda* were £45, compared with the £10 some paid to see a movie one night). This might even be a problem uniquely posed by plays. When parents are reading to their children, they can skip over, edit, or explain the scary parts, and they can pause/stop movies if they are watching them at home. With theater, the visual elements are much more in-your-face, can't be paused, and can't even be explained right away. (This might explain the inclusion of “tragedy” and “revenge” in the framing letters, since parents and older kids could read and understand that, but younger, more easily frightened kids could not.) So, I guess it makes sense for directors to simplify aspects of these plays – but I still find it a disappointing aspect

of children's plays, especially since moral issues and scary things are an integral part of children's stories.

In *Matilda*, Dennis Kelly, who first adapted Dahl's book for stage, tried both to minimize the moral ambiguities and to make frightening things merely funny. He exaggerated the darker elements from the book and movie to the point that nothing seemed like it could happen in the "real world," not even in a child's distorted or imaginative perception of it. There was no question that the Wormwood's were terrible, unfit parents who had singled out Matilda just because she was a girl: Mrs. Wormwood even neglected Matilda in utero, not realizing that she was pregnant until she was in labor, despite the fact that she already has one son and so presumably knows the symptoms of pregnancy, and they praised their son, Michael, even though he appeared to be mentally retarded. While the Wormwoods still did horrible, neglectful things like forget how old she is, rip her library book, and call her nasty names, there was considerably less of a sense that they were mean to Matilda just because they could not understand her. Their parenting style was made to seem all the worse by the exaggerated juxtaposition of other children's parents in the opening song, "My Mummy Says," in which obsessively doting parents praise their spoiled, misbehaving children. The problem of excessively loving parents is unique to the musical – perhaps derived from but expanded past recognition from a line in the movie in which Lavender tells Mrs. Trunchbull that her mommy thinks "braids are pretty." Both representations were so far at the extreme that none of it has much emotional impact. It also has the effect of diffusing the very real threat of parental neglect and abuse because the Wormwoods are made into the rare

exception: the real threat today, according to the play, seems to be parents who spoil their children because they are so numerous.

I did really like the play's attempts to show the various responses to and lasting consequences of abuse through its juxtaposition of Matilda and Miss Honey. I thought this was one of the few places where the play actually achieved some emotional resonance. While I identified with Matilda as a child struggling to cope with life in an abuse household, I identified much more with Miss Honey this time because the play gave her greater psychological complexity, making it perfectly clear that she still struggles to cope with her childhood abuse. She has to remind herself to "stop being pathetic, Jenny," a song that shows that she has internalized some of the messages she received as a child, and she reflexively grabs her arm when she interacts with Mrs. Trunchbull, showing that she has some post-traumatic issues or even that she still fears being physically abused ("I broke your arm once, Jenny, and I can do it again"). Matilda copes with her situation by turning to learning and specifically by creating fantastical stories; this not only provides her with a means of mental escape but also gets her some of the love and attention she needs from the librarian who is genuinely enraptured by the stories. In contrast, Miss Honey seems to have coped with her situation in a similar way, since she also turned to learning, but her reaction also seems to have been different from Matilda's in ways that are not made clear in the play. I can think of two possible explanations: first, that she lacks Matilda's powers and (super)natural intellect, and second, that she lacks Matilda's resolve to "change her story," instead accepting the abuse as part of life. The first is something made clear in the play – when Miss Honey goes to the

Wormwoods, she says that Matilda is doing math that she did not do until college – but it doesn't quite seem like the reason for their different reactions. The second also does not seem quite satisfactory because, while Matilda does to some extent escape into her stories and maintain that people can change the endings, she also accepts that life is not fair, that not all stories have happy endings: she maintains a clear distinction between fantasy and reality, even reminding the librarian that the story of the acrobat and escapologist is just that, a story.

This ambiguity made me wonder whether Matilda and Miss Honey's situations were really so different. The play certainly emphasizes their innate connection through the acrobat and escapologist story, which turns out to be the story of Miss Honey's own life, perhaps symbolizing their psychological similarities. This, in turn, made me wonder whether Matilda would really live her "happily ever after" or whether she would be troubled with psychological aftereffects when she got older, as Miss Honey was. I think the play offers this as a possibility, and I appreciate that it took the issue of parental abuse seriously in at least one respect. The more I think about it, though, the more I wonder if there might be another possibility for their different situations and still leave open the possibility that Matilda gets her "happily ever after" ending. The one thing Matilda has that Miss Honey did not is Miss Honey – someone who knows Matilda's struggles and who is willing to fight for her well-being, a savior-figure of sorts, who makes it possible for Matilda to escape from her abusive situation at a much younger age, presumably at age six rather than eighteen, and this could make all the difference in the world. It is also a bit more complicated than just this because she and Matilda actually end up

saving each other. Miss Honey's transformation begins when she starts to fight for Matilda: she finally accepts that she can be something other than "pathetic," that she can "change her story," and this allows her to stand up to those who tease her (Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood) and torture her (Mrs. Trunchball). Miss Honey's efforts to help Matilda and show her the kindness she deserves allow Matilda to use her knowledge of law and the library in a way that is truly productive: she xeroxes and fills out adoption papers so that she can live with Miss Honey, an act that is less spectacular but more substantive than putting a newt on the headmistress. Thus, it is their combined agency that actually "saves" both of them from their abuse.

