

28 December 2009
A Daughter's a Daughter
By Agatha Christie
Trafalgar Studios
PLAY #1

We entered Trafalgar Studios and walked down the carpeted stairway and onto the stage. The house, the audience was at our backs. How fantastic. We had become part of the performance; our importance as audience members was cemented as soon as we entered the theatre. Trafalgar Studios has been by far my favorite theatre space thus far and we're two days in as I write this.

A Daughter's A Daughter was, apparently, one of three plays that Agatha Christie wrote under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. Having built a career from mystery novels and mystery plays, she was able to create something entirely different under this new name. This production was incredibly well acted, especially by the two leading women, the mother, Anne, and the daughter, Sarah, whose relationship tragically degenerates as they spend years living together, resentful of the other for spoiling her chances at happiness. From the first scene, when the mother and daughter are reunited after a long war that left a lasting mark on the face of Britain, to the final scene when each admits their hatred and resentment of the other, the transformation of each woman is immensely tragic and overwhelmingly apparent. (And clearly exhausting to the actresses who looked totally beat during the curtain call.) In a way, when Sarah returns home after the war, she enters a new one when she comes into her mother's house and destroys her mother's possibility of happiness. So begins their relationship's tragic demise.

Bringing light to the whole story is Dame Laura who refuses to let either Sarah or Anne take the easy way out of their feelings. It is her tough love that brings the truth to

surface, for better or for worse. She was also the best and most inspired performance in the production – absolutely fantastic.

My main criticism is that the lighting design was dumb. Yes, dumb. And it often took away from the darkest and most emotional moments of the play by trying to be too interesting. I occasionally thought at times that the actors sounded a bit too rehearsed, like they've done this a billion times – on occasion, they forgot to listen to each other.

But on the whole, I greatly enjoyed the performance, the production and the script. It is a play very much about obligation, love, resentment, family and happiness. And one thing is very clear – Agatha Christie can write something other than mysteries; this play boasted an excellently constructed plot, and very real, honest, heart-wrenching characters.

29 December 2009

War Horse

By Nick Stafford (original book by Michael Morpurgo)

New London Theatre

PLAY #2

I have never been so moved by a piece of theatre in my memory. I adored this play. There is something about the connection between boy and animal and the general theme of family (which includes animals within that definition) which is intensely spiritual, and uniquely moving. There was a moment in the play, when the horse Tophorn dies and, in one carefully rehearsed, seamless movement, the puppeteers removed themselves from the puppet. I talked to my family after I saw this and I told them that at that moment it was as if Tophorn's soul had floated out of him and he became just a body. There was such life in these animals – often a greater life and spirit and sense of humanity than in any of their human counterparts. I wish I could pinpoint what it was about the play that made it so

incredibly cathartic for me but I just couldn't pick one element of the plot or one character or one idea. I think what made it so wonderfully emotional was that the production is so complex yet at its heart, the ideas behind it are so innate, so simple that they already rest inside our hearts. And it is the acting, more real than real puppets, the lights, the haze, the striking set that gracefully bring these ideas to the surface of our consciousness.

In class, Professor, you asked us what kind of story this is, what the genre is. It ends romantically, happily, rightfully. So it could be deemed a romance. But I immediately thought, this is a true war story. A long time ago, I read Tim O'Brien's short story *How to Tell a True War Story* in his book, The Things They Carried, which told about his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. And I can't remember a single thing about it except that after I read it, I became highly critical of war stories, always asking if they were true, if they were not an accurate portrayal necessarily, but built of honesty, free of fraud, a pursuit of war's truth. I think that though this story ends happily in that the horse Joey and his owner Albert both make it through the war, it is a story that paints (what seems to me to be) a hauntingly realistic picture of the power of a force for love in a time of war. Each human who comes into Joey's life during the war years seems to have found something worth living for, something honest and true and full of grace: a young French girl and her mother, a boy from rural England who soon becomes a man, a colonel who makes a promise, a German captain who misses his daughter and resents what the war has done to him. The story seems to insist that war is bad for everyone – even our enemies. And Joey, our symbol of goodness and love and strength, can touch the heart of individuals on every side of the war.

Highly relevant in a world still shredded to pieces by the atrocities of war, the story insists on a common human spirit which has the ability to be brought together by the spirit of someone like Joey.

29 December 2009

The Habit of Art

By Alan Bennett

The National Theatre

PLAY #3

Thus far, we have seen three plays that deal with what it means to create – to long for the experience of art. *The Habit of Art* was, in my opinion, the least fantastic of the three – the other two being *Billy Elliot* and *The Pitmen Painters*. This is a theme with which I deeply identify. I'm a big sucker for plays, poems, movies, music that deal with an individual's understanding of art and what it means to be a part of it, to create it, to learn about it. I think it has to do with the fact that as a young actress nearing the middle of my college career who has little intention of going into theatre after graduation, I am deeply fearful of a future sans art. Sure, my future will have art, but will I be creating it? I'm not so sure. It's a thought that scares me very much. I will develop this idea later in connection with *Billy Elliot* and especially *The Pitmen Painters* but it is important to note here the "habit of art," the notion that once one starts creating art, it's very, very hard to stop. In theatre, they call it "the bug." And I caught it a long time ago.

Seeing the set (an exact duplicate of one of the National Theatre's rehearsal rooms) up close and personal during the tour lent a new sense of significance to this play, which because of its countless Britishisms and fast paced dialogue, I had a difficult time loving – though I tried terribly hard and thought that the performances all around were quite excellent. I didn't feel any kind of affection or attachment to any of the characters, yet it

seemed to me that I had met them all before. I felt that I myself had been in rehearsals with these very characters; I felt that I had worked with these actors, that stage manager, and that very playwright. The play (about a play about W.H. Auden and Ben Britton) is not about Britton and Auden other than that they were both artists who dealt with feelings and ideas of art in the same way the actors, the writer and the stage manager do. The company of actors and technicians and the writer portrayed a fascinating familiarity sensed by audience members who may themselves have spent a lot of time in theater rehearsals. I've probably spent about a solid year or two of my life in rehearsal. Some of my life's most wonderful moments have taken place in rehearsal, and also some of the worst. So though I didn't like these people, they were each astonishingly familiar and the rehearsal seemed as though I'd lived it before. So maybe on some level, this play about the persistence and the constancy of art, is also about its timeless familiarity? Or maybe I'm reading too much into this because I've spent a good amount of my life in rehearsal with self-deprecating actors who publically insist that they're simply "a device" but secretly know that their character is why the play works, with actors who rewrite scripts, and playwrights who can't make up their minds and who create endings that make no common sense.

