

Theatre in London
Two weeks of Theatre, History and Bangers and Mash
28 December 2004 – 9 January 2005

Sara H. Cohen
Response Journal



The Actresses Pose Where it All Began...

ENG 252: Theatre in London
Professor Russell Peck

Wednesday, 26 January 2005

A Note on my journal with a mind into history...

While in London, a place I had never been before, I had a strange sort of homecoming. I have always been rather idly interested in history, but I had never pursued it nor had I felt particularly regretful at not doing so. I have, however, always had a keen passion for theatre, particularly in the reinvention of very old theatre. I am not sure where this avid interest originated, but I am quite certain that it culminated in London, along with a strange realization that it has been through theatre that I have tried to satisfy, while only further whetting, my lust for history.

Standing in Westminster Abbey, looking over eon's worth of human culture at the British Museum, walking the streets of Shakespeare, looking over bibles bound over a millennia ago at the British Library, and witnessing the rediscovery of centuries-old drama—all of them connect me to the past, and such a complete immersion in history left me completely breathless by the end of our two-week stay.

It is not remarkable, then, that I remember so many of the plays that we watched through the lens of historical curiosity and understanding. Many of the plots themselves deal with matters of historical relevance, be it human history, national history or personal, familial history. Reencountering one's own past is certainly a recurrent theme in our curriculum. But drama itself is historical for me as well. Performing a script that was penned for actors long dead, one inhabits a space that is like a monument. Perhaps this is why the Shakespeare plays were of such interest to me, just as our day in Warwick Castle was among my most favorite experiences of the trip. ✓

It is with an interest in different kinds of history that I engage the majority of plays in this journal. Writing this journal allowed me the opportunity to consider each play within this context, but some I focus on other subjects in some of them. Some entries are laden with analysis of historical bent; others briefly acknowledge a play's place for me within this week of historical engagement. I really enjoyed looking back on this tremendous experience in this analytical way, synthesizing all that I saw and did. I will never forget this trip, and I hope it continues for many classes to come.

Thank you, Professor Peck,

Sara H. Cohen

Wednesday, 28 December, 2004
"Fix Up"

This play seemed to me, after some thought, to be primarily concerning the transmission of information from one person to another, from one generation to another, from one tradition to another. In most cases, there seems to be an urgent need for communication, a yearning by one or both parties to say something or assert something, and this necessity is thwarted or complicated in some way. By engaging historically both socially and personally, it set the tone for the entire trip.

There are two primary conflicts within a storyline fraught with interpersonal conflict. The most universally oppressive is that Keye's store, a progressive, by-black-for-black, culturally-aware and history-preserving social center, is being taken-over by an unnamed force. This will not only run Keye out of business, but it will destroy what seems to be the last vestige of black-heritage in the neighborhood. It comes out over the course of the play that it is not Whites who are shutting Keye down, but Quasi, a black-extremist who seems more concerned with money and power than with the preservation of his heritage. This discovery affects the conflict, as it is no longer The Other that threatens the group, but someone within it.

The other central conflict is more personal: Newcomer Alice has a strange tension building with Keye. It is almost sexual at points, but always palpable. Through Alice's detective work we discover that they are linked by blood and that a great wrong has been committed by Keye. In the last line of the play, he tells Alice, "I built this store to silence your cries." He has been running from his guilt and sadness— his history— all these years.

Every character in this play is dealing with their own histories. The most noteworthy strugglings with this issue are Keye's, Alice's, and Carl's. Carl was lifted out of the slums by Keye's kindness and now has a fighting chance at some life to be proud of, but he is physiologically marred by an inability to communicate easily. His lisp can represent the dysfunctional communication taking place between many of the characters. They are each in the bookshop for their own reasons, and they hardly seem to genuinely connect for any reason other than to keep themselves connected to what they consider "their history."

Alice, by comparison, has not enjoyed a life that is profoundly "black," and yet she at times seems to channel the slave narrative of her predecessors from between the pages of a book. This is Alice's reconnecting with her history that has been, up until this point, unexplored and, at times, seemingly neglected. Keye tells her the name given her by her mother, and she spits back at him, "Why would my mother give me one of your made-up names." At this moment she separates herself entirely from Keye and her blackness, out of anger at being abandoned and denied real parents. She goes from this anger and sadness into the arms of Quasi, a character that up to this point has been entirely unfeeling and hostile to her. We witness in Alice's coupling with Quasi an emotional stutter, a misfiring of an attempted connection and communication.

In an attempt to escape personal history, Keye hides among his social history. In her desire to understand her social history, Alice discovers a personal one. Keye's and Alice's tangled histories spew across the stage by the end of the play, as many of the characters throw books— touchable, hoardable, hidable histories— across the store.

well put

Wednesday 28 December, 2004
"The History Boys"

Reiterated countless times during this play is the notion of distancing one's self from history, the goal being that with objective distance will come the ability to analyze, if not understand. Young Irwin arrives to whip these underachievers into shape for their O-levels, and brings with him this new method of engaging with history. A poignant scene takes place when Posner, the Jewish student, is horribly offended at the use of the Holocaust as an essay topic, as it is so personally upsetting to him. To write about it, old Hector says, trivializes and disrespects all those affected by it. Irwin's approach takes an emotional distance from the subject to avoid such difficulties. It is History, and therefore one can negotiate all sides of the matter, including those that might seem disrespectful to someone without emotional distance, such as the proposition that Hitler was an excellent statesman.

But Irwin applies this method of emotional distancing not only to academic history, but to his own living history. Unable to acknowledge his desires, he is paralyzed by the play's end. He seems to come close at the critical moment to "making history," as Dakin, his object of infatuation, puts it, but again his instinct is to write it in a date book for some point in the future, instead of making a decisive action in the moment. This moment between Dakin and Irwin is an intersection, a turning point, of the entire play. ✓
Structurally, the two characters approach from opposite sides of the stage and travel in a pair of perpendicular trajectories until they meet at the stage's center, where they make their plan for a rendezvous. After this moment, Hector enters and bisects the angle the two have formed, and Irwin leaves with him. He finally makes a decision, takes an action, and lives change forever. Hector doesn't live through it. He has no role any

longer, having lost his ability to teach and nurture these boys in his own way. Irwin misses his appointment with Dakin, and is thrust into a life of even more dramatic historical objectivity: making pop-history television programs that literally reduce Medieval history to shit.

