

War Horse, The New London Theatre – December 30, 2011

The scope of this production was incredible in that not only were its technical aspects amazingly done and beautiful even in their mechanical nature (namely, the horses), but the artistic choices and acting also represented the story's emotional content incredibly well. The detail of each horse puppet would have been useless without the same depth of detail by the puppeteers, and this was seen in their physical attunement to the puppets and to each other, from the motion in the horses' necks that made them appear to be charging while standing still, down to even their slight movements that made the horses "breathe." The use of such larger-than-life puppets made the staging in this production even more important. During what would have been somewhat linear scenes (such as horses charging or Joey attempting to plough), the use of the rotating stage made the production fluid and showed the audience many physical perspectives, just as the play showed the perspectives of other nationalities during WWI. The choice to use human actors as inanimate objects (such as men holding bars to appear as fences or stable walls), while animals were humanized, really emphasized that the show was focused on the horses rather than the humans – that the war was simply a context, a human complexity, in which Joey's story took place. And through our very human eyes, looking at his story and the various human perspectives it led us through, the audience was shown all the atrocities of war and left to draw its own conclusions about humanity, or perhaps humanity's animalistic side. Various scenes in which war was glorified (such as the major general's speech to his ranks) contrasted with scenes in which we saw its horrors

(the disfigured veterans returning from battle), but this was not the only animalistic human tendency in the play. Ted's alcoholism and his rivalry with his brother were similar to the idea of war in that they portrayed humanity's flaws; as if we were all just rough sketches made by some God-like artist, the same way that Albert and Joey are drawn by the major general in his sketchbook. The importance of the sketchbook was clear from the very beginning, when the narrator appeared suddenly on stage to show its first, blank page to the audience before handing it to the major general. The audience was at first unsure where the motif was going, although the passage of time was indicated on sketch-like projections on the strip of white "paper" along the back wall. I liked that this uncertainty, and the idea of the unknown (which came into play much later as well, with Albert's certainty of Joey's existence despite vast unknown circumstances) was emphasized in the shadowy back wall. As an audience, our very first image of the stage was overwhelmed by the paper strip, while the actual back wall was hidden, so that we had no idea how far the space extended. It was a nice comparison to the various illusions that different characters entertained; the idea that the war would be over by Christmas, that victory was assured because they were backed by divine right, and the general's promise to Albert that he would keep Joey safe. Another useful aspect of the hidden back of the stage was that it allowed a certain element of suspense, as when an adult Joey, emerging from the shadows, replaced the younger foal puppet. This highlighted the power of keeping the audience "in the dark," so to speak, about certain details, also seen in the German and French characters' use of different languages to speak to one another rather than translating their conversations for the English-speaking audience.

The fact that the play's language was just as important in this production as the visual drawings again shows the production's scope. There were several plays of tongue, the most noticeable being the English term "joey gun" in reference to the cannon that Joey and Topthorn were carrying for the German soldiers. The German officer's relationship to the two horses was founded on the fact that he spoke English to them, which also made him a much more sympathetic character to the audience; we could understand him in more ways than one. In the end, his English became his tool through which he spoke to other soldiers behind his commander's back, and for which he was nearly killed by his commander. In some ways, this lack of translation for the conversations between humans was counterbalanced by not only the "conversations" with the horses, but also the narrator and accordion player, who translated the story into a universal language, that of music. It was this music and its transcendence across borders and time periods that really carried the heartwarming aspect of the play across to the audience, and in such an incredibly detailed technical context, it made for both an aesthetically appealing and emotionally engaging show.

Hamlet, The Young Vic Theatre – December 30, 2011

Nothing about this production was as I expected it to be and, for one of the most well-known plays by Shakespeare, this spoke to the immense impact of directorial choices combined with actor talent. The very first impression I got, and one that was emphasized throughout the play, was the idea of the audience being integrated into the mental institution in which the characters appeared to be trapped. There were moments when it seemed Hamlet was directly addressing us, most notably in his end monologue just before the arrival of Fortinbras. But this “fourth wall” was broken in other ways as well, from the extremity of the set and the audience journey through it into the actual theater, making us feel as if we too were patients in the asylum, to the many ways in which we were driven insane by the production, trying to figure out who was a patient and who wasn’t. The decision to use Michael Sheen as Fortinbras had a similar effect, as the audience finally realized that they were going crazy as well, and seeing dead characters in newly introduced ones, just as Hamlet saw Ophelia and Polonius in rather minor roles after their deaths.