I like the performances of the actors, I liked that I felt a connection to the rehearsal setting and to each of the characters, with whom I felt I shared a common experience, and with whom I share the habit of art.

30 December 2009

Twelfth Night

By William Shakespeare

Royal Shakespeare Company

PLAY #4

I directed *Twelfth Night* at my high school at the end of my junior year. This was a time before I could think, I always say. Being a real, critical thinker started happening later. There was much that I misinterpreted as an amateur director that became beautifully clear in witnessing this production. I set my production on an island off the coast of New England in a Gatsby-esque 1920s where women wore their hair short, so it may have been easier to confuse a brother and sister for each other. In retrospect, it seems that I created a solution to the biggest problem I had with the script, and then directed an entire production around that single solution. Not the best idea. This production, however, was marvelous.

One thing I love about modern productions of Shakespeare is that they can be set anywhere – Elizabethan England, Gatsby's New England, some strange island off the coast of Morocco which seems to be ruled by British colonialists who have taken on a number of local traditions and customs. And the story will always still work, still have that same poignancy that it did on the stage of the Globe four hundred years ago. I loved the graceful incorporation of music into the performance, which I felt made the actors' production of the fragments of music all the more natural.

Twelfth Night, as we discussed in class, is a play about revelry. It is a play about celebration and happiness and fulfillment. Marked clearly with Shakespeare's standard devices, the play has an air of joy and newness, freshness, youth, that his other comedies somewhat lack. It is a play about birth – about being filled with something, a lie, or love, or

a secret, or a fear and then finally being released from whatever it was that was so filling. It is largely a character-driven narrative complete with a world of both upper class royal types of characters, and of lowly servants and bumbling fools. A few characters exist between these two worlds. Viola, namely, is herself of royal blood but is disguised as a servant going between royals and through the lowlier characters (who actually include a couple of knights, oddly enough.) Another character who, like most fools, exists between worlds and never fits nicely into just one setting, is Feste. Both characters exist on the periphery of worlds in *Twelfth Night*.

Perhaps most hilariously smart (in acting, not in character) was Sir Andrew Aguecheek; an entirely incompetent knight and suitor to Olivia who nearly stole the show out from under its leading women. Ah, the joys of live theatre, we all thought, as the blade of his sword flew off as he was threatening an opponent. I was also most strongly impressed by the actress who played Olivia, who seemed to have a lot of fun with her role, which is fun for an aspiring actress like myself to see in someone on stage. She was having a blast and she was very funny but also richly believable. One of her greatest moments, I think, was her attempt to console Malvolio expressing a genuine concern for a wronged friend.

I am a huge fan of literalism in theatre so I can't express how hard I laughed when the three got themselves into the boxtree. Incredibly clever staging and inspired acting all around. It was quite a wonderful production and I feel lucky to have seen, for the first time, the British do Shakespeare. It never really has the same ring to it all in America, I have to say.

30 December 2009

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

By Tennessee Williams

Duke of York's Theatre

PLAY #5

Goofing around online, I found a trailer advertising the moving of the New York production of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (the first ever with an all-black cast) to the London stage. The trailer consisted of cast interviews and interviews of with show's producer. In it, James Earl Jones says something like this: *Cat* is not a play about mendacity; it is a play about truth. I think that he hit the nail directly on the head with that statement, and the idea holds true not just for the words of Tennessee Williams but also for this specific production.

As I mentioned in class, I've seen *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* before and I fell in love with it. It became my favorite play. I've seen a Maggie and a Brick who were to me, as a young theatre lover, two of the greatest performers I'd ever seen on stage. A great many people in each of the audiences who have seen this production have also seen *Cat* and have had favorite Maggies and favorite Big Daddies. But out of all the Maggies we've all seen, all the Big Mammams, all the Sister Womans – these actors and actresses were different and it wasn't just because they were black. They did indeed, as James Earl Jones said, have a rawness and a harsh truth and honesty about them that was inspiring to witness. The play had a realness. It lacked the theatricality of other performances I've seen and seemed to get to the heart of story using the weapon of honesty. Though as I said in class, I didn't fall in love with this Maggie, I still thought she was fantastic – she had a raw, harsh, aggression and a physical presence that demonstrated significant training and acting ability.

I love this play. And I thought this production, differing from the traditional, remained truer to the play's heart than many previous productions.

31 December 2009
Christmas Cracker
Footsbarn Comedy
The Globe Theatre
PLAY #6

I feel bad for the people who sit on cushions. As groundlings at *Christmas Cracker* in Shakespeare's Globe, we were of the people. There is something about the Globe that moves me. I think it has to do with the feeling of timelessness and infinity that seep out of the circular space. This might not be the original Globe, but its spirit survives and beautifully infuses all who come there to experience theatre. Even the groundlings. I like to look up at the audience space and imagine the people who have been coming here to see theatre for the last five hundred years. Kings and Queens, aristocrats of the highest rank, merchants, bankers, peddlers, beggars, prostitutes, sailors, surgeons – in Shakespeare's time, theatre was for everyone. Today, in most theatres, I look around me and see members of today's middle class and not much else. But in the Globe, an echo of its previous life as a house of artistic equity still exists and continues to inspire.