1/10/2013: *Matilda: The Musical* at the Cambridge Theatre

Alison Harper

Cambridge Theatre, 7:30, *Matilda*

I was a little disappointed with this musical. There were many interesting and entertaining elements, and I thought that the production handled the challenges of a largely child-centred cast very well. My objections were mainly grounded in how fundamentally different the musical was from the book, not just in content but also in tone and style, so much that it seemed to be aiming towards an entirely different audience. Roald Dahl's book is a common literary favourite, largely because, as with most of his books, it is a children's story with a sense of menace. There are dangers and threats everywhere, from the villainy of the headmistress

and her elaborate punishments, to the nastier undercurrent of abuse coming from the uncaring and spiteful parents, who have near-control over the heroine's life. Dahl writes excellent villains, who often have strong antipathy towards children in particular (such as in *The Witches*, another novel that was successfully made into a play), and whose power is not situated in some 'other', unsafe space like the woods or the dark night-time, but in the institutions that are supposed to keep children safe, such as school and family.

This musical version of *Matilda* was not entirely a light-hearted production, but the director seemed to simplify the complexity of the world-view in a disappointing way. A relatively consistent refrain, especially from Matilda, was that life is not 'fair', and not all stories have happy endings. But these are the only two objections raised, and therefore are allowed to be completely resolved by the plot when Matilda achieves justice for Miss Honey and becomes adopted by her. The ending Roald Dahl's story gives us is much more ambiguously cheerful, as we are constantly reminded of all the terror and threats there are for children in the world. For example, it seemed like the show tried to completely defuse the idea of parental abuse, by making such a big deal about a modern habit of spoiling children. The song 'My Mummy Says', which starts off the show, is concerned with the idea that parents can give too much love and support to their children, to a ridiculous extent, and in which it differs extraordinarily from the line in the book which the song is taken from, where Amanda tells Miss Trunchball that her mummy thinks plaits are pretty. I initially liked the song, and thought it was a useful revision for a 21st century *Matilda*, as a current issue. However, it was not allowed to go anywhere: there were

no repercussions to the children's characters as a result of being spoilt, such as being overly arrogant or physically obese. Rather, this song and motif seemed to be purely used as a device to make Matilda's situation the more tragic, and was therefore only one of many instances in the musical where the producers exaggerated and inflated the point they were making beyond all reason.

It is the sense of exaggeration in the musical which I found unappealing, as well as the reduced complexity. The story and characters were largely the same, and much of the dialogue was similar, but everything was wrought at a much higher pitch: literally it was almost deafeningly loud at times, the lighting was occasionally physically painful in its intensity, and there were a number of unnecessary additions that only served to amplify the melodrama or comedy, and detracted quite a lot from the actual story. The character Rodolfo, for example, appeared to exist for no other reason than to allow for some different dance numbers, and occasional laughs. The subplot of the story Matilda is telling, of the acrobat and the escapologist, is a weirdly dramatic story that does feel in keeping with Dahl's style, but which I think does not belong in this musical, especially as it turns out not to be fictional at all, but part of the natural world they live in. Such events make the actual story of *Matilda* less powerful; if Miss Honey had such an exciting past, then Matilda's power to move things with her eyes is merely another fantastic event in a world full of them. The power of the original novel was that fantastic things happened only in books, and late in the text, in Matilda's own life, thus giving the impression that she is drawing her power from books themselves. I do think that the musical picked up very well on this theme in the use of songs and language that referenced the need to 'rewrite the

story', but it would have worked better if it contrasted more with the 'real' state of the world.

Instead, the musical predominantly focused on a feature that is in many respects quite alien to the book, that of spectacle. It is possibly unfair to complain about there being spectacle in a musical, as this is a more natural, arguably necessary aspect of this genre, in a way that it is not in books. However, I think that in this case there is a profound mismatch between the original and the genre it is adapted into. I was skeptical when I first heard that a musical version had been made, and was extremely interested in seeing how it would be managed, because of these inherent difficulties. I felt that the musical, although entertaining, could have been based on an entirely different children's story about young protagonists overcoming injustice in their school, and been much more effective. An alternative would have been to keep the tone of the book and put on a much less elaborate, more introspective musical that allowed any necessary 'showy' song and dance numbers to be more the production of imagination, or the content of the books she reads to escape her life. I understand that this might have been difficult, but I felt that as it was, the entire show is escapism, without reality, and therefore there is no real reason to prefer books, and they are in effect accorded no special value.

1/11/2013: Harry Potter Set Tour, Leavesden Studios

Scott O'Neil

The second to last day of the trip opened with our last free afternoon of sight seeing time. After having seen Stratford, the Globe, the British Library, the British Museum, the Louvre, Westminster Abbey, Southwark Cathedral and such, I figured I should get some real culture. Thus, I ended up organizing a group of four undergrads (Claire, Alison, Halle, and Madeline) to catch a train out to Watford Junction so that we could do the Harry Potter set tour at Leavesden Studios. The tour was broken into five distinct sections. First we got to walk through the doors to the Great Hall set, arranged with house tables and mannequins sporting costumes from the various films. This was really the only “guided” part of the tour, as a guide offered up some trivia tidbits about the details of the set. Most of the people on the tour (our group included), spent more time trying to get photos than listening, haha.