At first I interpreted the set, in all its extremity, to be telling us that all of the traditional characters were simply patients in the insane asylum, making the entire plot somewhat meaningless since their hierarchy was all imaginary. This was suggested by the rift between guards and characters (with the exception of Bernardo), in their uniforms and mannerisms, and the guards’ apathy and sometimes even amusement at the characters’ drama. But in the second act it became clear that Claudius, at the very least, was definitely not as imprisoned as the others, and may have even been a figure of power in the institution. This, and the burial scene of Polonius, led me to believe that the entire

visual side of the play was all imaginary, in the sense that we were in Hamlet's head. The act of burying Polonius was interesting in that it took us out of the very literal set, which up until that point had been reinforced continually with the use of the gate in and out of the "asylum" to bring characters in and out of Denmark. But in this scene, Hamlet drags Polonius' body on stage and finds a random hole in the ground under the carpet, as if he is mentally "burying" or repressing his responsibility for the death. In a very nice detail, Polonius' tape recorder then starts playing in a loop from inside the sleeping bag, like a tiny bit of reality breaking through whatever bit of Hamlet's imagination we are seeing. After that scene, it became clear that everything about the environment and the visual portrayal of the characters suggested something about his perception of it and them. His reference to Denmark as a "prison" was more than accurately reflected in the asylum, in which everyone around him appeared to be crazy, but only a few of them were actually trapped in the way he was. The way in which Gertrude was portrayed seemed confusing at first, but in Hamlet's eyes it made sense; he sees his mother as crazy to get married again so soon after his father's death, and repeatedly bashes the institution of marriage in general. Her drug addiction and giddy demeanor show his perception of her addiction to this new love and the childlike effect it has on her. Polonius, in Hamlet's view, is too inquisitive and annoying, which is shown in his obsession with the tape recorder, and Ophelia is seen as a pretty, pure and sophisticated young girl, just as Hamlet perceives her. The audience sees her insanity after Hamlet decides on its existence and only then, and her change in character, suggestive actions, and newfound obsession with music all show his new view of her. The decision to cast Horatio as a woman seems to have been not just a directorial choice to freshen up the play, but also a conscious decision to

emphasize that this is all Hamlet's perception. The bond between Horatio and Hamlet is more than clear in the script, and in this interpretation seems to indicate a slight attraction between the two, thus Hamlet's view of Horatio as female directly corresponds to his feelings about her. Hamlet sees Claudius as being guilty, and therefore he is; not only that, but his somewhat shady and corrupt nature is well perceived in his slicked-back appearance and his royal demeanor. Hamlet's view of the power that Claudius has over other people, in particular over Gertrude, explains the audience's difficulty in interpreting Claudius' place in the asylum. While he is most certainly in power, as king, Hamlet does not believe it to be legitimate, and therefore while Claudius seems to have some control over guards and treatment, he also is never seen directly administering the control or overseeing the people entering and exiting the stage. Ultimately, of course, for Hamlet, he is forced to put up an act for everyone, with the exception of Horatio. In this interpretation, this is a stroke of genius, because the production knows that's all it is: just a production. The realization of this is in the play-within-a-play, which appears to be even more insane than the one we are watching. Ultimately, Hamlet's imprisonment is one of revenge, because this is the driving force behind his actions throughout the play. This was most clear in the scene where Michael Sheen played his father's ghost; he was mentally as well as physically tied to the need for vengeance. This, perhaps, is why he sees himself in Fortinbras. The visual significance of the image of Michael Sheen as the Norwegian invader was a nice highlight of Hamlet's last monologue, in which Hamlet says of Fortinbras, "He has my dying voice." Maybe, then, that final image was less about driving the audience insane with confusion as it was about finding oneself.