This unique experience was added to by the fact that we were seeing the performance of Footsbarn's *Christmas Cracker*, a traditional English Christmas panto – a pantomime complete with music, magic, crude jokes, and puppets. By far my favorite part of the performance was a medley of performances from Shakespeare's tragedies. If I were a child in the audience, I would probably have been bored at this part of the show and been eager for the puppets and the dancing and the music and the snotty noses to return to the stage, but as an adult, I was incredibly moved by the tragic elements of the show. Romeo's

final speech in French, Lear crying to the storm, Hamlet with a skull in hand – I adored this part of the performance and was left feeling kind of incomplete. I came out of that wishing we could have seen those guys do *Lear* – they were fantastic actors. Even though I came away longing for Shakespeare, I did feel that the spirit of his theatre was alive in the Globe that day, and being part of such a truly English tradition was an incredible theatrical and personal experience.

31 December 2009

Billy Elliot

By Lee Hall

Victoria Palace Theatre

PLAY #7

For me, the defining moment in *Billy Elliot* is at the end when he finally makes it to his audition in London. He is about to leave after his interview when a faceless voice asks him, “Billy, what does it feel like when you dance?” It’s been a theme of the entire trip thus far, especially in the work of Lee Hall, but it’s one that can’t be written about enough. What does art make us feel? When a painter paints or when an individual looks at a painting, when a dancer dances or when an audience watches a little boy dance his heart out, what does it feel like? It’s an interesting question and one that I’ve never really known how to answer, simply because I’m feeling a whole lot.

When Billy dances, it feels like “Electricity.” When I act, it feels like my heart gets bigger – that’s the best way to describe it. It feels warm in my chest area. It’s the same when I see a good piece of theatre, when I am part of experiencing acting even when I’m not the one doing it necessarily, when I get to watch it and respond to it, it feels warm, like a blessing.

Back to the play. The choreography in *Billy Elliot* is stunning and some of the best, most innovative choreography on any stage right now. Movement is vital in art – not just in the theatre, but in music and literature – art is about movement. And *Billy Elliot*, though this play is literally about movement, is about a boy who loves to dance. Movement takes on other key roles within this story and is alluded to within the breathtaking choreography. The passage of time is beautifully illustrated in the grandmother's song as the men move across the stage with chairs, the changing political atmosphere is illustrated explicitly in the Maggie Thatcher song, but also more subtly at the end, when the miners go back to work, down the mine shaft, from honorable solidarity to defeated shame and hopelessness. The play deals with a number of political and social issues that are still relevant within modern society; though the play takes place over twenty years ago, it does not feel dated or irrelevant. But through the social commentary, this play is about the way art makes us feel. It is a play about a boy who loves to dance, who is moved – literally and figuratively – by the spirit of art.

1 January 2010

The Pitmen Painters

By Lee Hall

The National Theatre

PLAY #8

Aside from *War Horse*, *The Pitmen Painters* has been my favorite play we've seen so far. Looking back on my notes from the show, I laugh because it seems I barely took any. I jotted down a line or two that I felt really hit at something or got at me in some way, but I was so engrossed in the story, in the world of the pitmen that I couldn't be bothered to pay

any attention to my notes. A theme that stretched across *Billy Elliot* and *The Pitmen Painters*, both Lee Hall plays, is the idea of what art makes us feel.

In perhaps the most moving part of the first act, the pitmen stand in front of the audience – we are acting, presumably, as a group of people from the town, listening to their story – and they tell us about their trip to London, to the Tate Modern, where they saw Van Gogh paintings for the first time. As they describe his artwork, and his history – that he was from a mining town and that his family were all miners and his first paintings were all of mining scenes just like theirs – the projection screens behind them burst with the colors of the artist’s paintings. *Starry Night* and *The Olive Trees* and van Gogh’s early depictions of coal miners flashed behind them as they described how these paintings made them feel, how this artist, who didn’t sell one painting in his whole life, but who seemed to be so moved and so touched by the experience of art that he never stopped painting, affected them. This was at the very end of the first act and when the lights came up in the house, I hastily wiped away my tears. I don’t know why exactly, but I felt like my heart was growing. I remember the first time I saw a Van Gogh in person. It’s not the same as when you see it in books. I was in Houston at an exhibit called “The Heroic Century.” It went to three museums in the world and the Houston MOMA was one of them so I went with my eighth grade English class. I saw *Starry Night* and *The Olive Trees* hanging side by side, as a letter from the artist to his brother had made clear that he wanted these painting to be exhibited together; they needed one another. And I felt warm when I saw them hanging there on that sterile white wall, the paintings just bursting with life. I felt like I knew what the pitmen were feeling and I loved that I felt so much a part of their world.

There's a moment in the end of the play when Lyon is sketching Oliver. And they get into a fight that sort of begins when Oliver tells Lyon that there is no life in the drawing. Lyon yells at Oliver, who seems to have given up art in a way, and says, "Don't be afraid of the world; meet it. Don't be afraid to create something new." This is a play about freshness, about looking at things with fresh eyes and finding the will to see beauty and art in them. It is about discovering a will to create, a habit of art, and never letting it go, no matter where you come from. It is, like *Billy Elliot*, a play about the way art makes us feel.

2 January 2010
Annie Get Your Gun
By Irving Berlin
The Young Vic
PLAY #9

The Young Vic is a really cool theatre space and I immediately knew I liked the theatre when we walked into the lobby. And I think the theatre was my favorite part of the show. But here's the thing, I don't think that the cast was bad, necessarily. I think that *Annie Get Your Gun* is a play that hasn't aged well, and I think the cast was low on energy, and I think that they made some bad choices. For instance, I've seen this play as a kid in Texas and thought it was awesome. (As a grown woman, I have a number of problems with the message it sends young girls, but as a kid, I thought it was pretty fun.) I also remember from productions in my youth that Annie Oakley is supposed to be shrewd and sassy and smart and funny. This Annie was none of these things. She made Annie seem stupid. Her IQ dropped ten points every time Frank came on stage. I've never seen an Annie like this before. I wonder if the actress played her this way to make a negative statement about American women, to poke fun at the American South or simply because the director told her to do it that way or because they misunderstood the heart of Annie Oakley. I just refuse

to believe that she's supposed to be played *that* stupidly. I also won't buy the argument that it's children's theatre and it needs to be that way. No. Children are not stupid. They would understand just fine if Annie was smart and sassy like she's supposed to be.