After the Great Hall set, we were ushered into a big hangar-sized room that contained prop displays, more costumes, and a slew of the smaller sets from the 8 Harry Potter films. One of the things that really shocked me was how artificial everything looked. The dormitory set looks huge in the films, but in the studio it was extremely small (no larger than the conference room in Robbins). The beds (only four on the set—they artificially “created” a fifth one for the films) were also tiny, and we learned that the actors were too tall for them after the first movie—rather than replace the beds, they simply had the actors put their legs over the edge and shot around it.

After getting our fill of the set display, we went out to the courtyard, which had a number of props/sets, including the chess pieces from the first film, the flying Ford Anglia from the second and the Knight Bus. That area led into a special

effects/robotics section, and from there we went through the Diagon Alley set (again, far smaller than we thought it would be). Finally, we ended up walking around the huge scale model of Hogwarts Castle that they used to film exterior pan shots for the films,

While it was fun to play around on the sets that allowed such interaction, I was most interested in the special effects wing and the scale model. I was amazed at how little of what we see on a screen matches up with what the actors do in front of a camera. Like the dormitory set, which required multiple camera angles followed by digital editing and expansion, it seems as if the whole point of making a film is to create something that looks nothing like what's actually in front of the camera. For another example, Robbie Coltrane plays the giant Hagrid in the films. I had assumed that they just used camera angles to make him look taller when he was next to other actors. In fact, they had an animatronic facsimile of his head made, and put that on a much taller man's shoulders (see photo below). The only thing that seemed larger than we expected was the model of Hogwarts, which was just stunning in its attention to detail. Not only was it a massive model, but it was also full of fiber optic lights that made it look occupied by hundreds of people (in the windows). It was also housed in a room where the lighting was perpetually shifting from daylight to dusk to night.

Beyond the fact that it was just a really fun tour as a fan of the books/films, I'm glad that I went because it really made me appreciate all the more how carefully dramatic stages have to be crafted. The sets from *Uncle Vanya* or *People* were more realistic than anything on the tour, and sets from *The Master and Margarita*, *Old*

Money and *The Magistrate* were more adaptable. I suppose I'm a drama purist—I'm more impressed by sets built out of real materials as opposed to sets largely created on a computer.

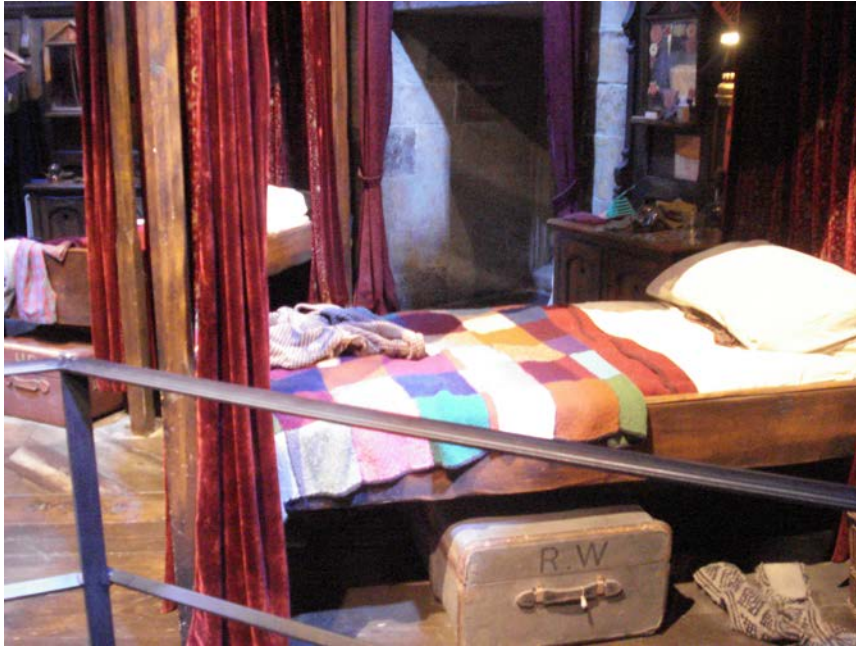


Photo of dormitory set at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo of the group reflected in the Mirror of Erised at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo of Halle and I in front of the door to the Chamber of Secrets at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo of the undergrads in the flying Ford Anglia at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo showing how they created Hagrid's height in fight scenes at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo showing the scale of the Hogwarts model at the Harry Potter set tour.



Photo of the group at the end of the Harry Potter set tour.

1/11/2013: *The Silence of the Sea* at Trafalgar Studios 2

Alison Harper

Trafalgar Studios 2, 7:45, *The Silence of the Sea*

We only have two more plays to see on this trip and unless they're unusually brilliant, I think I can now say with certainty that I've found my favourite play. *Silence of the Sea* did everything that I ask for from a theatre experience: it experimented with the form of drama, and the concepts articulated in the play and which the characters were themselves struggling with were a challenge to the spectator that left me thinking about it for hours afterwards. The characters were believable, none of them were wholly repulsive or wholly sympathetic, and their interactions affected me emotionally. The tone of the play remained consistent throughout, and was complemented perfectly by the choices in set and stage design. Ultimately, I felt that the topic, of the German occupation of France in the Second World War, was so perfectly expressed in this play that any other representation must be compared against it.