***Dublin Carol*, Trafalgar Studios – December 31, 2011**

The subtleties of this production really amazed me. For a show with a small cast in a very small space and a rather simple storyline, the play was surprisingly engaging and the actors did an excellent job illustrating the memories that fueled each character's actions. The focus seemed to be not only on each character's memories, but also on their imperfections, something well reflected in the appearance of the production. The allusions to the story of *A Christmas Carol* were apparent not only in the title but in the dark, frugal atmosphere of John's home, and yet the play was not too heavy-handed in its comparison to the original story. In its transfer to a modern, realistic plot, the "Scrooge" character (John) is frugal not in his financial generosity, but in his emotions, and is haunted by his past choices as opposed to physical ghosts. The other "ghosts" in this production, pieces of the puzzle that were apparent to the audience and yet never seen, were the romantic relationships that each character mentioned. John talks about his family life and then about his time with Carol; Mary tells the story of her brother Paul's girlfriend and her determination to stay with him; and Mark becomes less and less interested in his girlfriend, Kim. The difference between men and women in their perceptions of love over time shows the theme of imperfection as well. This is most clear after Mark attempts to leave Kim, and he and John discuss women and their grand illusions about true, "perfect" love that lasts forever. The final image of the production, John's abode with Christmas decorations scattered across the floor and only two, the advent calendar and the star hanging from the wall and ceiling, is another illustration of imperfection as well.

Although all of the characters are written in a sympathetic manner, they tell stories with subjects ranging from the compassion of certain other people, such as Mark's uncle who gave John the job, to the complete inhumanity of some others, such as John's story about the flushed baby. The complexity and harsh reality of the world, in all its depressing and yet emotionally complicated depths, was most apparent in Mary and John's reminiscence of him saving her from nettles when she was young, before the exact nature of their relationship has become clear to the audience. In her recollection she mentions, almost casually, that he had been drinking, indicating that this was how she encountered him most of the time. His reliance on alcohol seems to be less physical than emotional, and therefore inevitable; almost as inevitable as death, an idea that is also emphasized throughout the play. Not only is it found in John's job as an undertaker, and Mark's job as his assistant, but it also appears in Carol's position as a widower, with John's wife's terminal condition, and most of all in the advent calendar. It seems clear from John's talk with Mark that the calendar has been used and re-used each year, and yet he still keeps using it, opening each date as it comes. The pictures inside are inevitably always the same, and the calendar only reminds us of the passing of time, but John values it anyway, and even says he wishes he had a calendar like it for every day of the year with words of wisdom. At first it seems rather futile, and John's suggestion that they take down the decorations since they won't be there for Christmas anyway reminds us of that futility that he sees in the world. And yet he seems to still be a compassionate figure, as he tries to make sure Mark doesn't follow in his footsteps and talks about making the space as comforting as possible for the mourners he encounters through his work. He also clearly feels guilty about his relationship with Carol, and its effect on his

family, but in the end his guilt is not what drives him to go see his wife. His simple act of replacing the advent calendar before he leaves to see her suggests that he might now find a new way to comfort himself, namely through his relationships rather than through alcohol. In the past, relationships have only caused him pain, which is why he has seen only brutality in the world and values the opportunity given to him by Mark's uncle so much. But as he starts to see some of himself in Mark, and the two become friends as well as co-workers, John recognizes that he really does need people to talk to. Because of this, I saw the ending as hopeful despite the fact that it left the audience uncertain about the future of all three characters. The symbolism of John's replacement of the star ornament, reminiscent of the star that guided the three wise men in the Christmas story, is another indication of a hopeful future. John's use of Mark as something like his therapist suggested that he was beginning to come to terms with his problems, and learning to love himself again, an interesting message as it comes from a rather Christian background (the Gospel of John) in what seemed to be a very atheistic play. However, I think the existential picture painted by John in his depressing rants was not necessarily the picture that we were meant to come away with; rather, as it was impossible to judge John without also feeling some sympathy for him, we were allowed to come to our own conclusions and forced to do some self-examination and assessment.

