

Theatre in England Journal
Sara Cohen

Little Women
(Lost Theatre, 12/28/11)

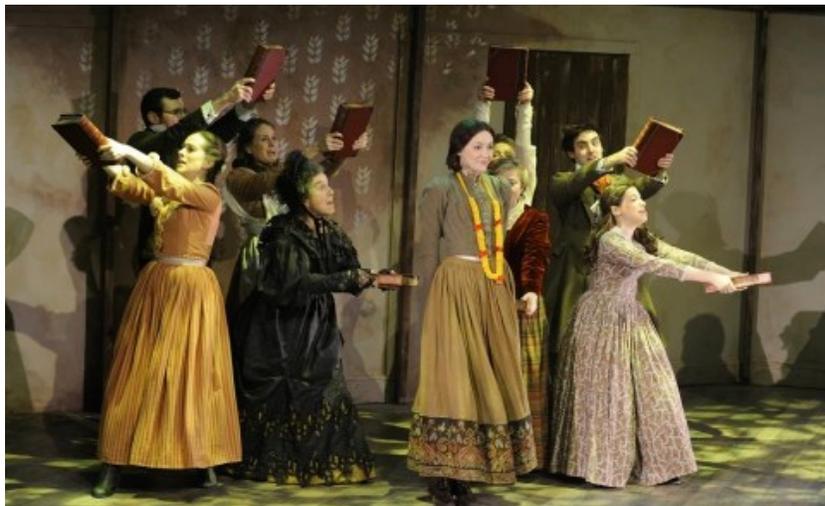
LOST Theatre's musical *Little Women* presents the UK premiere of a show first announced (then as a concert event) in 2005—ironically, the very day a different Broadway musical *Little Women* closed for good. The Broadway *Little Women* featured a book by Allan Knee, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, and music by Jason Howland; reviewers from the *New York Times*¹ and *Village Voice*² accused the Broadway show of denying the audience time and space to connect to characters due to its quick-moving plot and the theatre's colossal stage. It is only too tempting to read the LOST Theatre musical, directed by Nicola Samer with a book by Peter Layton and music and lyrics by Lionel Segal, as a rewrite of the Broadway show.

In this light, the show is entirely successful. The set is cozy and intimate—homey off-white walls with splotches of color hand-painted across the walls. The theatre is closer to a thrust stage than a proscenium (though the open stage does not actually extend out into the audience), contributing to a closeness between the audience and the actors. The cast of the production is limited to a cast of eleven (fairly small for a musical), and the cast has very limited costume changes, at least for the leading actresses. These aspects of the production could have felt “low-budget;” instead they come off as intimate and home-made. They also allow for great surprise in the few times the show does indulge—a full-ensemble fantasy sequence as Jo imagines how she becomes a great author, for example, or the wonderfully atmospheric lighting (green leaf gobos for the fantasy sequence and the opening of act two, and purple and pink lights as Beth and Jo

¹<http://theatre2.nytimes.com/2005/01/24/theatre/reviews/24litt.html?ex=1167109200&en=8e47fe4758c0f427&ei=5070>

²<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-01-25/theatre/forced-marches/>

sing about the magic of their future lives). Indeed, such moments feel like small, rationed delights—utterly fitting for a story about four girls finding everyday joys even as their father and their country is preoccupied by the Civil War.



It would be difficult for the *New York Times* to accuse the British *Little Women* of denying the audience time to connect with the characters. The production cut out a few key plot moments from the original novel—Amy burning Jo’s manuscript, for example—giving them mentions rather than risking that they might detract from the focus of the show. Instead the production focused largely on the atmosphere of the time and place, the successful love stories, and Jo’s career.

The lyrics strongly contributed to the atmosphere. While some songs functioned to advance the plot, many served to set up the war background as well as the girl’s wittiness—the opening scene concluded with an elaborate sequence where the girls forfeited a pie from their Christmas dinner so that the soldiers might get dessert. Amy pitches a fit and her sisters mock her by enacting a number of small tableaus saying goodbye to the pie. The lyrics were full of wit, including a bit where they tell Amy the loss of her pie will be “hard to digest.” It’s a fairly subtle and frivolous song, as far as opening numbers go, but it demonstrates how the March sisters

comfort and annoy each other, how the war shapes their everyday lives, and how their wit and storytelling abilities will carry them through.

I expected the plot of the piece to center around Jo's writing, but I was surprised at the play's emphasis on love. The playwrights and Nicola Samer all seemed eager to overlook the more problematic conflicts of the plot—Laurie spent little time dwelling on his unrequited love for Jo, for example, and Jo did not seem to have much difficulty refusing his declarations of love. Though the play devotes an entire musical sequence to Beth's death, afterwards the show skips ahead two years in the future, largely ignoring any mourning for her until Beth revisits the stage for the final number. Instead of delving into uncomfortable or problematic situations, the show spent much more time on the idea of love. By the show's morals, each of the girls finally "grew up" when they fell in love. Towards the end of the play, Marmie sings to Jo that she needs to leave home, that it is time for her to "learn to give her heart away." Amy goes to Europe and comes back a graceful young lady—with her besotted fiancé Laurie in tow. Meg finds her love interest very early in the play. Even Beth is given a new beau in this production—Layton and Segal wrote in a new character, an Irish immigrant Seamus who brings Beth a necklace. When Beth falls ill, she spends increasing amounts of time with Seamus as he reads to her by her bedside. Seamus, as a new love interest for Beth, allows Beth to "grow up" before she dies. In fact, the love stories in *Little Women* offer a great amount of character development as the girls decide how and when to "give their hearts away."

All the same it feels like a surprising, even ironic form of characterization considering the author of the original source. Louisa May Alcott, who wrote the original, semi-autobiographical novel *Little Women*, never married herself. Indeed, she only created Professor Baer, Jo's love interest, because the publisher forced her to marry off each of the remaining sisters before the

book ended. The focus on love allows each character to develop and mature before the play's end, but it stands out like a sore thumb against a play that feels so effectively close to the original source material in tone and energy.

Death and the Maiden
(Harold Pinter Theatre, 12/29/11)

For better or worse, Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, directed by Peter McKintosh at the Harold Pinter theatre, is soaked in ambiguity. Sometimes this ambiguity feels overwhelming—as Caitlin said to me afterward, “I was uncertain that they meant to be uncertain.” Similarly, one of the characters, Dr. Miranda, keeps asking people if they want to hear the “true true truth.” This redundant and even paradoxical repetition of the phrase—for how can truth be more or less true, much less triply true?—suggests the play's major theme and questions around the search for truth. Can we ever know the truth? How important is it that we know the truth? McKintosh's production, thanks to leading actress Thandie Newton's smug smile at the end, suggests that the “true” truth isn't nearly as important as what we decide ourselves to be the truth. Newton's character, Paulina Salas, believes she has received some proper form of retribution and closure after her rape by the old, corrupt, Chilean government. Whether she has actually enacted this retribution against the correct individual—which the audience is forced to question long after the play is over—means little to her. The irony of her satisfaction is highlighted by her equally smug husband, Gerardo Escobar (played by Tom Goodman-Hill), who brags about healing the country after the shame of the old government's crimes against humanity. Gerardo claims this after serving on a (new) government legal commission that accuses and arrests murderous individuals based on testimony. Though this approach to justice is state-sanctioned rather than vigilante, Gerardo's smug attitude, coupled

with audience knowledge that he served as a reluctant partner to his wife's illegal retribution and still agreed to be part of a commission that depends upon his judgment as a neutral third party forces the audience to acknowledge that neither the public nor private methods explored in the play allow for the truth to be exposed. Closure and healing, it turns out, does not require full honesty. In fact, in Dorfman's world, it requires a great deal of dishonesty.

Thus, it is absolutely necessary for the audience to exit the theatre unsure of what actually happened fifteen years ago. Paulina provides torture-like living conditions for, questions, and possibly murders Roberto Miranda (Anthony Calf), who she believes to be the doctor who sanctioned her own torture and rape fifteen years ago. We can never know if Paulina tortured the correct man—we cannot even know if she murdered him, since Dorfman fades to black before the end of the scene. McKintosh's production embraces the ambiguity to an extreme level, leaving viewers (or at least leaving me) frustrated by the lack of focus. For example, the interval seemed to represent a split in the play between two aspects of the same question. In the first act, the audience is trying to decide if Paulina's trauma has forced her to accuse and torture the wrong doctor. During the torture Paulina was blindfolded, and so she can only identify the doctor who tortured her by the sound of his voice. Gerardo does not accept her claim that Miranda has the same voice as her faceless doctor, but at the end of the first act Paulina says she also recognizes Miranda's skin and scent. Gerardo seems to find this evidence more compelling, though the appeal evokes far more pathos than logos, since the senses of touch and smell are often even weaker and more unreliable in humans than the sense of sound. His acceptance of this claim shows just how compelling—yet non-concrete—Paulina's appeal truly is. But Gerardo seems to accept her claim to an extent, and Paulina herself explains that she doesn't care if Miranda is actually innocent, since she has made up her mind (she bluntly says that if he's

innocent, “then he’s really screwed”), and this combination of factors means that in the second act the audience tries to decide if Miranda is actually guilty, regardless of whether Paulina’s judgment is correct.

It is important that the audience ponders both sides of this question, but the first act provides the audience with a more compelling, less situation-specific question. The first act gets at the play’s question of whether honesty is truly necessary—rather than whether honesty was there in the first place. Unfortunately, the production at the Harold Pinter theatre dances around any evidence that might answer the second side of the question in one way or another, and thus the story centers very heavily on the second side and loses the dramatic weight of the first side. To offer an example, Paulina claims she confirms Miranda’s guilt by changing key names and details when she explains her rape to Gerardo. She knows Gerardo will present her explanation to Miranda so that Miranda can craft a realistic-enough testimony of his supposed guilt that Paulina will feel as though she has received retribution for the crimes done against her and will then let Miranda go free. Paulina says that, in his testimony, Miranda corrected all of the details she purposefully said wrong. The audience sees a few moments of Miranda’s testimony, and notices a moment where he seems to correct her mistake. In the scene Miranda pauses before saying the new word, a gesture that completely still baffles me. If he corrected the word instinctively, he would not have needed to pause because he would not have been thinking about the word enough to know that he needed to make a change. If he was innocent, then he should not have corrected the word at all—and thus there was no need for him to stumble. The fact that he paused at all shows that the correction was important in some way to Miranda, and should thus be important to the audience...but I believe that his actual testimony and the proof it may or

may not provide should stick out less in audience memories than Paulina's desperation to receive the truth—or a convincing pseudo-truth—in general.



Despite this criticism I think that I liked the play significantly more than other students in the program. While I found fault with the production (the forms of ambiguity, but also at moments the acting and staging choices), I really admired the strong ominous tone of the production that signaled the true importance of the questions the play asked. For example, the play takes place on an elevated stage. Under the elevated stage lie piles of rocks that reflect the play's primary setting, Gerardo and Paulina's beach house. When the characters leave the beach house in the final scene, they still stand on the same literal foundation—reminding the audience that their later success and satisfaction is inherently founded on highly problematic grounds. Another example of the strong set and tone was the use of sound—crickets chirp through the first two scenes, both set at night at the beach house. Paulina attacks and binds up Miranda during the early morning hours, and the following scene takes place against a more silent, cricket-less background sound that feels different, eerie and unnatural even if viewers don't consciously notice the difference. The set also includes two large sliding partitions that allow the audience to see into the beach house but at times divorces them from the action, providing an ominous sense of distance and the feeling the viewer can never entirely access what occurs in the story. Miranda

remains upstage of the partitions the entire time, making him entirely unreachable to the audience. By contrast, Paulina and Gerardo's most honest, shocking confessions and epiphanies take place downstage of the partition, where the audience feels more connected to them. This motif in particular does help hone the focus of the play, even if other moments of staging, acting, etc. did not.

Thus, if I am critical of the play's success or failure in asking the correct questions, I can only feel so strongly about my critique because the set and tone of the production was utterly successful in proving how important—and haunting—those questions truly are.

War Horse
(New London Theatre, 12/30/11)

War Horse is, in a word, extraordinary. One of the chief reasons for the success of the production is its choreography. What I mean by “choreography” is that, while individual actors obviously influence what the audience sees in any given production, I got the sense watching *War Horse* that every single moment onstage was pre-constructed—and done in a very effective manner. A number of sequences, especially battle scenes set to music, feel somewhere in between a dance and a dramatic sequence. Many times the “setting” is provided by actors themselves—whether they hold posts that serve as farm or village fences or whether they are simply frozen in place behind the key moving players in the scene. At one point, the men and woman holding the posts-as-fences twirl into their new positions, where they stand with their heads tipped down and their eyes closed. This suddenly alters the mood of the scene so the stage space becomes a private space, shared only between Albert and Joey. If the staging were any less clever or less deliberate, the choreography could make the production feel stifled and predictable.