The staging was one of the most immediately noticeable things about this play. Previously, the only production I'd seen at Trafalgar Studios had been *Dance of Death*, a play which used a hyper-realistic, extremely detailed setting to contrast the lack of realism inherent in a small setting. This play worked in a very different way, as there was no real attempt made to give the illusion that what happened on the stage was 'real'. This was shown in the text itself, as there were frequent moments at which the character of the uncle (and briefly, at the end, the niece) spoke directly to the audience in a soliloquy which communicated something of their hidden thoughts and impressions, which of course, were not spoken out loud. Usually this happened while there were no other characters present onstage, but at one point,

the uncle does begin speaking to the audience while Werner is trying to converse with him, as if we were hearing his thoughts during the conversation. The lack of realism this produced then, was replicated in the staging, which was extremely bare and minimalist, composed entirely of a bench, a chair and a piano stool. There was nothing on the wall behind, and only occasionally were any other props brought onstage (the dirty sheets from Werner, a handkerchief he plays magic tricks with).

However, there was one element of the staging which was, in this otherwise minimalist design, somewhat unnecessary and which I felt added a particularly good touch. When the lights first went up on the stage, they were dim and tinged with blue, possibly in order to portray wistfulness or nostalgia: it becomes apparent later in the play that this first scene occurs at the end, after Werner has departed, and is one of the strongest indicators in the whole performance that the niece does feel sympathy or even affection for him, and misses him now that he is gone. It is such a low light in this scene, however, that it barely illuminates the stage, and thus it first appears as if the bare wooden floor and chairs are the only aspects of the staging. Immediately following, however, the lights become much brighter as we move into the 'first' chronological part of the play, and it is abruptly revealed that the stage has a wooden ceiling to complement the floor. It is so exactly like the floor, that the set looks nothing as much as if the characters are acting within a box of wood. Not only does the tiny theatre of the Trafalgar Studios mean that they have a very small space in which to act (and as with *Dance of Death*, they barely move, relying primarily upon words - and not even communication - in order to move the action of the play), not only this, but now the characters appear as if they are boxed in, enclosed or

imprisoned within the small space in a way that was not always clear in *Dance of Death* (with the use of the door, the windows, and the light that could frequently be seen emanating from them). I feel that this perfectly captured the mood of the play: the uncle and niece are prisoners inside their home by the German occupation, but Werner is also revealed as a prisoner, unable to break out of the growing uncertainty, disillusionment and silence he has been enclosed in. Frequently he entered the house joyful or excited, having been roused to inspiration by the beauty of the countryside, or the thought of seeing an old friend, or the power and majesty of the sea itself, but when he attempted to communicate this feeling to the others, he was shut down, made aware of how helpless he is to change anything or become happy. For such a simple piece of staging, it achieved a wonderful resonance throughout the play.

The role of communication and language is of course very important, as it is both a device by which the author played with dramatic form - how to have conflict, or relationships between the characters if they don't acknowledge conversation - and the most predominant theme of the play. It was difficult not to study this play, as well as take it in as any piece of theatre. Perhaps our role as students gave a particular significance to this aspect, but I feel that any audience member would have been similarly struck with the importance of observation and analysis in this text. As only one character is usually speaking at a time, for vast quantities of time, the other characters are necessarily objects of scrutiny. We cannot keep our eyes on Werner the entire time he is speaking. I think we were all watching the uncle and niece very carefully during these scenes where the German was declaiming on

whatever point he was making, to see if we could catch any nonverbal responses, attributing much to movements of the eyes or body language, and anxiously waiting to see when, if ever, they would respond.

Since we were at least privy to the uncle's voice through his 'thoughts', the character we were most interested in watching was the niece, who does not speak until the very end of the play. However, insofar as, in the frequent absence of explicitly verbal communication, we were relying on other clues, the play still gave us plenty of hints as to what she might be thinking. It was a short play, but it is still a little unimaginable to ask an audience to sit and watch a play for over an hour in which one of only three characters never does anything that we can identify as characterful. I think this play was full of them. For example, when the German showed her a magic trick, she responded in a non-verbal way typical of a magician's audience, her eyes became wide and she looks shocked and rapt with attention. Werner had his back to my seat at this point, but I imagine that he would have had a similar intensity of expression, and that it would have been possible to see some kind of contact between them, of interest at the very least. It is clearly emotionally affecting to her, for as soon as he leaves after this performance, she runs outside, offstage, and through the sound system, we hear a recorded voice weeping.

Seeing as the emphasis of the play was on communication, or lack of it, the audience became particularly susceptible to sounds. The title of the play, *Silence of the Sea*, foregrounds the importance of sound, and we were treated to the prodigious use of sound effects from the beginning, the sound of footsteps or closing windows, or piano music, in place of the sound of human voices. However, there was

another use of sound in the play, that which was being described by the characters. As much as we were interpreting the sounds we heard, they were doing so as well, and their commentary was often very telling. I think one of the most important stylistic aspects of the play was repetition, and many things were repeated, altered and inverted over the course of the play, such as the sounds characters describe. One of the first sounds of importance is the 'clanging' noted by the uncle. It was the sound the clamp made when he picked it up, the clamp which his brother used to kill a German soldier. It is also this clamp which is later reportedly driven into the wall of the house by another German soldier, to signify the unlikelihood that the inhabitants would resist occupation, that metaphorically (and only ironically literally) that they would stay quiet about it (the clamp, as the uncle says, representing the 'jaws' and thus voice). Such a 'clanging' is heard again at the end of the play, as a sound which prompts Werner's final understanding as to the true evils of occupation, and is in its own way a form of voicing the paradoxical resistance and capitulation of the French subjugated by the Germans. It is the sound Werner described when he goes to have dinner in Paris with his former friend, and observed him tormenting a waiter, first relatively harmlessly, and then more and more violently, until he is badly hurt and possibly killed. The friend having put a silver receptacle on the waiter's head, all the other Germans banged on it with their spoons when he comes by their table, making a 'clanging' noise.