Death and the Maiden, Harold Pinter Theatre – December 31, 2011

Despite the mixed receptions of this production, I was astounded at the amazingly accurate portrayal of conflicting emotions, not as much by the actress playing Paulina Salas but rather by the actor playing her husband Gerardo Escobar. The actors, particularly Tom Goodman-Hill, did a fantastic job managing a script that not only tries too hard to shock its audience through language and overly drawn-out suspense (Paulina and Gerardo spend a long time alluding to the horrors of her past), but also writes stark contrasts into its characters. Gerardo is a human rights lawyer but treats Paulina like a stereotypical housewife. She herself is written to appear as if her sudden raging insanity is the result of fifteen years of repression and fake smiles. And Roberto, or Dr. Miranda, has contradiction written all over him, in his pleas of innocence against his apparent guilt. Their contradictions tie into playwright Ariel Dorfman's message about the truth, but take away from the reality and reliability of the characters, which damages what is meant to be a very realistic production. In Gerardo's case, Goodman-Hill plays a different contrast to his advantage: that of the horrifying possibility that his wife is right, against the equally horrifying possibility (for him) that she has done this to an innocent man. Thandie Newton has a more difficult task, to show Paulina's pain and more-than-anger against her almost schizophrenic rationality that she is doing what is just. Dorfman does a much better job illuminating the "truth" question in the little details: Dr. Miranda's repeated phrase "the real, real truth" (which Paulina mockingly turns against him as a way of identifying him), her sudden need to find the truth in everything, (even her past with Gerardo, a nice comparison to the country's past in the question of how to let things

go), and Gerardo's wonderfully written response, "An overdose of the truth can kill a person."

This production in particular made excellent use of set and props to contribute to the atmosphere of suspense and uncertainty already established by the script. The glass doors or windows made for a useful method for the director to show the less socially acceptable actions, or those "meant to be hidden," such as Paulina's more violent treatment of Dr. Miranda (knocking him out, tying him up, and physically tormenting him when he tries to escape during her conversation with Gerardo outside) as well as actually hiding what is really meant to be hidden – the truth of whether or not Paulina actually kills Dr. Miranda. The very first scene sets up a feeling of apprehension and fear that permeates the play, as Paulina, appearing to be the average housewife, sneaks around in the dark and then pulls a gun out of a drawer, preparing to shoot an intruder. The tension eases when it turns out to be her husband, but the audience knows the gun is there and has also already seen how high-strung this woman is. From that moment on, every new twist in the plot is unpredictable, something perfectly exemplified in the arrival of the midnight visitor, whose presence is originally hidden even after Gerardo welcomes him. For a moment, the audience is unsure of whether this person is really a friend or not, something that seems appeased as soon as he enters the house, but which is never really answered in the play. The use of the tape recorder and the transitions it facilitated, both with Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and with Paulina's recorded story turning into Dr. Miranda's confession, made the show more seamless in appearance, a nice contrast to some of its frozen-in-time images. One such image is the beginning, when Paulina stands contemplatively outside the house, probably – we will soon learn – thinking about how

the past fifteen years of her life have been a lie. Another is the almost comic moment as Paulina stands outside the bathroom door, gun in hand, arm straight out at her side, holding Dr. Miranda at gunpoint even as he goes to the bathroom. Such static snapshots remind us of the tension of the entire situation and the seriousness of her intention, but provide a tiny bit of comic relief to help us get through the emotional issues of oppression behind the play.

The ending seemed too heavy on the suggestiveness of Paulina seeing Dr. Miranda's face, whether real or imagined, upon hearing Schubert's masterpiece. In a play where everyone wants the truth, yet everyone is lying about what they have done, what they will do, or what they want out of the situation, Paulina's seeming satisfaction made the whole uncertainty of the ending less effective for me. In the end, it wasn't about whether or not Paulina actually, *physically* killed Dr. Miranda, but whether or not she really got her revenge (completely regardless of his life or death), and it seemed all too obvious to me that she did.

***Juno and the Paycock*, Lyttelton Theatre – January 1, 2012**

The light and dark imagery of this play was wonderfully illustrated in both the set's illumination and its transformation to grandeur and back again. The underlying reality of the space was the same, but its appearance shifted into having the illusion of being a rich house, before being stripped bare so we could see what it actually was: a run-down tenement. It correlated nicely to both the play's dealing with the Irish civil war, and to the image we have of the main character, "Captain" John (Jack) Boyle, as the play progressed. Even when the tenement was "dressed up" with nice furniture and wealthy details, it was clear that it was the same space, and underneath was the same peeling wallpaper and rotting ceiling, just as Jack was the same person even with rich clothes and a new social position. The civil war, in its conflict of Irish against Irish, was the same way: a fight made to appear as if it had a real cause, when in reality it was just as useless as trying to cover up a worn-down tenement. The civil war was reflected in the family as well. While the parents were happy to inherit money from an estranged relative and quickly assimilated into their newfound wealth, the children changed very little, either in appearance or in their relations. The relationship between Mary and Mr. Bentham was not because of his money but rather because she genuinely loved him, and was true to her feelings. Her repeated phrase, "a principle's a principle," relates again to the essential nature of the set and how it can't be covered up with fancy material wealth, but also shows Mary's strength early on in the play as she fights in the strike for a new labor movement. Ironically, everyone except Juno (who reprimands Mary's stubbornness at the beginning of the play) believes that Mary's pregnancy means she has lost her principles, yet she and Juno are the only ones with slightly hopeful endings in the story. As the play

