

Kelsey Burritt
ENG 248: Theatre in England

War Horse, Wednesday December 29th

I distinctly remember being impressed with the scope of the New London Theatre upon walking in to find my seat. It was remarkably open, and the huge performing space sort of incorporated itself into the audience space. The mammoth suspended set-piece ripped through the blackness of the theatre, and I first took it for the face of a cliff rather than a representation of a torn-out piece of paper, which it ended up being. In some ways, *War Horse*'s first impressions followed through in the performance. It is a play that relies in part on its epic scale, and beyond Major Nichols' journal's purpose as plot device to provide the audience with a setting, the "backdrop" (for lack of a better word) also introduces the viewer to the ripping and tearing I found prevalent in the action of the play. The rip-roaring of Joey as a colt into Albert's life, how it seems to fill the boy with a purpose and a playmate as they grow together, the abrupt entrance on WWI on the scene as it tears mercilessly into lives, and the consequential tearing of Joey from Albert all struck me as narrative echoes of the literal tearing in the play (most notably, the torn-out picture of Joey that Albert carries with him in the war).

The intrusions into the audience were intentionally and carefully placed: The most effective being when the company would tear through the aisle while all singing a war song, including the audience in the oral tradition and sense of community. Another instance of this occurred when the two actors operating the puppet crows raced through the aisle screeching and cawing. This was particularly jarring for me in setting up the desolation and menacing quality of the second half of the play in WWI, perhaps because I was sitting just next to the aisle and could feel the air whip as they ran past.

The puppets, which I have unjustly not touched on yet, were so masterfully operated that the animals they portrayed never entered a subhuman status; they had as much Character as the human actors, making choices, learning (as in the plow episode), and capable of affection and caring (Joey's response to his reunion with Albert). The most stirring confirmation of the on-par-with-human status of the animals in the play was Topthorn's death, and the poignantly coordinated exiting of the puppeteers from inside the puppet and off of the stage, as if the horse's soul were departing his body. I also enjoyed the costuming of the puppeteers, that they reflected the status and background of the horse; Joey's puppeteers dressed like farmers or townsfolk, while those who operated Topthorn were in more rigid military attire. I also found the puppets were constructed in a way that managed to simultaneously touch on the earthen and the natural as well as the mechanical. Their movement and voicing were painstakingly detailed in concordance with nature, and yet the puppeteers and simple machines inside the puppet were openly visible. I wonder if, on some level, this was playing with the tension of the time period: torn between the traditional feel of horsemanship with the new technological warfare introduced in WWI. I think this conflict is highlighted in Joey's confrontation with a tank, in which Joey can do nothing but flee from its overpowering presence.

The play featured a good deal of generational conflict, in both the paralleled father-son relationships of Ted and Albert and Arthur and Billy. The competitive attitude of Ted and Arthur certainly carries on to their sons, and both sons receive a certain pressure from their fathers to carry on the family name with honor and respect, although they respond to this differently (Albert with rebellion, Billy with duty). The moment Billy is killed by his own knife, specifically his grandfather's heirloom, implies something of the

perhaps fatal trap of following in your parents footsteps, or maybe it speaks to the indifferent hand of fate that Billy should die while the rebellious Albert should live and be reunited with Joey. Branching off of this, there was also an ongoing theme of reciprocity between both human and animal characters alike. The animals actually played an integral role in the idea of “what goes around comes around”, in both the negative connotation (the crows) but also in a positive way, for example when Albert saves Joey’s life after Joey saves Albert’s. This moment is coincidentally the anagnorisis of the play, when Albert whistles and realizes Joey is in the same room as him (being blind, he couldn’t see him before). His rescue comes in the nick of time, which only adds to the catharsis of the reunion—that they had both sunken into a deepest despair and there was quite nearly the possibility of neither of them discovering each other again. Of course they do discover one another, and the ending seems dually to celebrate the perseverance of the Joey/Albert relationship, but also to mourn all victims of the war equally; the Germans as well as the British, the humans as well as the animals.

Birdsong, Wednesday December 29th

I'm afraid I must start out this entry with a bit of bias, and say that I was not the most avid aficionado of this play, although the production value was spectacular. I feel, as many discussed, it is mostly due to the characters and plot, which seemed to have lost a certain complexity, captivity, or believability in the transition from novel to play. I think the success of a story of such an epic scale does rely on the details and background readily available in novel form, but that can't quite find room to sneak into the play version. I was personally more engaged in the grittier second half of the play, finding the flighty romance of the beginning to fall a bit flat. Perhaps the love story between Wraysford and Isabelle was meant to be the stuff of fairy tales, and the crashing down of the back wall at the end of the first half signals the disillusionment that WWI brings, not only to their fantastical elopement, but to society as a whole. The set itself takes a complete turn from a refined Victorian summer house to the grunge of the war trenches.