“The History Boys” deals with the academic and emotional growth of a graduating class of preparatory school boys as their routine methods of learning are challenged by the arrival of a new teacher half-way through term. For the first half of the play, the characters inhabit classroom spaces on the stage, reenacting “gobbits” of text, song and film dialogue. The stage is compartmentalized, and this is the way that Hector views and teaches history. This is also the way that Irwin lives his life. During this section of the play, time spent in the corridors, in the navigating of spaces in between classrooms, is demonstrated using film and the rearranging of the angular set. However, as the characters grow in their methods of engagement with history, this changes and the stage opens up. For much of the second act the characters are outside of classrooms and interacting in the corridors, in the navigation spaces. They are making history instead of just studying it. The critical scene between Irwin and Dakin takes place in the corridors, demonstrating its place as a turning point, as an intersection, as a moment that having gone through, the characters will be changed.

The exposition at the close of the play where each character’s entire life is encapsulated for the audience, positions the play as a pseudo-historical piece in itself. We can then look back on the conflicts and developments taking place over the course of the play and consider them as parts of a whole lives lived. Posner, we learn for instance, was Hector’s best student in that he took every one of his lessons to heart. However,

even Hector's best student wrote about the Holocaust for his O-levels. Irwin, it seems, liberated some students from a compartmentalized method of historical engagement, even if he was unable to free himself from a compartmentalized mode of living.

Excellent lesson

Thursday, 29 December, 2004
"Journey's End"

For the entire duration of the play, the created environment was pressing down on the characters and the audience, exerting the oppressiveness of front-line battle. The ceiling of the dugout was just above the height of the actors on stage, and crossbeams and hanging lanterns forced each of the characters to stoop and bend down to traverse the room. Furthermore, most of the dramatic action took place off stage, on the battlefield, just beyond the entrance to their dugout. This served to further heighten the sense of being trapped. Elements of the plot helped to create this feeling of entrapment as well, for example the general's decision for Captain Stanhope to send two of his most important men to almost certain death. The characters even discuss the futility of fighting, as well as their fears that they do not serve any important function in the vast scheme of a World War. They are literally counting down the days for the "journey's end:" an end of the war, or an end to the fighting in death

By the close of the production, the audience was immersed in darkness and the ear-splitting noise of explosions taking place all around us. As most of the most sympathetic characters die one by one, it becomes clear that the end of this journey will not be a liberating one in the expected sense. The director clearly sought to create a physically painful environment for an emotionally painful conclusion. We are, however, liberated in a sense at the play's close. After the environment had been pressing lower and lower on the characters and audience, the lightness and vastness of the space following was overwhelming. Name after name stretching up to the ceiling, and soldiers frozen in time, unfeeling expressions on their faces, unmoving and unyielding to the hailstorm of applause; it was a living monument before our eyes.

If any play we saw had historical relevance, it is this one. The entire production itself felt to me like a memorial, like as a spectator of this play I was paying witness to atrocities experienced by real people long deceased. This feeling was most profound ✓ during curtain call, which was perhaps the most powerful moment of the play, but from the very outset, each joyful moment on stage was uncanny, and was oddly out of place, like laughter at a funeral.

Raleigh conveys this sentiment when he walks in on Stanhope and other members of the company drinking the champagne intended for his and Osbourne's victorious return. He feels that they are betraying "Uncle" by seemingly celebrating his death. Stanhope sets him straight: "We're trying to forget," he shouts and cries. That is the only choice these men have when surrounded by so much pain and death, to live each day *feeling* all of it would kill a man. Raleigh does die soon after, and with him all of the optimism left on stage. The audience is left looking at Raleigh's dead body, frozen in an innocent sleep, and the noise around us gets louder and louder, as the already low ceiling descends and we are smothered by a darkness, and utter hopelessness, that lasted a painfully long time before we were released into the blinding lightness of curtain call.

Speaking to several other students, I had the impression that I was in the minority having enjoyed this production. I did not struggle for one moment with the unavoidable sleep that sometimes comes to those who sit in dark theatres. Nor did I find it in any way inaccessible or boring. Perhaps that is because I did not struggle to relate to the characters, as they were experiencing something that I could not fathom. Instead, I *well put* positioned myself as a witness, as a spectator given the chance, in some small way, to

experience a very personal side of war, when up until this moment I had only seriously considered war in the anonymous, global sense.

Thursday, 29 December, 2004
"By the Bog of Cats"

Hester Swain's character is like a dark sun around which all the other characters revolve in this play about fate and family. Personal history plays an important role in this story, as Hester refuses to allow herself to grow beyond this place that doesn't want her nor can suffer her any longer. She is in many senses still waiting for her mother to return and her behavior is that of the child that was left behind so many years ago: vengeful, selfish, willful and impulsive. She has a great deal of difficulty leaving presently: she dresses her daughter in her baby clothes, for example, demonstrating her seeming unawareness at time passing. It is this inability to move forward that is her ruin.

The play opens with Hester dragging a dead, black swan across the stage. Moments later, a ghost appears and beckons Hester to go with him. He has made a mistake though: he is a day early. Over the course of the scene, we learn that Hester was ^{well?} prophesized to die on the same day as that swan, and she is now living on borrowed time. Ghosts and fate are central to "By the Bog of Cats," and both themes are tied up with the idea of history. Two ghosts appear over the duration of the play, one exerting the presence of Hester's guilty conscience at having killed her brother many years ago, the other signifying her mother's prophesy at the time of Hester's birth and also Hester's wish to die rather than leave the bog.

Because we know that this play is a retelling of the Media tragedy, we know that Hester will kill her daughter before the play is through. This knowledge heightens the ^{second} implications of destiny at work in the story. It is as if from the moment the ghost arrives at the outset of the play, alluding to a death wish of Hester's that even she is as of yet

unaware of, the events following are foretold and prearranged. The sense of impending doom is palpable.

There are several elements of "By the Bog of Cats" that connect it quite neatly with "Festen." Both plays depict the final days of an era; in "By the Bog of Cats" it is the era of Hester Swain's rule of the bog, while in "Festen" it is the era of a father's deceitful reign over his family. Each play revolves around a ceremony of some kind, and both plays work in similar visual senses to support this. In each there is a simple black wall serving as the structure of a house or church, and a long banquet table serves as a centerpiece for an ample section of the dramatic action. Also, the eerie singing and laughter of a child punctuates both productions, the implication that those dead are still with us in our children.

Both plays hinge on a stunning central performance of a tortured and tormented individual while both such characters are haunted by ghosts and starved for a nurturing, parental love. As we witness Hester descend into madness, however, Christian rises out of it by decisive action. Hester is trapped in the past and has no desire to escape from it, while Christian has had enough. Finally, Christian's ghost is seemingly released by the end of the play, while Hester's helps her end her life culminating in a complete conjoining of Hester and the ghosts of her past.

The final moments of "By the Bog of Cats" were strangely isolated from the rest of the production, serving to stress Hester's suicide from the rest of her hastily calculated actions. Up until this point, we watch Hester whip about the stage, brandishing makeshift weapons, as well as her own deadly hands, at any whoever crosses her path. The other characters respond in kind, impulsively grabbing at Hester or cowering at her advances.