concludes, it is Mary and Juno who have lost the most, not only materially but also in their hopes for the future, yet they also gain the most in the prospect of Mary's unborn child. Captain Jack, meanwhile, begins with seemingly nothing except his family and a little money for alcohol, and ends with absolutely nothing, having been deserted by his family and even his best friend. The tragedy of the story is that the audience is put into a position like Mary's. We open onto a scene of Mary and Johnny, the younger generation, hopeful about the changes happening in Ireland in the 1920's: a new labor movement, a new sense of nationalism, and a new women's rights campaign. By the end of the first act, our hopes of wealth and happiness have been raised with the announcement of the family's inheritance, but we close on an image of Johnny, who is fearful of being forced back into the fight, foreshadowing his death and Mary's outcast situation. The closing image of the entire show is perhaps the most telling: we see Captain Jack alone, abandoned and in a completely drunken stupor in his bare home, all hope and certainty lost, just as Mary has left the stage with an uncertain future.

The contrast between Captain Jack and Mary is crucial in that it revolves around Juno, the one holding the family together and the compromise between the two. Although she is just as uneducated as her husband, she is smart in her own way, seeing through his childishness and recognizing their situation. She, unlike Captain Jack, the "paycock," does not feel the need to be regarded highly by others, taking more care of her home and family than her image. Even after the inheritance, her appearance changes only slightly, and always remains practical in the same way that she remains practical despite the family's upheavals. Unlike the children, however, she is drawn into the promise of wealth in certain ways, such as her appreciation of new things like the gramophone. She makes

the key statement, “It’s nearly time we had a little less respect for the dead, and a little more regard for the living,” a contrast that comes back to haunt her when she hears about Johnny’s death, and a contrast that is also reflected in their turn to music from the gramophone, representing wealth and recognition, rather than real, family life with live singing and music.

The play’s realism (and its representation in this particular production through set, lights, and sound) provided a good foundation upon which to build the idea of ghosts mentioned several times in the play, most notably in the discussion between the family and Mr. Bentham about Eastern religions. This realism highlighted the massive intellectual gap between Bentham’s “high” statements and Captain Jack’s attempts to contribute to the conversation. In reality, Jack’s “grandiose” questions about the stars and the moon to Joxer were an attempt to put him in the same position of power that Bentham held over him. Of course, Johnny’s vision of his dead comrade occurs offstage, so we assume it was not real, but Bentham’s position about the science behind such apparitions provides a point of interest in which we realize we don’t actually know if he has seen a ghost or not. This is yet another manifestation of the uncertainty that the play will end with, which is held in stark contrast against the constant nature of the set beneath its apparent changes.

Jerusalem, Apollo Theatre – January 2, 2012

The power of this production lies in the fresh face it puts on an old idea: that of the youth in revolt against an older generation, and its seemingly eternally youthful leader, the all-knowing and influential central character Johnny “Rooster” Byron. Byron’s childish demeanor, combined with his magical, almost divine qualities (he is compared to Christ in more ways than one) make him far more than an escape for troubled teens from the village. He is the only one that sees through the façade of Old England and offers, through his fables, a sort of truth. Mark Rylance delivered a stunning performance as Byron, showing how such a seeming dirty, drunken outcast could realistically be such an emotional and even spiritual leader for so many young people, and convince them to believe and follow him. In a fantastic merging of past and present, old and young, Byron’s abode in the woods acts as the very sort of place where people “find themselves,” or the sort of place that young Lee is so anxious to get to. The story Byron recounts about Troy Whitworth and his last experience in the woods, looking into a “mirror” of wine in a silver plate and coming to an unspoken realization, illuminates such a point. And just as Lee’s talk about fasting and his “spiritual journey” is laughed at, but tolerated, by his friends, so is Byron’s shelter allowed to exist for many years despite its clear violation of the law. The set perfectly captured this merging of worlds, in its sharply contrasting steel trailer against the lonely, mystical forest, and in the opening image of St. George’s red cross on a curtain behind what appeared to be a trashed backyard, soon to be revealed as Byron’s home. The comparison between generations (“Old England” versus “New England”) was written into the script in a comic way (for example, Davey’s comment about the media being “everything that’s wrong with this