The story seemed to keep a running critique on patriarchal structures. Isabelle and Jeanne were both forced into matrimony by their overbearing father, the result of which for the former was an unhappy marriage and the latter a life of relative freedom at the price of her father's good graces. Indeed, much of the conflict of the play arose from a sort of power struggle for male dominance. Azaire overcompensates because of his impotence, and at first loses Isabelle because of his violent, brutish behavior toward her. Isabelle's abandoning Wraysford emerges from her being pulled back and forth between all the male figures in her life—between her security in Azaire, the expectations of her father, and the love she feels for Wraysford. Or, perhaps, in the end, she makes her decision not based on any male force but on what would be best for her unborn child; it is

possible she doubted Wraysford's ability to provide for him. Even then, maybe her problem was the want of her own comfort, and her perhaps disheartening realization that she could not survive on love, but missed the luxuries of her life with Azaire.

In the second half of the play, military hierarchy seems to be another source of discord. Wraysford, for example, could have taken Jack Firebrace's life for falling asleep on watch. However, Wraysford takes pity on him, steps out of the responsibilities of his position and in doing so creates one of the more humane moments we witness in the war scenes. Later, Wraysford must carry out orders from his commander—and confidante—Capitan Michael Weir, whom he greatly respects yet firmly disagrees with. However, because orders must be passed down without the consultation of each rank, Wraysford must lead his men on what becomes a charge to the death. The night before the attack was quite stirring. A song was sung by one person, quite solitary, which proved most haunting as the soldiers wrote farewell letters to their loved ones—certainly a different tone than the rousing, heroic chants of *War Horse*.

Religious themes of belief in God, hell, and redemption ran current throughout the story. Wraysford and Isabelle both carried their infidelity with them, Isabelle even literally in the form of a child, and each with the damnation Azaire laid upon them when they left together. I think destroying lives in the war haunts Wraysford, but such destruction is really the only thing that can register with him after his life was shattered. The imagery of the inferno creeps in with the tunnels, and the possibility of Wraysford and Firebrace being left to die there was reminiscent of a kind of damnation. What is most intriguing about the result was that Wraysford is then rescued by his enemy, not only his enemy but saliently a Jewish German soldier. The German soldier is important

not only in his humanity, but his gift of his dead brother's Star of David to Wraysford; it's significant that such a strongly symbolic token of faith should be placed in Wraysford's hands by the conclusion of the play. I think not only redeeming but forgiving—Isabelle, for example, and himself—is pertinent to the resolution.

Wraysford's ending monologue about the inability to "capture in words" the events that had transpired really struck me. To me it seemed that's what the whole show was attempting to do—capture words in letters or spoken dialogue or penned in a diary. It was particularly effective because of how upsetting it is to Wraysford, and perhaps in a metatheatrical sense how upsetting it is to the actor, that he cannot express what they went through, despite best efforts and jarring results as it is. It seemed a troubling reminder of the struggle of the theatre itself, and the ever-present challenge (or simply impossibility) of remaking events or presenting as reality something that is entirely orchestrated and contrived.

Another point of my own personal musing was about the title *Birdsong* and what it meant, why this detail was important enough to take the title. There is certainly the reference to Wraysford's phobia of birds to consider. Then I thought of the typical symbolic meanings of birds: freedom, liberation, and perhaps spiritual departure or deliverance. The characters in the play desire this sort of freedom from many things—abusive relationships, their own guilt, the past, the war. The song of a bird, perhaps, is both the hopeful evocation of the possibility of their freedom, but also a tantalizing reminder of how grounded and restricted they really are.

The Glass Menagerie, Thursday December 30th

Thinking on *The Glass Menagerie*, my mind jumps immediately to two places: memory and the American Dream. In some ways, the two central ideas of the play have a good deal in common. Both are sort of elusive, ambiguous concepts; both offer themselves to the imagery of glass (reflective and breakable). Even in their relation to each other, specifically looking at this as a modern production and why it seems timely now, the American Dream sort of relies on our memory, in both the audience's job to evoke their knowledge of it and the cynical retrospect Tom gives it in his carefully crafted expression. I also must remember the importance of Tom's creative control of the play; it's not an objective narrative, but a biased, purposeful voice that drives it onward. Tom's prologue, the open explanation of the play as an expressionistic piece of memory-art, and his corresponding epilogue seem to tie up the whole thing in a bow, and he is the first to admit things have been glossed over and tweaked. Memory, after all, is not so much a data-like record as it is an impression of a mood, which the play achieves with the music (both the two musicians and the victrola), the lighting (the artificial and the candle-light), and the fixed obsessions with escapism (the menagerie, museums, the movies). I think even the use of slightly unorthodox curtains hints at the illusion at work in Tom's memory-play. There is a red velvet curtain, but it only raises a short way to the ceiling, and instead of parting it raises from the ground, usually when characters (such as the first, frozen tableau of Amanda and Laura) seem to magically appear onstage. The other instance was in the scene between Jim and Laura, when a thin white curtain is drawn through the stage and the space of the house. Perhaps this signals the audience to the complete contrivance of the scene, shows that Tom could not know what happened

between them as he was not there, and so invents this theatrical moment of candlelight, dancing, and a refreshing transparency of thought.