Even Hester's murder of Josie is done swiftly and fervently. But her strange dance with death, a balladic joining of forces through the knife, is slow and choreographed and gracefully final. It is the culmination of a fulfilled destiny.

comment on the set,
especially the caravan, and how
it functions. Do more with differences
between the ancient traveller (gypsy)
culture and the capitalist replacement.

Friday, 31 December, 2004
"Sleeping Beauty"

The Young Vic's production of "Sleeping Beauty" at the Barbican theatre established itself from the outset as being an atypical telling of the classic fairytale. Our narrator is Goody, a mischievous, ageless fairy who is currently looking for a prince to rouse Sleeping Beauty from her century-long nap. This seems straightforward enough, and it positions Goody as just that: a good fairy. The hitch, we discover, is that it was ✓ Goody who put her there in the first place. The conflict central to this rendition of "Sleeping Beauty" is the distinguishing between good and bad, and the navigation through the world without the capacity to cast judgment so easily. The audience is forced to accept complexity from this very early discovery about Goody, and the theme demonstrates itself at every turn.

It seems that every character has a "good" and a "bad" side, except for Beauty herself. The King and Queen for example, two seemingly obvious "good" characters, snub Goody at the beginning of the play by leaving her out of the naming ceremony for their daughter. Goody, we learn at this point, is responsible for Beauty's conception, having cast a spell on the royal couple. This, it would seem, might place her inextricably in the good column, had we not just learned of Goody's responsibility for casting the fateful spell that put the entire kingdom to sleep, and stripped Beauty of her parents altogether. Parents can overprotect their children, and mistreat the magical creatures that help them conceive making them, in some senses, "bad." Ogres can protect baby ogres, making them in some senses, good. The complexity of each character, their ability to be both good and bad at the same time, and the treacherous landscape this creates for Beauty ✓

as she attempts to keep her newly-established family safe, are the most pertinent updates made to this age-old story.

The production's staging supports this confusing morally-relative environment as well. The centerpiece of the stage is a multi-tiered platform that becomes a sloped, sometimes rotating landscape for the characters working on, above and below its surfaces. All of the blocking takes place in concentric circles around this structure, with the characters running into and out of our view around this enormous obstruction. The surfaces of this construction are also able to shift, creating intersections where there weren't any just moments earlier, and characters meet spatially over and over again to create a sense of inescapability within this world. It is also enormously entertaining for children of all ages to watch two characters run away from each other, in circles, only to bump back into each other only moments later.

While this was an unconventional retelling of "Sleeping Beauty," ^{but} it was, nonetheless, a fairytale, and it adheres to some of the major tenets of fairytale telling as such. Beauty is stripped of her parents and forced to recognize and weather an uncomfortable reality: Nobody is perfect. Through this awakening, she matures as she navigates the confusing forces of the world. She becomes self-reliant, a fiercely protective mother, and remains married. The play also contains a hilarious send-up of fairytale morality in the "Just say no/ Just say yes!" numbers. Beauty's parents' last message to her on her birthday is to say no to every temptation. This is both an age-old fairytale moral, and simultaneously a modern catch-all phrase that is taught to children from a very young age in response to every behavior that they will at some point become curious about (sex, drugs and rock & roll of course). However, by the end of the play

synthex

everyone is singing "Just say yes!" further reinforcing the need to recognize the complexity of every person and situation.

Goody embodies the modern notion of people as both good and bad for the audience, as she remarks when Beauty condemns her for cooking the babies, "I'm not *all* bad." This line encapsulates the intricacies of Goody's morality, as it was my own impression to this point that she was on the contrary, just not *all good*. She makes mistakes. She gets jealous. She *farts*. She also questions her moral position and engages her own self-doubt. This made her incredibly interesting to me, and she was in my opinion the most human character in the play, apart from not being human, that is.

Friday, 31 December, 2004
"The Mandate"

This political satire was enormously entertaining. Its use of physical humor was priceless as was the indispensable capitalization upon comedic timing. This play was fast-paced and tongue-in-cheek. The playwright clearly had strong opinions regarding the political climate at the time, but had he written a play expounding upon the nuances of state politics it would have been immensely boring and would in all likelihood have failed in attracting enough of an audience to earn the state-censorship it would otherwise have deserved. No one would have been listening. As it turns out, however, the playwright did not write that play, he instead wrote one satirizing a public's desire to fit fashionably into a political party, or cultural group, and to simultaneously rebel against it and make a fashionable fuss.

Fashion, as it turns out, plays a huge role within "The Mandate." This is epitomized by Pavel's revolutionary disguise of a pea coat, cap and leather satchel. He looks the part and thus must be a member of *the party*. Furthermore, fashion exerts itself as the maid is mistaken for Anastasia because she wears a fancy dress. "The fate of Russia lies in that trunk," Mrs. Leopoldovna declares, certain that the discovery of an antique dress belonging to a member of the royal family will resurrect Czarist Russia.

Fashion functions beyond just costume in this play, as the production opens with Pavel and his mother debating the merits of hanging different paintings in their living room. A portrait of Karl Marx will align them with the revolutionaries, while a simple flick of the wrist flips the portrait to reveal the conservative, serene image of "Copenhagen Twilight," and position them peacefully with the old guard. At first, it's hard to tell the actual political alignment of the Guliachin family, but it soon becomes

pretty obvious that they do not have any political convictions at all, other than appeasing the current party to preserve their livelihood.

Sard

Although this play was immensely historical, it continues to have resonance in the current global environment of political unrest. It seems that everyone has something to say in criticism of America and of our President, but many are not doing anything to back up their words. Our trade continues to thrive internationally, every single modernized country in the world is dominated by our media, and domestically, there was an incredibly vocal outcry of Bush prior to the 2004 election, but where were all those votes against him? People stayed home, under the impression that their whining alone would oust him. Objectively, it's actually very funny. He's a dictator in many senses of the word, and it's the fashion to take issue with him even when you have no intention of standing behind your views.

Saturday, 1 January, 2005
"His Dark Materials I and II"

This six-hour production was not only a splendid visual accomplishment and fabulously entertaining children's story, but it was an emotionally and intellectually provocative experience. The unapologetic engagement in religious criticism, a retelling of the fall from Eden, the multifaceted character development and complex interpersonal relationships, and the psychological study of parent-child relationships as well as that of individuation and adolescence—in six hours, this play grappled with real issues and did so with grace and maturity.

An organized religion, loosely based on Catholicism with its leadership hierarchy, is one of the primary villains of this story. It is their mission from the first to kill anyone that attempts to meddle in the study of Dust, as to understand its origins is to reveal the fallibility of God and extraterrestrial origins of the soul. The major antagonists in the story—the President of the Church, Lord Asreal, and Mrs. Coulter—position themselves as religious zealots, but in truth they are on selfish power trips. Religious conspiracy and the overwhelming power of the Church are not new subjects, but they are perhaps not often discussed in the forum of a children's story. I was taken aback by the blasphemous implications of "His Dark Materials," and I was thrilled at the knowledge that such a highly questionable production is so enormously successful and well received.

