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Saturday December 31, First Official Day of Class

Today, our first official day of play-going, was a two-play day and I think jumping right into our rigorous schedule was a good idea. Our matinee was *A New Way To Please You; or, The Old Law*. What struck me the most about this play is the extent to which none of the main characters, not even Cleanthes (the character most closely resembling a traditional “hero”), can be labeled good or bad. For example, Cleanthes’ virtuous devotion to his father, Leonides, is complicated by his cruel rejection of his wife, Hippolita, when their scheme to protect Leonides from a certain death by hiding him is revealed. This change in Cleanthes’ behavior is signaled nicely by the removal of the cross Matt Ryan wore in every scene prior to this point in the play, indicating a kind of “fall from grace” which, ultimately reminds us that “good” people can behave badly and, by extension, “bad” people can perform good deeds (clothed entirely in neutral colors—an indication that he is different from his greedy peers who are dressed in increasingly ridiculous costumes—the cross was arguably the most noticeable feature of Cleanthes’ costume so its removal seemed particularly noteworthy to me). Human behavior, with all of its eccentricities or flaws, and not overly simplistic or romanticized ideals, is the subject of this play.

Evander’s edict, that all men over the age of eighty and all women over the age of sixty be put to death, introduces the inevitable and equally uncomfortable reality of death

to this pointed and frequently humorous exploration of human conduct. To be a mature adult and functional member of society, an individual must accept death as a reality. In this regard, *A New Way to Please You* reminded me a lot of *Hamlet*—"The readiness is all". Thus, Cleanthes' attempt to shield his father from the law while admirable is also a sign of his own immaturity as well as an act that consciously breaks the law. But immaturity is not restricted to the young as Lisander's ridiculous attempts to deny his age—first by marrying a young woman and subsequently by literally challenging her more age appropriate suitors to duels in dancing, fencing, and drinking—comically suggest. As both of these examples suggest, immaturity is frequently associated with selfishness (Cleanthes wants to save his father regardless of the law, Lisander marries young to enjoy the lustful benefits of youth), an association that is perhaps most apparent in the character of Simonides.

The first thing Simonides does after he believes he has inherited his father's estate is to fire all the household servants, ultimately creating a body of displaced people. Immaturity is, therefore, a problem with serious social implications. Evander's final edict, that sons cannot inherit until they are mature, is an attempt to address some of the more dangerous consequences of immaturity exhibited in response to his law proclaiming death to the old. How exactly maturity can be effectively judged remains unclear and I would argue that this ambiguity is intentional. For as much as we are meant to feel relieved that Simonides and his fellow fools are removed from their positions of power as judges and replaced by Cleanthes, I do not think we are meant to overlook or forget Cleanthes' own juvenile behavior—it is no coincidence that his immature sexism is revealed immediately before he is brought to trial. Thus, the very act of judging or the

passing of judgment is problematized although the play definitely rejects the selfish profit embodied by Simonides and Gnotho in favor of the selfless behavior that benefits the community as a whole best embodied by Cleanthes' parents (and, by extension, through his own efforts to save his father) and Evander himself.

The production itself suffered from a lot of awkward blocking which, as we discussed in class, is probably the result of the fact that it was designed for the thrust stage of The Swan in Stratford. For example, there were a lot of moments in which an actor would have to turn around to deliver a line directly to the audience. Consequently, many of these moments—whether serious or funny—came across as forced or overly theatrical. That being said, I think this play functioned as a good introduction to many of the themes that went on to dominate our subsequent class discussions. I really appreciated the extent to which the production enjoyed the satirical elements within the text (the wild costumes and heightened sound effects are just two examples that come to mind). The actors seemed to really be having fun so I found it impossible not to do likewise.

Like *A New Way to Please You*, *Twelfth Night* is very much concerned with the themes of social order and selfish immaturity. The shipwreck that strands both Viola and Sebastian in a foreign land is the first of many challenges to an established social order. Believing she is alone in a hostile country, Viola re-names herself, Cesario, which functions as a birthing metaphor. This symbolic gesture of her need to be re-born suggests that Viola understands the complex relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live, and is able to adapt accordingly. Feste and Maria are the only two other characters that seem to share this ability. They both recognize and are

able to fulfill their obligations as servants while simultaneously enjoying themselves in the twelfth night activities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of the action of the play is triggered by one of these three “director” characters who understand the larger implications of their own actions.

Love poses another—arguably the greatest—challenge to social order. Both Orsino and Olivia exemplify the extent to which selfish desires can hinder communal progress. Orsino, in scenes of solitary pining, proves himself to be in love with the concept of love and not Olivia. His desire to be an ideal lover results in a theatrical and fruitless courtship of Olivia in which his oaths of undying love, always delivered by a servant, are understandably rejected as tedious by Olivia herself, whose own desire to be an icon of mourning similarly withdraws her from the community in which she has social obligations or responsibilities. As Feste duly notes, it is somewhat ridiculous to mourn excessively for a brother who is thought to be in heaven. Olivia is using the guise of mourning to hide from the pressure to marry. Her attraction to Cesario is an attraction of like to like, for it is Cesario’s effeminate nature that makes Olivia’s seduction possible. The artificial objects of both Orsino’s and Olivia’s love are replaced by the potential for real love with the revelation at the end of the play but Malvolio’s curse and Feste’s somber song raise doubt about the nature and duration of this newly found happiness.

Malvolio is a fascinating combination of propriety and desire. He takes everything seriously with regards to his position as a trusted servant. Everything he says and does is planned. His desire to marry Olivia is the one example of his behavior going against the established social order and his motives for wanting to do so are selfish: lust and, more importantly, self-elevation. The wonderful staging of his prison scene, in

which the stage was lit brightly but the actors all moved around as if blinded by darkness, exemplified the extent to which Malvolio was disconnected from everyone else onstage. But this does not mean that he deserves to be abused in the way that he was. I do not think we are meant to entirely approve of the community's efforts to shame Malvolio who, although ridiculous in his vanity, poses no real threat to anyone.

While this production was also staged for the Swan Theater, it translated much better to the Novello's stage than *A New Way to Please You* did to the stage at Trafalgar Studios. The actors frequently entered or exited through the audience and the musicians moved from being highly visible onstage to being highly visible in the box seats of the audience. Props were lowered and removed from above, giving the distinct impression that things were indeed falling from the heavens. The traditional boundaries between the stage and the audience, and between onstage and off were intentionally being broken. The costumes also challenged our expectations for specificity of time or place since they were clearly modernized but also deliberately ambiguous. I must confess that I still cannot quite make sense of the face paint on Viola, Sebastian, and Feste. I liked the fact that the clown white links the three characters but do not understand why the twins had blue eye make-up unless it is just to emphasize the fact that they are twins. I was similarly intrigued by the image of the eyes on the back wall of the stage. As far as I could tell, they were Olivia's but what purpose they served I do not know. I was very impressed by the use of music throughout the show. It was at times jarring, even atonal—like when Orsino delivers his famous line, “If music be the food of love play on...”(the effect here being comical). In other instances it was quite beautiful and haunting. Feste's voice was particularly powerful. I think the sadness of his character as

depicted in this production through the love triangle with Maria and Sir Toby was really well done. Most other stagings of this show that I've seen make light of the "fool's melancholy" and I think that is a great injustice to Shakespeare's text. Finally, Clive Wood and John Mackay as Sir Toby and Sir Andrew delivered some of the best physical comedy I have seen in a really long time. Their timing was impeccable.

Sunday January 1

This was a free day for us. I spent it with my family, who were still visiting at that point in time. We took a bus trip to Warwick Castle, Stratford, and Oxford. You really need a full day to do one of these trips so it worked out well. Learning how to time your sightseeing around the plays without getting completely exhausted and sick is perhaps the biggest challenge of this course since there is so much to do and see!

Monday January 2

We only had one play to see today and it was an evening performance so I spent the afternoon walking around Covent Garden and Oxford Street doing some shopping in the fabulous after Christmas sales.

Our show for the day, *The History Boys*, surprised me in the extent to which it too functioned as a commentary on the tension between individual desire and communal expectation. This tension is most apparent in the different approaches to education exhibited by Hector and Irwin. Hector thinks learning should be personal. He is interested in the ideas and interests of each of the boys as individuals. The "sheer, calculated silliness" he encourages in his classroom provides his students with a context

for the literature they are learning while also challenging them to use their imaginations to make the ideas they are learning their own. Irwin, on the other hand, is simply interested in teaching the boys how to manipulate facts so that they can do well on their placement exams. He is more interested in test results and school rankings than he is the development of the boys. Hector encourages the boys to remain true to themselves while Irwin wants them to become traditional success stories by gaining entrance to Cambridge or Oxford.