The 'scream' Werner heard as he leaves the restaurant, coming from the alley where the others had finally dragged the waiter to attack him, is echoed in the scream given by his friend when Werner steps on his hand in the morning, breaking

the bones. Such sounds are reported as occurring at moments of key emotional intensity, and dramatic conflict, but there are also those which reflect more subtle themes. When Werner goes to bed, he describes the sound he makes as he sits upon the mattress as an 'ah' sound. Later, the uncle goes to sit upon the German's bed once he has gone and describes the very same sound. It is a small thing, but it does both confirm and mock the idealistic vision Werner had expressed upon first entering the house, that all people are basically the 'same', that they have a commonality which underlies everything else. This is somewhat borne out in the play, almost tantalizingly held before us as a desirable prospect. It is tacitly suggested that it would create happiness, if the lonely niece and the lonely German were to find some point of sympathy in their shared love of music or appreciation for magic, which would reaffirm their common humanity. The first words the niece does speak, an aborted 'I...!' when he is leaving, suggests that this possibility is within reach, but at the last moment denied. The 'commonality' expressed in something so banal as the similar sounds men make when they sit upon a mattress is, I thought, a beautiful expression of how ultimately futile the whole enterprise was.

1/12/2013: *Julius Caesar* at the Donmar Warehouse and *Kiss Me Kate* at the Old Vic Theatre

Scott O'Neil

The final play-going day of the trip was bittersweet in many ways. Nobody was ready to leave. Time was doing weird things to me. It felt like I had just arrived but also like I had been there for months. I left the hotel that morning expecting a mixed bag for our last two plays as well. I wasn't particularly enthused about seeing *Julius Caesar*. It's never been one of my favorite plays—when I taught high school, I actually wrote a new unit based on teaching Shakespeare's speeches just so I wouldn't have to teach Caesar to my 10th graders. I was curious about how they would handle the all female cast, however, so I figured it was worth an open mind. Besides, I was really looking forward to the grand finale. From the moment you mentioned that *Kiss Me Kate* was on the syllabus, I was ecstatic. I had never seen it before, but I had heard plenty of great things about the show, and *The Taming of the Shrew* IS one of my favorite Shakespeare plays.

I'll tackle this day's plays in reverse order, because as you know, *Kiss Me Kate* was sadly cancelled. That brings us back to the whole bittersweet thing. I was very disappointed about *Kiss Me Kate* being cancelled, but I was also kind of happy that *Julius Caesar* ended up being the final show of the trip—I thought it was, by far, the best of the 19 shows that I saw during Theatre in England.

When we first walked into the theatre, I was immediately intrigued by the set. There was a sort of wire-like material on the railings in front of us. We saw musical instruments, television screens and—the part I was most interested in—the performance space seemed to occupy three potential levels—the main acting space below us, some platforms and catwalks at eye level, and another set of catwalks

above us. I thought it would be absolutely fascinating if they ended up using all three—I thought it would make the show feel like it was going on all around us. I couldn't figure out how they would utilize the upper catwalk, however. When a random light from above caught my eye in the middle of the show, I looked up and realized that prison guards were patrolling the upper catwalk—and that we, the audience, were cast as inmates (the mob).

The show opened on the television screens. We saw footage of the actors being shepherded to the performance space, including what looked like a fight between two of them. When the actors filed in, it was clear that there was a prison motif going on—at that point, I started smiling, and I didn't stop until hours after the show (more on why later). It wasn't clear at first how the prison motif was being used. I wasn't sure whether or not this was the Caesar story taking place amongst a prison population, or a prison population putting on a production of Caesar. That ambiguity remained until the point that a guard interrupted a scene to pull one of the inmates out to take her medication and the understudy had to step in while reading from the book. This meta-theatrical take on the play was superb, and it benefitted even further from the fantastic performances. The woman playing Brutus was remarkable (and she looked a lot like Ian McKellen, which turned out to be sort of hilarious—more on why later), and Caesar, Antony and Cassius were also excellent.

The scene where Caesar force-feeds Cassius a Krispy Kreme while Cassius accepts the abuse with a look of utmost rage on her face added a sense of danger that I've never seen in a production of *Caesar* before. That sense of real danger also

came through in the inspired decision to have Antony begin the “Friends, Romans, Countrymen” speech in a prone, passive position. The prison population is one of the few modern parallels we have to the violence of the Roman mob as depicted in the play, and setting the play among that population made the production feel more dangerous and less “history channel.” I also appreciated other modern touches, particularly the Soothsayer’s warning being delivered via magazine horoscope. The play also incorporated some clever elements *not* tied to the prison motif. I thought it was an intriguing decision to have one actress doubling the roles of Portia and Octavius—thus playing Brutus’ wife and his military opponent. Doubling those roles not only evokes the kind of complex dynamics involved in prison romance (violence and sex), but also the universal themes of the play (the conflict between love and duty).