Production aside, I have some obvious problems with the script. I love Irving Berlin as much as the next guy, but oh my gosh, could you be any more sexist, Mr. Berlin? What was the moral of the story exactly? Don't have more success than the man you're in love with because no one gets married if they're better at something than a guy? And this is what we're showing our kids still? Today? I just hope every mom took their daughter home and said, "You know it's just a play, right? It doesn't really mean that you should do that." But as we've been learning over the past few days, plays mean a whole lot. They are tremendously powerful in conveying social and political ideas, especially to young people. Art is a tool for education and it can be used for good or for evil. (Maybe evil is a strong word, but shouldn't young girls today be watching plays that tell them to be the best they can be, not that they should hold back from their full potential in order to get themselves a ring?)

2 January 2010

The Priory

By Michael Wynne

Royal Court Theatre

PLAY #10

At the end of the first act of the *The Priory*, I looked around at my friends and colleagues and said something like "Oh my god, TOOP has to do this show, it's amazing. And I'm playing Laura." But then I thought, "No, I want to play Kate. No, I'll be Rebecca." It was so hard to pick a character (as if that's how it works in theatre) – they're all so rich, so

full of life. It's rare to find a play where even the "normal character" has insight and depth and tragedy and sarcasm, where that character to which "normal" people are supposed to relate is both a fascinatingly dynamic and quirky, and a loveable individual. This kind of character, one like Kate, is a tremendous challenge to play. The entire play, the plot, is driven by all of its phenomenally written characters and the choices that they make. Not one character is without their own story, their own depth, insight, hilarity and tragedy.

We walked into the space and took our seats in the stalls (they were fantastic seats) and took in the set. A simple living/dining room in a house complete with deer heads mounted on the walls and tall stained glass windows. There was a clear ecclesiastical vibe about the place that one could feel without even knowing the play was called "The Priory." It felt scary and the sound design added tremendously to the element of tension that set up the action of the play. Gregorian chants, creaky windows and doors, howling wind and rain, coupled with the way this company of talented young actors play with the space, creates an environment, a place for this hilariously serious story to unfold.

If I had to pick a favorite character, it would have to be Laura – the manic fiancé of one day to Ben who changes her outfit for every activity, who, in her own rather hilarious way, shows emotional depth in the way she interacts with these strangers who she believes to be normal, best friends. The actress who played her had such a poignant, hilarious and tragic emotional honesty about her. I was enormously impressed with her ability to act within and be able to maintain control over that huge range of emotions and to portray them with such honesty. Perhaps one of the most impressive elements of the show, technically speaking, was the blood spurting mechanism that was put into place when Laura slit her own wrist. After the show, we waited at the stage door and asked her how it

worked. (SPOILER ALERT: do not read further if you want the magical illusion of this piece of theatre to remain in tact.) And this is what she said: Beneath the bum role in her dress is an Evian bottle filled with blood. It has a motor inside it which is charged by a battery. A tube goes from the bottle up her back and down her arm and then is covered by flesh-colored putty. There is a valve at the end of the tube that releases the fake blood that is controlled by an assistant stage manager off stage with a remote control. So they watch and when she put the knife to her wrist, they press the button and it starts spurting out. And the remote can also control when the bursts happen. So, for example, when Kate presses down harder on the cloth and it bleeds through it, that's because they've controlled it so that extra spurts of blood happen as she puts pressure on the "wound." The actress told us that they initially were going to buy such a mechanism but it was to cost about £5,000. So instead, their incredibly talented technical crew designed and made this mechanism on their own. Pretty cool, right?

So not only was it fantastic for a young actress like myself to get to see this amazing company of younger actors in such beautiful roles and performing them so well in this wonderful piece of new, fresh theatre – it was just a really fun show. I had a great time watching it. I screamed, really screamed, each and every time a dark hooded figure showed up in the window. It was a blast. A favorite of the trip, for sure.

3 January 2010

Nation

Novel by Terry Pratchett

Adapted for the stage by Mark Ravenhill

National Theatre – Olivier

PLAY #11

In class, we discussed a number of the criticisms that *Nation* has faced thus far, namely, that it fails to make sense to an audience who hasn't read the book on which it is based and that it is incredibly fast-paced and hard to follow. While I wouldn't disagree with these claims, I think that *Nation* had a great deal of strength conceptually and in its production value. The lighting was phenomenal and it was well acted all around. The set was gorgeous and the 3D projection was really cool and different. Conceptually, the idea of the story – part creation myth, part love story with a tragic ending, and part philosophical debate about the relationship between faith and science – was incredibly stimulating. The combination of intellectual material with the music, the lights, the dancing, the set, the colors of the island makes the show appealing to both adults and children.

There is something very attractive to me about island mythology. One of my favorite musicals is *Once on this Island*, a myth about a young peasant girl on an island in the Antilles who falls in love with a wealthy, light-skinned aristocrat boy. They are unable to be together and she dies of a broken heart, but the gods turn her into a tree to watch over the people of the island and her spirit sets them all free to love. There was a quality of that story which exists in *Nation*, I think. These are island myths, or just plain myths I suppose, in which Love, along with elements of earth, water, wind and fire are all their own characters. In *Nation*, for example, the sea seemed to have a life of its own. So did the earth. And so did the power of love. All of these very abstract ideas, have concrete roles in myth. They help to sway the fate of the humans. In this production, this notion was heavily

aided by clever staging. The actors would rock back and forth on a ship during a storm, becoming the water in which Mau was swimming. Physical changes occurred in the actors when the element that they were tackling shifted. In this way, these elements took on their own role within the production and it was incredibly effective.

I like the island myth. And I know a lot of people had problems with the play's conclusion, but I didn't have a problem with it. It felt timelessly complete. Like the end of the sad tale had some kind of happiness and because it was modern, I felt like I was a part of making it happen – or something like that. It's difficult to explain, but I guess I just like the idea of it ending as if it had all been a story being told because I feel comforted by the familiarity of being told these kinds of stories.