Interestingly enough, neither Hector nor Irwin is depicted as being particularly happy. Hector comes across as terrifically lonely. His marriage is passionless and he seems to have little else outside of the boys and literature. His overwhelming desire to connect with the boys as exemplified in the “Drummer Hodge” scene with Posner (where he talks about the ability of writing to reach out and touch the reader and literally reaches out to comfort the distraught Posner) and, more disturbingly, by his fondling of his favorite students is both understandable and pathetic. While we know little about Irwin’s personal life, he too appears lonely but for different reasons. Perhaps isolated is a better word—he knows he is a phony. He is a cripple before he is actually crippled which is, I think, why both the first scene of the play and the first scene after the intermission both depict Irwin in his wheelchair before we as an audience know what happened to him. Furthermore, the boys that most resemble each of these men also complicate our ability to gauge success or happiness. Posner, who like Hector desperately wants to connect with others on an individual basis, ends up alone and depressed. Similarly, the manipulative nature Dakin learns from Irwin turns him into one of the most deplorably shallow characters within the play.

As far as I can tell, Alan Bennett agrees with Hector's teaching methods over Irwin's—although he does not completely dismiss the importance of getting into a good university or even doing well on placement tests. More than anyone else, I think Rudge comes across as the play's greatest success story. He learns as much as he can about everything without giving up what truly interests him—golf. He works the system enough to get into university but does not sell himself out in the process. The fact that he is not one of the most predominant speakers or even a steadfast presence on the stage throughout the play is one of the many strong points of Bennett's writing. What I'm not sure I understand completely is why he wrote homoeroticism into the characters of both Hector and Irwin. I do not think the incidents on Hector's motorcycle are about sex (how could they be, he's driving after all). Ultimately, it is my belief that they function as an effective metaphor for Hector's desperate desire to connect with his pupils—but then why make Irwin appear to be a closeted homosexual? It seems to me as though doing so “cheapens” the complex nature of Hector's confused behavior by making it fairly easy to focus on the issue of sexuality instead of the issues of connection and loneliness.

I know this play is going to Broadway and I think this issue, combined with the fact that the kind of public school education geared towards college entrance exams has no direct equivalent in the United States, might make it hard for a North American audience to fully appreciate. I know that I felt at times as though I were missing some of the jokes because I did not have the same educational experiences as the boys being depicted onstage. That being said, however, I thought that this was an excellent production of a very interesting and pointedly insightful play.

Tuesday January 3

There was no time to really do anything in the city this morning since we had to travel to zone 4 to see our designated plays. The first of the two performances was an optional viewing of the holiday pantomime *Aladdin*. I can honestly say I have never seen anything quite like this show. For starters, about three-quarters of the audience were kids under the age of ten and the majority of these kids had glow-in-the-dark toys. Once the show started, the kids were actively invited to participate and boy did they ever do so! They shouted warnings on queue; insulted the villain, participated in a sing along, hid from water guns, and scrambled to catch sweets being thrown at them from onstage. I think in a way they were almost being trained to not only sit through theatrical productions but to actively experience them and this is no small task! It was a really fun environment to be a part of and by the end of show I had even gotten over most of my own reservations about yelling at the people onstage.

For a play that is clearly aimed at children, *Aladdin* had a lot of jokes that were meant to engage the older members of the audience. (Take for example the fact that one of Princess Jasmine's suitors was named "Prince One Hung Low" and that every time this name was mentioned, specific hand gestures were involved). The musical numbers were a hilarious combination of traditional holiday songs ("The Twelve Days of Christmas"), pop songs ("Almost Paradise"), and movie themes (*Monty Python* and *Annie*) all re-worked or taken out of context to provide a laugh. I was both surprised and impressed by the number of children who seemed to know the words for the majority of the songs being referenced. The casual nature of the acting also surprised me. Several of the actors flubbed one or more of their lines but instead of trying to hide this from the

audience, they laughed at themselves and each other. It was really quite entertaining to watch. I am really glad I decided to go to this show. It was, in every sense of the word, an experience.

In between *Aladdin* and our next play, *A Journey to London*, we met with Sam Walters, the director of the later production. While much of what Walters discussed was very interesting, I was disappointed by the extent to which he avoided talking specifically about his ideas of the show we were about to see. I can only guess that he did not wish to prejudice or slant our reactions to the play itself. He did, however, offer some interesting insights into the nature of performing in theatre-in-the-round. For example, the fact that the audience members are as aware of each other as they are the actors in front of them is not something I had ever really thought about but throughout the performance itself, I found it to be quite true—I frequently caught myself examining other members of the audience in ways that are not possible in tradition proscenium arch theatres. The extreme intimacy with the actors themselves is also worth mentioning. There was a point towards the end of the play when Colonel Courtly, stunned by Betty’s ability to trick him, sat on a prop directly in front of me and I found myself having a bit of a staring contest with the actor playing him. The experience was both electrifying and uncomfortable—I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like to act under similar circumstances. In these challenges to the traditional audience-performer dynamics, *A Journey to London* actually reminded me a lot of *Aladdin*.

It was hard for me to get into this play, as much as I enjoyed the experience of participating in a theatre-in-the-round production, mainly I think because I really did not like the language of Saunders’ completion of Vanbrugh’s unfinished text. The word

“nincompoop” seems out of place in a Restoration Comedy if you ask me! The gender dynamics set up by Vanbrugh were highly significant since women actors were, for the first time, allowed to perform onstage. The manner in which Saunders developed these dynamics, however, was predictable. The “morality” speeches about equality, servitude, and freedom were not especially engaging—they felt more like forgone conclusions of a modern era than a complex subject worthy of exploration.

As the two most predominate female voices calling for change, Arabella and Betty best exemplify some of the irreconcilable contradictions that confuse the message of the play. For example, Arabella’s assertion that she is unhappy in her marriage because she is emotionally neglected (her line of reasoning here reminded me a lot of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath) and her demand that she receive an allowance equal to the amount her husband spends on himself are based upon contemporary conceptions of an ideal marriage and clash with the eighteenth century understanding of marriage as a social contract, which she herself upholds at different moments throughout the play. Similarly, Betty constructs a plot to punish Colonel Courtly and initiate a change within society based on the manipulation of traditional gender roles but then falls victim to her own plot and essentially becomes the emotionally attached female. What exactly are we supposed to walk away thinking or feeling about any of this?

Wednesday January 4

I woke up this morning with the beginnings of a cold and opted to take a nap after class. I know this sounds somewhat lame but it really is important to keep up on your sleep however you can!

Our first play today was *Epitaph for George Dillon*. Everything about this play is suffocating—from the set that confines the movement onstage essentially to pacing between one chair to another in a cramped living room, to the ideas of progress and success (like getting a telephone or simply earning lots of money) that ultimately win over individual expression at the end of the play. Each and every character is quite literally trapped in mediocrity. The only difference between them seems to be the extent to which they are aware of their own situations. In this regard, the play reminds me a lot of several classic American plays of the same era like *Death of a Salesman* and *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

As its title suggests, the play ultimately functions as a case study on the intellectual death of its main protagonist—after all, epitaphs are only written for the dead. Part of what makes George such an engaging character, despite his bitterness, is his ability to recognize what is going on around him. His brutal mockeries of everything from the Elliot family's taste in furniture to Josie's means of entertaining herself are brutal precisely because they are grounded in recognizable truths. George is great observer of others. His critical insights remind me, in many ways, of the insights of a privileged member of the audience—at least as far as the Elliot family is concerned. He is not quite as capable of acknowledging failure when his own efforts are involved. In Ruth he finds a kindred spirit of sorts. Like George, she is also unsatisfied with the life she is living. Unlike George, however, Ruth does not pretend to be happy—she does not lie. While George pretends to be and ultimately becomes a character in someone else's bad narrative, Ruth withdraws herself from that same narrative of mediocrity by moving out of the Elliot house. Thus, despite the fact that the play ends with the death of George

Dillon, there is some hope in the possibility that Ruth might be able to make something of her life.