One of the reasons that I started smiling when I realized that this play was being set in a prison is because of my pedagogical interest in the use of Shakespeare as a vehicle for reform *in* prison. Not only have I watched and recommended the film *Shakespeare Behind Bars* (there is plenty of info on their website: <http://www.shakespearebehindbars.com/>), but I’ve also written curricular materials for a former colleague who is doing just what the DVD suggests—using Shakespeare as a vehicle for change for the prison population. I’ve seen the “Shakespeare in prison” motif used in other media (the last season of the HBO prison series *Oz* had the inmates putting together a production of *Macbeth*) but I’ve never seen it done *seriously* (*Oz* treated it as a joke—every time an inmate was cast as Macbeth, that inmate would die by the end of the episode). This production was a

serious look at the kind of production that inmates might put together. Dr. Mannheimer sent us a link to a news story about this play that made it clear just *how realistic* a production this play was—two of the actors, the women playing Trebonius and the Soothsayer, are beneficiaries of a program called “Clean Break” which uses drama as a means of rehabilitating inmates (like Trebonius) or at-risk youth (the soothsayer). The somewhat odd portrayal of the Soothsayer as a sort of youthful avatar of innocence (she rides around on a tricycle with pigtails and walks through a violent scene in the nude—though not in a sexualized manner) is suddenly far more interesting in light of the actress’ background. Rather than viewing the character as innocence surrounded by violence, I’m tempted to view her as recapturing a feeling of innocence through the stage.

The prison motif—particularly the big reveal at the play’s end that the woman playing Caesar was one of the guards rather than one of the inmates—also served to address my biggest fault with *Julius Caesar* (the play). One of the reasons I’ve never been overly fond of the play was that the title character is dead and gone by Act Three, yet the play continues (largely in dragging conversations between an increasingly whiny Cassius and an ever more pitiful Brutus). It is mentioned in the play that the conspirators see Caesar’s ghost as they prepare to kill themselves, but I’ve never seen that idea expanded upon so thoroughly as it was in Phyllida Lloyd’s production. After Caesar’s appropriately grisly prison murder, she routinely begins popping up where we least expect her. When the cloaked standard bearer is shot dead and stays prone on stage, we don’t give it a second thought—long minutes later, in a quieter moment, however, the standard bearer stands and drops her

cloak, revealing herself to be Caesar's ghost. Caesar never quite vanishes after her death—moving around the background, glaring at the conspirators and, in one fantastic moment, Caesar mans the drums, providing the drum-beat sound effects for the gun shots that take the lives of the lesser conspirators. The ghost of Caesar is present in this production in a way that I've never seen before, and when we find out at the end of the play that Caesar was the only prison guard in this "play", it adds a whole new dimension to how we understand the almost omniscient constant presence. The play is rehabilitative in part—the inmates are clearly dejected that their acting time is over, and despite this, they fall in line to be taken to another part of the prison—but guard/Caesar also perpetually re-establishes authority. It's a warning that they are always being watched, and that insurrection (ie- prison riot) can only end in the deaths of those who lead such insurrection.

After seeing the play, I looked online for some of the reviews. I was shocked to find that it had mixed reviews, though it seems that most of the negative reviews are based on Lloyd's political views. She apparently made arguments for a 50/50 gender split on all Shakespeare productions, and the negative reviews seemed anxious to call her out over the seeming hypocrisy of making that argument and then casting an all female cast. None of the negative reviews addressed the social and political contexts of the prison interpretation, however, which I think is a shame. I don't particularly agree with Lloyd's gender split casting argument, but that doesn't detract from the phenomenal show that she directed.

On a totally star-struck moment, I feel I should mention (in case nobody mentioned it to you yet), but we were in the same audience as Sir Ian McKellen!

While we were waiting to go into the theatre before the play, he walked past a small group of us (Alison Harper, Liv, Alex and I). We all just sort of looked at each other, and said "No, it couldn't be." After the show, Nate and I saw the actress who played Portia/Octavius in a coffee shop. We went over to tell her how much we loved the show. She thanked us and said that they were all really nervous, as after the play began, the director told them that Sir Ian McKellen was in the second row. Her response was priceless, as she said her first thought was "Oh no! My Portia was shite!"

1/12/2013: *Julius Caesar* at the Donmar Warehouse

Alison Harper

Donmar Warehouse, 2:30, *Julius Caesar*

As with nearly everybody who saw this production, I was completely awed and amazed. Out of all the plays I've seen on this trip, it probably ranks second, just behind *Silence of the Sea*, for its brilliant acting, setting, choreography, and the wholly new interpretation it did of a classic Shakespeare play that has never been terribly interesting. One of the most compelling things about it was the use of the prison setting, and how this was shown in the play. I didn't know any details about it beforehand, and looking at the set it appeared very much like a survivalist's bunker or an abandoned warehouse that some people were squatting in - cold grey concrete

and metal walkways, with rubbish strewn everywhere. When the play started, the women all filed in wearing fairly uniform clothing which made it seem like the producers were going for minimalist simplicity, only with all grey and yellow instead of all black. The only overt signs that this was a prison were in the clothes of the woman who opened the door, in a black and white uniform. However, as the play immediately started when the lights went out after they came in, I wasn't sure how relevant the prison angle was to the production. As the play progressed and there were only a few signs that this was a prison - the occasional guard standing on one of the walkways, the locks on the door - I thought that it could be more a part of the stylistic design than actually the set for a play-within-a-play.