A major narrative thread of this story is the reinterpretation of the fall from Eden. Lyra's secret name, the key to her destiny of either redeeming or condemning the Church, is Eve. When the President learns this, he reveals why they must kill her immediately. Her fate is to reenact original sin by undermining the word of God. Her childish innocence is compared to that of Eve before the consumption of the Fruit from the Tree

of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As she is swept up in this epic adventure, Lyra simultaneously makes a much more personal journey into adolescence and experience. While asexual friendship dies Lyra discovers a more nuanced and mature love for Will. Lyra quests to resurrect Roger, taking her to the land of the Dead, but she cannot remain in that innocent stage of her life forever. The Witch, Serephina, reveals to Lyra the explanation for her new feelings, and in doing so, metaphorically hands her the Apple.

This play positions the Fall as the greatest moment in human development, directly opposing a basic assumption of Judeo-Christian doctrine. Rather than our first act of defiance against God, we make the first act of our God-given free will, and in doing so, we receive the ability to experience profound romantic love. I thought that this interpretation was deeply moving and profoundly spiritually exciting.

Innocence and experience are points on the continuum of life; they are not opposing forces separated by the favor of God. Children, in this world, have daemons that have unsettled forms. Not until adulthood is your path determined and your soul fixed. In youth, there is only potential. Similarly, children can read the alethiometer out of an innocent creativity, while in adulthood, it is a quest for knowledge or a submission to the assumed Authority that lends one the ability to decipher the mystical instrument. Good and Evil become vocabulary of the Church, of those who would presume Authority over the human condition. You can live your life according to the dogma of the church, in hopes of going to heaven, or you can live the life that you make for yourself, and thereby have a story worth telling to the Harpies.

Complication the issues of free will that are raised by "His Dark Materials" are the simultaneous implications of destiny that are reiterated throughout. Lyra and Will

happen upon the Authority and unknowingly and quite innocently kill him out of a desire to help him. This, it seems, was Lyra's fate, but it grew out of the choices she made as she grew into a young woman.

Simultaneously, a complicated analysis of parent-child relationships takes place in "His Dark Materials." It seems on the surface, that both of Lyra's parents are power-hungry, evil people that do not have Lyra's best intentions in mind. Lyra has lived most of her life as an orphan, in the care of an institution of higher learning. The noble quest for knowledge and an innate, sometimes mischievous, curiosity have been instilled in her from the start. When she learns that her father is a seemingly uncaring power monger, and that her mother does heinous experiments on children, she faces the truth that all children do at some point: that your parents are not perfect.

Lyra's mother's cruelty is more complicated than initially portrayed. Like "Sleeping Beauty," "His Dark Materials" deals with the notion that everyone has goodness and badness within them. Mrs. Coulter, it is revealed, does these experiments out of a genuine desire to protect children from the unpleasantness of growing up. Separating a child from her daemon before it settles, we learn, apparently prevents a kind of spiritual maturity. She explains, in rather complicated and sterile language, that doing so will prevent one's sex drive from developing. While this assumes that sex is "bad" and that its prevention will in some way protect a person, the Witches seem to know the truth: that the ability to experience passion is what separates us from the animals, and it is our greatest gift. Regardless, though, Mrs. Coulter genuinely wishes to protect children. She simultaneously has a very nasty daemon, indicating her mean streak, and wicked lust for power.

The complex story of "His Dark Materials" was gripping and provocative. The staging of this immense production was also enormously gratifying to witness. Nowhere in the United States is there a theatre construction with nearly the potential of the Olivier. I found myself constantly wishing that I was onstage playing in what, to an actor, looks like the greatest jungle gym ever made. This production, with all of the rooms and worlds and jaw-dropping effects that the Olivier is capable of, seemed in many ways, more like a movie than a staged play. Adding to this quality was the smoothness with which the transitions took place. Aside from a few minor technical difficulties— one of which, incidentally, provided for a wildly entertaining interlude between Lyra and Mrs. Coulter's daemons— the multilayered network of turntables and lifts allowed for the changing of sets without any blackouts or pauses in the production.

It certainly had plenty of motion.

I would wager that something would be lost in the translation of "His Dark Materials" to film, because the creation of these worlds in the same space, on top of one another, lends itself to the notion that an infinite number of dimensions exist in the universe, each one corresponding to the infinite possibilities of human existence. "I spread my wings and brush a million other worlds and then know nothing of it," says Serephina's daemon. The heartbreaking separation of Will and Lyra and the end of the play epitomizes this. They sit at the same bench and can never touch each other's hand or hear each other's words, and the simple and elegant depiction of this as Lyra steps between the two halves of the tree would not be nearly as powerful or symbolic when transferred to film.

Sunday, January 2, 2005

"Romeo and Juliet" performed by an Icelandic Acrobatic Troupe

We discussed at length the process of translating words to actions, of representing spoken language with physicality. While I was enthusiastic to see this production, I did not anticipate the performance to be so powerful. They used spectacle to heighten the humor and offset the tragedy, and they captured the power of the emotion in visceral and provocative ways. It made for one of the most astounding theatrical events I have witnessed.

While we used Romeo's literal flight over the Capulet walls as an example of this troupe's physical metaphors, we could do so with countless other instances within the production. We explored this process in class the next morning. This troupe's ability to use their bodies to depict the actual words was exciting, but not nearly as interesting for me as the ways in which they adapted the text to suit a physical production. The most obvious instances of this were deaths in which Shakespeare calls for the use of conventional weapons: daggers, poison. This production was very sparse on props, so they instead used their bodies, and their acrobatic techniques, to carry out every action including murder and suicide.

While the entire production was a delight, Tybalt's slaying of Mercutio was the first moment when I lost my breath. Up to that point the action was graceful and poetic, and they demonstrated that the same movements could be swift, and deadly. It was shocking and incredibly satisfying. He literally snapped out of the sky and illustrated Mercutio's own description of the Prince of Cats' precision and skill.