The acting in this production was spectacular. Joseph Fiennes and Francesca Annis were particularly good. Their scene together right before intermission in which they get to know each other for the first time was a very long scene with limited movement. In the hands of less skilled actors this scene could have been a disaster but Fiennes and Annis made it mesmerizing. Fiennes' facial expressions and body language exemplified to the audience the extent to which George knew he was a phony while Annis' powerfully understated presence onstage established Ruth as not only older but wiser than George. The music and BBC news broadcasts played during the scene changes skillfully established the historical context in which the rise of the middle class was taking place—this play is very much a period piece set in the mid to late fifties. To a certain extent life, not to mention material comfort, is an achievement after the devastation of the Second World War as the haunting presence of the dead Elliot boy suggest. But seeing as how none of the characters are really happy—George and Ruth are miserable because they realize how unsatisfying mediocrity is, Kate is miserable as a result of the loss of her son and status of less than ideal marriage, and the Elliot girls have no sense of potential and, as a result, no real sense of happiness or loss—the play raises some profound questions about how we gage success.

This evening's production, *Thomas More*, can also be summarized as an exploration of the events leading up to one man's personal downfall. Based on William Roper's *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, the play opens with the May Day Riots of 1517 and ends with the More's execution in 1535. Unfortunately, however, there was little

development in More's character as depicted in this play over these eighteen years. More's intelligence, profound sense of morality, and protectiveness of those he loved do not come across clearly in this script like they do in *A Man for All Seasons* or the many biographies written about him. In fact, it becomes increasingly difficult to take the character of More seriously as he insists upon throwing dinner parties and being merry in spite of the growing threat to his own person. Furthermore, we never actually learn what it is that More refuses to sign. I kept waiting for a scene between Henry VIII and More, or at least some reference to Henry's desire to become head of the church so that he could get a divorce, but neither came. This, for me, was highly problematic. Having no context in which to understand the significance of More's actions, he comes across as a kind of "holier than thou" character who is really hard to relate to. The profound significance of the historic More's last words, "The King's good servant, but God's first," is completely lost as a result of these major omissions.

Many of the problems discussed above can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that this play was banned in 1592 and again in 1595 because of its sensitive subject matter (riots, disagreements with the king, etc...). For example, the dependence on comedy—even when it comes across as inappropriate—is most likely an attempt to get around censors and censorship. Similarly, it would have been incredibly difficult to portray the king in an even remotely negative light at the time when the play was written and subsequently revised since Henry's reign was not something of the distant past and Elizabeth herself was dealing with the Essex rebellion. Since the play was prevented from being performed for so long, it lacks the polish of having been developed in production. Ultimately, this is what I found most interesting about the play. I prepared a

report for Rosemary Kegl last year in which I compared the different versions of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy so I was aware of the fact that Shakespeare's plays were altered, sometimes significantly, after they were first written and produced but I had never actually seen an early version of a Renaissance play by Shakespeare or anyone else. The Shakespeare I am accustomed to seeing performed onstage is the product of multiple revisions by Shakespeare himself after his earlier scripts were performed. It was, therefore, really quite remarkable—albeit frustrating—to see a play that never went through that process of development.

Thursday January 5

I spent my morning at the British Library today. This is a place I would highly recommend to anyone with any interest in literature, music, or history. The timing of my visit turned out to very advantageous as both part of what is believed to be Shakespeare's revision of *Thomas More* in his own hand and several selections of Handel's original scores were on display.

Today was our big National Theatre day. The matinee, *Coram Boy*, employed music in manner unlike that of any other production I can remember seeing in the recent past. Music not only sets the tone for and reflected the themes of the play, it is also central to the plot itself as it both fractures and restores the Ashbrook family. Mr. Ashbrook wants his son, Alexander, to give up music and learn how to manage the family estate once his voice breaks but Alexander wants to make music his life (this tension between the alleged benefits of practical or result oriented learning and learning for the sake of the passion of learning reminded me a lot of *The History Boys*). This

disagreement, and Alex's subsequent disappearance and disinheritance, almost results in a tragedy of Dicksonian proportions (think *Oliver Twist* meets *Bleak House*). Ultimately, it is the skillful incorporation of music into the text itself that prevents the characters of this melodrama from becoming soap opera-esque caricatures.

Music also held the thirty-five scenes of the first act and the thirty scenes of the second act together, preventing them from feeling too much like episodic moments without any linear progression or narrative purpose. The multitude of scenes in this play can, I think, be explained by the fact that Helen Edmundson adapted her script from a children's book by Jamila Gavin. The rapid shift from one scene to another enables Edmundson to depict a progression of events across time without relying on a narrator to summarize events for the sake of brevity. In fact, I would argue that music effectively takes the place of a more traditional narrator in this truly original show. The large cast also helped contribute to the efficiency of the many quick scene changes. I was really impressed by the versatility of the cast. They not only brought props on and off stage, they became props—like the crucified Christ and the angel in the church, or the waves that rocked Gaddarn's boat (in what is the best staging of an under-water scene I think I have ever seen onstage)—and they provided much of the choral music. The one choice I found a bit odd in terms of casting was the decision to have the actor playing Alex's younger brother be black. Normally colorblind casting does not bother me in the slightest but race becomes such a huge part of the second half of this show that in this particular case, it seemed a little odd.

Immediately after seeing this show I had a hard time imagining how it could be adapted from a children's novel—I mean, I had a really hard time watching the scenes in

which babies were buried and subsequently dug up as carcasses, how could this be deemed appropriate for children? The more I thought about the play, however, the more I came to appreciate its exploration of familial relationships and its emphasis on love. I think this is most clearly developed in the parallels between the traumatic relationships of both Alex and Meshak with their fathers—both of which are resolved through the character of Aaron. I have already summarized the main problem between Alex and Mr. Ashbrook. It becomes apparent before they are actually reunited that they each miss each other. The discovery of Aaron’s real identity enables them to put their pasts behind them once and for all and to finally work together for the benefit of someone else. It also gives Alex a new purpose for living since he is now a father himself. The strain between Meshak and his father, Otis Gardiner, is of a much more ghastly nature. Not only does Otis deceive parents unable to care for their babies by taking money to deliver the children to the Coram hospital and killing them instead, he also forces Meshak to bury their bodies. The conflicted Meshak finally snaps, running away with Alex and Melissa’s baby boy instead of burying him. It is through his relationship with this boy, Aaron, that Meshak is finally able to heal and grow. He becomes involved in a new father-son relationship—he becomes Misch, Aaron’s father. By sacrificing himself to save Aaron, Meshak confirms what the Alex himself is just beginning to appreciate: the importance of love and family (although not necessarily in the traditional sense of the word—Toby, for example, becomes a part of Alex’s family even though he is not Alex’s biological son). I can think of no greater message to pass on to children.

In between *Coram Boy* and *Pillars of the Community* we took a backstage tour of all three of the theatres that belong to the “National Theatre”. This, I think, was an hour

well spent. It was really interesting to see what went into effectively utilizing the space within each of the three theaters—I got a lot more out of the set designs of the remaining plays we saw in these spaces as a result of this tour. For example, *Pillars* was performed in the same theatre as *History Boys*—the Lyttelton Theatre. But the set of *Pillars* felt a lot smaller, more confined. It consisted simply of one room with the traditional three walls (the audience is the fourth wall). The set of *History Boys*, however, seemed much more open and it certainly was much more versatile. Walls and furniture were constantly being shifted to depict different locations. The only permanent “barriers” were the hung lights that separated the action involving live actors from the action depicted in the film clips projected onto a movie monitor above the lights. More than simply being different and exemplifying the adaptability of the theatre itself, these set designs reflect the pieces they were designed to support. But I am getting ahead of myself...

I was not sure what to expect from *Pillars of the Community* because I am not particularly fond of Ibsen’s writing. While I appreciate the significance of his writing for the time in which it was written, his morality frequently feels preachy to me. I ended up really liking this play, however, not only because everything about this production was outstanding, but also because the text itself functions as a pointed critique of the high moral standards that I have—justly or not—come to associate with Ibsen. The imprisoning effects of “civilized” society and the artificiality of its morality were built into every aspect of this show. For example, there were next to no lights actually onstage (the only ones I can remember are the candles in the party scene at the end of the play). The majority of the light present onstage was light that filtered through the cracks of the many closed doors and windows of Bernick family home. Karsten is constantly shutting

himself and his family up within their house. It is as if he is afraid of the community he claims he so desperately wants to serve. As it turns out, his fear is not without cause—his reputation is one built entirely on lies. This sense of artifice is similarly mirrored by the set itself. Right before intermission, precisely when Karsten’s lies are beginning to unravel, the two flies that had previously prevented us from seeing into the wings of the stage are removed and we are suddenly able not only to see actors moving outside of the enclosed room of the set, but also to see the very edifice upon which the set is built. Things are quite literally beginning to disintegrate onstage.