Referring back to the first appearance of Amanda and Laura onstage, as if frozen in time, I now wonder if this is another example of tableau that adds to the museum-like quality of the show. Just as Laura obsesses over her symbolic little glass menagerie, so Tom arranges his play, polishes and orchestrates it to make a cohesive, glimmering whole. The play, like the museums Laura would visit when skipping class, is a place of collected moments in time, set up to evoke a certain reaction. In some ways the American Dream also fits into the idea of the museum; the careful arranging of one's life as if on display, the importance of artifice in career, spouse, house, car. It is important to keep in mind that museums in themselves are separate both mentally and physically from the real world. When first Jim breaks Laura's favorite glass piece, the unicorn, it seems as a sort of tearing down of Laura's imaginative world. In a way, however, Laura does the same for Jim. Whether he realizes it or not, by reminding him of his glory days in high school Laura points to the failure and insufficiency of the American Dream in his current life. Jim works a very average job in the factory, only speaks of rising in the ranks and entering into politics (his taking a course in rhetoric is a clear-cut example of artifice), and even in this encounter with Laura it's possible he is even unsatisfied with his fiancée. When she gives Jim the broken unicorn, I think it is partially part of her coming to terms with reality, and yet also burdening him with a token of that broken imaginative realm.

On this same note, the last line of Tom's—"Blow out your candles, Laura—and so, goodnight..."—really lingers in the mind as a testament and summation of the entire play (due again, perhaps, to Tom's intentional crafting). Candles as a general symbol

seem to encapsulate life and hope, but by blowing them out I certainly don't believe Tom is demanding that Laura end her life or relinquish all hope. Perhaps these candles, as the glass menagerie, are devices of this imaginative world, creators of this soft deceptive light (which reminds me of how Blanche manipulates light in *A Streetcar Named Desire*). It is troubling, the dark void the audience is left with when Laura does blow her candles out, as if her imaginative realm—the American Dream, all escapism—leaves in life a gaping nothingness when stripped away.

The Country Girl, Friday December 31st

The discussion in class of the playwright Clifford Odets greatly aided me in my appreciation and analysis of *The Country Girl*. To give a brief recap, Odets was one of the figures instrumental in the development of Method acting. The basic idea of the school of acting is to create a character from the inside out, the actor building it from themselves. Odets apparently was an advocate of group theatre, which involved improvisation, and the summoning of personal experiences to bring to the emotional experiences of the character in the play. The goal, then, was to end with a form as naturalistic as possible, in so much as that the actor actually inhabits the character, and that the character is specific to the person playing it.

All of this comes into play when I say I believe I saw some of the finest acting on the trip that night. It never felt as though I were watching a character or an actor on stage, but rather a person simply living their life. Because the play rested so heavily on the characters and their relations, it was of utmost importance that they were believable enough to evoke that catharsis from the audience by the conclusion of the play. Jenny Seagrove as Georgie, in particular, was simply captivating in all her mannerisms, the voice she adopted; even the way she carried herself was a testament to the painstaking character work Seagrove must have gone through.

Odets's involvement in the development of Method acting is also intriguing when digging into the plot of the play. Frank, a former star actor now past his glory years, is cast in a play by Bernie despite his stumbling through the lines at the audition. This certainly places Frank as a Method actor, who works better when he can inhabit a character rather than force himself into a prescribed notion of that character on the page.

Later in the play, in the premier of the show, we witness Frank's repossession of that greatness as he loses himself in his character on stage, even if it means causing physical harm to his fellow actress.

At the same time, the play attests to the dangerous possibility of the actor who uses a façade to deceptively cover up an ugly past, as Frank does with his humor and charm. In fact, Frank is so successful that for a good half or so of the play Bernie believes Frank's wife Georgie to be the cause of his downfall as an actor, when really she has been his rock through the years as he suffered through alcoholism and rejection.