Romeo's passionate and hasty act of revenge on Tybalt was also very interesting to watch, in particular when juxtaposed with the scene immediately preceding it. Romeo

awkwardly smothers Tybalt, with both sets of feet on the "ground" of the stage, with the same hanging sheet that Tybalt wielded with a deadly meticulousness. This positioned Romeo's crime as one of passion compared with Tybalt's unfeeling act of malice. ✓

Of course, the whole play is building towards the final deaths of Romeo and Juliet, and Gísli Örn Gardarsson directs the final sequence stunningly. First of all, the apothecary scene is left out, as it is rendered unnecessary when the deaths will be performed without props. Next, there is a beautiful dance between Romeo and Juliet's lifeless body. She is supposedly dead, yet her body has so much life in it as she works with Romeo to carry out a love scene as passionate as and perhaps more powerful than the one in her bedroom. They tumble and dance together in Romeo's farewell to what he believes to be her dead body. There is a moment when her head lifts up, facing the audience and away from Romeo, so that the audience can revel in the bitter irony of their love scene: he prepares himself to say goodbye and end his own life, as she is waking up. ✓ It is the irony and outcome that everyone expects, yet every detail heightens it for the audience. It is an experience and not simply the carrying out of the anticipated conclusion.

When a play has been inhabited as many times and in as many incarnations as this one, every nuance and revelation is appreciated. I read a review that condemned this production for its use of humor and spectacle, namely in the presentation of Paris and his show-stopping song and dance expositions. While my jaw dropped at his first appearance, I would argue that his role in the production was neither inappropriate nor unnecessary. The story of Romeo and Juliet is one so laden at times with melancholy and high drama and it is often the tradition to have a character whose role it is to lighten

such moods and appease the masses' desire for base entertainment. This Paris, with his neon tuxedo and completely over-the-top master of ceremonies attitude, proved just the ✓ distraction and release of tension that was needed. Furthermore, the lavishness of his lounge singer act coupled with his ignorance of the impending tragedy make his numbers even more entertaining and bittersweet. The comedy and joy serve to heighten the tragedy, as the audience is pulled from one extreme into the other with such force and abandon. This production was not only one of the absolute highlights of this trip for me, but it was one of my favorite performances that I have ever attended.

excellent point

Monday, 3 January, 2005
"Festen"

This play is further linked to "By the Bog of Cats" by the questionable mental stability of its central characters. Hester is obviously psychotic in some ways, but Christian's frailties are less apparent without the accusations of his family. For the first several scenes after his critical toast, he is almost rendered unbelievable by all the references to his mental breakdowns, his hospitalizations and his criminal tendencies. These claims in themselves, however, are hard to swallow as we look at what appears to be a calm, composed gentleman. Especially when Christian is juxtaposed with his brother, he seems the image of dignity. This composure, it turns out, is really exhaustion and desperation for redemption. Luke Mably's performance was one of the most disarming and fascinating of our entire trip, and he certainly stands out among his cast. The weariness Christian experiences and the loneliness he is lost in are palpable.

The layered bedroom scene was very interesting, and it served as a fine metaphor for the relationships between each family member. They occupy the same space and do not notice each other. They exist independently of each other and yet are inextricably linked. They are like living ghosts of this deeply disturbed family.

The other presence on stage that overwhelmed me was that of Michael and Helen's little girl. She is the image of innocence, her ears covered by her mum as the tensions rise and the subject matter matures. Her laughter echoes across the stage and beyond, rocking Christian as he remains umbilically linked to his recently dead twin sister. I was really astonished at the remarkably importance of this unnamed little character, for she served several integral functions to this productions.

First of all, she doubles as the ghost of Linda, Christian's twin and closest friend. ✓
Even though Linda has committed suicide in adulthood, she is frozen in time for Christian at the age when he and Linda began to be molested by their father. This trauma was so great that it had a sort of splitting effect on Christian. We hear about Christian's madness and violent episodes from family members, and we see a broken man barely holding onto his will to endure interpersonal contact, but furthermore, we are given the strong impression that all of his problems are his father's fault, and likewise that it is the trauma endured at the hands of their father that drove Linda to take her life.

comment also on his love of his father.

✓ The presence of this child also made the subject matter significantly more upsetting than I imagine it might have been had her character not been in the play. While child-abuse is always a horrible subject, certainly sexual intercourse with one's own children is among the most horrible crimes one can commit against one's babies. However, the discussion of past abuse against a now-adult man is abstractly and conceptually upsetting, while hearing of such abstractions while looking at a young child, a potential victim, the audience as well as Christian's family, can hear of such long-finished offences and experience them as ongoing and present. Michael flies off the handle upon the revelation that Christian's words are true; one trigger for his rage is probably the presence of his own little girl. Furthermore, when all of the commotion has settled and Helge has acknowledged his guilt, she rushes to sit upon his lap. She has no notion that her grandfather is a bad man, or that he poses any threat to her. But that moment for the audience and for the entire family is one of incredible sadness and anger. The little girl MUST be protected, and this feeling cinches for everyone the need for Helge to leave.

Running water sounds and her carefree giggling serve as a soundtrack that could be real or that may be resonating through Christian's traumatized psyche. That the audience can hear it does not clarify this, but it is not a distinction that has any far-reaching implications in any case. The important facet of those sounds is that it ties Christian to the point in time when all of the deception began, as he struggles to make his family aware of what really happened all those years ago, what continues to happen in his mind and what put his sister in her grave.

excellent lesson

Tuesday, 4 January, 2005
"Aladdin, a Pantomime"

Participating in this production was enormously entertaining. Initially, I did not know what to expect from a show structured to include the audience so much, but as the event got underway, and the children all around us knew what to do at every turn, I began to take my cues from them and shout and boo and hiss with the best of them. During intermission, a man turned around and spoke to us, presumably because we were obviously American and somewhat unfamiliar with the Pantomime format. He was with two young sons, probably ages five and eight, and both of them were enjoying the program enormously. I asked him how they both knew exactly what to do at every turn. He said that they go to a *panto* every year, and that it is like a religious ceremony that has been passed down through the generations. This was very interesting to me, having studied the origins of drama from religious reenactments of the bible. It seemed to me to be a less highly evolved form of theatre and thus, in many ways, a more historically significant production. I was thrilled to be a part of it when I thought about it in this way.

There were several elements of the production itself that made an impression on me. The first was the incredible set design. It was deceptively complex: designed to look like a grade-school production, but constructed with incredible intricacy and functionality. For example, the laundry set was simple enough; row upon row of garments hanging from the ceiling and a larger-than-life washer/dryer at center stage. The clotheslines on the ceiling were made to look two-dimensional and campy. However, at the start of the seen, two actors simply pulled a set of strings on either side of the stage and suddenly this intricate matrix of hanging laundry arranged itself out of an empty space. It was a magnificent set design altogether and one of my favorite aspects of

the production was watching the actors maneuver the fabulous set pieces in each scene. A huge box opens to reveal a tiny castle in the distance and the pulling of a single cord transforms the distant castle into an enormous structure in the foreground. Aladdin falls through a hole in the desert set and the stage is instantly transformed into a glittering Cave of Wonders. It was all breathtaking.