I can certainly understand why the ending to this play has been problematic to so many critics. Lona’s last line about “the spirit of freedom and the spirit of truth” being the real pillars of the community seemed desperate to me and not without good reason. I am not convinced that we are supposed to believe that Karsten has learned much of anything, accept perhaps to be kinder to his son. As soon as he learns that Johan is not on the unseaworthy *Indian Girl*—before he learns that his son is missing—he orders it not to sail. There is, therefore, no real evidence that he has suddenly grown a conscience. I think he has simply realized that his plan to murder Johan to save himself and, I might add, sacrifice the lives of hundred of completely innocent bystanders in the process, is not going to work so why risk his reputation for no gain? If, as Lona’s decision to destroy the letters incriminating Karsten as a fraud suggests, Lona has returned out of a desire to help the man she loves, the realization that she appears to have failed would understandably upset her.

More than anything else, I was surprised by my own reaction to Karsten. Although I was certainly repulsed by his malicious cowardice, I found it impossible to

simply dismiss him as a villain or a “lost cause”. After all, many of his fears about the community are founded on truths. As it is depicted in this play, society thrives upon gossip, on the destruction of “others” to feel better about itself. And it is not only unforgiving, it never forgets. Karsten is not the only one to recognize this. Dinah knows this truth all too well and flees to America because of it. Why, then, does Karsten stay to serve what he fears? Why is he so dedicated to communal progress as embodied by shipping and the railroads? He is, at least to a certain extent, sacrificing some of his own happiness to do so if we are to believe, as I think we are, that Lona is the woman he really loves. The extent to which conceptions of progress and happiness are deliberately complicated through this play reminds me of *Epitaph for George Dillon*. The strength of both of these plays is their ability to raise a variety of important and frequently uncomfortable questions without providing “neat” answers or solutions to the problems they present.

Friday January 6

I split my day today between the Victoria and Albert Museum and Kensington Palace. There was a really interesting photography exhibit about “social outcasts”, for lack a better term, in New York City by Diane Arbus at the V&A, which is where I spent the majority of my time while there. Kensington Palace also had a special photography exhibit, although it was slightly more glamorous—the last pictures taken of Princess Diana for a magazine, *Vogue*, by the famous fashion photographer, Mario Testino, were on display alongside the dresses she was photographed in. For the record, Kensington

Palace has one of my favorite places to get high tea in London—L’Orangerie. I highly recommend it both for its assortment of delicious teacakes and its charming ambiance.

Instead of seeing *Paul* with the rest of the group, I saw *On Ego*. I am still not entirely sure I know what to make of this show, especially since there was no class discussion to help me clarify and explore my reactions further. I think my difficulties responding to this play stem primarily from the fact that I am not sure if I am more of a “bundle” or an “ego” theorist. I am not so vain or unobservant as to think that there is something fundamentally unique or special about my conception of myself but I still do not want to believe that I can be explained simply as the product of neuron reactions or that I am reproducible! Clearly this play deals with some pretty profound issues relating to our conceptions of self-identity. As Alex so nicely puts it, “how does matter become a mind?”

This three-person production used relatively few props or scene changes. The main component of the show, besides the words of the actors themselves, was a video monitor placed directly behind and above the stage. In the beginning of the show when Alex, confident of his assertion that consciousness is simply the result of neurons, is giving a lecture, the screen contains an image of his face as he asks questions about our perception of him or his identity. When the setting changes to a restaurant or the hospital, the image on the screen changes to reflect these new locations with images of tables and lights or chairs and sterile greenness. In the end of the play when Alex’s conception of his own narrative becomes distorted, so do the images on the screen. The exact lines that opened the show are now redistributed and said by all three of the

characters instead of just Alex, while the images of all of their faces begin flash blurrily across the screen.

The use of this screen both exemplifies and challenges the extent to which our notions of identity are based on visual recognition. This, I think, is why the destruction of Alice's brain as a result of her butterfly melanoma is so devastating to both her husband and her father. She continues to look like the young, beautiful women they knew, even after she can no longer recognize them or remember the details of the life she lived. What does this mean about her identity? It seems to me that this is where Alex's theory of consciousness becomes most problematic—in its application to our perception not so much of ourselves, but of others. It is one thing to argue everything you think, perceive, or feel is the result molecular science but attempting to explain how you apply this theory to others is exponentially more difficult, especially when that “other” does not or cannot react in the way you want or expect them to. This begs the question; to what extent are our identities created by other people? By the show's end, Alex's certainty about the answers to these and other questions he poses in his initial monologue has diminished and it seems like nobody is really sure how matter becomes a mind.

The only thing that seemed to emerge from this show with any certainty is the importance of narrative in our conception of both selves and others. In his opening monologue Alex suggests that the brain is a story machine in which the self is the story. Neither the deterioration of his wife's health nor the transporting error that duplicates him seems to really challenge this assertion. The “second” Alex has all of the memories of the “first,” they share a narrative up to the present moment so it is very hard for the “second” Alex to allow himself to be labeled extraneous and, as a result, willingly be

terminated—he has a sense of self. Similarly, Alice’s disease does not immediately remove or even disrupt her presence in other people’s narratives, it simply destroys her ability to reconstruct her own. Thus, memory clearly plays an important role in our conception of self—you seem to have to be able to not only have a sense of identity consistent over time, but also remember this sense of self to be truly recognizable.

This whole production reminded me more of a “performance piece” than a traditional play, both in the manner in which it was staged, and the directness with which the questions and issues being addressed were confronted and explored. I am much more used to plays that present a story that the audience has to then has to extrapolate the meaning from. While this show certainly told a story, it asked a lot of the big questions for you right onstage. I really liked how this challenged my own perceptions of the relationship between science, philosophy, and theatre.

I was one of the eight or so people who decided to go see *Saucy Jack and the Space Vixens* at night. In a lot of ways, this show reminded me of a pantomime for adults. The theatre was set up like a cabaret with tables and chairs in addition to the more traditional row seating and there was a bar open throughout the entire performance right onstage. The characters interacted with the audience both before the show started and during intermission, taking drink orders and asking for gossip, etc... This interaction with the audience continued once the show began in the form of lap dances and direct addresses. In fact, if we did not clap loud enough or respond in the way that the characters wanted, we were scolded.

Like *Aladdin*, the script consisted of a lot of over the top jokes derived from pop culture references. While the music for this show was original, a lot of its actual

speaking lines were warped versions of famous movie quotes (“As God as my witness, I’ll never be subservient again”—“As God as my witness, I’ll never go hungry again” is from *Gone With the Wind*). The storyline itself was completely over the top. Set in outer space, the basic premise is that a “sling back killer” is murdering the cabaret acts in Saucy Jack’s bar. The intergalactic police, also known as the Space Vixens, come to investigate. (They also happen to be incredibly sexual young women in knee high silver boots who get their power from disco.) People begin to couple off and a whole slew of bizarre secrets are revealed—half of which are in no ways relevant to the murder investigation (it turns out Jack himself is the killer). This play makes fun of everything—heterosexual love, homosexual love, gender equality, sexism, “art”—and has a great time doing it. As silly as the premise was, the actors were in fact really good singers and dancers. This was a really enjoyable way to spend a Friday evening!

Saturday January 7

My morning was spent napping since we did not get home from *Saucy Jack* until two o’clock in the morning. Our first show today was the Matthew Bourne ballet of *Edward Scissorhands*. I was really impressed by how this production used a combination of dance and set design to effectively tell a remarkably poignant story—at no point during the performance did I feel as though dialogue would have clarified or strengthened the show itself. The majority of the dancing was ensemble work, which I think nicely highlighted and supported the story’s fundamental critique of suburbia—there are no real individuals in this world other than Edward himself and he did have several solo dances. This being said, however, even within the large ensemble numbers there were a lot of

different ideas and emotions being expressed. For example, the younger and older generations of the community had very different dancing styles and would frequently take turns dancing in what felt like a “dance-off” of sorts (I am thinking of the pool party scene in particular here). This, I thought, was an excellent way addressing the tensions between children and their parents that exist in every community. Edward’s body language was especially wonderful, as it really communicated both his awkward “otherness” and his very human desire to belong (here I am thinking principally of the imagination scene in which Edward ultimately looks in the mirror and sees himself for the first time). Unlike the daughter’s boyfriend, who actively attempts to come across as a rebel for the sake of being different, Edward is truly unique. He is an artist and could teach the community a lot about art if it was only ready and willing to learn. Unfortunately, however, the closest the community comes to being open-minded is its “designer” shrubbery and haircuts. Only the daughter comes to really appreciate and understand Edward for who he is.