country these days”), but the seriousness of the confrontation between young and old is more than realized in the brutal attack on Byron and the destruction of his home. The realism of all the technical aspects of the play (spraying real water or eggshells on the audience, real dirt, moveable trees, live chickens, background noises and realistic lighting) only added further power to a show that would steal the audience’s hearts even without them – not only because we are culturally primed to love this youthful Peter Pan or rebel Robin Hood character, but because the theatre is the same sort of escape for us that Byron is for the young adults of Wiltshire. And the tech of this production, like the drugs that Byron offers, takes everything to a whole new level.

The character of the “Rooster” and his impact comes from his all-pervasiveness in the community – everyone knows him, whether they love or hate him, and his fearlessness makes him seem immortal. He shows us that New England is not really new at all, just the same as Old England, but with all its faults and repressions uncovered. This is more than apparent in the stories Byron tells about villagers (the supposedly “innocent” girl who has slept with every guy in town, or the fact that all the parents used to be visitors at Byron’s camp) and the fact that two solid characters representing tradition and Old England, the Professor and Wesley, both come to Byron for escape. The Professor, at first, seems like he could be an exception, since he appears to be going senile and doesn’t really understand what’s going on with Byron in the woods. But when Wesley, as well, comes to Byron for drugs to help him get through the festival, we see that Old England is just as psychologically screwed up, emotionally needy, and physically addicted as the youth it condemns. In fact, Old England is portrayed as not just in denial about their internal issues, but actively relying on racism (calling Byron a “gypsy” repeatedly),

humiliation, and violence to solve their external problems. Notably, Old England provides the story of St. George and the Dragon, through the use of the festival on St. George's Day and the Professor's recount of the story at the end of the first act; it is Byron and New England that makes us question what is so great about St. George, the epitome of Old England, and makes us understand that the dragon was probably no more a threat to England than Byron was to Wiltshire. But it seems also to present an unanswerable question, because the two cannot compatibly live with one another, yet we are reluctant to side with either. While we are drawn to Byron for his fantastical aspects, somehow always being tempted to believe his stories despite their mythical nature, we also recognize the need for order and law. Phaedra marks a strange overlap between the two, in her role as the May Queen who has gone missing and ends up in Byron's trailer (possibly a symbol of the Queen of England and her rapidly decreasing influence over her subjects). The indecision of the ending begins in the end of Phaedra's "reign," and continues into Byron's revelation that his lineage is special and his blood precious, which we can barely believe after relating so well to this imperfect, but loveable character. But after he delivers his powerful curse and exhilarating drumming, it leaves the audience wondering if the shaking trees are really being bulldozed or if the giants have finally come in response to his call.

The Animals and Children Took to the Streets, Cottesloe Theatre – January 3, 2012

The interactive nature of actors and animations in this production made it not only a technical masterpiece, but also fed the imaginative quality of the script with its picture-book style presentation. In a strange combination of childish storytelling, adult themes, and comedy, this show was a nice change from traditional theatre in its style of late-1920's silent film and the exaggerated, cartoonish appearance of the animated characters. The political message behind the show was not explicitly anti-establishment, since its vilification of the city government was overdone (with the dark, faceless Mayor and his black cat, Mr. Meow), but the realism of the bad neighborhood that the city wants to hide from its visitors (and the chosen "realistic" ending, where nothing really changes for the status of the Bayou's habitants) was all too familiar to most audience members. While in other ways the good-versus-evil dichotomy was hugely exaggerated, in this case, the extremity of the poverty was portrayed not in exaggeration but in symbolism. The original narrator's description of the residents in the Bayou apartment complex illustrates this. The strange and slightly comic description of the man who lives with a horse and eats out of a feedbag (while the horse dines with china and silverware) was not only an interesting reflection of the title, but also a representation of the Bayou residents' living conditions (that is, worse than animals). Another resident is said to poison all her visitors with tea, something the narrator encourages rather than condemns, showing the lack of compassion and humanity in the neighborhood, but with a comedic aspect that relates back to the production's childish appearance.