As I filed out, I heard someone comment to the effect that, since Shakespeare scholars had claimed that the second half of *Julius Caesar* was very dull, this production had attempted to liven it up by introducing a meta-fictional component. The first time we became fully aware that this play was being performed by female prisoners, as a play-within-a-play, was during the scenes where the rioters murder Cinna the poet in the second half. The rioters were just descending on her when the lights came up and an electronic voice from the speakers requested the inmate (Carrie Rock) for medication. Another Cinna then had to be chosen from the group, and we were treated to an interesting blend between the two plays, where the new Cinna desperately tried to recite her lines from a copy of the text, and the rioters acted like schoolyard (or prison-yard?) bullies in trying to snatch it away from her. Another break follows soon afterwards when they accidentally slammed her head too hard into a metal pole and the play is stopped while they made sure she wasn't

badly injured. At another point later on, while Brutus is speaking emotionally with Cassius, giggles were heard from behind a curtain, and the inmate playing Brutus (Harriet Walter) had to step out of character to shout at them to be quiet.

So what does this aspect bring to the play? Certainly, it was a new way of seeing *Julius Caesar*, where themes of dictatorship, mob violence and intimate friendships are newly seen as issues similarly belonging to a prison environment. The close identification between the inmates and the characters they were playing is apparent in the Cinna episode, where the one who called for a break to the action and pushed forward to make sure the woman was all right, was also the one playing Caesar. Regardless of which play she's in, she seemed to be a natural leader. However, that we were able to see this at all showed the different usage of the setting in this play: it was not 'Julius Caesar set in a woman's prison' as I've since heard other people refer to it, but 'Julius Caesar put on by female inmates', and I believe this makes a world of difference.

The nature of the play-within-a-play naturally heightens the illusive reality of the outer frame, and it was easy to see the inmates as 'real' people, more so in this production because it was more evident that this was a play that they were heavily invested in, and which affected them. There were cries of disappointment whenever the play had to be halted, and the degree to which some of them threw themselves into the violence suggested that the performance was in some respects therapeutic, in enabling them to work out some of the issues they had from being incarcerated. The most memorable proof of their interest in the play, however, was found at the end. While Octavian's victorious forces are still celebrating, the lights are suddenly

brought back on full, illuminating the audience (this technique was used frequently throughout the play) and the wardens called for the inmates' return. As at the beginning of the play, they all formed a line and marched out of the door – except the Harriet Walters, who stays with her head bowed against a steel pillar evidently in the grips of some powerful emotion, before being called again and angrily walking out as well. It was a very moving demonstration of how the women could be emotionally affected by the experience themselves, and gave more of a humane touch to the mechanism of the play-within-a-play. It was one of the more brilliant fictions of the production, to suggest that the use of women to play this largely male cast was not because they could be used to 'represent' something, or to make any kind of gender-based point, but simply that the choice of putting on *Julius Caesar* had been theirs, and they had a genuine response to it.

Other aspects of the play which made it a compelling experience included the use of film as one of the modernizing components. The staging used three security cameras which for much of the play displayed the same loop of security footage: mostly empty hallways with occasionally groups ascending the staircases, and others being dragged around corners by prison guards. By themselves, they reinforced the sense of the stage as a prison, but also as a place of military strength and protection, like some kind of defensive bunker, and thus was appropriate for most of the scenes in the play. They were used much more dynamically, though, in two important scenes: firstly, when Caesar is stabbed to death in the Senate, and secondly, when Octavian makes his victory speech at the end, his men holding up Brutus' dead body. At both these moments, the cameras reflected the live footage of

what we were also seeing onstage, and by doing so, made the audience much more of a participant in the dramatic production. Ultimately, I think this reinforced the 'reality' of the prison, in that we were startled and a little frightened when the lights suddenly came back on as if it were the interval and yet the play went on, filming us and our reactions with no way to hide behind the usual obscurity of a shadowy theatre. It certainly made watching the murder a more uncomfortable experience, as if we were bystanders watching a crime taking place but being too nervous or cowed by conventional social behavior to step in. On the whole, watching this play was a very disturbing but thrilling experience.

1/12/2013: *The Mousetrap* at St. Martin's Theatre

Kyle Huskin

***The Mousetrap* (1952)**

Directed by Phyllida Lloyd

Written in 1947 by Agatha Christie

Performed by St Martin's Theatre

I am amazed that Alison and I managed to see this play at all, since it was not scheduled for the course and we only just managed to get from the Young Vic, where we were supposed to see *Kiss Me, Kate*, back to the West End, where we checked (to no avail) three other theatres for a replacement play, only to stumble into *The*

Mousetrap, sweating and out of breath, five minutes before the performance began, and find that they had two cheap fifth-row seats available. I knew Agatha Christie's works and her continued popularity, but I was not actually aware of just how significant this play is as the "world's longest running play": incredibly, the 2012-2013 season marked its 60th anniversary season, and 18 November 2012 marked its 25,000th performance!

I can see why it has lasted as long as it has. Unlike many of the other plays we have seen in the past two weeks, there is nothing in *The Mousetrap* that is radical or controversial or even new, as Agatha Christie's original was set in an immediately post-war Britain and Phyllida Lloyd's version does nothing to update it. Instead, it offers a unique opportunity to see the England of a bygone era that has miraculously managed to withstand the ravages of time. In this respect, it contrasts most directly with Alan Bennett's *People*, which shows the decline of an historic country estate (a decline that started around the post-war period, if the names of famous people attached to the chamber pots are any indication) that has to be either demolished or sold to the National Trust for the pornographic voyeurism of the public. *The Mousetrap* presents a young couple who are tenaciously holding onto their property, transforming it into a bed and breakfast, something useful, profitable, and personally fulfilling, even if it, too, is subject to public consumption. In this way, the play also contrasts with Sarah Wooley's *Old Money*, which shows the decline of a family that is precipitated, in part, by the maintenance of negative images of moneyed "respectability," which made Joyce miserable in life and which she rejects outright early on in the play, and also by the loss of past generations' positive values,

especially frugality. While *People* and *Old Money* present the past as something no longer accessible to modern generations – perhaps even something we do not want to access – *The Mousetrap* presents it as something alive and thriving, something to which we can still relate, and something of which we should regret the loss.