Although the illusion of powerful acting is spectacular, it is still that: an illusion. At the end of the day Frank's deceptive behavior misleads and reflects poorly upon his wife, whom he loves greatly. Even so, the discovery of Georgie's good intentions by Bernie leads to a certain anagnorisis in a kiss they share. For Georgie there is a possibility of a new love, one less complex and weighed-down than her marriage with Frank, and for Bernie the recognition of his past wrongs tied with a deep admiration of Georgie's loyalty. That last bit is rather ironic, that Bernie loves her for her loyalty and yet wishes her to abandon her husband. This tension between fidelity and betrayal culminates at the New York premier of Frank and Bernie's play, to which Georgie wears a fantastic red dress that perfectly captures her power, strength, and beauty—she is clearly the dominant character in the final scene, the fates of Bernie and Frank lying in her lap. In the end she does choose Frank, or so the ending hints at this decision as she waits in the wings for Frank to exit, towel draped over her shoulder to wipe off his sweat, and the last action before the blackout is her yanking the towel from her shoulder. The abrupt movement seems to me her dramatically confirming her decision to herself. She stands right

offstage, in a strange in-between place of transition, and simultaneously lingers in her decision that is not entirely clear. This action, although small, seems to me a genius discovery of Seagrove's that Georgie, being such a strong character, would need some sort of action to imprint in reality the path she has chosen, the decision she has made.

Romeo and Juliet, Saturday January 1st

What first comes to mind about this production of *Romeo and Juliet* is the intensity and grittiness that it first took off with: in the street-fight between the Capulets and the Montagues you felt real malice, a hatred that may not have been as riveting in a staged fencing sword fight. It is unfortunate, then, that the production does not carry the fervor of the physical fight between the two households into the dramatic action of the play. We witnessed their feud, yes, but it seemed to take the back burner as spectacle to the love story between Romeo and Juliet. This same vivacity appears again at the ball in the Capulets house, where the two lovers first meet. There was a tremendous dance number that had the feel of some tribal ritual; Juliet threw her full back and shoulders into every move she made, contorting her body and whipping her hair as if demonstrating the emotional toll her adolescence is taking on her. Romeo is as captivated as we are, and the revelry freezes as they meet for their holy palmer's kiss. In some ways, I think the love story suffers from the emphasis this particular production places on it, as it is not meant to carry the cathartic weight of the whole play. It's not that the actors who portrayed Romeo and Juliet were not convincing—on the contrary they were remarkably earnest and grounded at the same time—rather the nature of the fast-paced action, how quickly they fall in love and therefore how quickly the audience must be convinced of their undying passion. The love story definitely had its moments, one of which was the reunion of the two at the end of the first half; he climbs up her balcony and around their embrace gold streams of light illuminate the back wall, as if it is not merely Juliet but the lovers combined that function as the sun, a sun that shines light upon the grudges and hatred that occupy the shadowy lives of their relatives.

Of course then the purging of this old feud at the close of the play, the reconciliation between the two families upon finding their children slain out of love for one another, would be the vital conclusion in both giving significance to the relationship between Romeo and Juliet and putting the tragedy in the larger perspective of the two households. Although two lives were lost, it could be argued they were sacrificed to save generations of bloodshed. Unfortunately, however, this resounding conclusion was cut a great deal in the production: The watchmen and Balthasar hardly find the bodies before, taking what is originally the Prince's line, Balthasar proclaims, "For never was there a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo." The beginning of that infamous ending is cut that mentions "a glooming peace", eradicating that a peace was even achieved because of their deaths. The two families seem to coexist for a moment in the tomb together, but they seem separately overtaken in their grief. Lord Montague does promise to erect a statue of Juliet, perhaps to serve as an enduring memory of their sacrifice and the consequential reconciliation. The problem is the production hardly leaves the audience with a firm belief that this reconciliation even happens. I personally was so caught up in trying to process the costume switch (Romeo and Juliet from modern to period clothing, everyone else vice versa) that I was less concerned with the anagnorisis the two households were experiencing. Perhaps they were assuming that the audience knew how the peace of the two households unfolds at the end, and in fear of letting the ending drag they cut it to its bare bones. On the contrary, it ended up feeling slightly rushed, hardly allowing time to process their death, their parents' reaction, and the Prince's moral before the lights blacked out.

I am being decidedly critical, however, for on the whole I think the production was successful. There was an energy in the revitalization that I had not witnessed in any previous production of the tale on stage or screen. Both Romeo and Juliet were endowed with a sort of modern free-spiritedness, so I think the disparity in the costuming between them and the rest of the company was an inventive way to manifest that mindset. As for Mercutio, I think his outrageous performance (miming crawling into Rosaline's vagina to find Romeo), perfectly captured the extremist tendencies a lot of the production took on to breathe new life into the play.

Hamlet, Sunday January 2nd

Hamlet has all the makings of a political thriller in Elizabethan England, and the National Theatre took full advantage of that in their modernized interpretation of the tragedy. The production fleshed out pre-existing moments of espionage, such as Polonius's hiding in Gertrude's closet, with technological components now available to them in a contemporary setting: tape recorders, walkie-talkies, security cameras. Instead of discovering a door ajar in which Polonius et al are eavesdropping on his conversation with Ophelia, Hamlet finds a hidden recording device in the book she carries—adding a new fear and uncertainty as to who could be listening in on the other end. Hamlet may have been able to assume who was spying on him in that case, but throughout the play you never have the feeling that one can be truly alone: there is always some nameless presence watching through the abundance of windows lining the set or through the fixed eye of the video camera in the corner of the room.