Interestingly, since the show only used three real actors, there were no "real" children represented except for Zelda, leader of the Pirate gang. Her position (and her

followers) are a perfect example of the way the production simplified and animated such real and terrifying issues as crime, murder, kidnapping, class conflict, urban decay and the use of propaganda (nicely represented by “Granny’s Gum Drops”) to hide the city’s problems rather than solve them. In its treatment of Agnes Eaves, the play showed the uselessness of good intentions against the massive structure of society and the fate of its residents, represented in the repeated phrase, “Born in the Bayou – die in the Bayou.” The dichotomy between the reality of the play’s subject matter and the way its evils became almost amusing in their extremity (the “shadow nanny” guards, the sense of miscommunication between the Caretaker and various ticket vendors, and the slight rhyming in the narration) provided an engaging and unpredictable ride.

The technical cues for this production also took it to an entirely new level. While the animations were meant to move the story forward, and thus had to make some sense, they were also very consciously just that: animations. The Caretaker illustrates this as he (silently) addresses the audience, as he wonders whether to choose the realistic or idealistic ending. The coordination between live music, lights, sound effects, actors, and projected animations made the audience very aware of the storybook feature of everything, and thus further appreciate the way in which all the cues were put together to make the production cohesive and appealing. Other elements of design, such as makeup and costumes, helped further the picturesque image without taking away from the amazing animations. The white faces of all the characters helped them merge into the projections, while their costumes were rather simple and typical to their characters (a prim dress and hat for Agnes, white shirt and suspenders for the Caretaker, bathrobe and towel turban for the grumpy narrating resident of the Bayou apartment complex, and a

witch-like black dress for Zelda's mother who runs the shop on Red Herring Street). The ultimate moral of the story takes the audience back out of the comedic world of animations which we originally entered to hear the story, and tells us that we can't always get what we want, whether that be an idealistic ending to a production, or a childish belief that we can escape our fate or the social norms that bind us in society.

Reasons To Be Pretty, Almeida Theatre – January 3, 2012

The script of this play was exceptional in its ability to provide characters on either side of an argument with qualities that the audience could relate to, but at the same time shows the ridiculous absurdity of both sides in a comedic way. This was beautifully done in this particular production, which built the set within and around a storage container, rotating the open or closed box at various angles to show different places in the same way that we saw both sides of the story. Steph's side was emphasized in the bedroom, despite her exaggerated outrage; Greg's side, namely his justification for his actions, was revealed at his workplace. The way in which the scenes transitioned into each other complemented this as well; the audience was treated to a complete black-out and music by Queen (often happy, inspirational songs such as "Don't Stop Me Now") that was abruptly cut off as the lights bumped up on a rather uninspiring, less glamorous, exasperating tableau of everyday life. The staging of the scenes themselves was done simply enough to emphasize the language, a key component of the play, yet dynamic enough to be engaging as well. Greg and Kent's fight, a particularly entertaining moment for the audience, as this rather unappealing character seems to get what he deserves, is important in that it emphasizes Kent's competitive streak over his anger (that is, he would rather win the baseball game than fight over what he perceives to be Greg's betrayal). His competitive streak is a key part of his character in his treatment of Greg, but it also reflects a larger theme in the work: the individual obsession with image, and the inherent idea therein that we can't all be equally beautiful. Kent's treatment of Carly contributed to the same theme, in that Kent objectified her to the point of being brutally honest about his opinions on her beauty during pregnancy. Greg's reflective monologue at the end of

the script, interestingly left out of this production, tells us his moral of the story: that all beauty is subjective. But in a way, the truth of this whole play is subjective, because we are continually unsure what was actually said between Kent and Greg that made Steph so angry. She, in the very first scene, just wants him to admit to one word (“ugly”) that she believes he said about her, whereas he is oblivious to her demands and recalls it as “regular.” I think the ending of this production, with Greg’s interaction with Steph giving us an idea of his future and then the bell calling him back to work, was equally if not more effective than the written ending. Greg as a character is one that we gradually come to sympathize with, once we learn that he’s not as unobservant as he appears during his first fight with Steph. In fact, he almost seems to be the most intellectually broad-minded, as he reads Poe, Hawthorne, and Irving throughout the play, yet ironically can’t figure out what it is that Steph needs. As he becomes more rational about their relationship, and tries to deal with the insistent Carly in a compassionate way while still respecting Kent, he matures, and all the while we watch from our vantage point outside the action. Bringing the audience in by directly addressing them at the end would do an injustice to the other characters here, making them all just different people that pass through Greg’s life; although with Greg’s repeated joke about how he’s psychic, this might have been LaBute’s intention.