I was also very interested in the roles of each group of characters. It was clear there were characters present for the purpose of entertaining the adults, and also those for the entertainment of young children. Ian McKellen's Widow Twankey was completely, wickedly, sinfully delightful, but I'm sure that his humor was not as entertaining for the little folk that were unfamiliar with his previous roles, his sexual orientation, or simply the double entendre of his dirty jokes. (He was, furthermore, stunning in a cocktail dress!) On the other hand, the Aladdin's nature was one much more suited for children. He was smiling almost the entire show, he talked slowly and sweetly, and he sang an Elton John duet with the princess. The pair of slap-stick comedy cops was also entertaining in a simple, old-fashioned way that was reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin and the Three Stooges. I'd never seen physical comedy like that on stage, and it was very enjoyable.

The show itself is structured as a juvenile, rag-tag production that might be put on by a troupe of school children. In class the next morning, someone characterized Aladdin's demeanor as "Blue's Clues," referencing the toddler show on public television. But this pantomime was far from simple. It was on the contrary, a highly elaborate production with the simple aim of entertaining every single member of the audience, from age three to ninety-three.

Tuesday, 4 January, 2005
"A Doll's House"

It was interesting to watch a play performed in such a small space as the Playhouse theatre, but I was largely unimpressed with the performances therein. Having seen the vastly nuanced and thoughtful portrayal of Nora by Juliet Stevenson only months earlier, I expected more from the amateur cast. Admittedly, I expected too much, but it was a letdown nonetheless. The major characters—Nora, Thorvald, Krogstad, Helen and Dr. Rank—are each significantly more complex than their actors were able to convey. They each had a tendency to play the emotion, and it made for a portrayal that lacked any nuance or transition.

The overall lacking of nuance was most notable for me during the climactic speech of Nora's at the play's conclusion. Had Nora demonstrated the wildness and fervent innocence that the part calls for, chirping about the stage and thus actually earning Thorvald's nicknames, her control and composure during this turning point would have been a revelation and relief. Instead, it was a strangely empty conclusion that left me utterly disappointed.

Your points are well taken.
Perhaps we should all have gone to
Playboy of the West Indies. Still, I was glad
to have seen it and to have gotten out of London
to see what their local efforts would amount to.
The ride back on the bus was great. Thanks for
inviting us on it.

One other thing; we saw the first performance after
a longish 9 day holiday, which may have been
a factor in the flatness of the production,
But stronger directions might have helped
a lot. None of the performances matched
up to the credentials that the cast appears to have

Wednesday, 5 January, 2005

"Romeo and Juliet" by the Royal Shakespeare Company

There were several elements of this production of "Romeo and Juliet" that I was interested by. The use of color to distinguish the families from one another, as well as the blending of colors to represent the impartial Prince, was very visually exciting as well as being a meaningful directorial decision. Likewise, the set design was very elegant. It was sparse, creating a blank canvas for the actors to play upon, while incorporating ✓ Elizabethan images and architecture that lent a period feel to the space. It reminded me of the lining of very old trunks, layers of wallpaper peeling away to reveal older layers of image and time. This was an excellent metaphor for this production, as it was very conservative in its reading of the text and thus transported us to the period in which it originates.

"Romeo and Juliet" is among Shakespeare's most well known plays, and it is one of the most adored love stories of all time. I believe that is probably because it takes place at a time in Romeo and Juliet's lives that everyone can relate to: adolescent passion and abandon. There was a delightful chemistry between the actors portraying the young lovers, and this was both a relief and a joy to behold. They were reminiscent of Will and Lyra, growing together over the course of an incredible journey, where Romeo and Juliet grew up over several days as they discover a love worth dying for.

Having so recently seen such a different interpretation of the text, one that was wildly innovative and provocative, I was primed for another original interpretation, and was thus somewhat disappointed to watch such a traditional and formulaic reading. However, I was simultaneously interested to see a professionally performed "Romeo and Juliet" that did not try to modernize the story or adapt it in any way. It was an uncut and

*industry
company*

ceremonial in its design. No liberties were taken in any respect. This, however, had the unfortunate result of showcasing performances that were without a complexity of emotion or believable sentiment. The actors were playing at levels of feeling, in some places even reading the meter of the text. Instead of being an engaging example of traditional Shakespearian drama, it was flat and uninventive, which was disappointing.

This blandness was most obvious in a comparison between the culminating death scenes in the RSC's version and the Acrobatic version. In the RSC's production, Juliet's body is a burden to Romeo. He struggles to pull it up onto the stage, and her body's lifeless weight pulls him to the ground. The difference is remarkable in the Acrobatic interpretation of this scene, and the contrast is quite literal. Juliet's body, although not yet roused from its drugged sleep, is anything but a burden to Romeo. They dance across the stage in their final moments together, as he gracefully removes her from her tomb. Finally, Romeo's death happens high above the stage, even above the audience. The lightness they experience in death was stunning. ✓

Perhaps the struggle that was portrayed by the Royal Shakespeare Company's Romeo was more realistic. There is something to be said for an academic and respectful recreation of what one imagines is close to what Shakespeare may have originally intended. I am glad that we saw two remarkably different performances of a text I know practically by heart. It was certainly an interesting comparison between interpretation and tradition.

Thursday, 7 January, 2005
"Two Gentlemen of Verona"

During our historic trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, I marveled that I was walking among buildings that Shakespeare occupied and looking at the same bends in the Avon River that he probably did. In the Swan theatre, two Shakespeare plays were remarkably adapted, much to my relief and delight after the Royal Shakespeare Company's less-than-astonishing traditional reading of Romeo and Juliet.

"Two Gentlemen of Verona" was placed in the pre-crash twenties, and bandstand swing music roared and the characters broke out into the Lindy hop at a moment's notice. This lively updating of the text worked beautifully and proved a splendid choice on the part of the director. The flapper stylings worked so well, in part, because it represented the modern, fast life of the big city of Milan. Young people were described as being swept up in the Roaring Twenties, and Proteus certainly is.

We discussed in class the relevance of Dionysian and Apollonian sensibilities to Shakespeare in general and "Two Gentlemen" in particular. The interplay between the abandon of big-city culture and the morality of their small down origins is among the conflicting concepts of "Two Gentlemen." Further tension exists between the civilized world and the untamed wilderness, and between the pursuit of love and loyalty to one's friends. Each character must experience all of these realms before they can immerge matured and grown up. Because Valentine is able to negotiate these opposing mentalities, he survives unfazed by his adventure. He does not compromise his integrity, and he betrays no one.

Proteus, on the other hand, does not have a firm sense of moral responsibility and that is why he is blinded by the big-city abandon and by Sylvia's star-quality, why he

betrays his friend and forsakes his fiancé. It all begins why he lies to his decrepit father and is sent away to Milan. Had he not lied, he would have remained in Verona and left his integrity intact. As it goes, however, he must tell lie after lie to reach what he imagines will satisfy him.

when?