The set design for this show reminded me of a grotesque cartoon with its vibrant colors and distorted proportions. At first glance, everything appears normal, picturesque even. But after awhile you begin to realize that the houses are too small for the people they house and that behind the colorful doors are equally colorful households full of adulterous affairs and other forms of less than ideal behavior. In other words, the community and its inhabitants are not as perfect as they might initially appear to be. The use of the scrim throughout the production contributed to this theme of the stripping away of illusion by making the audience feel as though we are seeing through empty facades while the lighting was very suggestive of the power of imagination to illuminate. And

the music, clearly adapted from the original movie score, contributed to the overall sense of wonder and enchantment suggested by the story as a whole. I know I for one left the theatre wanting to dance.

Our evening performance was another show I had some apprehensions about seeing since it has been my experience that good Molière is absolutely delightful while bad Molière is practically unbearable. However, my fears were quickly abated—this production of *The Hypochondriac* had me rolling in my seat within the first five minutes! Nothing was off limits as a subject of satire within this play, not even the author himself. Molière's sense of humor is wonderful in the extent to which it embodies everything from toilet jokes to incredibly insightful observations about human irrationality. Although this show is a farce, the characters are by no means one-dimensional. Even Beline, the character who is perhaps most easily dismissed as a stereotype—that of the conniving younger wife and step-mother—is a somewhat sympathetic character if you consider the fact, as Molière clearly does, that the law forces women to prostitute themselves in one way or another. Women cannot legally inherit money; they can only receive gifts. Thus, the scheme to leave all of Argan's money to Beline's implied lover is an acute commentary on the law in addition to being extremely funny.

Like Maria in *Twelfth Night*, Toinette is a servant who essentially runs the household she is employed in—she directs the action of the majority of the play. Although brutally honest and vocal about her opinions, Toinette devises her schemes out of a genuine desire to help those who need and deserve to be helped. In fact, her honesty and her loyalty establish her as the perfect foil to Beline, who lies and cheats in an attempt to promote her own self-interest. Ironically, it is through the dramatic staging of Argon's death

(directed by Toinette of course) that the “actress” Beline’s true character is revealed. The same test also reveals Angelique’s devotion to her father. Thus, Toinette seems to embody the potential of theatre to enact positive change. This suggestion is, I think, confirmed, by the extent to which the cure of Argon’s many “diseases” is simply being cast as a productive role in his own medical drama. Ultimately, Argon is his own best physician. He has to learn to solve his own problems to be liberated from his toilet. Toinette, and to a lesser extent, his brother simply prompt him to do so. They help Argon transform himself from a man defined by illness, to a man with a promising future.

The other character I found truly fascinating in light of our previous discussions on the nature of education (after *History Boys* and *Coram Boy* in particular) was Monsieur Dioforus’ nephew, the false suitor. He is clearly meant to be an educated man. Everything he says and does reflects the manner in which he learns, through the constant repetition of knowledge read in books. His argument about what obligations a husband-to-be owes his fiancé is well constructed but ultimately logic-less and delivered at a bad time. All the rest of his speeches are awkward and clearly rehearsed, exemplifying the extent to which he has failed to really possess any semblance of knowledge (Hector would be horrified!). Thus, while his consistent misapplication of book learning provides for some of the most hilarious moments of the play, it also functions as a frightening commentary on the dangers of displaced knowledge. Argon also exhibits this tendency until the end of the play—he believes anything and everything a doctor tells him about the poor status of his health. Again, it is his brother and Toinette who help rid him of this affliction by giving him another context in which to conceive of himself.

Sunday January 8

After class this morning I opted to join the majority of our group in attending Eucharist at Westminster Abbey. I would highly recommend this experience to anyone and everyone, as it is not every day that you get the opportunity to hear a service in a space used to crown past and present monarchies! The acoustics were amazing and the service welcomes people of all backgrounds and religious beliefs—you are not obligated or pressured into doing anything you do not feel comfortable doing.

Our show for the day was *As You Desire Me*. Like *On Ego*, this play is a self-conscious exploration of the process through which identities are created and destroyed. Everyone in this play—not just L'Ignota—is looking for something to believe in, a confirmation of life after the devastation and loss of the First World War. For L'Ignota, this search is simply complicated by the fact that she has no memory of her life both during and before the war. It is, of course, this very complication that makes her such a convenient companion for the other characters who are engaged in their own quests of wish fulfillment, most notably Salter and Bruno. For Salter, L'Ignota is the mysterious sex symbol, Alma. In a fit of passion inspired by the threat of losing her, Salter claims Alma is nothing without him when the opposite appears to be just as, if not actually more accurate. Salter is, after all, the one who has left his wife and child to be with Alma. He has more vested in her identity as an ingénue than she does, it gives him a sense of power as Alma herself notes. Alma, on the other hand, appears bored with her own performance. It is not, therefore, surprising that she decides to leave Salter, nor is it particularly surprising that he attempts to kill himself when she does.

Bruno's conception of L'Ignota is quite different. He needs her to be his long lost wife, Lucia, a woman known to have been horrifically abused by the invading German army but who, since the war, has been missing without a clue as to whether or not she even survived. Ultimately, however, he expects her to be the wife he remembers from before the war and is unable to recognize the fact that her experiences during the war would have changed her regardless of what exactly happened. His "recognition" of Lucia is also complicated by the fact that he stands to preserve his claim to a considerable fortune if his wife is found alive. L'Ignota herself adapts to reflect the desires of whomever she is with, hence the title of the play. She plays the part of Salter's whore in Berlin, and Bruno's innocent wife in Italy. It would seem, therefore, that her identity is not stable but relational. Thus, when Bruno begins to exhibit doubts about her identity, she too is plagued by doubt. Unwilling and unable to live in this world of romantic disillusionment, L'Ignota decides to return to a reality she can trust—even if it is a harsh one. She goes, however, able to finally make her own decisions with an understanding of her own ability to grow and change so her life in Berlin will not be the same as the life she left behind. Whether or not it will be happy, well, that is an entirely different story.

This play raises some really interesting questions about identity. For starters, how do you recognize someone? Physical characteristics are not necessarily reliable—consider the debate about Lucia's eye color. How do you tell who, if anyone is wrong? Inez recognizes a memory but this too is problematized by the existence of the journal. L'Ignota is searching for an authoritative record of identity throughout—in her recorded music, in the painting, in the journal—only to realize that even facts are relative.

Perhaps, then, there is no authority on identity. Perhaps the best way to define us is through our behavior.

I really like Pirendello's writing so it was great to see something of his staged but I must confess that I really disliked the set and lightening design of this show. While I am willing to concede a fair amount to any legitimate attempt at "atmosphere" I thought this show was consistently too dark or too light to such an extreme that it was hard to actually see what was going on onstage (especially in the blindingly bright villa). There was also alarmingly little for the actors to physically do onstage. To intentionally deny them action is one thing, but there was also a lot of nonsensical movement (like Lena's setting up of the tables and chairs in act two, what was that?) incorporated into the staging. And it really bothered me that absolutely nobody except Lucia moved for almost the entire third act for no other reason than I found it boring to watch everyone stare blankly at Lucia.

Monday January 9

This morning I went on a literary tour of Bloomsbury—it really is both amazing and wonderful how much is located within ten minutes of our hotel. Stops on my tour included one of Yeats' old apartments, one of Virginia Woolf's homes, the place where Sylvia Plath spent her wedding night, and the Charles Dickens home and museum. It was a really enjoyable morning; London is an amazing city to just walk around in.