4 January 2010

Rope

By Patrick Hamilton

Almeida Theatre

PLAY #12

Here's what's messed up: Part of me wanted the Leopold and Loeb characters not to get found out. I mean, really, how disgusting is that? But here's the other thing: I think it's entirely intentional. I think Hamilton wanted the audiences of *Rope* to feel this uncomfortable, shameful and embarrassing connection to these men who seem like people anyone would be friends with, but who are clearly so emotionally and intellectual rotten that if we knew what went on in their heads and certainly what they had done, we would truly fear them. I was on the edge of my seat, having an anxiety attack throughout the entire performance. I think the Almeida could have sold tickets to watch me watch this show. Every time an actor even looked at that chest, I felt *my* chest tighten.

As I discussed in class, John Logan's play *Never the Sinner*, which deals with Leopold and Loeb's trial and was written in the late 1980s, a time much more removed from the actual event than *Rope*, is one of my favorite plays. These men and the crime they committed for intellectualism, for the danger of it all, fascinate me. As a student of history and a lover of theatre and drama, I am particularly drawn to plays that successfully mix both history and theatrics. Both *Rope* and *Never the Sinner* are enormously successful in dramatically examining the crime and trial of these two characters.

Here are the facts, for they are particularly important in understanding the theatre, film, art and literature that was inspired by this crime: Leopold and Loeb were two of the most promising students at the University of Chicago in 1924. They both came from very well to do, blue blooded American families. Both were astonishingly intelligent. Inspired by a darkly construed interpretation of Nietzsche's superman philosophy, they meticulously planned the kidnapping and murder of a 14-year-old boy with whose family they were acquainted. They picked him up in a rental car, bludgeoned him to death, and then poured hydrochloric acid over his face in order to make the body more difficult to identify. They then sent a ransom note to the boy's mother. Everything fell apart when the body was discovered and the killers tried hastily to cover the tracks of the ransom note. During questioning, their alibis fell apart and they both went to trial, defended by Clarence Darrow, perhaps the greatest lawyer in this country's history. Darrow's defense was that the corruption of intellect into which Leopold and Loeb fell into could have happened to any of us. It wasn't their fault that they interpreted Nietzsche's philosophy in such a way and they can't be blamed entirely, though Darrow had them each plead guilty. They were

each sentenced to life plus 99 years. Loeb was killed in prison in a knife fight. Leopold was paroled in 1958 and moved to Puerto Rico where he wrote an autobiography.

The story of these two men, boys really, who fell into such a tragic and rotten intellectual pit, is intrinsically horrifying to us as viewers. Darrow's defense seems to be the haunting message throughout many of the plays, novels, and films made about to tell this story and in watching them, we ask ourselves: Is it true what Darrow argues? Could this have happened to anyone? Could such corruption of mind happen to any brilliant mind? Could we be next? How can we stop ourselves from committing something so vile if the ability to do so lies within us all?

The play was fantastic – from the writing to the acting to the set – *Rope* at the Almeida made it into my top five of all the plays we saw.

5 January 2010

Jersey Boys

By Marshal Brickman and Rick Elice

Prince Edward Theatre

PLAY #13

Brittany and I went to see *Jersey Boys* for this matinee and were probably the youngest people in the theatre by fifty years. We were swimming in a sea of white hair. It seemed each of our fellow audience members had watched Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons live on *American Bandstand* when it first aired – or whatever show on which they had first appeared. The show was really fantastic. I recognized almost all the music even though going into it, I had no idea that I knew the music of the Four Seasons. Perhaps most interestingly, by watching this show, I was reminded of the importance of the audience to theatre. It simply doesn't work without us. Theatre is a game of catch where the ball is our

energy. The performance, the actors, the lights, the set, everything on stage throws energy to the audience and it's our responsibility to throw that energy back to the stage. If one party doesn't follow through on their end of the deal, something falls short in the theatrical experience.

The matinee of *Jersey Boys* was particularly interesting, insofar as the role of the audience in theatre is concerned, because throughout the entire first act I heard not one peep of reaction from the audience! And it was so funny, too. The script is incredibly clever. I was laughing so loudly at every little joke because I felt so badly that the audience wasn't giving the actors anything to work with. Then I thought that maybe they weren't responding the jokes because it was a lot of Jersey-related comedy. But then I figured it was just a tired matinee audience which actors are forced to deal with sometimes. And then, the weirdest thing happened. The curtain call starts. A medley of Four Seasons music is played and sung as the actors take their bows. It's a pretty exhilarating curtain call (not like *Billy Elliot*, but still really fun) but I didn't expect anyone to get too excited by it. But, shock of the century, just about every person in the stalls, everyone who had sat through the entire show with a straight face and not laughed once, stood up and started dancing and singing. Brittany and I looked at each other and said, "Where the hell did that come from?" It was so surprising but I guess it just goes to show that you never really know what an audience is feeling based on their silence or their responses in general. This audience apparently loved it, but I never would have guessed it. All in all, it was a really great show – we had fantastic seats, I was an excellent audience member, and we had a great time.

5 January 2010

Pains of Youth

By Ferdinand Bruckner

The National – Cotteslow Theatre

PLAY #14

The most striking part of *Pains of Youth* were the transitions between scenes in which modern, elite, business-y, members of a futuristic bourgeoisie enter from opposite ends of the stage and a cold, clinical fluorescent darkness washes over the stage. They move set pieces, putting props in plastic bags as if cleaning up after a murder, and bring pieces on stage, putting them in the hands of actors, lighting their cigarettes for them. It was as if the bourgeois elite were cleaning up after and controlling the (dare I say) pseudo-intellectual medical students living on the fringe of Bohemia but never quite committing to its lifestyle. I loved the transitions. I found them jarring and painful – like a bad car accident. They weren't pretty but I was so fascinated by the movement, the choreography of it all, I couldn't look away.