A comparison of the two women yields an interesting study of femininity. Sylvia, on one hand, is at the center of Milan's high-society, and yet she knows herself well enough not to bend to the will of anyone else. She is loyal to Valentine in his absence when Proteus makes advances. On the contrary, she completely abhors him when she learns that he would betray his friends for a woman he hardly knows. Furthermore, she is not vein even as the recipient of abundant praise from suitors, demonstrated by her willingness to give Proteus a picture of herself as a sort of send up of his advances. "Having a picture of me means nothing," she says with this gesture.

This needs clarification.

wrong word

Julia, in comparison, is not a seasoned lover. In one of the funniest scenes of the play, she struggles with the implications of accepting a letter from Proteus, and she refuses it because it means so much to her, "as a woman should," she says. She and Proteus roll about on the floor for a good long while before they are caught and embarrassed. Neither, it seems, possesses any ability to control themselves.

develop a bit further.

To travel alone to the big city, she assumes a masculine role, cross-dressing and taking on what she imagines are the characteristics a man should have. In her disguise, she is safe to approach Proteus and over the course of the play, in the role of a man, she develops a worldly feminine discipline and composure that she was without at the beginning of the play.

This play and the remarkable production need more attention than you've afforded it. Comment on the 3 settings as a way of getting at the clever plot and skillful staging.

Thursday, 7 January, 2005
"Julius Caesar"

In another splendidly interpreted Shakespeare play, the Royal Shakespeare Company found an opportunity not just for creative storytelling, but for vastly significant political commentary. This was also among the most historically pertinent plays that we saw while in London. "Julius Caesar" was a historical play at its inception half of a millennium ago. So oft performed with togas and olive wreaths, the RSC modernized it to a contemporary age of fascist regimes and totalitarian media machines. This is a provocative and exciting retelling of an ancient story of political maneuvering.

well put

It is a very intelligent reading of the text. One of the most noteworthy moments of this is during Marc Antony's eulogy for Caesar. Read into the rhetoric of the original was a tremendous sentiment of provocative sarcasm: "Brutus is an *honorable* man." The actor portraying Marc Antony had immense presence, a voice to match, and this speech was spine-tingling. Adding to the power of this interpretation was the use of cameras and projection screens, creating a series of propaganda posters reminiscent of Mao, Stalin and Saddam Hussein.

✓

Further political relevance was evident at the moment when Caesar and his surrounding senators are frozen as a soothsayer lists every single one of them as being a threat to his life. He had complete faith in them, and each one bathed their hands in his blood. This was indicative of current political administrations where a leader may be more of a figurehead than he seems, a puppet controlled by manipulating cabinet members that are working for their own agendas. Running during America's election year, this play probably positions itself to comment to a degree on today's politica

climate. Sometimes it seems like Bush may be one such figure head; he seems at times to possess neither the know how nor the fortitude to enact the policy changes his administration aims to. Certain statesmen beneath him, however, are in the position to carry out their own plans using the leverage and position of our simpleminded President. Furthermore, the Bush administration is often condemned as totalitarian in its growing control over what sometimes seems live every aspect of our livelihood. It is similar unrest surrounding Caesar's rule that pushes Cassius and Brutus to rebel.

Simultaneously at work in this production, as evidenced by the presence of soothsayers and the characters' attention paid them, are the anciently recognized forces of fate and ghosts. Caesar hesitates upon hearing Calpurnia's foreboding dream. Furthermore, Caesar's ghost visits Brutus and foretells their meeting at Phillipi. But fate only takes each character so far. After Caesar hears Calpurnia's dream, and after Brutus learns of the upcoming battle, each knowingly makes the choice to proceed.

In fact, the play's title character dies rather early in the production. His influence does not die with him, and that is why the play is not called "Brutus" or "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," or some other such less appropriate title. Although Caesar dies, the entire play hinges upon the circumstances of a leader's power overwhelming the people he rules, and the events surrounding his death and succession make up the dramatic action of the play.

The interplay between destiny and freewill is only one of several connections that can be drawn between "Julius Caesar" and "His Dark Materials." Consider the role of Asrael, as he quests to kill the Authority. Both plays take on issues surrounding assumed leadership and the oppression capable of human-created laws. Many plays that we saw

good point

this trip, in fact, consider the problems inherent in legal and political systems: "Two Gentlemen of Verona," "The Mandate," "Simply Heavenly," even "Journey's End" and "Romeo and Juliet." It's actually really rewarding to think of the connections possible in the process of careful analysis.

Friday, 8 January, 2005
"Grand Hotel"

The resident voice of the Grand Hotel is Dr. Otternschlag, who is present on the stage for what seems to be the entire duration of the production, watching the goings on from the sidelines. He lives in the walls, he sees everything. He "will stay one more day." He puts it rather succinctly at the start of the show when he remarks, "Grand Hotel... always the same. People come, people go. Nothing ever happens." The revolving door image is a strong one in this story, as one person checks in, another room is vacated. But the Doctor is being ironic, it would seem, for as he would know better than anyone, plenty happens in Grand Hotel. Deaths, births, meetings and partings; people come here to die and discover lives worth living.

A hotel is a building rich with histories, but never complete or resolved histories. Rather, a hotel plays host to moments of life-cycles and thus many of the histories within are forever in a state of cliffhanger. Ballerina Grusinskaya's story is a perfect example of this. She comes to the Grand Hotel completely run down and unwilling to continue with a life on the stage. During her stay, however, she meets a man who awakens in her all of the youth she had thought lost forever, and a passion and fervor to perform that had all but burned out. The baron dies before they can run away together, but Grusinskaya checks out, and the play ends, before she learns of her lover's fate. Her stay in the hotel is not a resolved moment; it is, instead, a turning point without a resolution.

Flaemmchen and Otto come to Grand Hotel for completely different reasons but leave together in the closest thing we have to a resolved storyline in this play. Both of their lives are in a sense hopeless: Flaemmchen want to go to Hollywood but she'll probably never get there, and Otto is a sick man with a wish to experience the highlife

before he dies. In Grand Hotel, both of them think for a moment that they have found their dreams' fulfillment, but the death of the Barton deeply affects each of them. The presence of death in the "greatest hotel in the world" is a reality check. There are more important things in life than champagne and celebrity. They have found real companionship and with it a hope for a more meaningful life.

Hopes and dreams are central to this play, especially those involving money. A luxury hotel such as Grand Hotel caters to the rich and privileged, but its operation depends entirely upon the working class. We see the line drawn between the upper and lower classes from the first number "Some Have, Some Have Not," and we feel deeply for the employees of Grand Hotel that need the money so much that they cannot live their lives meaningfully. For instance, the front desk employee cannot leave his post to stand by his wife as their baby is born. He must hear about it on the phone as if he is staying in Grand Hotel on a trip. What's more, the makeup of the hotel workers, pale-faced and dark under-eye circles, emphasizes their exhaustion and mistreatment.