However the play, directed by Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris at the New London theatre, feels orchestrated and inventive.

The fact that the set is often constructed by people also responds to one of the most important themes of the play, a battle between man's pastoral, "natural" side and the man-made, artificial chaos of war. Albert lies about his age to join the war and look for his horse, and as he advances through the ranks his older peers compare his love of Joey with their own yearnings to be reunited with loved ones, especially one soldier's girlfriend, "Flossie". This is an uncomfortable comparison, associating sexual love with an asexual love shared between a boy and his horse, but that is exactly the point—the war renders Albert's childhood love of Joey unnatural because it forces him to become an adult sooner than he was ever meant to be. While some art depicts man's "animal nature" as dangerous and uncivilized, *War Horse* suggests that the "civilized" nature is what we should really be afraid of.

The choreographed feel to the show presents an interesting tie with this theme in that it couches the entire production in an organic space. The set is largely bare, the floor sculpted black material that imitates war rubble, and above the stage hangs a large, ripped "strip of paper" that images are projected upon. The emptiness of the set allows for an organic feel, so that everything that appears onstage seems to be created and stylized out of nature rather than in an artificial manmade theatre—it doesn't feel like nature, but it feels like an artistic rendering of nature that is completely separate from the cold, industrial world. Even the paper's torn edges show the personal human interaction with the natural material. The set offers a space of creation, where the players-as-the-set (such as the men and women holding up fence pieces) present the people as part of the stylized, "organic" natural setting. This pseudo-organic aesthetic, combined with artful choreography, makes battle scenes feel *more* real because in this surreal, stage

environment they are rendered larger-than life, epic and organically created. (I might be struggling to explain this concept—I'll add in a picture here in case it helps!)



There's a wonderfully surreal moment where a bunch of puppet-soldiers fall to the ground because they have been slain in battle. Many people in our group remarked that they hadn't realized they were puppets until after they had already hit the ground. They mistook the artificial for the truly organic. Similarly, the horse-puppets are clearly constructed by man out of unnatural materials—the audience can see the puppet's artificial skeleton through the body of the animal. But plays, like all stories, require an audience's willing acceptance of fiction as reality.

I think the production thrives around a blending between the man-made and the organic, even as it presents the two thematic concepts as polar opposites in times of war. It's a strong aesthetic that's paralleled in themes—and if there's some ambivalence about beautifully created man-made puppets, perhaps there is also ambivalence about whether WWI plays a positive or negative role in the canon of English History.

Hamlet

(Young Vic Theatre, 12/30/11)

To be honest, I feel like I might be the only person in the program who did not unconditionally enjoy *Hamlet* at the Young Vic theatre, directed by Ian Rickson. I believe the

production has strong moments, especially those provided by Michael Sheen as the titular character; I feel the imposed setting of a mental asylum offers a fresh interpretation that allows the audience to examine new sides of Shakespeare's very old and often-explored text. However, I also feel that Rickson's unwillingness to modify the play's original source material slows down and limits the power of his new interpretation. In concept, Rickson's *Hamlet* is a modern interpretation that allows for new viewpoints to be seen in an old and universal text. In effect, his *Hamlet* is a piece that risks limiting its appeal to an elite academic population that has full understanding of the original source and the willingness and patience to uncover Rickson's intentions and true successes in a rather muddled, inaccessible piece.

My claims about the play may sound excessive and pretentious, considering I'm closer to amateur theatregoer than expert. On the other hand, I have concrete, populist evidence in that I noticed a number of people sleeping or looking sleepy at the slower moments in the play. Over the course of the four-hour-long production, there were a number of such moments. I wish I could say that I was entirely riveted by the action, but I too was distracted enough to observe the sleeping audience members. Part of the problem behind this was the sheer length of the piece. From what I can tell, Rickson endeavored to stay as true to the source text as possible, even when this meant discussions of the international conflicts between Denmark and Norway that had to be "explained" through piped-in news footage on a random TV screen. There was no explanation for why the TV, which had previously displayed security camera footage, suddenly changed to show the news, and the conflict distracted from the play's new concept as a whole. (The ending scene, where Fortinbras returns to take off the dead bodies and sanitize the asylum, could have been just as surreal and clear without the context of the conflict over "Denmark." I even found it unclear whether, in Rickson's production, "Denmark" referred to the country or a

name for the asylum.) Though Shakespeare's text is taken as sacred in the production, and as an English major I ought to appreciate this fact, the concept is already so divorced from the bard's original concept (where, for example, Hamlet was very debatably "mad" throughout) that here, by refusing to modify the text to suit his new means, Rickson fails to explore this concept to the fullest and instead leaves the audience distracted and confused—which I believe explains the yawns.

Similarly, in this production Claudius and Polonius play therapists, rather than actual fathers; in his production Rickson translates their families from the original text into family units made up of a doctor and his closest patients. Thus, Polonius plays therapist-father for Ophelia and Laertes. Presumably Claudius is Hamlet's therapist-father. However, this complicates how the audience understands Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude. She's certainly a fellow patient rather than a therapist—but is she actually his mother? Is she a close friend, so much so that she feels paternal? Was Hamlet Sr. a patient or a doctor or not involved in the asylum institution at all? What about Horatio, who seems to trade off between being a therapist and a patient? Yes, the audience can hypothesize each of these on their own, rationalizing the ambiguous reading of the text, but the fact of the matter is that Rickson's production fails—or perhaps more likely, refuses—to offer the audience full explanations or understanding on the issue.

Similar identity issues pop up throughout the play. For example, the small cast means Benedict Wong, who plays Laertes, also performs the role of a player. One could argue that Rickson is playing extensively with confusions of identity. Indeed, other murdered characters who return, reincarnated after their deaths as victims of Hamlet's revenge and future pawns in his plot (such as Polonius's return as a priest). However, compare the latter identity crisis to the double-casting of Laertes, who does not "haunt" Hamlet in player form at all. Indeed, Laertes is

still alive when Wong shows up as a player. Little details like the double-casting and the unclear patient-therapist relationships lend the production more of a frustrating than a philosophical edge—one that distracts from the new interpretation of the show.



This seems particularly unfortunate when compared to the less frequent but always-exciting moments when Rickson's concept works very well indeed. There were a number of bright moments in the show that prove the cleverness of his concept and really do offer new light on the play. The introduction to the theatre, a constructed walkway that leads the audience through the mental institution in order to get to their seats, engages the audience deeply into wondering exactly where they are being led and allows them to better visualize what later proves to be a somewhat metaphorical set. It shows the audience the extent of Rickson's vision and the extent to which Hamlet is entrapped. The concept sheds new unique light and dramatic tension of a number of scenes audience members have likely seen many times before. For example, Hamlet's denied appeal to leave Denmark gains new poignancy when Hamlet is asking permission to leave the mental institution. By contrast Laertes gets to leave, and the audience notes Hamlet's dejection and envy. Polonius's extensive instructions to Laertes about the outside world, usually played for doddering comedy or great wisdom, become urgent and either heartfelt or sinister, depending on how one weighs the relative wisdom of the advice. Sheen's portrayal of

Hamlet presents a highly sympathetic, worried but optimistic and persistent version of the character and he seems to go to great lengths to make old speeches new. The fact that Hamlet watches his reflection in the darkened glass when his mother accuses him of speaking to figments as he talks to his father's ghost is particularly brilliant as it echoes the fact that Hamlet is indeed speaking to himself—Hamlet's state-categorized madness allows Rickson to present Hamlet's ghost as a multiple personality of Hamlet himself. There were other important inventive and insightful moments of interpretation in Rickson's production. But unfortunately, not even the excellent acting could reform every line, and the limitations to the interpretation that resulted from refusal to modify the original source text meant that even brilliant moments were not enough to prevent distraction, confusion and quite a few yawns.

Dublin Carol

(Trafalgar Studios 2, 12/31/11)

If that traditional Dickens' story, "A Christmas Carol," features a man haunted by fantastic ghosts who transport him on a journey through time and space, Conor McPherson's *Dublin Carol* (directed by Abbey Wright) does not give its own pseudo-Scrooge, the alcoholic and emotionally stunted John, the same kind of salvation through fantasy. If anything, McPherson's character might be saved through the very alcohol he finds himself dependent upon. As he drinks his way through a bottle of Jameson during the course of the three-act, 70 minute play, his behavior can be seen as a kind of self-medication. If so, there is a kind of fantastic quality to the play, but it's a very conditional source of salvation. How happy can John ever be, if he's attached to the bottle that's created much of his negative behavior across the course of the play?

Rather than fantasy, McPherson carefully grounds his play in a harsh realism. John is an undertaker, suggesting a kind of hint to Scrooge's ghosts—is John constantly haunted by the spirits of those he buries? McPherson suggests nothing of the kind, but rather creates a strong contrast as John is haunted by the ghosts of the living. There's his estranged daughter, Mary (the very affecting Pauline Hutton), who visits him in the second act and is the emotional crux of the play. She's desperate to reconnect to her father, despite the (many) ways his bad parenting hurt her during her childhood, in part because her mother, Helen, is dying. At one point John flat-out refuses to host his wife's funeral, which seems to be a direct insistence against a Dickensian fantasy plot. The third character, present in the first and third acts, is Mark (impressively performed by Rory Keenan, though I did not believe for a second that he was in his early twenties), a young man who is temporarily assisting John at work. If Mary can be compared to the ghost of Christmas past, Mark might be the ghost of Christmas future, especially in the third act where John's and Mark's argument about Mark's girlfriend cautions Mark against turning out like John. In the first act, John tries to separate Mark from himself—insisting the boy eat a full breakfast each day, but in the third act his romantic advice temporarily seems to threaten to bring Mark closer to repeating John's own mistakes.



If any fantastic concepts come into play, it's not impossible ghosts but a particularly religious sense of the holiday spirit. At the very end of the play John, who waits for Mary to come by so they can go visit Helen together, puts up the holiday decorations—just the advent calendar and a tinsel star, but the audience, desperate by this point for any kind of happy resolution, can read the act as a yearning for the guiding light of a star, the hopeful promise of the upcoming advent and his future in general. By the end one can only hope John will find some kind of salvation. There is no great Dickensian conversion, and John does not run about London shouting season's greetings and offering money to the poor.

It's so easy to find contrasts between Dickens' and McPherson's works, especially when *Dublin Carol* is played in a small, too-close-for-comfort space as Trafalgar Studios 2, that I'm tempted to read McPherson's title as an almost aggressive, Irish reply to a classic British moral tale. McPherson offers a contrast to the usual holiday fare that is difficult to forget, a play full of characters determined to share their bitter stories and revise a traditional British expectation in order to prevent a kind of mindless happy holidays. The play is insistent, and incredibly dark (not in the least because of its bitter-witted humor), but I do believe that is entirely the point.

The Ladykillers
(Gielgud Theatre, 12/31/11)

The Ladykillers was a perfect show to see on New Year's Eve. Based on the 1955 British film, the production (adapted for the British stage by sitcom writer Graham Linehan and directed by Sean Foley) is absolutely focused on spectacle as entertainment.

The show is carefully constructed as a series of surprises—beginning with the set. The show opens on a mock London street—a constable strolls along and greets the audience with “Evening” (the audience responded in kind) before entering the house. The set then unfolds (in

truth it rotates), like a dollhouse opening, to display the sprawling house interior. Everything is a little off-kilter—the attic and highest parts of the house are represented by a white metal frame (including a spiral staircase that leads up to nowhere) and the various rooms of the house appear on separate platforms—the largest of which is a raked bedroom where the main characters—five criminals, of varying aptitudes for crime—plan a bank robbery. The set continues to move throughout the show, but every time the set rotates back to the “street scene,” something has changed. For example, at one point the set becomes the upper level of the street—essentially an upper window of the house, near the roof, and the actual street is a long fall down. This reflects a theme in the show of changing perspectives.

For example, the first act of the play presents the five criminals as bumbling, even lovable men who attempt a bank robbery. Each criminal has his wacky trait—the illegally medicated, hyperactive Harry Robinson (Stephen Wight), or the slow-witted One Round (Clive Rowe). Harry constantly bangs his nose on a chalkboard; One Round doesn’t know how to hold a cello (see photo below). The con men are conned into playing a concert (of course none of them know any music—this was their cover as they planned their heist) for a little old lady, Mrs. Wilberforce (played by Marcia Warren). Their heist—which proves shockingly successful—is even enacted onstage in miniature, with a series of remote-control toy cars that climbed up the brick walls of the “street set” buildings. The delightful and unexpected sequence received a round of applause at the end. If Aristotle worried spectacle in theatre distracted from the real emotional or moral consequences in a play, this is a textbook moment—the audience cheered for the criminal activity without real thought to the moral consequences. In a comedy such as *The Ladykillers*, such a use of spectacle seems entirely appropriate. The first act of the play caters directly to what the audience expects from a comedy: each gag, character, and set piece was

created to please and entertain. Towards the end of the first act the leading criminal, Professor Marcus (Peter Capaldi) tells Mrs. Wilberforce, “being fooled by art is one of the primary pleasures afforded the middle class.” He even winks at the audience, breaking the fourth wall to ensure the audience understands the saying is directed at them. It’s a semi-flattering statement, casting their trip to the theatre as a “primary pleasure” and yet mocking them for being so enthusiastic about being the victims of a kind of con themselves.