The actual narrative was incredibly difficult for me to follow. It was directed to be very fast-paced, I think, and so I was unable to follow everything that was going on. I do think it was probably written intentionally as ambiguous or chaotic, since the structure was a string of short scenes artfully tied together by transitions. The other problem I had with the play, which I'm also fairly certain was intentional, was that I didn't particularly like any of the characters. At the beginning, I thought that Marie would be a good, strong, likeable character but by the end, she seemed just as irrational and angsty as everyone else. The only character who I really, truly liked was Alt. And I think it's because he was the only character to show any kind of selfless compassion towards another. Everyone else was remarkably self-serving and seemed most content wallowing in self-pity, feeling so sorry

for their tortured and confused love-lives. If they took a minute to step back and realize how lucky they were they might have been quite happy. Marie, a woman doctor in that time period, falls apart because her boyfriend breaks up with her, and falls into a pit of depression so devastating that she will probably never be able to return? It's just ridiculous. During the whole play she can't seem to think of anything but herself, even her love for Dizzy seems to be simply a mask for concern over her own desires and fears. Alt, however refused to be pulled into the pit of selfish self-loathing into which the rest of the characters seemed to have fallen. He was nice, simply. And I wished that he had been a bigger part of the story and not, as it seemed, almost a mechanism for normalcy in a chaotic and crazed community of pained youths.

6 January 2010

Oliver

By Lionel Bart

Drury Lane Theatre

PLAY #15

As I said to Ruth after the performance, *Oliver* wasn't giving us 100%. But the production value of this show is astounding. Given the sets moving all around, the bridge coming out of the ground, the haze, the lights, the costumes, the fly system (which must be insane), the production in the Drury Lane Theatre is an experience in and of itself. I don't think it even matters so much what show you're watching. The theatrics of it all are enough.

I said this in class and was practically booed from the room, but it's how I feel so I'll go ahead and say it again: I just don't like *Oliver*. I don't find the music particularly compelling, and the story feels too irrelevant to tug at my heartstrings. I'm sorry! But it's

how I feel. I just don't like it. I didn't grow up watching it, so that probably has something to do with my feelings. It seems to be a family favorite of some of the other students in the seminar, but I never watched it as a kid, so maybe I'm just not feeling it the way they all are. "Food" was probably my favorite musical number, along with "Who Will Buy" but I can't honestly say that I really loved either of them.

I thought that the actress who played Nancy was fantastic and seriously outshined her costars, certainly Oliver himself. But the show, I suppose, isn't really about Oliver as much as it is the situations and coincidences in which he finds himself existing. I thought Nancy was great, she had a remarkable stage presence and an emotional honesty that commanded the space – which is a huge feat in a space as massive as the Drury Lane. I also really liked her voice. It was unusual, but very strong and bright. I also thought that Fagin was great. He had a great and realistic sense of his own comedy and understood how to interact with children onstage, to make them stand out and to find his place among them. I was a bit disappointed in his singing ability, I felt that he talk-sang everything, but maybe that's how it's written? I'm not sure. He had a really wonderful and warm energy about him and I liked his character very much. Not to mention his ability to act with his whole body. I did a little research after the show and it turns out he's a young guy, not by any means an older man, though he was entirely successful in seeming old and a tad loony without falling into a caricature of the true character.

I was disappointed in the show mainly because I thought that *Oliver* was giving us only 20%. I didn't particularly like the music or feel of the story either. But the production was phenomenal and a joy to witness and I'm happy we had a chance to see a show in one of London's oldest and most beautiful theatres.

6 January 2010
An Inspector Calls
By Joseph Priestly
Wyndham's Theatre
PLAY #16

This was a phenomenal production. Firstly, I love that this show was once something that was performed at every high school all over America and the UK and became tired and washed up, but has now been transformed into something very special, something honest and moving with intellectual and moral quality. It is a story that puts its faith in the power of youth – unlike *Pains of Youth*, which seems to diminish any belief that we young people may be able to change the world and turns us into a culture of self-obsessed pseudo-intellectuals. This story, quite literally, calls for two young people to carry the emotional and moral heart of the show. Sheila and Eric are the two characters, other than the inspector, who feel, innately, an astonishingly inspiring degree of social responsibility in the face of their family whose values of privatization and self-promotion threaten to corrupt their goodness. And in this case, actors whose honest emotions were perfectly able to carry the show to its cold, tragic, and curious end were gracefully able to take on these two roles.

Moving on to the set, on which it seems an entire honors thesis could be written – it was so magnificent; it was its own role. The play takes place in the years leading up to the First World War when Europe's elite ruled over the people and, naturally, over its young, industrializing economies. Inside the house of London's elite, it is this time period. But outside the house it is London in 1945, post Blitzkrieg. London has been almost completely bombed out and is a shell of its former self, where it was politically on the forefront of complete nationalization. The explosion of the house (which was given away to us that

morning in class!) was very, very cool. But what was even more amazing was the role it served as the actors interacted with its broken pieces, as Jerald, the mother and the father climb back into it as it rights itself. It's like a mask of their former life, of life before the inspector called, or life before the First World War, when private interest ruled the social, political and economic norms of life. But it can't be like that any more and the characters who understand this, Eric and Sheila, remain outside, in 1945, in the future, and those who cannot, who will fight against the tide of change, go inside and try to deal with a broken version of how they used to live.

The ending speech from the inspector, directed out towards the audience, is quite literally, a speech. He speaks to the audience more than he does to the family. The world is changing, he explains, it is too fragile to only look out for ourselves. The only way to create a strong tomorrow is to care for the welfare of others. When this play was written, Britain was changing; it was becoming a nationalized, liberal welfare state. And this play seems to serve as a plea for the British to believe in it, to have faith in the welfare state, to believe that only in helping each other, in a philosophy of liberal equity, can Britain pick itself up from the devastation of WWII and rebuild itself. (Of course that all went to hell when Maggie Thatcher decided that privatization was the superior political philosophy, but we've already seen a number of other plays about that.)

I felt that the acting was really inspired. There wasn't a weak actor in the bunch. The children were wonderful, the inspector was very good, the mother was hilariously tragic, the father was excellently pompous, Sheila was just beautifully honest, as were Jerald and Eric –all excellent performances. I very much enjoyed this play, it was one of my absolute favorites.