On the flipside of this, the characters seem to have an awareness of this constant monitoring, and therefore put on acts, create little staged performances to use the exposure to their advantage. The presence of the media was especially intriguing, giving the audience the ability to see how characters would act in front of the camera crew as opposed to the “privacy” without them. It is curious that a play so famous for its soliloquies and asides should also be a play about espionage; this modern take especially seems to capture a world in which one's private life is limited if not absent entirely. All of Hamlet's soliloquies surely must only be figurative vocalizations of his thought processes, using the audience as a reflective tool; there is no way he would dare speak his sentiments aloud lest some hidden recording device detect them. This is why, even in

their modern adaptation, the arrival of the players is such an important event. The players do professionally what every other character in the play seems to have picked up as an amateur, although at one point Hamlet famously instructs an actor not to “saw the air” with his melodramatic gestures—hinting that Hamlet himself has had plenty of experience with acting, albeit in his actual life and not on stage. It is an interesting piece of metatheatre when Claudius’s own performance is broken—for the first time in the play—by viewing another performance. Obviously the players’ show altered by Hamlet hits a little too close for Claudius, but even beyond that I think a self-consciousness of their own performances arises that causes such an uproar at the end of the first half.

The “villain” t-shirts, I thought, were an interesting spin on political propaganda, almost like the “Hope” Obama campaign designed by Shepard Fairey that appeared on countless posters and almost every piece of clothing imaginable when he ran for office. I think Hamlet’s passing the shirts out, and people actually wearing them around, visualized what was apparent in the text very well: Hamlet was a man of the people, and generally more popular and well-liked than Claudius. Despite this, he still struggles with what he was “born” to do: “set things right”, as he says. I think the constant presence of surveillance in his life only encourages his pensiveness, as his vengeance is often thwarted by guards or cameras, and he is forced to take pause and consider his intents even further, driving him into a sort of real madness. I think the moment of anagnorisis—when Gertrude drinks a glass Claudius intended to poison for Hamlet, perhaps—and the consequential revelation of the private scheming of Claudius finally allows for Hamlet to put into action his own private scheme. I think Hamlet’s death is appropriate, as is his last action of finally realizing his destiny, as it may be. I think it took a great deal of courage

for Hamlet to overcome the censored existence his life in politics has forced upon him by making a grand gesture of truth and justice. Whether avenging his father by killing his uncle was his destiny or not, it was an act of unabashed earnestness that seemed to both fulfill and dissolve him, even in the face of his own death.

Billy Elliot, Monday January 3rd

There was a contagious energy to *Billy Elliot* that I still cannot seem to shake. It was incredibly affecting with its combination of the primal force of fairy tales, and the spectacle of dance and music, with some deep-festering passion for art that must have risen from the show's autobiographical roots in its creator and lyricist, Lee Hall. I was wary when taking my seats for the show, afraid that perhaps the show would not meet my expectations or worse fall into that glossy, slightly hollow category that I feel it is sometimes easy for musical theatre to do. On the contrary, there was a refreshingly natural quality to the whole production. Song and dance burst forth from the characters on stage with no pretense, as if they were the same as talking or breathing. In an article in the program about finding the right child actors to portray Billy, Lee Hall conveys his astonishment at their ability: "to them what they do is the most natural thing in the world because they have found a way of expressing themselves."

This idea of expression is also something we discussed in class, and how the story of Billy presents an argument for the value of individuality in expression. This theme is a common one for Hall, as he often tends to instill in his work evidence dispelling hierarchy in art. Another play of his brought up in discussion, *The Pitmen Painters*, walks a similar narrative line of a mining community that strives for a sense of higher education, so they hire an art instructor, their finished products now priceless paintings hanging in museums (a true story, although *Billy* is not). Both of these stories try to squelch the concept of high and low art, and I think *Billy Elliot* succeeded in doing that. I realize now that even I went in to the show with a shamefully stilted attitude, but

emerged shaken to the core by the performance of this boy who is hardly 13-years-old. I think Lee Hall is incredibly accurate in his observation; this expression is so natural for them, that as a member of the audience you feel you are—although I hate to use the cliché—seeing straight into their soul. There is a purity and simplicity to Billy’s passion for dance, something untainted about it, even though he lives in a dire and turbulent time.