The play continues to surprise, however, as the second act proves much darker than the first—the semi-lovable criminals become decidedly less lovable when they plan to kill off Mrs. Wilberforce (who becomes a witness to their crime). The criminals attempt to kill the lady, but, in an ironic twist on the title, end up killing each other in their greed. In the end the old lady is left with the spoils of the heist, and no one who will believe her story. The second act is still very funny, full of slapstick and witty lines. (I took part in an extensive conversation trying to quote and paraphrase the show’s humorous dialogue after it finished!) But suddenly the moral implications that seemed absent in the first act show up full-force. It is another form of surprise, and there’s another kind of delight that audience members can take in being genuinely scared

(during the suspenseful death of mobster-type Louis Harvey, played by Ben Miller, set in a dark room while Professor Marcus invokes Freudian fairy-tale imagery as he strangles Louis) in the midst of a comic production. It provides yet another surprise, yet another moment where we can take pleasure in being fooled by art.

Juno and the Paycock
(Lyttelton Theatre, 1/1/12)

Even though we discussed the set of the National Theatre's *Juno and the Paycock* extensively in class I'd like to write a little more about it here just because it was so utterly incredible. Laurel and I were discussing how to describe the aesthetic of the set—that artsy quality that accompanied the battered walls with peeling paper—and she figured it out, precisely. It looks like an oil painting. There are other effective things about the production, absolutely, but I think the set really makes the show what it is. The director, Howard Davies, must have been aware of this when crafting the production—the ceiling of the set is incredibly high up, creating a lot of empty space above the actual area where the actors move. (There is a staircase outside the apartment, in the back of the stage, that allows actors to appear above the ground level in the set, but it isn't used very often.) So viewers simultaneously observe the action of the play, taking place on the lower level of the set, as well as this distracting, large empty space. It creates a very compelling emptiness, which is really brought to light in the final scene of the play, when Captain Jack Boyle, the father figure in the play, lies alone and desolate in a humongous, barren room that is stripped of its earlier furniture. Jack represents the end of a kind of patriarchy in Ireland (partially in evidence as his wife and pregnant daughter leave to raise a daughter on their own without male assistance). Within the context of the stage space, surreally decorated as a tenement house located in an emptied, run-down mansion (hence the high ceilings), Jack's death

feels like the end of a long, impressive legacy. The set gives the production a consistently epic feel.



I think that epic feel is absolutely necessary given the source material. My foremost original critiques of the production was that Sean O’Casey seemed to be beating us over the head with the themes of his piece—I understood by the end of the second act that the parent generation of Boyles, Joxer, and Mrs. Madigan were exercising problematic behavior—dancing inside as a community funeral procession occurs outside. Though the Boyles still had their fancy goods by the end of the second act, as an audience member I knew that these items were bought on loans that would not last. As a result, I thought the third act was fairly drawn out. None of this was a critique of the production, but rather of the original script. Upon learning, however, that O’Casey wrote for an audience contemporary with his characters, so that the problems of the characters were meant to parallel problematic behavior in the audience members themselves (a bit reminiscent of Sondheim’s *Company*), I understood his reason for being so direct and insistent, ensuring that audience members understood the dark consequences of the Boyles’s follies and willful ignorance of the political situation surrounding them. The first two acts of the play work so well, even for modern British and American audiences, in part because the

audience members feel the same way the Boyles do: when people go to the theatre they do so to experience a form of entertainment as much as art. O’Casey plays upon these expectations by providing super-accessible, physical humor—such as Joxer’s and Jack’s struggle to hide their breakfast from Juno—in the earliest scenes. The audience that enjoys these moments would likely prefer to experience more of the same rather than the harsh truth, just like the Boyles. Thus the audience is critiqued alongside the characters onstage when the Boyles’ enjoyment is revealed to be problematically ignorant and uncaring. This form of critique applies to modern audiences as much as any who saw the play at its premiere in 1924.

As far as the third act goes, I think the theatre attempts to set the social critique that I originally found to be a little redundant into a greater literary context as well as one of historical critique. By this I’m referring, in part, to the role of the set in the final scene, that feeling of an epic descent for a culture as well as the family. The setting hones that point—a beautiful house, destroyed before the play even began—is no longer hospitable at all. The father figure lies drunk and dying on the floor. It’s an archetypal moment, recognizable to people from every patriarchal culture—and the set really brings this timeless universality to light.

Pippin

(Menier Chocolate Factory Theatre, 1/1/12)

As far as I understand it (see *Broadway Musicals: The 101 Greatest Shows of All Time*, written by Ken Bloom and Frank Vlastnik), *Pippin* and *Cats* occupy a particularly bizarre place in the Broadway canon as shows that are incredibly popular with fans and entirely unpopular with theatre scholars who write them off as shallow creations. *Cats* has endured the test of time, but *Pippin* has largely fallen off the map of professional musical theatre.

This tainted past makes the Menier Chocolate Factory's new adaptation of the show, conceived, directed, and choreographed by Mitch Sebastian, so exciting. As soon as we saw the set (with pseudo-laser lights tracing out doorways and windows, and Pippin himself, played by Harry Hepple, sitting at a computer positioned outside the theatre), I worried aloud that the music would feel too dated for a technology-themed production, unless they created new orchestrations. There was some of this, which gave the opening number more of a rock-and-roll feeling. But director Mitch Sebastian is also a genius at integrating new modern elements with musical theatre clichés—so much so that Pippin's evil stepbrother, played by David Page, can perform a dance solo complete with a cane and sparkly hat, in the midst of a number about warfare, which still feels *entirely* in character.

Dance is high-priority in Sebastian's work—not in the quantity of dance but in the way it colors the production. The aforementioned number about war featured an extensive fight sequence that included dance; Catherine (Carly Bawden) performs “Kind of Woman” in pointe shoes. This emphasis on choreography is one way Sebastian honors the original production; he studied under Bob Fosse, who choreographed the original production of *Pippin*. Much of Fosse's original choreography seems to be adapted to fit this production. Unlike Stephen Schwartz's score, the choreography feels as modern as if it was invented today.



If I had to pick a single word to describe the production, I would probably say “modern.” It shocked me, again and again, how well the framework of the story fits today’s culture. The structure of the original production feels episodic and distracted (evidenced by listening to the cast album, or even attempting to describe in which time period the original production is meant to take place). At first glance, the “musical in a video game” seems gimmicky, but in truth it solved more problems than it created. The video game setup explains away the episodic nature of the production. In addition, this rushed aesthetic—especially present in act one—seems to match the internet subculture, where you can become “famous” (or at least notorious) for a single video on Youtube, and where cultural trends seem to change in the blink of an eye, rather perfectly. The scene in which Pippin raised support to overthrow his father through a series of tweets felt unnervingly recognizable from everyday life. It’s interesting to consider, however, that these concepts cannot be nearly as modern as I’m inclined to believe. *Pippin*’s original text discussed the search for instant fame and recognition forty years ago.

Reception for the Menier production has been mixed.³ The general consensus seems to be that it's incredibly clever, but reviewers are hesitant to link this cleverness to effective storytelling. There are rumors of a Broadway or West End transfer for the production, and I think it will be very interesting to track its reception on a larger, multi-national scale. After all, *Pippin* was a huge original success (it is the 31st longest running show on Broadway—longer than *South Pacific* and *Crazy For You*⁴) despite critical confusion. It will be fascinating to see if this proves yet another case of history repeating itself.

Jerusalem

(Apollo Shaftesbury Theatre, 1/2/12)

It seems cliché to harken seeing *Jerusalem*, written by Jez Butterworth and directed by Ian Rickson, as a religious experience, but I'm not sure there's a better way to describe my personal reaction to the show. Normally, after a performance, I like to discuss the play with everyone I possibly can; after *Jerusalem* I bought a copy of the play to bring home and hopped on the tube, literally stunned into silence. I made no effort—and had no interest in—discussing the play before class the next morning. I remember wanting to understand my personal, emotional reaction to the production before filling my brain with critical analysis.

Luckily for journaling purposes, I've gotten past my initial resistance. And I'm still trying to understand what is so emotionally affecting about the play. I think one reason is that the play is one of the rare pieces of storytelling that welcomes you into what might seem a semi-threatening subculture. The community in *Jerusalem* wants to throw Johnny “Rooster” Byron (Mark Rylance) off his property, and on an objective level it's not difficult to understand why—he deals drugs to teens, he's lewd and disruptive, etc. etc. By the end of the show, however, I

³ <http://broadwayworld.com/article/Review-Roundup-PIPPIN-at-Menier-Chocolate-Factory-20111208>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_100_Longest-Running_Broadway_shows

can't imagine that a single audience member believes Rooster should be sent away. Somewhere along the way the audience becomes one of Rooster's gang. It might begin the moment Rooster tossed an eggshell directly into the audience—which was still more hygienic than what followed, where he drank the raw egg straight; it might be the first time the audience members realize there are flies buzzing around them in the theatre. Maybe the audience is startled into inclusion—and the gradual introduction of characters does allow the audience time to recover from the potential culture shock. Perhaps the roots of inclusion come even earlier than that, when the curtain lifts to display a raging party at Rooster's trailer. The audience isn't witness to much of the party, but it's enough that when Rooster's gang-member Ginger (Mackenzie Crook) complains about missing the party, we already feel more included in the gang than he does.

The effect of being invited to laugh along with Rooster's gang is to feel united with them against their enemies—those who want to relocate Rooster, but also those who refuse to listen to his stories, those who have already grown up. It's quite easy to draw parallels between Rooster and Peter Pan. Audience members are suddenly re-granted youth and imagination, and as part of the deal they are allowed to understand a subculture they might not be a part of, or characters that seem alienating on an objective level. In understanding this culture and these characters, audience members can experience a kind of forgiveness, a refreshing release from the heavy weight of socially dictated judgments that they subconsciously made against the characters. (In my musical-oriented mind, I liken the experience to what a straight-laced adult might have felt leaving *Hair* in New York City after being serenaded by hippies for the past two and a half hours.)



Somewhat tragically, just like Peter Pan's lost boys, Rooster's gang eventually grows up and leaves him; three of the adults in the production cavorted with Rooster in their youth. The audience watches as Lee (Johnny Flynn) leaves Rooster's gang in order to grow up; Ginger is older than most of the other members and his failure to move on seems to reflect a kind of deficiency in getting his life together. By contrast, the audience sticks with Rooster through the entire show even when the others leave. In some ways it's a perfect match—Rooster is a storyteller and the audience attends the theatre with the sole purpose of hearing a story. The audience has the luxury of free time to listen that the on-stage characters lack. As audience members, however, we surpass Rooster's onstage gang as the ultimate followers of whatever it is he dictates (imagination, old English mythology, Dionysian culture, a return to nature, etc.). It seems only natural in retrospect that the audience cares more than any other character about Rooster's fate, and yet while watching the play there's a great tragedy in seeing Rooster left alone and abandoned onstage—the irony, of course, being that the audience remains and he is truly not alone at all.

To continue with the idea of *Peter Pan*, the play is also affecting because its ending offers the audience a chance to remain in the realm of imagination—if not as children in

Neverland, then perhaps as ancient figures in a pastoral setting. While Shakespeare's pastoral comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, nearly always return to their "real" city setting as they close, *Jerusalem* leaves the audience deeper in the pastoral and imaginary than ever before, as the lighting turns green and the ambient noise is overwhelmed by Rooster's beating out his drum. At the end, Rooster—and we—waits for the giants who he claims will come rescue him. I remember my heart was in my chest, and the adult, cynical part of me knew no one was going to arrive—how would they even fit a giant onstage? (In class we discussed the shaking trees employed especially effectively in the New York City production, which suggested the giants' impending arrival. However, the smaller stage space at the Apollo Shaftesbury Theatre rendered the effect less noticeable or conclusive in this production.) The audience is left to interpret the three resounding offstage thuds—is it the noise of an approaching giant or some other sound (perhaps the bulldozers about to destroy the forest)?—however they wish. But the fact that the audience has that choice at the end, that they can elect to believe the stories if they wish, is what makes the play utterly spectacular.