7 January 2010

Greta Garbo Came to Donegal

By Frank McGuinness

The Tricycle Theatre

PLAY #17

Greta is about a down-and-out Irish family working at as cooks, housekeepers, and chauffeurs at a mansion that they used to own. For some ambiguous reason, through some poor business decisions or something similar, the family lost the house along with the family business. The gay English artist who bought the house from the family has hired them all as his help, along with his young English lover, who works as his gardener. The story begins when the very likeable English boss announces that his good friend, the fabulously famous actress of years past, Greta Garbo will be visiting their house in the Irish countryside as part of a European vacation for a couple of days.

The plot unfolds as the relationships between the characters, of both the romantic and platonic variety, come to life. The play, as far as I can tell (and I certainly couldn't tell everything) was an exploration of the way relationships function, the way they are able to survive in the face of so many complex challenges, the way they start and how they grow and the way in which they so often fail. In the background and betwixt the intermingling of these different relationships is the subtle existence of the local peacock whose fiercely unsettling call echoes through the scenes, startling the audience. It is a beautiful, lone creature whose call doesn't match its appearance. Similarly the relationships that make up this story are each ultimately composed of two lone individuals, two solitary peacocks each crying out something horrible to their partner – the other can't seem to hear or understand the meaning. It's a kind of tragedy. Eternity spent with someone who can't understand your cry for help. This idea, I think, intentionally echoes something Garbo herself once

said, that she is a solitary man orbiting the earth and just hasn't decided where it is she wants to land. This idea is passed from Garbo on to the youngest character, Paulie's niece, who is struggling to find a way to put herself through medical school. This young woman is the only character, perhaps besides Garbo and Paulie, who isn't tied to a futile and lonely relationship from which she can never escape – except perhaps to Donegal, from which it is apparently very difficult to leave. But in a rather morally or politically confusing conclusion, the girl who has said she will refuse help from anyone, ends up taking money from Garbo to help fund her education in Dublin. I don't know quite what to make of this ending– I don't know why I'm supposed to believe in the rightness of taking handouts etc, but I liked it, I think. I liked that the girl got to go to med school and live her dream. I guess I'm just happy with happy endings even when they seem to come out of nowhere and have a hollow, tragic quality about them. There are so many more layers to this plot than what I have discussed here, but there was so much to process I simply chose to pull the ideas which stand out most in my memory – that apparently being the role of 'the relationship' and the saga of the young woman.

It was an incredibly neat experience, being a part of history like that, seeing the world premiere of a Frank Guinness play. And the Tricycle was a very cool space and seemed to attract a really tightly knit, very cool community of theatergoers; when we went to pick up tickets, literally everyone in line knew each other. I feel very lucky to have been a part of such an historic night.

8 January 2010

Red

By John Logan

The Donmar Warehouse

PLAY #18

Red was one of my favorite plays from the trip. John Logan, who wrote *Never the Sinner*, has a clear gift for writing speech-y, art-inspired, philosophical and intellectual but not pretentious, moving dialogue. This was one of the most quotable plays we saw. For the most part, I have really hated taking notes during performances – taking notes, I feel, discredits the production, disrespects it. So I try not to do it. But I had to with *Red*. I'm paraphrasing here: selling a piece of art is like throwing a blind child into a room full of razor blades, we killed cubism, go make something new, the tragedy is that we can never achieve balance, you have been weighed in the balance and you have been found wanting, etc. The play is full of the most lyrical combinations of words, words any actor would kill to utter. I was quite blown away by the writing.

But even more than the writing, the story (or maybe it's not really a story, maybe it's more of a slice of a man's existence) is so compelling to me as a long-time admirer of Logan's work. At this time in Rothko's life, he is nearing the end of his career. Andy Warhol's bullshit Campbell soup cans are starting to gain steam and the popularity of Rothko's brand of late modernism, his abstract expressionism starts to wane. Rothko claims, however, that popularity never mattered. He says he wants to throw up any time somebody tells him his artwork is beautiful. The modernists – and he is a late one among them – did not create art for a popular culture. They created art for themselves, for an elite community of individuals who were intellectually privileged enough to understand. Supposedly. But there is a remarkably moving part of the play in which Rothko discusses

with Ken the relationship of the viewer to the art. I don't remember the exact dialogue, but the gist was this. The painting isn't really anything without the individual who goes to experience it. The act of looking into the heart of the picture, feeling the experience of art is vital to the movement, the aesthetic beauty, the feeling of the painting itself. In a seminar I was in this very morning, we were discussing Picasso's *The Three Musicians* and I recalled Rothko and *Red* and said that I thought it was like a puzzle and sense can't be made out of it without those who view it. Without appreciators of art, art is nothing. It's like theatre; without an audience, a performance is nothing. To try to understand, to try to make sense, the journey of feeling the story of art is the point of modernist art. Even if we fail to complete the puzzle, the point is to try.

This is, I think, what Rothko believed and I think that it's part of the mysterious reason behind why he pulled out of the contract with Philip Johnson and the Seagram Corporation. He says in the play that he will not allow the people who dine in *that* restaurant to look at his art. It may have partially been his elitist attitude, but I also think that because he believed so strongly that the people who view his picture are participating in the artistic process because they are the ones who bring art to life, and he didn't want the people who eat in the Four Seasons to experience his art.

Stories about art, like *Red* and the *Pitmen Painters*, capture my heart. I think I know why, too. Both of these plays brought up the idea of the importance of creating something new – “don't be afraid to create something new,” both Rothko and Lyons say at the end of each play. The message of these plays is often that art, creating, being part of something artistic, makes us feel something very raw and incredibly meaningful. I feel that when I act. And I also feel it when I go to museums and I get really close to a painting so that I can see

the painter's brush strokes. It's such an out of body experience, art. Van Gogh makes me feel one thing and Rothko another, but all of these feelings are so raw, so real because I do have this sense, which Rothko talked about in *Red*, that in viewing these paintings, I have made them come to life, I have breathed movement into them and set them free.