Our first show of the day was *Tintin* and I honestly was not that impressed although, in all fairness, I thought the production itself was pretty good—it was the story that lagged in my opinion. Visually, the show was actually quite stunning. I really

appreciated how, in homage to its cartoon origins, every scene employed some sort of framing device reminiscent of a cartoon cell. The bright colors, costumes (especially the red socks against the white stockings), and the repetition of catch phrases (“blistering barnacles”) also contributed to this sense of a cartoon reality. Having an actor play the dog was a nice touch; I thought he was the most interesting character in the whole production. I must confess that I was confused in the beginning as to precisely what Tintin was famous for—his dreams made him seem like some sort of action hero. And it did not understand the nature or context of Tintin’s relationships with both Captain Haddock and Chang. Knowing the comic strip would probably clear up some of these issues, but a good adaptation should really stand on its own.

While the script addressed several serious topics including friendship, mysticism, and death, I was never especially engaged in what was going on, especially in the second half of the play—it lacked the moral gravitas of a fairy-tale despite its efforts to be accepted as a serious story in its own right. Ultimately, the show felt very two-dimensional to me, which although it makes a certain amount of sense since it was adapted from a cartoon strip, does not necessarily translate into the most interesting live theatre.

In contrast to this rather disappointing experience, the evening’s production, *Gem of the Ocean*, ended up being my favorite show we saw in London. Not only were the writing and the many complex messages of August Wilson’s script amazing, but this was also one of the most impressive pieces of ensemble acting I have seen in a long time—everyone was “spot on,” I literally had goosebumps for the majority of the show. I was really moved by the play’s message that you cannot be dependent on others for your

freedom or your sense of self. This does not, however, mean that the community cannot help or support you in your struggles. Citizen Barlow arrives at Aunt Ester's house precisely because he is in need of help; he has inadvertently contributed to the death of an innocent man and wants to have his soul cleansed of his guilt. Although Ester is able and willing to help Barlow, her methods of helping him consist of helping him help himself (this theme is reminiscent of *The Hypochondriac*). For example, she sends him out to get two pennies for no other reason than to make him feel as though he has accomplished something. She narrates the journey to the City of Bones, but it is Barlow who must ultimately bring himself through his own purgatory and by doing so, create a sense of self worth. It is only after doing so that he is able to not only exist, but also function as a productive member of the community of free African-Americans (a community embodied by the members of Ester's house: Ester, Solly, Ely and Black Mary—all of whom have gone to and aided others in going to the City of Bones).

Caesar functions as what I saw as a tragic corruption of the concept of freedom because as much as you end up despising him and what he does to Solly, you hear through Mary that he used to be different. According to Mary, he used to move outside of the law to help others. Now he is a slave to a law that does not even really recognize him as a human being, a law he chooses to uphold (take, for example, the fact that Selig is not arrested even though he helped Solly escape—Caesar knows that white men are above the law). His conception of community, like Karsten's, is strongly associated with the promotion of industry and the pursuit of profit. Both Caesar and Karsten are most interested in their own gain and they both ultimately fail to recognize what their selfishness is and will cost them. Solly, on the other hand, is Caesar's main foil. Like

Ester, Solly's power emerges from his desire to use his own experiences to help others. He worked for the Underground Railroad after escaping slavery, he burned down the mill in an attempt to abolish the newest form of black exploitation, and he returns from safety to break those being held for their alleged roles in burning down the mill out of jail. Having found his personal freedom in every sense of the word, a fact best exemplified in his re-naming of himself, Solly literally dies trying to help others. Unlike Caesar's, Solly's conception of not only freedom, but also community, holds hope for the future. Thankfully, Barlow's "education" enables him to recognize this potential and, quite literally, carry it forward into the future (nicely represented by the claiming of Solly's hat and walking stick).

I thought the staging of this production was really quite remarkable and benefited greatly from being in such an intimate space. I really like how the stage bowed like the deck of a ship, although I did not fully understand the implications of this decision until after the scene in which Barlow actually goes to the City of Bones. The fact that Black Mary was actually cooking—I could smell the food!—and that the men actually ate, really strengthened the sense of comfort or sanctuary offered within the walls of Ester's house. Overall, you could really tell that every aspect of this production was carefully considered and constructed to support Wilson's text and boy was it ever effective!

Tuesday January 10

I spent day today exploring the Wallace Collection, something I had never done in my previous visits to this wonderful city. The house itself (a short walk from the Bond

Street tube station) is lovely and it houses a truly amazing personal collection of art and artifacts that includes the largest collection of medieval armor in England.

Our play for today was *Mary Stuart*. It was a new and really interesting experience for me to see a play about this period of English history that was not written by Shakespeare or one of his contemporaries. I think seeing a show like this, where the difficulties of comprehension based solely on language barriers associated with Shakespeare are not an issue, would really help people begin to understand how universal so many of the issues dealt with on the Renaissance stage are—for example, relatively little has changed with regards to political intrigue! I must confess, however, I did not know exactly what to make of the fact that only the women were in historically accurate costumes in this production, while the men all wore black suits. At first I thought that as the case was in *A Journey to London*, the modern aspects of the costuming was meant to reflect the modern authorship of a “period piece”—who knows, perhaps it is—but the suits were not of the style of the era in which Schiller wrote either. Besides this slightly confusing detail, I thought the staging of this production really reflected the text’s interest in the issues of liberty and language. The bare, black walls very much suggested a restricted sense of freedom—something both queens had to deal with—and the minimal props drew both the audience and the actors’ focus to the words being said.

Language, or perhaps I should say eloquence, and its relationship to power was a huge issue throughout this play. I was really struck by the extent to which everyone at court was performing, including both Elizabeth and Mary, for one reason or another. Leicester and Mortimer are the most obvious examples of this phenomenon as they both literally reinvent themselves for each queen through their use of language. But both

queens are also depicted of being aware of the instability of their positions within society (the most poignant depiction of this for me was Elizabeth's first scene onstage where she gives a ring to France, calling it both a symbol of commitment and the link of a chain). Even as royals, these women are pawns in a patriarchal society as their dependence upon men shows. Elizabeth has few successful relationships with men. She is well aware of the fact that each of her male advisors has an agenda of his own but cannot avoid her dependence upon them, a reliance that as she herself notes is complicated by the fact that she is a woman. She is well aware of the power of direct speech and, as a result, is frequently ambiguous, deferring her own opinions to that of her peers. So used to suppressing her own femininity, Elizabeth is mistrustful of Mary's appeal to her on the grounds of a shared experience of "sisterhood". Mary, on the other hand, has had many profitable relationships with men. She has seduction down to a science but has also learned the hard way that manipulating men will only get you so far because, as a woman, you can always be dismissed as a whore. Her eloquent appeal to Elizabeth is ultimately doomed to fail in a world in which women, even as rulers are not taken seriously. Her anger at the moment she realizes this transforms her from a lamb begging for mercy to a lion claiming what she considers hers and verbally denouncing those who stand in her way, ultimately confirming her doom.

Death, however, offers Mary a kind of freedom unavailable to not only her, but also Elizabeth, on earth. She dies with two loyal friends by her side while Elizabeth is quite literally left alone. This similar but opposite progression in the status of the queens was mirrored nicely in their clothes. Mary starts in very plain attire but goes off to her death in a splendid gown of red, the color of martyrs, while Elizabeth is stripped of her

royal garb as the play progresses. She too functions as a martyr of sorts, albeit a less romantic or even likable one.

Wednesday January 11

The weather was absolutely beautiful today so I decided to take an extended walk along the river. I started down by the Tower, crossed the Tower Bridge, stopped by Southwark Cathedral to see Gower's tomb, wandered through the Clink and past the Globe, before arriving at the National Theatre.

Today was our day of musicals. The first of the two, *Once in a Lifetime*, bored me for many of the same reasons I found *Tintin* so hard to appreciate—the lack of an interesting story. It very much felt like a translation of an early Bugsy Burkley film—elaborate sets, flashy costumes, two-dimensional characters and all—to the stage, which although an interesting choice if it was in fact a deliberate decision, did not in my opinion make for an engaging theatrical experience. So many of the jokes and effects of the play were specific to the time and place in which the play was set that I think they were not easily accessible to a modern audience, myself included (and I know enough about movies to appreciate the fact that the opening clip of the play was from *The Jazz Singer*, a 1927 movie considered to be a milestone film for its use of sound). The use of grandiose scene changes and highly stylized, albeit beautiful costumes, ultimately felt like an attempt to conceal the hollowness of the plot and characters being depicted. None of the characters inspired my interest, let alone my sympathy. In fact, the only character that invoked any real response from me was the train porter, whose reflection of the racist

caricatures of simple-minded African-Americans that permeated Hollywood throughout the 1920s and 1930s simply made me uncomfortable.