The Animals and Children Took to the Streets
(Cottesloe Theatre, 1/3/12)

Two of the most innovative and memorable elements of *The Animals and Children Took to the Streets* are the show's humor and animation. The show, written and directed by Suzanne Andrade, is colored by its snarky, pessimistic, and often meta-humor. The show depicts life in the Bayou Mansions, a fictional, run-down tenement block. Life in the Bayou means life in less-than-acceptable living conditions, and the snarky and pessimistic humor comes into play as the characters from the Bayou, particularly the Caretaker, struggle with the pains of daily existence. The Caretaker, narrated by a slow, depressing male voiceover (the character is acted out by a

silent female actress), records his activities in a log. At one point he says something like, “I hid in the closet for eight hours. I ate a Kit Kat.” This is already a humorous moment, due to the excessively pathetic conditions and the unexpected specificity of a brand-name chocolate, but then the Caretaker adds, in the same sad voice, “It was a pretty good day,” which just renders the whole scene completely ridiculous, and makes audiences wonder (and shudder to think) what occurs on a bad day in the Bayou. The ridiculously poor conditions in the Bayou are so bizarre and extreme that they’re funny to audiences even as they appear completely ordinary to the people who live there.

The meta-humor in the production highlights the artificial nature of theatre—particularly theatre supplemented by animation. In *Animals and Children*, three actresses play a multitude of roles by donning different costumes and acting in front of (or behind!) three separate screens onto which animated sets and other characters are projected. This allows the production to make several self-referential puns that play on the unique nature of the production. My personal favorite was the so-called “shadow nannies.” Throughout the production various minor characters are depicted simply with silhouettes. The Caretaker displays a meta-theatrical awareness of this type of depiction—arguably even a stylized shortcut to make the animation easier—when he remarks that the government facility seems to be guarded by a number of “shadow nannies,” or silhouettes of women. The joke gets an even bigger laugh when the security alarm is triggered and the recording calls “all shadow nannies” into action. Suddenly the audience understands that the Caretaker isn’t aware of the animation so much as the animation is the reality—the characters are actually just silhouettes of people. This meta-humor separates the onscreen—and onstage—world from our own, and allows the production to depict extremely

dire conditions, and social commentary about extremely dire conditions, in a semi-humorous, semi-safe manner.



The distancing safety of watching a story from a movie screen, however, is shattered when the characters in the film explain that the mayor has a plan to subdue unruly children from the Bayou by feeding them sedative gumdrops. Before the production begins, women walked amongst audience members and distributed packages of these gumdrops; presumably the audience members are eating them throughout the production. Suddenly the audience is involved in the story, they too are theoretically victims of the political, social, and economic system that created the Bayou. It's a silly moment, but it's also shocking in part because it closes the distance between the audience and the characters in a semi-threatening way. The production also plays with the effects of seeing a movie (versus seeing a play) when as the play nears its climax. The story pauses for an audience vote on whether the play should have an "idealist" or "realist" ending. I know I spent a long time debating with other students over whether there were actually two options or if the character always chooses a "realist" ending, regardless of how the audience votes (we had more cheers for the "idealist" ending, but also some very loud shouts of "realist!" coming specifically from John). But whether or not the play always ends the same way, the

moment shatters what seemed to be an entirely pre-destined movement of the plot. It teases the audience with the idea that the characters might determine their own destiny, while the “realist” ending we saw seemed to counteract this idea and insist that, at least in the Bayou, life will end just like it began—as the characters repeat, “When you are born in the Bayou, you die in the Bayou.” There is no escape.

Reasons to Be Pretty
(Almeida Theatre, 1/3/12)

If I’m obsessed with trying to understand why *Jerusalem* affected me as much as it did, I’m equally obsessed with trying to understand why *Reasons to Be Pretty* didn’t seem to affect me at all. After we saw the play, discussion with other students revealed a sort of split between us. Many people loved *Jerusalem*, but a significant number of others liked *Reasons to Be Pretty* significantly more. From what I’d heard of playwright Neil LaBute’s harsh treatment of popular social issues (in this play the value our society places upon beauty and our dependence upon others to know whether we are beautiful or not) before I saw the play, I had steeled myself for something uncomfortable, very difficult to sit through. I didn’t find it. I was interested in the characters and the themes of the play, and I thought the production was very high-quality (see my discussion of the set below) but I had a surreal moment as I watched the actors take their bows with tears in their eyes—I was entirely dry-eyed. Maybe it was my relationship with the characters—I worry about my physical appearance, but I’ve also been raised by parents who put little to no importance whatsoever on physical beauty. I would be hurt if a boyfriend said I wasn’t attractive, but I can imagine staying with him if I knew there were other ways in which he valued me above others. As a result, I found it difficult to associate with and pity Steph as much I think LaBute intended.



I've continued to explore LaBute's work a bit since I left London, just because I seem to find the premises of his plays absolutely intriguing. I watched the film version of *The Shape of Things* and had a similar reaction as I did to *Reasons to Be Pretty*. I found myself more involved with the characters in *The Shape of Things*, but again I found myself feeling lacking the strong emotions I would have expected to feel at the end. But maybe my frustration with LaBute's work, which seems to discuss extreme situations and emotions, but in a fully realistic manner, is also his strength—moments extreme enough to offer catharsis would offer the audience some release. Instead he frustrates (or frustrates me, anyway) with his firm insistence on total realism. Moments that incited audience laughter in the midst of an angry or tragic scene, or the constant, tiny hints that Steph and Greg might get back together (even after their characters had grown so far apart, all based on a moment before the play began) frustrated me because they seemed to distract from the ultimate harsh tragedy of the piece that I had expected to see going in. But these were also moments that made the play the most realistic, and in some ways the moments that should have led me to tears. I believe I was supposed to note glimpses of happiness that made me empathize with the characters. I found myself more a distanced and objective observer than I believe I was meant to be.

I'm still unsure whether LaBute and I make a bad match,⁵ I'm just *incredibly* unfeeling (I hope not!), or if my reaction is a kind of discomfort that's actually very appropriate when one is forced to confront, or at least witness, near-total realism on stage. My love of *Jerusalem* as well as my ongoing appreciation for the Almeida production (directed by Michael Attenborough)'s surrealistic set both attest to my preference for plays that are in some way exaggerated and larger than life. At the same time, I really like the set in *Reasons to Be Pretty* because it symbolically represented the themes of the production. The central set piece, a huge rotating box that mimics one of the packaging boxes from the factory where Greg works, has a repetitive and even claustrophobic feel—many scenes took place in the sets that collapsed back into the box after each scene, which presented a metaphor of the characters' inability to break free from their own problems as well as a sense of futile stagnancy as the same sets returned again and again—which really parallels the life Greg leads and proves the necessity for him to escape his factory, as he plans to do at the end of the play. Shipping boxes have to be assembled—and the audience hopes, in the end, that Greg's current lifestyle, which he somehow assembled for himself, can be just as easily dismantled as a cardboard box, so that he might eventually free himself and move on.

Measure for Measure
(Swan Theatre, 1/4/12)

I find it very telling to compare the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2011 production of *Measure for Measure*, directed by Roxana Silbert, with Ian Rickson's *Hamlet*. The latter

⁵ I should add, however, that I read his essay in the *Reasons to be Pretty* program on the plane ride home, and found myself absolutely fascinated with his discussion of beauty and maturing and the role of writers in modern culture. In retrospect, I am so glad I bought the program, and I might just have to keep trying to find a play written by him that I absolutely adore—I wonder if I would find reading the script more emotionally satisfying than viewing the plays in production. I really *want* to like his work, so it might be worth a try!

production seemed to impose a new context on a Shakespeare text in order to turn it into something entirely new. In my *Hamlet* journal entry I argued that Rickson's differed enough from the intent of the original text that it required a reworking of the text to fit the new concept. By contrast, the S&M aesthetic employed in Silbert's *Measure for Measure* seemed to expand upon already existing themes within the play without rendering any of the original text inappropriate or difficult to interpret within the new context. If anything, the aesthetic of Silbert's production offered the audience a new way of accessing the original Elizabethan-era messages of the play.

Bondage and ownership form an important motif throughout *Measure for Measure*. Like S&M, Shakespeare's problem play connects ideas of discipline and passion in a sometimes-uncomfortable mix. Angelo (Jamie Ballard) appears most likable and human as he recognizes his passion for the novice Isabella. In other productions Angelo's self-proclaimed "love" might stand as a code word for lust, but in this production his infatuation seems to be one of the heart as much as one of the blood. However, this new passion comes into conflict with Angelo's strict and literal interpretation of the law; he demands Isabella sleep with him in exchange for her jailed brother's freedom. Angelo does not know how to reconcile his need for strict discipline with his new passion for Isabella, and his own solution is to force Isabella into a form of bondage, a secret sexual tryst that will ruin her forever. In both the whorehouse scenes and the scene with Mariana at St. Luke's, Silbert's set included women positioned as totally stationary props—human lamps in the former and a fountain in the latter. These women are literally turned into property, and they reflect the problematic nature of Angelo's desire to possess Isabella.

There's a sense of social discomfort with S&M in modern-day society, but the fact of the matter is that the sexual practice is traditionally consensual. At its best, S&M effectively fulfills

both parties' sexual passion through the application of discipline. It's an extreme sort of contract, but in a way it parallels the marriage contract that was seen as an effective way to couch sexual passion through socially acceptable discipline. Even the ideas of dominant and subordinate roles applied as married women had significantly fewer rights in society than men. I don't think Silbert's production necessarily draws this direct parallel, but I think the idea of a successful combination of discipline and passion is presented by Duke Vincentio (Raymond Coulthard), who proposes marriage to Isabella at the end. The Duke is the first person who appears onstage, attired in a costume that includes discreet bondage elements—a thick leather belt, for example. This contrasts with the studded leather jacket worn by Pompey (Joseph Kloska) or the sheer undershirt worn by Lucio (Paul Chahidi)—by contrast, the Duke presents an effective study in moderation even as he insists upon endearingly showy magic tricks throughout the play.

The Duke's use of magic (which is not part of the original Shakespeare script) is only one of the ways in which the RSC's production moves beyond the moral-focused context of the problem play to provide great amounts of humor. While on some level S&M is about discipline, it also has heavy associations with sexual liberation in modern society. This is reflected best in the play during the rowdy, and hilarious curtain call—the actors dance around one another, faux-slapping and kissing each other in turn (or doing even sillier things—I noticed a girl pretending to pinch Barnardine's nipples, to his great amusement, and Lucio waving the hand of the babydoll that represented his illegitimate son at the end of the play!). They all appear amused and excited to be joking around after the performance, and it's incredibly fun to watch as an audience. There is an overwhelming enthusiasm that pervades the comic moments of the play—the Duke, Pompey, Lucio and Barnardine especially endeared themselves to the audience

through the energy they brought to creating humorous moments, especially in the latter half of the play.



With the exception of the utterly Dionysian curtain call, the body of the production doesn't advocate for sexually liberal behavior (as proven through the extreme trials of Claudius and his very pregnant, semi-spouse Juliet), but it does accept that passion is natural and healthy for human beings. After all, as Pompey half-jokingly asks the government officials who plan to close all the whore houses, "Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the youth of the city?" In short, the aesthetic and setting of the RSC production of *Measure for Measure* rather consistently help audiences focus on and understand key aspects of one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays.

Written on the Heart
(Swan Theatre, 1/4/12)

I don't think anyone would call David Edgar's new play, *Written on the Heart* (directed by Gregory Doran) mindless entertainment. Nearly every review I read about the play cautions that the work may not be for everyone. My favorite example is from Michael Coveney's (generally very positive) review in *The Stage*. He writes, "David Edgar's new play about the final literary and doctrinal arguments surrounding the publication of the King James Bible in

1611 comes as close as you could imagine to making the subject compelling.”⁶ I don’t think the play is impossible to understand, even without the background of an English education that would have specialized in such history, but it absolutely requires one’s utmost attention. Also, I think I would have really benefited from reading the program in order to gain a better understanding of the historical context before the show began.

As it stands, I believe much of the historical debate went over my head, especially in the early sequence where a series of important religious figures (who may or may not have been bishops) each present their opinions on what should be included in the King James Bible. These opinions are cleverly embedded into their conversation. Also, a small gag where the characters shake water off their coats as they come inside to gain shelter from the rain keeps things energetic and attempts to engage audience attention. On the off-chance the history doesn’t capture your interest, you’ll probably pay attention to the men shaking water at you! As I understood it, each character presents a different approach to choosing the language used in the new Bible, foreshadowing the way some of these different attitudes become future movements that fracture from the church.

All the discussion makes for an intimidating beginning, but things become easier to understand as the play’s timeline reverses in a kind of flashback that depicts a younger version of protagonist Lancelot Andrewes as he rescues the Biblical translation created by William Tyndale (Stephen Boxer) from under the noses of Tyndale’s jailers. Tyndale, who believes in creating a Bible that is accessible to all social classes and that emphasizes personal religious understanding, rather than a Bible for the elite that supports the formal elite systems of church and state, becomes the emotional center of the play. I found Boxer the most compelling actor, though my background (agnostic Jewish beliefs and American heritage) may have biased me towards his

⁶ <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/34147/written-on-the-heart>

position and made it difficult for me to empathize with those arguing against Tyndale's translation. I found myself frustrated with the older Lancelot Andrewes (Oliver Ford Davies) as he continues to struggle over which changes to make to the Bible. Edgar does a wonderful job of proving that these small changes are worth arguing over, in part via a repeated joke about a passage that could potentially be translated to reveal homoerotic undertones in text. As a result, I believed the translation choices were incredibly important. Even so, I felt like the second act dragged as Tyndale's ghost approached Andrewes again and again to suggest Tyndale's translation—I wish Andrewes had understood the demand, and stuck with it, just a little bit sooner.