9 January 2010
The Misanthrope
By Molière
The Comedy Theatre
PLAY #19

I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to see *The Misanthrope* at the Comedy Theatre at the end of our stay in London. I think that Kiera Knightley is very bad in films that I've seen in America. In general, I find her to be a pretty terrible actress. And I wanted to see *The Misanthrope* in part because I wanted for my opinion to finally be justified or to be blown away and come home and tell all of my friends that she's actually quite good on stage. Neither of these things happened, largely because she's not the primary focus of the story. The narrative does take place in the New York actress' swanky London hotel room – the set design of which is stunning, by the way – but the story has everything to do with Alceste and the misanthropic way in which he views the world, or rather his blisteringly negative feelings towards humanity as a whole. I didn't realize this. I knew very little about the play and because I'd heard so much about Kiera Knightley starring in it, I assumed it was all about her. She has the final moment, and a number of good, honest moments throughout the story, but the heart of the play is the tragedy of Alceste's outlook on life.

Regardless, when I sat down to write this journal, all I could think of was Kiera Knightley. Knightley's role doesn't call for a whole lot that she can't easily give – she plays a famous actress whose primary struggle involves overcoming the crippling self-doubt and low self-esteem characteristic of those who act and those who gain fame through it. That said, she did a convincing enough job. I saw the play after we had discussed it in class so I didn't know what people were talking about when they said Knightley couldn't handle the syntax of the script, that she couldn't handle the verse and that the couplets came out too sing-songy while the other actors managed to make it all sound very modern. But when I saw it, I understood what my classmates meant. Verse, and rhyme especially, are difficult to handle. I agree that she struggled with making the language sound natural, but her American accent and general attitude and energy were very genuine and believable. In the final moment of the play, when Alceste, the only person she actually cares about, leaves her alone with all of these wretched people with whom she surrounds herself, there was a wonderfully tragic moment where the lights dimmed, everyone is turned upstage to watch Alceste leave. She turns downstage and looks out, scared and alone, a tiny glimmer of warm light shining on her face. It was a really good ending, a wonderful moment.

But other than Knightley, the production in general was infinitely clever. The characters continually make jabs at themselves, saying that their current drama sounded like it was more likely to be acted out on a 17th-century stage than in real life. And the final scene is set at a costume party in regally decorated hotel room. Alceste falls asleep in the hotel room and is woken up by a man dressed in 17th century French clothing, carrying a candelabrum. I thought Alceste had entered into some sort of dream, and I think he did too. It was such a hilarious and clever way to maintain the integrity of the original work and the

original context. I very much enjoyed the play and thought it was well-acted for the most part, intelligently directed and designed, shrewdly written and fun to watch.

9 January 2010

Six Degrees of Separation

By John Guare

The Old Vic

PLAY #20

I couldn't have picked a more phenomenal show to be the final one I had the pleasure of experiencing in London. My first impression is that this theatre space is very interesting. It's a completely oval space, so you can tell that the purpose of going to the theatre when it was built was to be seen, not necessarily to allow enjoyment of art in the way that we now go to the theatre for. The director or design team (or both, most likely) thought of a really cool way to extend the experience into the audience, so instead of keeping the stage the way it was and using the traditional proscenium space, they extended the stage about four or five rows into the audience. The sides of the new stage, going out into the audience almost, were in line with shape of the space so that the audience couldn't lose an actor onstage. Even in such a strangely shaped theatre, it would have been incredibly difficult to not see someone on stage.

The set itself included bright, Rothko red, oval walls that extended out into the audience creating the shape of some kind of glowing room. In the center of the space was a couch – no, a sofa, as Paul would say – facing upstage so that you could barely tell it was a couch and on the red floor, it looked like it was floating. When the performance began, the couch was revealed to be on a circular rotating floor so that by the end of the opening bit, the couch becomes the center. Throughout the play, as the story progresses, as characters come in and out of the story, and as it shifts in and out of its dream-like quality, the walls of

the ovular room separate and move around the stage, creating different dream-like atmospheres. The most bizarre thing is, though, that I never even noticed them move, I only ever noticed them once they were in new places and thought to myself, “how’d they get over there?” Maybe I was too preoccupied with the acting to notice the set moving. But it was one of the coolest parts of the production and its subtle glow was quite beautiful.

I have never read this play, but John Guare also wrote *House of Blue Leaves*, which is one of my favorite plays, so I had a feeling that I would enjoy it immensely. I was right. Not only were the technical aspects of the show breathtaking, but we were also lucky enough to be privy to, in my opinion, arguably the best performance of the trip. The woman who played Ouisa was remarkable. I mean, I didn’t even think she was acting; I just believed her. I believed in her love and her happiness and her longing to accept this kid and help him and the tension with her daughter and the reality of her marriage. It was all so real. That is something so rarely achieved, even in the best theatres in the world, that kind of honesty. She had an honesty so deep that it’s hard to believe we aren’t watching a real person tell the story of what has happened to her. She was truly remarkable. And so were the other actors, although she outshined them all. The man who played the husband, Anthony Head, was also very good – their relationship in general was superbly honest and movingly real. The man who played Paul at all stages of his life, and Sydney Poitier at one point, was amazing as well.

One of the things that made the experience of this play unique was that the actors all really seemed to be on the same level, to be experiencing things together, making choices as a team, and as an audience member who also loves to act, I love seeing casts who all but breathe in unison. The show was also very raw. We saw the production’s second

performance, I believe, so it was really interesting to see these actors at the very beginning of a huge run, before they become tired of their roles and stop giving their whole heart to the performance. (Such a thing should never happen in professional theatre but unfortunately, it does.) It was also a treat to get to see a team of British actors successfully convey a story that is so intensely American, so deep within American culture and tradition that it couldn't translate into a British setting. The story is contingent upon its American-ness and these British actors rocked it.

I adored this production and would like to see it again and again so that I can watch more. I was so sucked into the story this time that the production value is only a faint feeling or image glowing in the back of my mind. But I loved it so much. And if there is to be one thing that stands out from this production it is Ouisa. I can't say it enough, the woman was phenomenal. For someone like me, a young woman who quietly and without quite admitting it aspires to a life of theatre, there is nothing so beautiful as seeing a woman play a character, being a character so beautifully and honestly and completely. It was a gift to experience such a work of art.