Here I think Lee Hall’s personal experience adds a certain emotional—even physical—dimension to *Billy*: In the same essay mentioned earlier, Hall says that “the basic premise of a young boy discovering a new world of creativity against the background of the harsh realities of the 1980s was a world I felt very familiar with.” I think this creative world with a backdrop of “harsh reality” was brought forth in the musical in a very effective visual sense. In one number, Mrs. Wilkinson and her ballet class singing “Shine” melt into a line with the miners on strike singing “Solidarity”. The two melodies weave together, the ballerinas and the miners begin to dance with one another (although each remains in his/her own world), and the result of this dichotomy is a breathtaking portrait of life in its various permutations—the youthful and the tired, the glamorous and the gritty, the spirited and the downtrodden. Another moment of particular affection for me was the “Angry Dance” that concludes the first act in which Billy dances as if his very life depends on it, letting out these painful cries of anger. The relentless, almost detrimental amount of energy he puts into his movement spoke to me as Billy proving to himself that dance is something he cannot live without, that dancing to the point of self-exhaustion and collapsing is better than not dancing at all, not being to express himself at all.

As far as the folk/fairy tale strain throughout Billy that was brought up in class and in Lee Hall's essay, I entirely agree with that assessment of the story. Billy reminds me of most fairy tales in that it may seem targeted for children, but it is entirely more suited for an adult audience. I think many of the politics—although often presented in a comical and obscene sense with Maggie Thatcher—are still abidingly real, and force the characters into acts of shame and desperation. Billy's father willingness to break strike to earn enough money to send his son to the school of his dreams paired with the image of the miners descending into the mines—singing a capella "Once We Were Kings"—to me added a power and perspective that served to make Billy's story a greater beacon of inspiration and hope.

A Woman of No Importance, Thursday January 6th

A Woman of No Importance is the second Oscar Wilde play I had the pleasure of seeing, and like both *An Ideal Husband* and *The Rivals* it was very much a society play in the issues it dealt with. This play, however, had an overall darker tone than *An Ideal Husband*, as it did not end with the reunion and/or engagement of couples, but rather climactically with the confrontation between two former lovers, whose relationship has gone sour. Again, this play also dealt with issues of morality and secrets of the past coming back to haunt, however these moral problems were less political and more based in gender roles and sexism. The main character Illingworth is very much a Wilde hero: a witty, fashionable, flirty bachelor. Illingworth shares many qualities with Goring from *An Ideal Husband*, but these similarities operate purely on a surface level. Goring had a slew of redemptive qualities, his dedication to his friends for one, however Illingworth's past indicates a man of lesser character. As a younger man, Illingworth had seduced Arbuthnot, impregnated her, and then refused to marry her upon hearing she was with child. Arbuthnot, the model of another strong woman character in Wilde's works, raised the child, Gerald, all her own without his help. She lived her life with a stringent moral code from then on out, becoming a frequent churchgoer and good Samaritan, in order to build up an appearance of having an untainted past (as with Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*). Many years later during a weekend visiting a mutual friend's (Lady Hunstanton) summer house, the two encounter each other. Gerald, their son, actually hopes to work as a secretary for Illingworth, who has an illustrious career as the rising Ambassador to Vienna. Illingworth, unaware that this is his illegitimate son, offers Gerald the position. It is not until the end of the first half of the play that Arbuthnot

makes the great reveal—in front of a great amount of the party, too—that Gerald is in fact his estranged son (and Gerald is as taken aback as Illingworth). The second half is extremely shorter, and jumps straight back into the action as Gerald proposes that his mother and Illingworth be married. Gerald is not worried about the happiness of his mother, but rather his own reputation now as the illegitimate son of an ambassador; he fears his career is ruined. In an extended confrontation between Arbuthnot and Illingworth, Illingworth also proposes they marry. This proposal, just like Gerald's, is not at all considering Arbuthnot and her struggle, but because Illingworth wishes to know his son. After years of negligence, and years of Arbuthnot's selfless effort to support her son as a single mother, Illingworth *now* wants to know his son that he is grown and a promising young politician. Arbuthnot is appropriately disgusted by Illingworth's offer, and refuses. The play ends quite abruptly, and although Arbuthnot is resolved against marrying Illingworth, it seems the play ended on its climax without any falling action. Perhaps no falling action is needed, however. The argument between Arbuthnot and Illingworth is able to resonate to a greater extent without a bit of resolution tacked on, and instead there is a haunting feeling of how much an irresponsible action can affect the life of not only poor Arbuthnot, but also Gerald's. Illingworth, who was at one point charming and amusing to the audience, now takes on an entirely different shape. His surface appearance, of course, is as deceiving as Arbuthnot's (for I suppose she is not as saintly as she first seems), but his fakeness seems to peel away with vulgarity, and the discovery of his true character is a rather ugly reversal that left me troubled for quite some time after the show.