The play seems quite obviously written to favor Tyndale's attitude toward the Bible. For one thing, the title of the play, *Written on the Heart*, references Tyndale's personal translation of Jeremiah 31:33 as well as his belief that the Bible should be deeply and personally understood by people from every walk of life. For another, one of the few female and lower-class characters in the play, Mary Culler, finds comfort in a Bible that uses Tyndale's translation. The audience is offered so few examples of the people who will most benefit from Tyndale's changes, so the one

character we do see becomes incredibly compelling. Jodie McNeer's strong acting, a compelling mix of pride and desperation, also ensures we sympathize with her side of the argument.

I spoke with Devin after the play, who said that Doran's directing strongly favored people who sat directly across from the stage over those who sat on the right or left of the stage. This might be another reason, beyond the dense historical background, why I rarely felt fully engaged with the characters. On the other hand, the sets Doran chose made it easy to tell the different time periods (for memories and such) from one another, because the locations that accompanied each time period were vividly realized through lighting (such as a stained glass window in 1586) and set pieces (such as a raised platform atop the stage in 1536) that dramatically altered the stage. Overall, I appreciated *Written on the Heart*, but I wish I had the historical (and possibly cultural) background to fully understand its finer details.

Richard II
(Donmar Warehouse, 1/5/12)

Last semester I took Rosemary Kegl's Shakespeare course, and it has absolutely colored the way I experience modern adaptations of the bard's plays. After reading about Elizabethan and Jacobean staging, one of the first aspects I noticed about the Donmar Warehouse production of *Richard II* (directed by Michael Grandage) was the way the set echoes the playing space available at the original Globe. Both the set in the Donmar and the Globe included a large floor space, an overheard balcony (though in Shakespeare's time this was used for seating as often as for performance space), and small alcove areas underneath the balcony where scenes could be displayed. I'm not certain if this parallel to Shakespeare's original theatrical space was a key factor in Grandage's production or if the combination of the material and the available theater space at the Donmar inherently resulted in such a setup, but it was exciting to note nonetheless.

Indeed, it echoes a theme throughout Grandage's production of taking archaic images and contexts and rendering them accessible to modern audiences—which is often necessary when directing a Shakespeare history. So the stage wasn't just crafted similarly to Shakespeare's own; it was a mock-wood surface that appeared to be covered in flaking gold leaf—a subtle symbol for the way divine rule decays and falls to pieces over the course of the production. Other examples of rendering historical motifs modern (or vice versa) include the costumes, which use modern aesthetics but seem to appear archaic enough to fit the time period. Richard, played by Eddie Redmayne, wears a long white coat that could be stolen straight off a modern catwalk, and in the opening sequence, Richard is seated on his throne in a tribute to a 14th century painting of the monarch.



I really liked the way the production began with Richard seated on the throne—Redmayne alights in the seat before the audience enters the theatre, and he sits still, eyes closed, until the play begins. The fact that Richard parallels a famous work of art invites audiences to identify the character and to address their associations with the ruler—to judge him somewhat objectively—before the play even begins. It reminds the audience that Richard, as king, is open to public scrutiny, which in some ways will be his undoing over the course of the play. Finally, it shows Richard alone and reflective, which allows the audience to consider Richard out of the

context of his court persona. Redmayne's performance makes it very clear that, as king, Richard is constantly performing. His affected voice and courtly gestures shroud his uncertainty and foreshadows his reluctance to give up the crown even after he has been defeated.

Many actors in this cast appear overwhelmingly young—Redmayne has a boyish face, and the opening moments, where the members of his court each enter and kneel before him, displayed a similarly youthful court. The idea that Richard, who in real life was crowned at age ten and died at age thirty-three, chooses to surround himself with men the same age or potentially younger than himself visually proves John of Gaunt's accusation that "[a] thousand flatterers sit within thy crown." Shakespeare's Richard, as presented by Grandage, forfeits the wisdom of older members of society for the safety of men who will follow his every word.

If Richard is painted as youthful and even foolish, Henry Bolingbroke, played by Andrew Buchan, presents an entirely different picture. Richard is attired in jewel-tones or pure white fabric that could only come from a court—even the gold plate armor he dons to fight Ireland is more symbolic than practical. Bolingbroke wears ruddy earth tones in far darker shades. Where Richard succeeds by diplomacy, if at all, Bolingbroke rebels through force. Bolingbroke also rebels with support from older members of the court. Physically, Buchan forms a strong contrast to Redmayne—he is studier where Redmayne is skinny, and his face appears older, his features less refined. Between staging, set, casting, and costumes, Grandage presents a production full of strong visual cues that render Shakespeare's text accessible to modern-day audiences without creating a production that feels distanced from the original time period or text.

No Way Out (Huis Clos)
(Trafalgar Studios 2, 1/5/12)

I can't imagine Sartre's *Huis Clos* (directed by Paul Hart) performed effectively in any space larger than the tiny Trafalgar Studios. The play is meant to be uncomfortable—it's two hours without an intermission after all—but it's even less comfortable in Trafalgar Studios, where the theatre-in-the round, with very little physical space separating the actors and the audience, means that audience members are constantly aware of other audience members around them. If "hell is other people," then the audience's inability to look away from the audience even as they watch the performance matches the dynamic perfectly. We are trapped in the theatre much like the characters are trapped in hell. This constantly forced acknowledgement of the audience also inspires viewers to consider the characters' presumptions that they are alone, in an entirely new light. We are always reminded that they are not actually alone, and I think that reminder encourages the audience to doubt other unsupported claims they make—such as the claim that they are in hell. Part of what's so effective about Sartre's text is that the concept of hell, while physically embodied onstage, still remains imaginary. The characters could easily be in a purgatorial afterlife, or heaven could be in the next room over.

Even though the acting for this production seemed to be absolutely top-notch, I think the set might have been one of the strongest parts of the production. I feel like I spent a lot of time watching the set, reading it for clues to Sartre's afterlife. The furniture was worn down, as if taken from a secondhand shop. There was one piece of furniture per person in the room—indeed, the characters each claim a single seat at one point—and this parallel suggested that the room had been prepared for them, for exactly three people. However, the worn furniture suggested a sort of timelessness—that the room had been occupied by three people before then, and that it might one day hold three other people. The ceiling was covered in fragments of molded plaster,

with large black spaces in between. This seemed to suggest similar decay, but also the idea that their prison wasn't entirely as solid as they pretend—after all, the characters can see into the real world at various moments in the production. The set accompanied these monologue-descriptions with surreal colored lights and other sounds, so that it was clear that the characters had access to a kind of escape from the literal prison around them. At the same time, these visions created another type of entrapment, where the characters hungered for recognition and remembrance in a way that they had no power to achieve. The partial ceiling presents a kind of similar *trompe l'oeil* feeling of escape—the spaces in between the ceiling set pieces are just as solid as the ceiling, but we consider them as breaks in a partial set. Moreover, since each character “sees” the outside world on their own, these visions create a kind of personal prison (which is reflected in the different colors of lights and different sounds used to individualize each character's world).



Throughout the show the characters struggled to escape their own personal prisons—Estelle tries to sleep with Garcin in order to control him, as a way to gain power over her surroundings – but in their inability to ever actually couple there seems to be another type of hell, a failure to simply come together with another human being and make physical and emotional contact. Though all of the characters interact with each other in ways that attempt to establish and maintain the ultimate power, there's a pervasive sense of loneliness throughout the play, and

when the characters have the chance to leave the room and potentially separate, they elect to stay. Hell may be other people, but the characters (especially Garcin) seem to believe that they could also never achieve true peace alone. It's a lose-lose situation, and it's left up to the audience to decide which form of entrapment—within our minds or within a room with others—would ultimately be the worst.

Cinderella

(Richmond Theatre, 1/6/12)

After hearing descriptions of the *Cinderella* that Jay and a few other students saw at the start of the trip, it seems to me that, as far as pantomimes go, Richmond Theatre's *Cinderella* (directed by Christopher Dunham) must have been relatively tame. There were no policemen in the audience (there were no policemen in the production in general!), the stepsisters (played with great enthusiasm by Graham Hoadly and Paul Burnham) never lost a fake bosom onstage, and there were far more musical theatre songs than top-40 hits performed. Before the performance started, Michael bet me a penny that there wouldn't be any inappropriately sexual jokes in the production. I won the penny, but it took much longer than I had expected. Moreover, the scariest moments of the *Cinderella* story seemed to be mysteriously absent. Cinderella's father was still alive in this production, and the stepsisters at their worst only threatened to make him miserable unless she tore up her invitation to the ball, but they also ran shrieking away from a spider later on in the show.

There were still plenty of in-jokes for the adults in the production, but they veered towards localized humor. At one point Cinderella tells Buttons she can't marry him because he's like her brother, and he names a part of England where "that's still okay." The script writer (and the actors seemed to stick pretty closely to the scripted material) Eric Potts wrote an essay in the

program where he says that he likes to use local humor in his pantos—he writes a number of them every season, and he makes sure to joke about issues specific to each theatre’s target audience—even things like outrageous bus prices. And for every adult-centered joke, there were three times as many gags that the children would understand, such as the sequence when Buttons tries to sweep dirt (actually a moving spotlight) off the wall, but every time he tries to sweep the light it travels around him and bumps him in the butt. This, of course, had the kids giggling uncontrollably—and I believe a number of the adults laughed too. This was a panto meant for regression: we all shouted “Wotcher, Buttons!” whenever the character arrived onstage (in our best British accents!) and felt like children again. I wonder if more risqué pantos—such as the other *Cinderella* production—treat adults and children as more separate groups.

Either way, seeing the Richmond *Cinderella* was a highly enjoyable way to spend an afternoon, and the production was a fascinating (and fun!) study of spectacle-in-excess. There production makes use of four or five large sets, all of which look like pages straight out of a child’s coloring book. A host of children comes onstage for the large group numbers, and the production cast includes six dancers that dress up in a variety of different characters—villagers, gypsies, party guests—and perform as many dance solos as they have costumes. Two fat Shetland ponies lead Cinderella’s carriage at the end of Act One. I can’t even imagine the sheer amount of glitter used to decorate that stage. The stepsisters don increasingly ridiculous costumes, moving from huge citrus-colored dresses to leopard-print furs to Christmas-themed costumes for the ball (with no explanation why they are the only ones in fancy dress!) to, finally, cloaks and orange and purple versions of hats from the recent royal wedding. I’ve skimmed a couple reviews of the production, which received high marks, and almost all reviewers mentioned the royal wedding reference with particular glee. There are rotating, color-changing

lights, disco balls and small explosions of light on the left side of the stage. And as if all of this wasn't enough, there were gasps across the entire house when Cinderella's "glass slipper" falls onto the floor and shatters into a million little pieces of glitter.



My largest complaint was the particularly unexciting fairy godmother; she appeared at the beginning and end of each act, for the most part, and spoke entirely in rhyme. I think the idea was to create a maternal figure—perhaps a replacement for Cinderella's absent mother—but in the chaos and excitement of a pretty visually stunning production, hers was easily the most predictable and least exciting part.

The Charity That Began at Home
(The Orange Tree Theatre, 1/6/12)

I found *The Charity That Began at Home* (directed by Auriol Smith) to be utterly winning, but I have to wonder if audiences at its premiere in 1905 would have had the same kind of reaction. The play, written by St. John Hankin, certainly raises relevant questions about the meaning and acceptable uses of charity. It was a funny coincidence that the sermon we heard at Westminster Abbey on New Year's Day claimed that there was such a thing as selfless giving (beginning with the blessings God gives) and also discussed the topic. Moreover, even modern

audiences feel frustrated sadness when the show's primary couple, Margery (Olivia Morgan) and Hugh (Oliver Gomm) splits up at the end.