The plot, as far as it is developed, simply deals with people who, in hard times, are trying to survive by any means possible and see the transformation of the movie industry as a business opportunity. There is no real sense of resolution or attempt to explain the reasons for anything—May and Gerry never quite get together, Vale never gets a break, George's success is never explained, etc. If Hart's objective was depict a world in chaos, he succeeded, but it is not a particularly interesting depiction of a world in chaos and there is no apparent motivating reason for depicting it.

Our second musical, *Billy Elliot* was much more enjoyable. While I did not think that all of the songs were all that memorable and there were moments in which the orchestra drowned out the actors who were singing, the dancing really amazing and the story is just so likeable that you are willing to forgive some of its minor flaws. Like *History Boys* this strikes me as a uniquely British play. Set during the Durham Miners' Strike of the 1980s, the play is based on a true story of a boy who escapes economic oppression to become a dancer. Like *History Boys*, *Billy Elliott* is also going to Broadway but while, as I have already mentioned, I think the former play might run into some problems in terms of its accessibility to an American audience, I think the later show will most likely do quite well. Even though most American audiences probably will not understand say, all the implications of the criticism of Margaret Thatcher and her policies of privatization or the nature of the class tensions alluded to throughout the play, they will be able to respond to and route for Billy's successful escape from what can easily be recognized as a dead-end future.

My favorite numbers from this show were those that simultaneously depicted the minors and the miners in action—the choreography alone was impressive, one false move and someone could have gotten seriously hurt! The integration of these two very different groups of people within the struggling community of Durham really showed the extent to which the strike and the economic hardships it implied affected everyone in Durham. The miners want better lives for their kids. Even in the midst of a strike, they struggle to provide 50p so that their kids can attend recreational sports and they take great pride in supporting one another—community is clearly a hugely important motif. “Solidarity,” the title of one of these early combination numbers, says it all. These are not stupid people, they are very aware of what is going on around them. They are used to making a living under extremely difficult circumstances, together—quite literally, underground—and are looking for a future, together (the opening song, “The Stars Look Down” uses stars as a metaphor for hope, which reminded me of Ester’s similar usage of the stars in *Gem of the Ocean*).

Billy is very much a part of this community himself. His desire to dance, seen initially by his father and brother as something that makes him different in a negative sense of the word, is in many ways simply a different manifestation of the desire for change expressed by the strike itself. The fact that not only Billy’s family, but also the entire mining community (scabs and all) can ultimately recognize this is not only amazing, but also moving. When he finally leaves at the end of the show, he brings his sense of community with him as a source of strength and pride (this is nicely alluded to by Tony’s gift of a mining lantern). Billy actually exits not only his home, but also the stage, walking right down into the audience. Thus, the play ends with an extension of the

community to include all of us audience members and our shared experience of wishing the best for Billy.

Thursday January 12

I divided my morning today between Westminster—one of my favorite places in London—and the Cabinet War rooms, a place I had never been before as they were being renovated the last couple of times I was here. Both were fabulous experiences of communion with the past.

Our first play for today was *Comedy of Errors*. This is actually one of the few Shakespeare plays I had never seen staged before and it was really great to see it for the first time after having seen the same company's production of *Twelfth Night*. This whole show reminded me of some sort of warped fairy tale or romance narrative in which everything that could possibly go wrong does. The vibrantly colored but frequently asymmetrical costumes, the highly stylized hair, the tango-esque music (very appropriate considering all of the twosomes that emerge throughout the play), the use of puppets, and the tattered canvases that made up the set all contribute to this sense that we have all—actors and audience alike—wandered into a realm of fantasy where duplicity is king. The resulting chaos, while entertaining to watch, is not socially productive—order must ultimately be restored and, this being a comedy, it eventually is. The community, coming together under the shared experience of utter confusion, calls in an exorcist to aid in the restoration of order but the exorcist is himself exorcized in favor of a revelation that leaves each of the main characters in some sort of redemptive relationship.

In the extent to which this show problematizes how much of our conception of identity is dependent upon the assumptions or projections of others, it reminded me of *As You Desire Me*. Adriana, Luciana, and Angelo all mistake Antipholus of Syracuse for the Antipholus they know—Antipholus of Ephesus—and expect him to behave a certain way based upon their assumption of who he is. Similarly, each Antipholus assumes the Dromio he interacts with at different times throughout the play is not only the same man, but also the man he knows and each Dromio makes the same assumptions about Antipholus. Since both sets of twins are not only identical, but also share the same exact name, the situation is complicated even further. We are encouraged to laugh at all of these mistakes (and do) because the improbability of any of this ever happening but the questions Shakespeare raises about how we recognize one another and ourselves are really quite profound. According to this play, physical resemblance, behavior or “character”, and names are not—at least in and of themselves—good indicators of an identity. It seems to me that, like Pirandello, Shakespeare is suggesting that identity is relational since all of the main characters only begin to discover themselves while in the process of searching for other people. It is, therefore, very much a social construct. Thus, I thought the director’s decision to have all of the characters strip off some garment of clothing in recognition of their newly (re)established position within society was a nice touch. I like the suggestion that there is nothing wrong with error or erring as long as they lead to discovery.

Once again, I was impressed by the quality of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s physical comedy. The two Dromios, in my opinion, really carried the show. They both were funny without being ludicrous. In fact, there is a definite sense of melancholy

involved in each man's desperate attempt to understand why he is being so abused by his master. Luciana's confusion is similarly grounding as she struggles to understand her growing attraction to a man she can only recognize as her sister's husband and, as a result, a scoundrel for pursuing her. While you can tell that this is one of Shakespeare's early plays, there are, nevertheless, some pretty amazing moments within this play that foreshadow what is to come.

Our second show of the day was *Night of the Iguana*. This was my second time seeing this play produced and I must confess, I had some doubts about Woody Harrelson's ability to "do justice" the character of Shannon. I am pleased to say, however, that my fears were quickly dissipated—Harrelson did an excellent job (as did Claire Higgins and Jenny Seagrove). I found myself thinking a lot about *Epitaph for George Dillon* while writing down my response to this play—particularly how Shannon and George struck me as both quite similar, and very different. For instance, they are both intelligent men who recognize, at least to a certain extent, that they loosing their respective struggles to remain true to themselves and, as a result, express a lot of self-loathing. I do not, however, think that Shannon is a complete sell-out in the way that George certainly is. Both of the times that I have seen *Night of the Iguana* I have left with the impression that Shannon leaves the stage for the last time to go and "swim to China" or kill himself. He would rather end his life than hit rock bottom like George does. Thus, Shannon chooses to actually die instead of existing in a living death like George ultimately resigns himself to do.

Given Shannon's propensity for one-night-stands, it is not surprising that the people he interacts most with are women. Although very different from one another,

Hannah and Maxine are both remarkably like Shannon in different ways. In fact, I would even argue that they function, at least in part, as the personifications of Shannon's increasingly fragmented and competing conceptions or components of himself. Hannah is, in all senses of the word, pure and in many ways what Shannon wishes he could be. She has no sexual experience but she has had two relationships with men that she considers intimate (I doubt Shannon has ever had a truly intimate relationship with anyone until, perhaps, Hannah herself). She sees everyone and everything as one of God's creations (this is something that Shannon needs to hear since he has clearly struggled with his spirituality for a long time. Although his ideas are not exactly traditional—like calling God a “senile delinquent”—he still believes in a God—a God of thunderstorms at least). She is very much a pillar of spiritual strength but she is not without flaws. She too has had a breakdown and while she is quick to point out that despite all of his affairs Shannon is very much alone, she too will be alone once her grandfather dies.

Maxine, on the other hand, resembles the Shannon that exists—a person who does whatever needs to be done to survive, even if her methods are somewhat sleazy. She is much more in touch with reality, even though her reality is in many ways an equally lonely one (widowed recently, alone in the rainforests of Mexico, etc.). She is also a remarkably resilient woman and she has helped Shannon pull through on more than one occasion. She offers Shannon the opportunity to enter into a relationship that seems to actually have the potential to be mutually beneficial. Shannon's great misfortune—for lack of a better word—is that he is too much like Maxine to be Hannah and too much like Hannah to be Maxine. He cannot reconcile the divergent parts of himself in a productive

manner so he chooses simply to stop existing. It is a sad choice to see somebody make, but a choice nonetheless.