Men Should Weep, Thursday January 6th

Men Should Weep details the dramatic issues of one family that stem from the extreme poverty they live in, and also the power of poverty to break down gender roles, familial expectations, and at the same time provide a sense of solidarity, community, and graciousness. It does seem that poverty is the driving force in the play, like the way time, love, or social standing operates in other productions we saw. Maggie and John are the parental heads of the family, and it seems to be more of a matriarchal society as Maggie is the one that makes money for the family, while John is unemployed. The two make countless sacrifices for their children: almost starving themselves so their children may eat, sleeping on a mattress in the kitchen so the others can have beds, etc. They manage to keep a light-hearted spirit in daily family life despite their circumstances, and there is much humor in the interactions with their younger children and with their granny. The drama seems to enter with the three other adult females in the play: Maggie's sister Lily, a feminist, who is self-sustaining (a strong model of an independent woman, to be sure) but also happens to despise men, including John; Isa, their son Alec's wife, who is headstrong and quite openly expresses her dissatisfaction with her marriage; and finally Jenny, their eldest daughter, whose wish for nothing more than to escape the house and her parents' rule—which she eventually does—is a point of great tension in the family. The presence of these women in the play is a testament to playwright Ena Lamont Stewart and her boldness in portraying such dominating female characters in an age that had not yet experienced any substantial feminist or women's rights movement. However, I don't think Stewart makes heroes or villains of her characters based on their gender. I think that poverty works as a method of leveling their capabilities and powers as

characters, and from there they become people—each endowed with their own goodness and fault, each left to deal with their sparse situations as they will. On this note, it is easy to group Isa and Jenny together at the beginning as the two young troublemakers, blind and selfish in their youth and beauty. By the end of the play, however, the two swing in quite opposite directions: Isa breaks away from the family while Jenny returns to them. It is easy then to classify Isa as the unfaithful tramp and Jenny as the glorious prodigal son, but I don't think that is how Stewart meant us to view them. I think first and foremost they should take a cathartic effect on us; unlike wealthier characters we've experienced for instance in Wilde's plays, they do not have the comfort of riches to back their decisions, and sometimes a decision must be made for wellbeing over morality. Isa was abusive to Alec, yes, but the abuse was mutual, and it is possible that the relationship was broken past repair, and to remain in it would be destructive to her, Alec, and the rest of the Morrison family. Jenny, on the other hand, needed to separate from her family and experience the hardship of the world on her own, and although she returns at the end she does so with the offer of money for forgiveness. Although her father John is at first disgusted by the proposition, of course they take her in once more. Immoral decisions must be forgiven when family is the strongest source of solidarity and strength in one's life. The family is the plot, as was discussed in class, and its importance is reflected in the centrality both in the setting and the actions made throughout. Jenny's offering money, then, is not as in some society plays for the purpose of scheming or manipulation, but out of a true and fervent love for her family; poverty again removes all shame from her action, and allows her to offer the money for what it is—a necessity.

The Master Builder, Friday January 7th

Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, while enthralling and confounding in countless aspects, most swept me up in the mysterious Hilda Wangel. Perhaps it was only the portrayal of Hilda by the captivating Gemma Arterton, but I believe the character alone latched onto my thoughts, despite or maybe encouraged by Arterton's feral, seductive, yet bouncy and childlike take on her. Even on the level of costuming, Hilda's look was starkly different from Halvard Solness, the master builder himself, and his somber wife Aline. Aline is appropriately dressed in black and lots of it—her Puritan lifestyle is surely manifested in her costume and its covering from below the ankle all the way up above her collar bone. Halvard, while not as conservative as his wife, still wears a formal business suit, polished and dignified as the master builder should be. However, as his mental health degrades throughout the play, he appears less and less comfortable in his suit, as if it clings to him like a second skin, one that he sheds upon his ascent to the Tower at the end of the play. Hilda's costuming however is not restrictive in form or movement at all, but rather allows and exaggerates her physicality with its sheer, flowing quality. She often walked barefoot, indicating some sort of connection with the earth that the other characters did not share, and many of her clothes were worn loosely to expose as much skin as natural without being openly obscene (quite the opposite of Aline, as it seems).

So Hilda is, as her clothes suggest of her, some sort of otherworldly sprite or siren, or perhaps a daimon, or even some image of Satan. Whatever she is (for that's part of her beauty, that she is not clearly drawn as any of these), I did not get the impression she was a natural human being. Although the play does fall in the lines of Ibsen's realist