Despite the sad ending, Smith's production provides a highly enjoyable show. It is full of humorous bit parts—a judgmental sister, a sour-faced governess, a loquacious veteran, and so forth—and the cast seem to embrace their memorably quirky roles with relish. The Orange Tree Theatre is a theatre-in-the-round, and the setup offers a sort of community-theatre feel to the production—not through any lack of professionalism but in a sense of general camaraderie between the cast, and a sense of intimacy due to the smaller space. The one set change in the production is performed with aplomb, as a series of servants (and secondary cast members newly-attired as servants) waltz through the center stage, transporting props to an energetic piece of classical music. The audience stays silent, rapt, as one particularly coldly professional servant places empty grape-stems on each dining-room plate (setting the scene for the very end of dinner). It's a sequence that simultaneously celebrates and mocks the complex system of servants required to operate an English house in the early twentieth century. When the sequence concluded in our production, the audience burst into applause, a very twenty-first century reaction. Hugh, who is supposed to be a scallywag unsuited to marry Margery, delights the audience from the moment he opens his mouth—and then with pretty much every facial expression following. Gomm put great energy into the role—some of his reactions proved funnier than jokes written into the script. However, I wonder if such unadulterated enjoyment of his character isn't a modern sentiment. Hankin proposes Mr. Hylton as a more appropriate match for Margery, but until Hugh himself argues for the pairing in the final scene, I didn't believe they made a compelling match at all. Hugh also breaks off his engagement with Margery, which in modern eyes seems sad but not unthinkable, whereas in class Professor Peck called marriage “the

one unchallengeable institution of the 19th century play.” It seems that some of the most intense social critique of the play, such as critiques of subscription charities, might be lost on modern audiences.



Still, if the play has lost shock value over the years, that doesn't make it less effective as a discussion of charity—rather, it seems to bring the question of how selfless (or selfish) charity truly is into even sharper focus. If the audience roots for Hugh the entire show, then the moments in the final scene where he leaves Margery to ensure her future happiness become even more compelling. Hugh says that marriage lasts too long to live unhappily, and the audience members who accept divorce nod their heads sympathetically rather than gaping in shock. Overall, *The Charity That Began at Home* is a comic piece with aesthetics reminiscent of anything by Oscar Wilde. However, its bittersweet ending marks it as something unique, a play with slightly less humor but far more heart.

Twelfth Night
(New Diorama Theatre, 1/7/12)

Last semester I fell in love with *Twelfth Night* through reading the text (a second time) and watching Trevor Nunn's 1996 film version, but I had never seen a live production before

attending the New Diorama Theatre's production (directed by Mark Leipacher). I'm really glad I got a chance to see Leipacher's interpretation, in part because the New Diorama Theatre's black box stage provided a completely different kind of production than the others I saw on the program. More importantly, though, Leipacher's production gives new life to what was previously my least favorite part of the text—the scenes with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria, and Sir Toby Belch. In general, the production focuses on the comedy and the danger in the story rather than the romance. In a way this focus changes the story into a new story, or at least a new story based on my limited preconceptions, and without question it proves the great variety and richness available from the original source material.

The acting in the production isn't consistent—because of the limited set and small cast, it becomes easy to devote one's full attention to the active performer onstage. Perhaps the comic elements are emphasized because Toby (Richard Delaney) and Andrew (Jonny McPherson)—each attired in their own fake moustache and disheveled clothing—are some of the strongest performers. Olivia (Derval Mellett), like Toby and Andrew, add great energy to the production, albeit energy of a different, sexual genre. Malvolio (Gareth Fordred)'s wide-eyed rants provide humor but also a sense of fear and pity. There is pathos in *Twelfth Night* at the New Diorama Theatre, even if it's not the kind I might have expected from the story. Even if the actress who played Viola is not terribly compelling as a romantic figure, the highly physical, collective acting in the production effectively dramatizes the trauma of being shipwrecked in a strange land.



It also seems very possible that comedy is prioritized in this production simply because the physical acting allows for great moments of humor (or perhaps vice versa). Absolutely the most memorable scenes in the production are those that combined comedy with collective physicality—such as the sequence where Toby and Andrew hide as a “tree” (made possible because the “tree” onstage is created by other actors), and the scene when they sneak into Olivia’s house in the dead of night, in this production dramatized by the actors crawling out from under a gigantic sheet beneath which Olivia and other household members sleep. Moreover, the simplistic set means that when props or deliberately dramatic lighting are used, they seem much more effective because they are so unexpected. Feste’s comic accessories are actually incredibly simple and common-place—a sombrero, a clown nose, a dress (with false breasts that sometimes fell on the floor!), etc.—but here these common items, startlingly random, generate great laughs. Similarly, the exquisite lighting like a single spotlight on the imprisoned Malvolio—who is locked up not by bars but held down by other actor’s hands—is utterly chilling. Even in a production where people often act as set pieces, the prison made of hands goes a long way to showing the cruelty of Malvolio’s imprisonment, a cruelty that could drive him to a kind of madness. Malvolio also wears a loud, clunky metal leg brace in the production, which is an

ingenious costuming touch that makes the man imposing, even frightening, in the way that his social-climbing delusions of grandeur might have generated fear in an Elizabethan audience. Moreover, the pre-existing emphasis on his leg effectively emphasizes the infamous “yellow stocking” moment. After his torture, Malvolio limps onto the stage, holding the brace in his hands and using it as a crutch, painting a largely sympathetic picture of a man wronged.

Overall, I would never have predicted a production like Leipacher’s *Twelfth Night*, which contains more silence than music, more comedy than romance, and more physicality than atmospheric and complex sets and costumes—would have worked. It’s certainly not a *Twelfth Night* I expected, but it provides an excitingly different way to view Shakespeare’s delightful text.

13
(Olivier Theatre, 1/8/12)

Say what you will about Mike Bartlett’s play *13* (directed by Thea Sharrock), but it’s the kind of play that gets people talking. Discussing *13* with classmates helped me understand certain aspects of the play better—for example, why Bartlett opted to introduce the modern world through a kind of sci-fi concept. This baffled me for a long time, because the story that the play tells has nothing to do with science fiction. Nearly all of my favorite moments in the play, the moments that surprised me (such as the ambiguous way Sharrock dramatizes Ruby’s death, that first moment when the cube grows translucent and you can see all of the characters are inside, the club sequence, the moment when John knows in advance that it’s going to rain, etc.) are moments that suggest there might be something otherworldly about the plot. This surreal imagery is sustained through the very end of the production—the sequence where the characters all watch Youtube videos on their glowing iPads has a kind of surrealism to it, even though it’s a

completely realistic moment. Or perhaps by this point, the moment isn't sci-fi so much as high-tech.



But as far as the more extreme science fiction elements go, nearly all the effects created by the technological capabilities of the stage rather than moments deep in the script itself, seem totally bizarre. The effect it creates is similar to what would happen if Obama wore a Superman costume to deliver his State of the Union address. It would be interesting, eye-catching, and totally random. But it would generate attention, and a media field-day. It might even distract from his meaning long enough that we're shocked when he reaches his conclusion. Most importantly, if the President never explained his actions, the people would come up with a variety of possible meanings and maybe spend more time analyzing the outfit than the speech. The tech in *I3* is similarly distracting—my favorite moments in the production all seemed to detract from, rather than contribute to the central political and social message of the piece. I still maintain that they could have been lifted from *I3* and used (more effectively!) in an entirely different play. But then, would *I3* have been nearly as interesting without such moments?

After our discussion in class, I'm beginning to realize that that might have been the point. It could be that Sharrock uses technologically-generated spectacle to parallel the discussion of a

single, apocalyptic dream in the play. It's a dream that the media has created, a dream that comes specifically from a world that is full of technology that amazes and terrifies, that saves and kills on a daily basis, only it's too integrated into our daily lives for us to understand how deeply it affects us. So if it, combined with media fear-mongering, manifests as bad dreams, it shouldn't be surprising—the modern world has a lot of qualities that also correspond to bad dreams. And if *I3* just uses the superimposed sci-fi genre to catch our attention, is that any worse—or even any different—from the extreme ways the media spins social and political events?

However, I wonder if this analysis is trying too hard to connect the pieces. Was the nightmare was specific enough to prove that they actually had the same dream? From the ambiguous way the dream was described, it is possible the characters in the play dream about different terrifying things but never share enough information with each other to realize the truth. I would also be more convinced if more than twelve people had the nightmares. Our class came up with explanations for these as well, but again, it seems like Bartlett's play left enough unsolved that the audience has to struggle to guess at the play's message and motives. The best explanation I heard about what audiences can learn from the play came from Michael, when he said that the play suggests to audience members that “you have to make the choice that you think is right at the time and take responsibility for it if it turns out wrong later.” This makes sense with the storyline in the play (even if it problematically justifies Sarah killing Ruby), but I'm not sure it's *enough* for audiences. What kind of a message is that? From a play about religion, it's an oddly existentialist message, that your choices might be wrong because you might use evidence around you to make the wrong conclusion. Moreover, I'm not sure what I, as an audience member, am supposed to *do* with this information. Own up to my mistakes as I keep making them? Resign myself to chaos in an unpredictable world?

I think the genius in *I3* is that, like the characters' parallel dreams, the themes within the play are kept so nonspecific that you can connect and justify them nearly any way you like. This non-specificity is a motif throughout the production; at one point, someone blames Ruby's murder on John's failure to use specificity in his speeches. The lack of specificity in the plot isn't entirely clear at first because the technological aspects of the production are so stunning, the play's genre is ambiguous, and the storyline is so fractured. These elements of the production can absolutely be read as a metaphor for media spin...and yet, they can be read as almost any kind of statement about modern society. That's the beauty, and problem, of ambiguity. In this, one can justify *I3*'s fractured, ambiguous nature—but is that Bartlett's message, is it one of his many messages, or are we just yet again attempting to justify artistic choices that, due to their ambiguity, allow us to project our own ideas into the kind of murky ether that is *I3*, an ether that fails to divulge Bartlett's message at all?

The Pitmen Painters
(Duchess Theatre, 1/9/12)

From the opening moments of the Duchess Theatre's *Pitmen Painters*, directed by Max Roberts, it's clear that playwright Lee Hall holds great affection and respect for the story of the real-life "Pitmen Painters," also known as the Ashington Group. The first scene begins as five men enter a classroom, finished with work in the mines and ready to learn about "art appreciation." Humor and a little bit of lighthearted rivalry quickly characterizes and endears us to each member of the group. We see the men in their natural habitat, so to speak, and we have a good idea about their basic personalities long before their teacher Robert Lyon (Ian Kelly) enters the room and has to sort things out for himself. Lyon is the outsider, but we, the audience, are not. We're invited to sympathize with the miners (and other community members) as they

struggle to understand Lyon's rapid explanations. As one miner explains, "We just want to be able to look at a painting and know what it means." I think this is a really common frustration, unless you're a professional art critic, and it allows the audience to sympathize with the characters from the start.

The staging even offers the audience some assistance analyzing the paintings, as the projections on three screens above the stage—which seem absolutely organic within the world of the set—show close-ups of the art so the audience knows exactly where to look. Sometimes the screens are used cleverly for comic effect—for example, when a "Freudian symbol" (a bent-over pipe) appears sequentially, insistently, upon each of the screens. The screens also serve as a place to project unobtrusive reminders of the true story that inspired the play, as place names, dates and facts are displayed above the stage. The staging is very clever—cacophonous blasts of sound end almost all of the scenes, and the characters often change their clothes without leaving the stage. These moments effectively portray the chaos and discomfort of mining work without actually showing anything of the mines themselves. The moments when scene changes are accompanied by jazzy, era-specific music feel comforting but also suspicious in a way that seems to mirror the miners' confusion and sometimes discomfort with the upper-class art scene they encounter as their paintings gain increasing acclaim.



The play offers a mix of light humor, deep pathos, and even socio-political debate. Despite the effective storytelling, Hall's words and Roberts' staging leave two significant "loose ends." Both are connected to Oliver's (Trevor Fox) relationship to the upper class. Maybe these are purposefully left open in order to show the difficulty in bridging social divisions. Still, these unresolved themes frustrate, even haunt, long after the production ends. One such loose end is the question of whether Lyon ever truly understood and respected his students. In the professor's final scene he sketches out a picture of Oliver, Oliver critiques the picture as a depiction of Lyons' "idea of a miner" rather than a picture that shows Oliver himself. Lyon even dresses Oliver in old-fashioned mining clothes for the portrait. Though this is art advice, the fact that it is offered in Lyon's final scene shows a problematic, and unresolved, disconnect between the teacher and the student. Did Lyon, in real life, ever truly understand and respect his pupils, or did he objectify them to secure academic prestige? It seems tragic to imagine that such a long relationship would end without the parties ever having seen eye-to-eye.

The other "loose end" is introduced when private collector and art patron Helen Sutherland (Joy Brook) tells Oliver that his paintings have not improved as much as she would have hoped. She accuses him of failing to convey desire in his art. There's a somewhat

ambiguous relationship between Helen and Oliver throughout the play, one that could turn romantic in any number of moments. Thus, her critique of Oliver's paintings may come from a personal regret that they never dated. However, there seems to be a painful sacrifice if she is telling the truth, and that Oliver forfeits all sexual desire, even all romantic love, in order to preserve his art and his community. The audience is offered no evidence to deny her claim. The play ends as Oliver returns to the group with a hand-painted banner supporting the socialist movement. He has used his art to convey the social change he wants, but he also proves Helen's point entirely. Are sexual desire and social change totally incompatible? It seems problematic, even limiting, if the pitmen's lives are confined to mining and art. Some of this may be narrative economy, and some of it may be truth. But by failing to really depict this aspect of the pitmen's lives, Hall denies the men full sexual maturity and therefore runs the risk of the audience too viewing the men in a somewhat limited, objectified capacity.