Friday January 13

This morning I went to the Tate Britain to see the Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec exhibit and then spent some time wandering the museum's permanent collection. This is another of my more favorite places to visit while in London and a really great trip to make while seeing so much theatre since many of the paintings by Rosetti and contemporaries take plays and/or actors as their subjects.

We had our group dinner this evening at Mon Plaisir, which was lovely. I thought the food was really excellent and it was, of course, fabulous to eat in a restaurant with an established literary reputation! My only suggestion would be that in the future it might be a bit more relaxing to have this dinner on a day where the only show was a matinee because our coffee and dessert portion of the meal felt a bit rushed since we had a 7:30 performance and the restaurant did not open until 5:45.

Our show for the day was Ibsen's *Wild Duck*. While I thought the production itself was excellent, I did not like this play as much as I liked *Pillars of the Community*, in part because I figured out what was going to happen within the first half an hour or so of the show. I also did not find these characters as interesting as those depicted in *Pillars*. Both Gregors and Hjalmar were not only despicable, they were predictable—something that cannot be easily said about Karsten, for example.

Like most of the shows we have seen, *Wild Duck* is very interested in the deconstruction of superficial realities. Unlike the majority of the other shows, however,

there is no sense of growth, progress, or reconstruction of any kind after the Ekdal family is torn apart. Gregors' idealism comes across as very selfish. He wants to get back at his father and to convince other people of the validity of his own ideas, no matter what the cause. His own perceived victimization makes him determined to right the world and he transforms Hjalmar into heroic ideal that has no basis in reality. Doctor Relig tries to explain the impossibility of Gregors' idealism to Gregors with no avail. He also tries to contain Gregors' influence over Hjalmar by continuing to encourage Hjalmar's work on an unnamed invention (the extent to which the invention is supposed to function as a task to give Hjalmar a sense of self worth reminds me of the citizen Barlow and the coins in *Gem of the Ocean*) but this also fails. I for one found the suggestion that the average man is nothing without life lies really depressing. Arguably more discouraging is the fact that Hjalmar is taken by both Gregors and Relig to be representative of the common man. He is, after all, ultimately just as responsible for Hedwig's death as Gregors is. And I do not think it is merely coincidental that Relig spends the majority of his time in the company of drunks—being able to see the potential dangers of idealistic games in a world run by ideologies is no easy thing.

What I do think this play explores well is the extent to which Truth (with a capital "T") is a fallacy, which is reminiscent of *As You Desire Me*, because even facts mean different things to different people. Gregors' presumptuous error is that Hjalmar will respond to the "truth" in a predetermined or predictable manner. What he and, ultimately, Hjalmar himself fail to recognize is that Hjalmar's little make-shift family has been able to successfully establish a truth of its own, love—why can this not be enough? The tragedy, of course, is that it is a child who suffers the most as a result of this error.

In closing, I have to say that I really do not like how the Donmar Theatre is set up—no matter where you sit, it is physically impossible to see the whole stage. It was particularly uncomfortable for me, sitting where we sat, to have people standing directly behind me for the entire show—they were physically closer to me than people actually sitting in other rows and I felt as though I could not move without hitting one of them. And the rail across our line of vision was not exactly pleasant either.

Saturday January 14, Our Last Day

I spent my last morning in London at Portobello Market, looking for gifts for my family. In my opinion, the open-air markets are the best place to purchase souvenirs that are not too “touristy”. I am particularly fond of Portobello because, in addition to having a lot of antiques, hand made arts and crafts, and clothes, it has a fabulous food section as well—lunch is a must here! It does, however, get ridiculously crowded.

Instead of seeing *You Never Can Tell* with the group—I play I saw last June at the Shaw festival—I saw Stella Feehily’s new play, *O Go My Man*. This show was written in 2005 for the cast that is currently performing it, so we were really seeing something completely new (lines differed in the play from the printed script because they were changed during the final weeks of rehearsal). Set in present day Dublin, the show follows the disintegration of two long-term relationships in the context of other, arguably larger social problems in both Ireland and Africa. Sarah and Neal, one half of each of the two original couples, have been having an affair for close to a year and, in the process of the play, leave their current significant others to be with one another. While I do think that these characters are meant to be understood to have genuine feelings for one another,

a big part of the appeal of their relationship is its novelty, which quickly begins to become problematic—especially for Neal, who left not only a wife, but also a child.

Neal is, in my opinion, the most interesting character in the show. He is an alcoholic reporter who has dedicated his life to documenting other people's problems and has lost his ability to deal with his own in the process. The show opens with his return from the Sudan, where he witnessed a massacre that haunts him throughout the play, and follows his efforts to make people aware of the tragedies that occur in Africa on a daily basis. He is the oldest character in the show by about a decade, the most established in his career, the most "worldly," and arguably the least in touch with the realities of his own life. His wife, Zoë, works for a publishing company but has essentially dedicated her life to supporting Neal and raising their daughter during his many absences. She is devastated when he decides to leave because trying to make their relationship work had essentially become the purpose of her life and ultimately throws herself into a series of promiscuous relationships with men she meets from a dating service in attempt to find a new relationship to replace the one she has lost.

Similar issues plague the play's other "original" couple. Sarah and Ian are both artists, an actor and a photographer respectively, who have had to give up many of their self-proclaimed principles with regards to their art to survive. Increasingly disillusioned with their own lives, they become increasingly distanced from one another and, in this instance, Sarah seeks comfort elsewhere. In the last scene of the play, however, many of the dangers of seeking yourself through a relationship with someone else become apparent, forcing each of the main characters to begin to acknowledge that they cannot

possibly be happy with someone else before they are happy with themselves. Who will end up with whom remains deliberately ambiguous.

I was really impressed by the quality of writing in this show, Feehily has an amazing ear for dialogue and she does an excellent job portraying people whose main problem is that they are unaware or unable to deal with their various personal problems. I also very much enjoyed seeing a contemporary play about normal people dealing with contemporary and normal issues. The one thing I had a hard time making sense of was the fact that every prop used in this show started out onstage. When they were moved in the process of being used, they never made it back onstage and in their absence, an outline of where they used to be is marked in colored tape. Thus, by the end of the show, the set was full of empty-outlines. Beyond making some basic connections with the relationships between appearances and reality, between the external and internal self, I was not sure what to make of this interesting phenomenon.

It seemed only fitting to spend my last night, although technically “free,” seeing a play and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to do so, especially since the play we were seeing was a Sam Shepard show. I have been a huge Shepard fan since high school, when I had the opportunity to act in one of his shows, *True West*, and have subsequently had the good fortune of seeing several excellent productions of various Shepard plays at The Steppenwolf Theatre (they seem to do a lot of Shepard), but had never seen *The Late Henry Moss*. I really enjoyed not only the play itself, but also the attention to detail and superb acting of this particular production. In typical Shepard style, this play is very much concerned with the relationship between two-brothers who are haunted by the past. In this particular play, the Earl and Ray Moss are reunited after the death of their father,

Henry. As the circumstances surrounding Henry's physical death are divulged, it becomes increasingly clear that Henry was not much of a father to either of his two sons so on some level he has been dead to them for years. What I found really fascinating is the extent to which the play suggests that Henry has been dead to himself for an equally long time. And yet, Henry is also clearly not dead to his sons or the world at large in many ways. Ultimately, I think this atypical ghost story provides an insightful and frequently unsettling depiction of the father-son relationship (not to mention that of brother to brother). The more Early and Ray proclaim they are nothing like their father; the more they become entangled in his legacy of violent isolation (I saw reflections of Shannon from *Night of the Iguana* in both of them) until it is hard to imagine either of them ever being functional members of society, let alone emerging as such. My only regret is that more people did not have the opportunity to see this excellent show.

Some Concluding Thoughts

I would strongly urge any and all students capable of coming over early to do so, as it helps you get over jet lag before our rigorous schedule begins. Doing so also lets you get some sight-seeing done before class starts which will let you relax a bit and not run yourself into the ground trying to do everything around when you have shows to see. I do not know of a single student participating in this trip who did not take at least one morning to nap, so I would encourage students to keep that in mind when planning their trips.

I was pleasantly surprised by the number on non-English majors involved in this class and by how much they all seemed to be enjoying themselves. It just really goes to

show you that there is something for everyone in the way that this class is designed and that is no small feat so I would like to end by thanking you, Dr. Peck, for this amazing opportunity. I really appreciate all the time and effort that both you and Ruth put into making sure that we all had not only an educational, but also just an entertaining trip—it certainly paid off!