Today's public seems utterly fascinated with such portrayals of the historic England and the lives of its dwindling aristocracy, a trend to which the immense popularity of current television shows can attest: *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *North and South*, *Parade's End*, *Gosford Park*, and even PBS's continuous reruns of *Mrs. Marple*, whose namesake character is derived from Agatha Christie's novels. While the television shows portray their historical reality with varying degrees of accuracy, *The Mousetrap* offers an unfailingly positive image of post-war England. Unlike in *Old Money*, we see women with options other than marriage (Catherine Casewell, who behaves in a masculine manner, wearing men's ties, speaking a little too loudly, making direct eye-contact with everyone, and living independently on Majorca), and those who are married are quite content (Mollie Rolston, who actively manages Monkswood Manor with her caring husband, Giles Rolston). All of the men are unfailingly polite to the women regardless of their age or social situation (even the murderer, who turns out to be Detective Trotter, manages to convey complete courtesy throughout the play, making it incredibly difficult to solve the mystery on one's own). Finally, unlike in *People*, none of the guests (with the exception of Mrs. Boyle) appear to be staying at the house as paying guests, a public interested in the manor only as something they can mark off their lists of things to do and see, but rather as friends of the family who immediately

make themselves right at home. For example, Major Metcalf goes through antiques in the cellar as though he had a personal interest in the family's affairs, Christopher Wren enthusiastically helps out Mollie in the kitchen, and all of the characters discover different ways to get to their rooms, showing an unusual familiarity with the house.

1/12/2013: *The Mousetrap* at St. Martin's Theatre

Alison Harper

St Martin's Theatre, 7:30, *The Mousetrap*

It was very lucky that we were able to see this play at all, since it was not scheduled and we only just managed to get to the theatre in time. It had been a play I'd always wanted to see, and having the legend of 'world's longest running play' makes for a very interesting premise to a theatre experience. On the whole, I can understand the perpetually popular reaction to *The Mousetrap* as owing to a love for familiarity and comfort. There is nothing in this play that is radical or provoking, nothing indeed, that is new, as it is set in some kind of late 40's Britain and doesn't seem to have been updated since. Given that, it is remarkable how entertaining it still manages to be, evoking laughter through jokes which are more timeless than topical, focusing on such stock characters as the henpecked husband or the embittered old woman.

Of the plays we'd seen over the course of the trip, the one it most reminded me of was *Sauce for the Goose*, primarily because of the staging and the way there were numerous entrances and exits. Unlike *Sauce for the Goose*, the audience was entirely separated from the action, but there was nonetheless a similar sensation of hurried activity, especially in the first scene, when each of the guests arrives and take off outer clothing, puts down canes, turns on the radio and in other ways alters the set, making it busier and more involved, as in the hotel scene in the French farce. However, while in that play the various entrances were useful in symbolizing the chaotic mix-up of the couples and their marital lives, here there was a more precise value, in setting up so many options for the murderer to enter and escape from. The murder mystery plot was the whole point of the play, minor issues with marital distrust and the universality of keeping secrets aside, and the chaos caused by so many characters popping out of various doors (and windows) aided the audience in switching suspicion from one to the other as new evidence emerged.

On the other hand, anyone familiar with Agatha Christie stories could probably spot the murderer out of the bunch (as the one who is never under suspicion), and if this were the only reason for audiences to see it, I doubt the play would have had as long a run as it's had: 60 years and over 25000 performances. Besides the thrill of mystery and the enjoyable comedy, I think that what most appeals about *The Mousetrap* is the impression it gives of preserving an England which has vanished. As we saw earlier in Alan Bennett's *People*, old country estates can frequently no longer be run by the inhabitants, and have to be sold off to the National Trust, or torn down. The image of a young newlywed couple holding on to

their property – even through renting out rooms – is a charming, but a non-realistic image of modern business practice. The characters who populate it are still available in general form, but the specific types, such as the ‘modern young woman’ post-war, who wears men’s ties, has a slightly over-loud voice and looks people confidently in the eye, is largely unfamiliar. The accents of most characters are in posh BBC tones, and all of the male guests are unfailingly courteous to the women despite variations in age and social background. Fitting with the setting of an old country manor house, none of the guests (despite Mrs Boyle) appear to act as paying guests, but more as friends of the family popping down for the weekend. The major eagerly tramps through the dusty cellar and pokes through all the cupboards in his antiquarian interests as if he had a personal interest in the family. Christopher Wren happily ensconces himself in the kitchen (shooing out the actual cook) in the delightful English spirit of getting on with things and helping people out. Such details help to create the illusion that the world of the play – despite being fraught with murder and child abuse - is at heart one of gentility, of which we should mourn the decline, on exiting the theatre. Whether this is true or not seems irrelevant. There are many people who critique *The Mousetrap* for projecting such rosy-eyed views of a bygone England, but clearly this topic is a winner with audiences, has been for six decades, and will no doubt appeal for many years more.