Noises Off
(Old Vic Theatre, 1/10/12)

I should probably begin by stating that *Noises Off* (directed by Lindsay Posner) was one of my favorite productions we saw over the entire course of Theatre in England. I'm a big fan of meta-theatrical humor and wit; this play is bursting to the seams with both. I feel a compulsive need to stop writing this journal entry right now and go read everything Michael Frayn has ever written. I'll restrain myself, but don't be surprised if this entry is a little overly enthusiastic.

Part of what fascinates me about this play is how much depth exists beneath the highly comical surface. I don't think I've ever discussed comedy with the depth our class approached *Noises Off* or *One Man, Two Guvnors*. One aspect we touched on in discussion is the extent to

which *Noises Off* fails to provide the traditional content of a comedy. Comic strategies—repetition, continuing to top itself, slapstick, etc.—were employed to tell what’s actually a pretty tragic story. By the third act of *Noises Off*, a play that seemed disastrous on opening night has become utterly incomprehensible, as couples split up, an old man chases down a bottle of alcohol, and so forth. When the cast struggles with how to end the play, Dotty and Belinda improvise a wedding. Belinda adds, “What a happy ending... to the... to the first act!” This totally unbelievable wedding mocks traditional happy endings—such as those found in Shakespearean comedy or even *One Man, Two Guvvons*, where despite all the chaos the characters find “rebirth, reconciliation, and renewal” (to use Professor Kegl’s terminology) at the end. In *Noises Off* the characters have faced an entire play’s worth of chaos, only to end with more chaos. So much of the humor comes from a sense of *schadenfreude*, which seems in part to be a result of the metahumor that so capitalizes on the characters’ limited awareness. The characters fret about their performances onstage, but of course the actors are onstage the entire time, even when they are not acting in their characters from *Nothing On* (the play acted out through *Noises Off*). One of my favorite comic moments from the first act occurs when elderly Selsdon forgets his line. The director prompts him, “It’s so hard to face retirement!” “What?” Selsdon calls back. Selsdon forgets a line in the play that he simultaneously fails to acknowledge in real life, as the old age makes it hard for him to remember lines and here the director indicates it is high time for him to retire as well.



Another type of depth is provided by the play's failure to present absolutes, in a way that mirrors everyday life. As Kieran pointed out in class, the play is constructed so that the characters never stay permanently behind doors, or ever strip fully naked. There's a kind of tragic and frustrating inability to reach a permanent state of any kind. This is enacted when Gary topples down the stairs and momentarily appears to be dead. He isn't dead, of course—the audience and the characters are not offered any such lasting satisfaction. If viewed as a religious metaphor, the characters are trapped in purgatory and unable to reach heaven or hell. If viewed as an existentialist one, the characters are trapped in the play as in everyday life, unable to ever die. The play even struggles to provide the finality of an ending, as the first act of *Nothing On* finishes but the curtain gets stuck. After the characters manage to pull the curtain down, it breaks so the Seldons still remain onstage. *Noises Off* is no *Waiting for Godot*, as the characters have a goal and an endgame. But their pre-destined (scripted) parts unravel in the third act until their motives are stripped down to finally reaching some kind of confusion. The camaraderie and the sense of a collective goal that unite the characters at the end is even similar to the way Vladimir's and Estragon's partnership sustains them through their endless wait.

If *Jerusalem* is a play that isolates us and urges us to introspection, *Noises Off* is a play that brings us together, creates a collective echo of laughter at the word “sardines,” and helps us bear the harsh realities of life because, at the very least, we can laugh about the absurdity of it all.

One Man, Two Guvnors
(Adelphi Theatre, 1/11/12)

One Man, Two Guvnors (directed by Nicholas Hytner), written by Richard Bean, could be the polar opposite of *Noises Off*. The latter play is minutely planned and executed, situated in a timeless location, and chaotically crashes into its ending. By contrast, *One Man, Two Guvnors* employs improvisation, is specifically set in the 60s, and ends with marriages, dance, and a song with a refrain that seems to embody the spirit of comedy—“Tomorrow Looks Good From Here.”

The play is based on the classic Italian play *Servant of Two Masters*, by Carlo Goldoni. However, *One Man, Two Guvnors* has a decidedly British twist. Beyond reviving the long tradition of *commedia dell'arte* and adapting it to a play from the mid-1700s, Bean’s play is set in the 1960s, thus creating yet another level of nostalgia. There’s a definite rosy glow put on this past—busty feminist Dolly (Suzie Toase) waxes poetic about a future where a female Prime Minister will spread kindness and equality in the land. The future has seen Maggie Thatcher and so much other chaos, but in the idyllic past of the show the characters can get excited about the wonders of “a pub that does food.”



One aspect of the show that shocked me at first was the use of audience participation. There has been a distinct absence of actor-audience interaction onstage throughout the trip. From what I can tell through internet research, however, audience participation is common enough in *commedia dell'arte*—at the very least the genre does not practice the same kind of fourth-wall tradition as standard theatre fare today. In addition, the other show with the most audience participation was the Richmond Theatre *Cinderella*; it makes sense that a nation raised on pantomimes would be comfortable responding directly to Francis Henshall (James Corden) when he asks if anyone in the audience has a sandwich. In truth, the audience begins asking, “is this actually part of the show?” from the moment the band *The Craze* begins playing onstage about ten minutes before the show starts as people are still finding their seats. The answer, in nearly every instance, is “yes.” One of the many tricks *One Man, Two Guvnors* employs is two fake audience members, “plants” who seem to change the flow of the production. Early in the show Francis needs help picking up a trunk, and he selects two members of the audience to help him out. These are real theatregoers, and their genuine confusion and amusement might be hard to recreate. Later on, though, when Francis asks for a sandwich, an actor planted in the audience answers that he has one. Corden does a very convincing job of seeming shocked at the man; he gets a great laugh when he can’t stop laughing to carry on with the production as another actor

enters the scene. “Do you see this man?” Corden asks, pointing to the other actor and still laughing. “He only had three lines in this show, and you just got rid of two of them. He hates you.” Similarly, there was a pretty compelling performance by Clare Thomson who pretended to be an reluctant audience volunteer who gets sprayed, at the very end of act one, with a fire extinguisher.

As a theatregoer I have mixed opinions about the idea of faux-improv. It’s absolutely an effective trick—at the end of the first act, I was appalled that the play would ruin the woman’s dress, even for the sake of comedy. It was startling and shocking—an absolutely effective moment in a play whose constant comic styling made it more and more difficult to top its own level of hilariousness. The other effect of the audience plants, and the way they were treated by the cast, is that it creates a kind of intimacy in the performance. James Corden’s breaking character over the sandwich made us feel like we had seen a totally unique, special performance of *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Clare’s nervous and body-shaking laughter as Corden maneuvered her into more and more ridiculous positions (at one point she hid under the table with her bottom half awkwardly sticking out behind) made us empathize with her because she felt like “one of us.” It was exciting to feel that kind of camaraderie with a room full of strangers, but the fact that it was faked camaraderie leaves me a little bit sad. I’ll get over it—I know that if the theatre broke what some might view as a sacred trust between the actors (the storytellers) and the audience (the gullible listeners), they did it for the sake of making us laugh.

Matilda The Musical
(Cambridge Theatre, 1/11/12)

If seeing *Cinderella* let us feel like kids again, and facing the end of *The Charity that Began at Home* or *Dublin Carol* made us feel like adults, the real magic of *Matilda the Musical*

(directed by Matthew Warchus) is that the characters and production creates something in between an adult world and a child's world, an impossible, beautiful world where adults are once more immersed in childish imagination, innocence, and energy, and children root for a girl with an adult vocabulary and more smarts than her family and headmistress combined. This paradoxical world is created through nearly every element of the production—lyrics, characterization, and the visual aesthetic.

Matilda the Musical features music and lyrics by Tim Minchin, a man who writes and performs satiric songs including “Bears Don’t Dig on Dancing” and “Woody Allen Jesus.” His lyrics for *Matilda* are a bit more family-friendly but still feature a very adult vocabulary and wit. In the opening song, “Miracle,” the children in the cast sing, “ever since the day Doc chopped the umbilical cord / it’s been clear there’s no peer for a miracle like me.” There’s something decidedly adult about the humor in this sentence—in part because of the use of “umbilical cord,” but also in the blunt sound of the “Doc/chopped” rhyme (as pronounced in a British accent) and the wit in “it’s been clear there’s no peer” rhyme. In *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981)*, Stephen Sondheim repeatedly discusses the importance of writing lyrics that could come from the character singing them. He critiques Alan Jay Lerner for writing Henry Higgins’ lyrics that run-on between musical lines (Sondheim’s explanation: as a professor of language, he should have better control over his vocabulary) and questions his own early work in “I Feel Pretty” when the newly immigrated Maria has enough control of English to create the interior rhyme, “I feel pretty and witty and bright / That I pity any girl who isn’t me tonight.” I can imagine Sondheim would similarly critique Minchin’s work on the same principle, but Minchin is absolutely writing for his characters—the children of *Matilda* aren’t your average children. They’re fantastically precocious. To offer further proof, the very important second act opener (in

The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theatre Richard Kislán names the second act opener one of the four most important songs in a musical) isn't about the plot of *Matilda* at all. *Matilda* doesn't even sing in the song itself. Rather Minchin wrote a musical interlude, "When I Grow Up," which celebrates the innocence of childhood as the children long to become adults.



Matilda may not sing "When I Grow Up" because most of the adults in her world are uninspiring role models—Ms. Trunchbull is terrifying and her parents are ignorant and bratty, as evidenced by her mother's failure to realize she was pregnant until moments before delivery and her father's insistence on calling her "boy." The adults who are kind to her, Miss Honey and the librarian, both act like children at times—and it's *Matilda*'s childish determination to "put [things] right" (from "Naughty") that will help Miss Honey gain independence from Ms. Trunchbull. *Matilda* still yearns for parent figures, as expressed through her story about the escapologist who becomes an imaginary surrogate father figure (in "I'm Here"). It's worth noting that the most responsible parents in *Matilda the Musical* are imaginary.

Finally, the visual elements represent the final component that keeps *Matilda* suspended between childhood and adulthood. This may be the most important component—watching special effect after special effect made the set seem like a magic box. The moment Ms.

Trunchbull puts everyone in “Chokey” and laser beams descend on the audience was wonderfully unpredictable. It is impossible to watch *Matilda* and lament your lost sense of wonder—the effects onstage (including the moving chalk, which was engineered by a professional illusionist and remains a secret from most of the creative team) vividly realize a child’s imagination for all to see. In class we discussed how the set appears to be made out of blocks and scrabble tiles, which present childhood toys that encourage children to use their imagination (even the letter tiles can make words and stories) in strong contrast to the Wormwood family’s beloved television. Finally, the show cast adults as a set of older children, and children as tiny doctors in the opening number, showing a kind of surreal ability for children and adults to move between their socially designated realms. “Surreal” is a good word for *Matilda the Musical* in general, as it presents a wonderfully paradoxical, ageless experience that feels more than a little bit miraculous to observe.

Comedy of Errors
(Olivier Theatre, 1/12/12)

This might just be me, but I feel like sometimes you see a production of a play and you know, for you, it is the definitive production of that play. All other productions will be measured by this one. Unfortunately for the National Theatre, I saw my definitive *Comedy of Errors* (until further notice, anyway) in high school. So I didn’t consciously go into this production thinking it would be bad—I was really excited about it, actually—but I don’t think I was the least biased viewer either.

That said, there were things I like about the National Theatre’s production of *Comedy of Errors* (directed by Dominic Cooke). The gigantic set is effectively imposing, presenting both Antipholus of Syracuse and the audience with an imposing, at times menacing, new world to

explore. The sheer number of extras, each seeming to enact their own drama in the corners of the stage (most memorably the knitting dominatrix seen through an apartment window), gives the stage a crowded, urban atmosphere, making it clear that Antipholus' story was only one of many narratives taking place in the city. The set feels effectively gritty and urban, so when Antipholus (either one) attacks Dromio (also either one) the violence is contextualized by a city atmosphere that is also home to prostitutes, gang leaders (as Cooke chose to characterize Solinus), and more.



The set isn't entirely realistic, however, and one near-constant reminder of this fact is the parallel set up of the stage, crafted so there are often two equally sized buildings next to each other, another kind of twinning, or three buildings with the two large buildings on either side of a small one. The latter set-up is employed in the final scene, where each pair of twins (and Adriana and Luciana, whose matching blonde hair in this production renders them twin-like themselves) enter the abbey together. Finally, I think Emilia (Pamela Nomvete) and Aegeon (Joseph Mydell) give particularly moving performances, so that their union at the end of the play, which could seem incredibly random, becomes the most moving part of the entire production.