drama, I believe Hilda was an intentional slip in the realism, or that is to say that Hilda is representative of a kind of psychological realism—a character that is realistic in the mind though perhaps not in the actual world. Perhaps the mystical quality of Hilda is in that she lends herself to so many possibilities as a force of nature; she fits in perfectly with *The Master Builder*'s discussion of will and madness. After all, it is entirely possible that Hilda is the living and breathing will of Solness, she who realizes his wishes so he is only left to ponder the means and not the ends. And, again, it is also possible that Hilda is Solness's own madness running wild and free in the world, driving him to places that he would not go were he in his right mind (for example, the top of the Tower when he is afraid of heights). Although I doubt she is literally playing the role of Satan, I think she does exhibit certain Satanic qualities: She blazes onto the scene demanding a castle in the air that he had promised her 10 years ago when he kissed her, a set-up that loosely echoes the concept of Satan demanding the souls from those who made bargains with him. Also, on this same note, the Hilda's line that ends the play ("My master builder. Mine.") is particularly effective as Arterton interpreted it, with the emphasis on the "my", and then a tantalizing little snatching gesture with the word "mine", as if she were scooping his soul out of the air to keep it for herself. In a quite separate spiritual role, Hilda could also function as Solness's daimon, as a sort of personal spirit that gives inspiration and guidance. Like Socrates's daimon, however, it can also lead to the destruction of the individual who worships it (part of Socrates's death sentence was based on his practicing with a god not recognized by the entire Athenian polis). Whatever she may be, she is unmistakable in her entrance, through the back door of the theatre that—when seen from the balcony—sent a beam of light down into the darkness of the stage, like some

illuminating presence breaking into the darkness of his mind (the light at the end of the tunnel, if you will). In other words, whatever Hilda may be she brought Solness to his death, but also to a sort of peace in his life, and in this she functions as a psychological exercise in coming to terms with mortality, and defines what a fraught and multifaceted process it is.

Deathtrap, Saturday January 8th

Before seeing *Deathtrap*, I heard that it was meant to be a suspenseful thriller, and this sort of, well, surprised me. I had never seen or heard of thriller plays before, and wondered whether they would be as effective as thriller movies. Film, of course, allows for so much visual trickery that the stage could not, not to mention the use of CG, that shrilly music, etc. During the performance, though, I was entirely consumed by the characters and the story; I jumped at each twist and turn and screamed with each horrific surprise. The play itself is intriguing in its exemplary effectiveness within its genre and its simultaneous poking fun at this genre. The plot also dabbles in comedy and tragedy, but I feel the potency of these comic and tragic moments is greatly enhanced by the play's suspense and the way it manages to keep the audience member on the edge of the seat, tuned in to every movement made and word said, constantly wary of something popping out in the silent moments. Although I knew very well I was watching a play and actors on a stage, I still felt extremely uneasy, more so than when watching many thriller movies, perhaps because you are sharing the same space with the frightening events, there is no screen to separate the two. Author Susan Hill beautifully condensed and polished my thoughts in the program notes: "We know that even in 3D a character cannot leap out and get us from the cinema screen. In the theatre, they actually could and that makes all the difference." Then it must be this apparent possibility that proves to trouble the audience so when watching thriller plays, despite it being completely irrational—since when was fear rational in the first place?

Deathtrap's renown author, Ira Levin, carefully placed the moments of greatest suspense and shock, functioning as turning points and moments of anagnorisis (when the

audience realizes in the first act that Sidney and Clifford are in cahoots, and then later when their intentions to undermine each other are revealed in a literal fight to the death). Levin intentionally fills up the space between with equal parts humor and drama. The humor adds a lightness to the script, situates the audience with the characters (for example, the many self-referential remarks Sidney makes about the script, basically Levin making fun of himself), and perhaps intentionally makes them more at ease than they should be, rendering the peaks of suspense even more effective. He does the same with the drama, drawing the audience in a closer to the characters (for example, the relationship between Sidney and Clifford) in order to evoke a greater sense of catharsis for them when they are pinned in high stakes situations. In a way the play is a tragedy, and almost a romantic one in that the two lovers do not kill each other out of their love but out of passion for their art, their craft as playwrights. That may be the more romantic side, as I think it's equally possible to take the cynical route and say that they killed themselves out of the selfish pursuit of money, the vain chasing of a fortune and success that, for whatever reason, they did not trust the other to share with them. Whichever it is, if not a combination of both, I still could not shake the image of the two of them slumped lifeless on the enormous desk in his study; they were all too reminiscent of the *Romeo and Juliet* death scene I had seen not a week earlier. Was the staging supposed to evoke that image? Was the intent to present the thrills as a tool to deliver and augment the story, or at least the relationship between Sidney and Clifford? Even so, Romeo and Juliet as the story goes died so that their families may resolve and forgive one another. There was no resolution with their death, except the end of *their* fight over the script, because the ending scene seemed to hint at the continuous trouble-making trajectory of the script. I

think these concluding deaths, then, take on a sort of foil of Romeo and Juliet: they kill each other and not themselves, they do so out of jealousy and greed rather than love and selflessness, and their death merely passes on the conflict they died over rather than resolves it. Levin provides a compelling story that can strike fear into a modern audience; the killings seem more plausible to us because of their malice, and that is a troubling thought indeed (especially for those of us considering playwriting as a profession).