Money is the linchpin of this story, especially as it is positioned this close to the stock market crash and depression. Everyone is desperate to hold onto their money—Preysing kills for his wallet. The Barton is willing to steal to stay at the hotel another week. Poor Flaemmchen prepares to sell her body for a way out of her temp job. Money both propels the stories forward in this play, and traps each character in his or her own misery.

Opportunity is simultaneously satirized in "Grand Hotel." The black performers retort when asked if the streets are really paved with gold in America, that their streets aren't even paved. Each character believes that money will solve their problems, but it is

money that is proven to unravel lives. The conclusion of the play only happens when Otto and Flaemmchen realize this and look for something else. Ironically, however, it is only when Otto is financially free after hitting it big in the stock market that he can take Flaemmchen away from Grand Hotel and all of the perils of high society.

*comment on her
response → Otto's
response. How does that
play into shaping the
conclusion?*

Saturday, 9 January, 2005
"Simply Heavenly"

This joyful production presents itself as one that is carefree and escapist in nature. It makes no claims to political or social agendas other than entertaining^{ment}. The undercurrent of racial inequality and social injustice bubbles just beneath the surface of this show for much of the first act, lending the show a multifaceted depth, like the gorgeous poetry of Langston Hughes. It makes its point here and there, subtly and in accordance with the story at hand. However, these connotations and subtexts eventually boil over in the second act with an oppressive and derailing effect. It was at this point that I wondered why the show needed to continue when it was, in fact, far from heavenly.

The central storyline of Jesse's and Joyce's tumultuous courtship was two-dimensional and completely lacking charisma or chemistry. It was unbelievable why anyone was drawn to Jesse in the first place, let alone willing to wait for him to grow up and do the right thing for once. Furthermore, lust-object Zarita was far more interesting and deep and the chemistry that finally ignites between her and Jesse is stigmatized and for some reason exactly what Jesse shouldn't get involved with. This love triangle was predictable and frustrating, and not in the least bit engaging.

However, the show is not without its moments of glory. "Did You Ever Hear the Blues," sung by Melon and Mamie, and featuring a fabulous blues guitar, was almost worth sitting through the rest of the production. The vocal talents of these two actors was astonishing, and I was most disappointed that they were not the focal points of this production. Scenes taking place in Paddy's pub in Harlem, located at stage level and in the foreground, were dramatically more engaging than those above it in Jesse's or Joyce's rooms. The exception to this was Zarita's birthday party; it was full of life, fabulous

Elion

We got the holiday cast. Live live - Ruby Turner is now back in the show and it's been extended to July.

dancing and vocal solos. The balloon was burst, however, by Jesse's grumpy, lanky boxer shorts-wearing attitude, and Joyce's wet blanket. This show would have been *Simply Heavenly* if it had stayed in the bar and engaged the audience with bittersweet numbers about the everyday struggles against poverty and prejudice, instead of letting such material leak through here and there through the saccharine love story.

Aside from numbers like "Did You Ever Hear the Blues," and a brief moment dealing with hate crime, the show seems to save up its political commentary until almost the end. Just when I was feeling like I would get angry if Jesse whined one more time about not deserving Joyce, the production took a dramatic turn for the worse. From atop his bar counter soapbox, Jesse regales the audience and the meager crowd left in Paddy's with his sudden aspirations to lead a battalion of white troupes to battle. Up until this point we hear absolutely nothing of such plans for Jesse. He has no military background; he is on the contrary "working" towards settling down with Joyce. Furthermore, this speech is uncomfortably long. Had the show been isolated in Paddy's, had we heard more fabulous blues guitar, and had Hughes' fascinating and resonant quality so commonly felt in his earlier work been more dominant in "*Simply Heavenly*," then perhaps it would have lived up to its title.

Saturday, 9 January, 2005
"The Producers"

"The Producers" was an excellently positioned play within our curriculum. After two weeks of theatre, we are privileged to watch a play that dramatizes the process of putting on a production from concept to review. Further pertinence lay in that Brooks' storyline explores audience reaction to historically sensitive material, where many of the other plays we saw implied or directly engaged with such sensitive matters. The irony was not lost on this theatre-goer.

First of all, Max and Leo set out to produce a show guaranteed to flop, and they select a play about the Holocaust, one they are certain will offend "anyone of any race, nationality, gender or religion." The show fails to fail, however. To relate this production for a moment to "The History Boys," one of the plays to set a historical tone on our entire trip, the audience for "Springtime for Hitler" was completely emotionally distanced and unable to be offended by the subject matter. Hector of "The History Boys" would have completely objected to the production, as it degrades those affected by WWII. Leo and Max think like Hector; they take for granted that everyone will be outraged and that the show will close after a single night.

"The Producers" as a production in itself, pushes the same buttons that "Springtime for Hitler" does. With its stereotypification of gays, Jews, Swedes, the elderly, and other groups, it proves its own point with its success: audiences can appreciate jokes at their expense with a proper emotional distance that is created with the use of spectacle and showmanship. This is perfectly demonstrated within the play when Max and Leo forget that they are wearing Nazi swastika armbands. The attendant asks

them if he can take the armbands with their coats, and they become suddenly aware of how completely despicable they must have seemed. Enjoying this performance was at times like laughing at a Helen Keller joke: you are only getting away with it because you are sitting in a roomful of other people too wrapped up in their own hysterics to notice the inappropriateness of it all.

Aside from the irony made possible by the meta-theatre, there was another element of the story that has stayed with me in the weeks following the performance, and that is Max's redemption by Leo at the close of the play. Leo arrives at Max's sentencing, fresh from his fabulous vacation with Ulla, and sings a heartfelt song about the importance of friendship and the beautiful, benevolent man that helped bring him out of his shell. Looking back on the storyline, however, Max didn't really do a single kind thing for Leo that wasn't selfishly motivated. He inadvertently helped Leo to realize his dreams of being a Broadway producer because Max needed Leo's accounting sensibilities and know-how. When their friendship is tested as Max is captured and Leo escapes, instead of feeling happy for him and acknowledging that it was largely Max's fault that they were in trouble in the first place, he feels betrayed. Furthermore, Max tries to take the last opportunity to escape, running from the courtroom for the money and the door. Max's character is very funny at every turn, but he is a rather unlikable character in the long run. I regretted that Leo felt so warmly towards him even in the end.

Excellent reviews, Mary Lou, Sara;
a pleasure to read. Your insights are often very
astute & well placed. I like the thoughtfulness
of your comparisons of the plays with each other.
I assume you have the away on deal. Could you forward
a copy to me? I'd like to put some portions of it on
the website, if you don't mind.

A