In general, however, I found Cooke's production of *Comedy of Errors* frustrating to watch. Many technological and staging aspects of the production seem crafted with an

overarching determination to minimize the use of the actual Shakespeare text. The constant movement of extras onstage, while atmospheric, distracts from the actors' speeches. This may be one reason why most laughs from the audience occur during moments of physical comedy, or other non-scripted reactions (such as the reactions from the men in the pool hall as Adriana tries to win Antipholus back). There's nothing wrong with nonverbal humor, but Shakespeare's text is genuinely funny, and yet many of the lines that demand laughs are spoken to dead silence. Cooke's approach to the text seems to be "rush through it, get to the good stuff" (such as an elaborate chase sequence toward the end of the show), rather than to accentuate what is already funny in the original script. In another example, Aegeon's opening prologue is almost entirely inaudible as actors move all over the stage, providing visuals and loud sound effects that convey his story.

Another thing I find frustrating is a near-consistent lack of integrity in the characterization. The two sisters snivel and cry at Antipholus' heels in caricatures of their gender. Antipholus of Syracuse sleeps with Adriana without apparent regret, then almost instantly attempts to seduce Luciana. Except for Emilia and Aegeon, all of the main characters are denied agency and integrity for the sake of a comic effect. This proves more problematic, however, for the women than the men. At least the men, as dubious as their actions are, keep their wealth and prestige, in part because of the gender dynamics standard when the play was written. I think it's much more problematic to remove agency from Luciana and Adriana, who are depicted as fairly dependent on men in the original text already.

Our discussions about the intended audience for Cooke's production—teenagers with short attention spans and probably those with a preexisting knowledge of the play—helped me to

understand his directorial choices. All the same, I wish Cooke had decided to show the teenagers that Shakespeare's writing is as funny and exciting as their own fast-paced modern worlds.

Haunted Child

Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, 1/13/12)

Like my reaction to Rickson's *Hamlet*, I am under the distinct impression that I left Joe Penhall's new play *Haunted Child* (directed by Jeremy Herrin) with a very different interpretation of the characters. I understood that Julie (Sophie Okonedo)'s character faces a challenging parenting situation, but throughout the play I was put off by her refusal to answer Thomas's (Jack Boulter) questions about his father. I was also upset by her complete denial of Douglas' (Ben Daniels) new beliefs, certainly before it is made clear that he is in a cult. In short, I saw the beginning of Act Two, where Julie's hair is blown out and Douglas' hair is slicked back and he trudges into the kitchen, to be a kind of condemnation of Julie. While the cult turns Douglas into an irresponsible, dangerous figure, totally unequipped to be a parent, it also gives him an optimism and (on the surface at least) a sense of openness that is sorely lacking in the house. This might be the clearest in the scene where Douglas tells Thomas about the cult. It's frightening, because he succeeds in stirring Thomas's interest about the cult. At the same time, it shows one of the only scenes in the play when Thomas's questions are answered in full, and where the parent seems to respect the child. Of course it's a sham—Douglas cares more about pleasing his cult than pleasing his son. But if the means didn't justify his ends, the means still seem important here. I'm not saying I found Douglas admirable in any way, but I was far more critical of Julie than other students in the class.



In general I like that *Haunted Child* raises difficult questions, but I think the answers are discovered a little too easily. Julie is good, Douglas is bad. Julie cares about Thomas, Douglas cares about pleasing his “new family.” The concept of being haunted, suggests a lingering person or concept that you feel powerless to escape. In the opening scene, Julie says she feels haunted by Douglas in his absence. However, much of the ghost metaphors and imagery quickly fell apart after the first scene; either Penhall or Herrin (or possibly both) seems to forsake this concept of lingering doubts. Julie is certain she has made the correct choice. Douglas does not linger in her memory, but literally returns in the final scene. If one takes the title literally, it seems possible that Thomas will be haunted, perhaps in adulthood, by his parents’ conflict, especially since Julie fails to answer many of his questions about the issue. But if Thomas is haunted or traumatized, the script largely ignores this to show Douglas’ seduction of Julie into the cult, and Julie’s seduction of Douglas out of the cult (neither of which are successful).

After hearing Professor Peck read the final pages of the script to the class, wherein Douglas’ return to the house is prefaced by an extensive sequence of shaking doorknobs, another instance of ghostly imagery, I wonder if Herrin’s direction put strong focus on realism. Some of Penhall’s script would be difficult to execute—it was utterly unconvincing that Douglas had his teeth his removed when they are there for all to see, but I have no idea how stage makeup could

make his teeth appear absent. I'd be interested to compare the script to the production—I wonder if some of the haunting, and perhaps some of the depth, was lost in execution.

Les Misérables

(Queen's Theatre, 1/14/12)

As a musical theatre enthusiast, it's a little bit embarrassing for me to confess that this was the first time I have ever seen (or even heard the full soundtrack for) *Les Misérables* (directed by Trevor Nunn). However, I am absolutely grateful Pam called the box office to pick up tickets, and I have a far better understanding of why the show is so popular.

For one thing, Claude-Michel Schönberg's score is riveting. I have no idea how well his music reflects early 19th-century France (the heavy use of synthesizers in songs like "Dog Eats Dog" suggests a significantly more modern aesthetic, befitting a show first performed in 1980), but, when appropriate, the music effectively conveys sheer energy and revolutionary spirit (in "Red and Black" and in "Do You Hear the People Sing?"). The score creates and employs motifs to a fault, so that Fantine and Eponine both sing the melody from "On My Own" at various moments in the score, connecting the characters as two women who die before their time (Fantine from consumption, Eponine from a gunshot fired around the time of the 1832 Paris Uprising). The "Master of the House" theme used in the first act characterizes the Thénardiens as persuasive, humorous, and cunning conmen, and it returns after the uprising ends in "Beggars at the Feast" to reassure the audience that life for the characters has resumed a kind of normality.



The show is based on Victor Hugo's identically titled novel from 1862, and this helps explain why the musical's story becomes (in my opinion) a little unwieldy. The show doesn't have a "book" in the traditional sense, since everything is sung-through. It begins with two separate prologues in an attempt to explain the lives of the parent generation (including protagonist Jean Valjean and Fantine, Cosette's mother) and Cosette's childhood. Fifteen songs later, (out of a total twenty-six songs in Act One) the main story begins, though I'm not sure you can count it as the "main" story if it takes up fewer than half the songs in the first act. On the other hand, it's the first time in the staging that we see a major set piece—two cleverly-constructed barricades, packed with all sorts of boxes and barrels, that move and rotate to imitate different parts of the city. Going back to the issue of pacing, the second act also features significant leaps through time, so that after fifteen songs sung in the "main" time period, there are another eight songs to go before the end of the musical. I think the prologues work a bit better than the epilogue—even though I enjoyed the music, characters, and plot, I was getting a bit restless by the end. It's also very tempting to contrast the musical with the 1998 film adaptation of the novel, directed by Billie August, which effectively condenses the novel's plot into a neat 134 minutes.

Despite my complaints about length, however, the musical is very well put-together, full of spectacle, rousing song, and a cleverly constructed set that conveyed the (many) changes in time and location fairly effectively. I should also add that I may have had far fewer complaints with the runtime if I had felt more engaged with the particular cast. In large part, I think that had to do with my seating—I had “partially restricted” seats in the circle, and the production included lots of “stand and sing” numbers where the characters faced front and emoted with the audience before them. The staging absolutely favored people in the stalls, and had I been sitting there I might have engaged more with the characters.

I had the good fortune to sit next to a British student who has seen the show five times before (!) and acted as our resident expert. He explained to me that our particular Eponine was played by Alexia Khadime, a mezzo-soprano who proved popular for playing Elphaba in *Wicked*. From what I’d previously heard of the play, Eponine (who dies in the arms of her unrequited love) often acts as the emotional center of the play. However Khadime’s brassy voice made her Eponine a strong female figure with lots of agency (especially in her solo song “On My Own”). I think this made her death, where she depends on Marius’ arms to hold her, a little less effective. Her portrayal created a wonderful character, but I’m not sure it was the right character for the show. On the other hand, our Jean Valjean (Ramin Karimloo) had incredibly strong vocals. However, the most moving member of the cast proved to be the child actor who played an adorably winning Gavroche,⁷ a street urchin who dies collecting ammunition for the fighters behind the barricades. I definitely cried at his death. That, in a way, proved the production

⁷ Unfortunately, I was unable to discover who played Gavroche in our production. I do know it was one of three young actors who rotate through the role: Rory McMenamin, Tommy Rodger, or Marc Wadhvani. I did find one online review that praised Marc Wadhvani; I wouldn’t be surprised if he was in our production as well.

successful—*Les Misérables* is a show written to engage audiences emotionally, to provide deep characterization for its large cast, and to convey the spirit of rebellion.

Crazy for You
(Novello Theatre, 1/14/12)

Just like *Comedy of Errors*, I have strong high-school nostalgia for *Crazy for You*. (I never performed theatre in high school but I was a big fan of our shows!) Despite my very critical perspective, however, I found our Timothy Sheader-directed version lots of fun. I've spent a lot of time since the show reflecting on Sheader's depiction of America in the 1930s. Considering this was a British production, I'm not entirely surprised that it didn't feel nearly as *American* so much as a kind of sunny fantasy world, perhaps something out of a movie starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The last few minutes of the production provide a direct tribute to the dancing duo, complete with a sparkling gown for Polly (Clare Foster), a fog-covered stage that mimics clouds, and a glittery moon that lifts Polly and Bobby (Sean Palmer) above the stage after they finish their waltz.

However, I think an important reason why this production didn't feel as "American" as I might have expected, and in the end less effective than it might have been, is that the production failed to effectively distinguish between Manhattan and Deadrock. This might seem like a ridiculous claim—Deadrock was effectively characterized by wooden slat buildings and spitting cowboys, creating a strong parody of the Midwest. However, the set in Sheader's Manhattan was created out of the same wooden-slat material as Deadrock, with the same color-changing cyc (cyclorama) in the background as in Deadrock. As a result, I didn't believe that Manhattan was a place Bobby really needed to escape from. He could conjure brightly-colored showgirls with his imagination and dance on theatres made of wooden planks (which suggest a kind of homemade,

imaginative construction as well). Moreover, when Bobby first meets Polly he sings “have some pity on an easterner” (in “Could You Use Me?”), so clearly the distinction between the American east (a crowded, hectic world where no one listened twice to Bobby’s requests) and the west (a desolate and run-down town that also provides a land of opportunity where Bobby can pioneer his own theatrical production) is an important one. There could not be a stronger contrast between Sheader’s depiction of the east and the claustrophobic, black-and-white set from the original production, as seen at the Tony Awards on Youtube.⁸ The original set erupts in color only when Bobby’s imagination takes over—and even then the color is a pale pink rather than the zealous teal-and-blue costumes in Sheader’s production.



Sheader’s *Crazy For You* originally premiered at the Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre before transferring to the Novello, so I imagine they chose a relatively simple set because of their original venue—Palmer’s Bobby didn’t tap-dance on top of a car (a memorable moment from the original production), and so forth. All the same, small changes might have made this contrast a bit more clear. In the show itself, the first large number (“I Can’t Be Bothered Now”), set in Manhattan, feels a bit “off,” somehow lacking the full energy or imagination that makes it so

⁸ <http://youtu.be/MbGdzR7vzYc>

exciting to see onstage. It seems likely this is because the stage is already a space of imagination long before Bobby starts singing. However, the *Crazy for You* ensemble pulls together effectively in time for “Slap that Bass.” From that moment on, the largest numbers felt like watching someone perform a musical-theatre marathon (the Act One finale, “I’ve Got Rhythm” had to be at least seven minutes long), exhausting but also exhilarating and lots of fun. The cast seems to burst with energy, up until Palmer’s adorable nod to the audience at the very end of the last curtain call. The costume changes, cleverly-placed special effects (like the changing saloon sign), and the cheesy 1930s-era jokes echo and enhance the cast’s lively attitude. If the production’s resources (set complexity and possibly cast size) are more limited than I would have expected for a hit West End musical, the cast absolutely makes up for such losses with their sheer enthusiasm.

Clare Foster’s impressive vocal talents make Polly’s iconic ballads (most famously “Someone to Watch Over Me”) a delight to hear, and the actress carries enough emotional weight to navigate and enliven the humorously frequent ups and downs in her relationship with Bobby. Sean Palmer sparkles with energy, but I wish he’d presented deeper emotions at appropriate points. He seems to take his character’s name—“Bobby Child”—to heart and has a somewhat bratty attitude toward his foibles in love, especially when Polly refuses to believe he was pretending to be Bela Zangler. The “real” Zangler (David Burt) captures the tricky proper mix of rude New Yorker energy in the first act and adorable desperation over Tess in the second act without making the transition seem out-of-character.