The acting from all of the players at the Almeida, but in particular Tom Burke, was especially strong. Greg’s honesty is one of his more appealing qualities, and Burke’s portrayal of getting caught in situations where honesty is completely useless (first with Steph, then with Carly) was excellent in that it was genuinely exasperating to watch. Kieran Bew’s Kent was just nasty enough to make us view him as dim-witted, infantile,

and sexist, and yet he wasn't completely evil enough to make him unrealistic. His self-centeredness was apparent in everything he did, from criticizing Greg to never cleaning up after himself. Yet it contrasted nicely with his focus on other people, particularly women, and the perpetually physical lens through which he viewed them. The women in the show were written to fit slight stereotypes as well: both of them were over-analytic, controlling, and insecure. But, like the men (or at least Greg), there were hidden depths to their characters that came out not in their leisure reading choices but in the details of their perception. Billie Piper did a fantastic job showing Carly's obsessive-compulsive qualities yet endearing her to the audience; by the end of the play, her relationship with Greg had completely healed and we saw them share a brief hug before Greg indirectly revealed Kent's infidelity. While Carly and Kent appeared at first to be the simplistic, socially normal characters that only stir up trouble for Greg and Steph, Carly and Greg are the two more complex people and the ones who end up actually learning from the play's events. Steph, meanwhile, seems to go through the most change, and yet her conclusion is rather sad; although she has morphed herself to fit society's conception of "pretty," and is finally getting what she needs (stability in a relationship), she clearly still has feelings for Greg and is now convinced that her looks are the most important aspect about her. In all, this production did an exceptional job making the ordinary in appearance seem extraordinary, whether in the set's contained structure or the somewhat banal, everyday wording of the script.

***Measure for Measure*, Swan Theatre – January 4, 2012**

For a director to modernize Shakespeare in in such a way as to make it nearly offensive in its vulgarity is a real feat. *Measure for Measure*, however, is probably one of the most adaptable Shakespeare plays in this regard. The striking contrast between the orderly scenes played out by Duke Vincentio, Escalus, and Angelo and the scenes in the brothel with the characters of Mistress Overdone, Pompey and Froth, was accented by the similarities between them, shown through the production's use of costumes. The government officials, notably Vincentio and Angelo, both wore simple costumes but for the leather girdle-type piece they both had around their waists. In some ways this seemed to connect them to the people they ruled, because of the similarity to the lace and black leather costumes worn by the prostitutes and the brothel's customers. This trend was nicely extended in the set as well, with the fringes of leather acting as a curtain behind the stage through which some action was visible, and the single chandelier of chains that hung over most of the action. The Duke's choice to go in disguise as a friar is interesting in that it directly relates back to the Bible passage from which the title of the play is taken, and also shows his power in that he chooses to be a religious figure rather than, for example, an enforcer of the law. In this play, we see characters such as the Provost and Elbow, the constable, continually being manipulated by Pompey, Froth and then the Duke in disguise. It suggests that perhaps the law and the interpretation of the law are subjective, and that really, the enforcement of the law is best left to its subjects. The character of Lucio is a wonderful reflection of this contrast, in that he attempts to gain from every side of every argument, while in reality siding with no one. He is the perfect example of what happens to the subjective interpretation of the law when subjects refuse

to take responsibility for their actions – the complete opposite of a character like Angelo. Interestingly, he provides a slight annoyance to the Duke and affects Vincentio's schemes in a way that no one else is able to. He seems to have many tricks of his own, but unlike Vincentio, his plans are always for his own gain. Because of this, he gets justice just as everyone else does, in the form of responsibility. Paul Chahidi did a wonderful job portraying the very individualistic Lucio and all of his selfishness, while keeping him comedic enough to be human.

The modernization of this play was much more extensive than just its costume choices, however, and I particularly enjoyed the way in which this production chose to get the audience's attention: by building up music from a live band, beginning with just a basic beat. The singing from the actors, as well, during exits and entrances of religious figures (first the monks bearing what appeared to be a coffin but instead was Vincentio, then the nuns in Isabella's convent) was a nice touch. One of the most exciting additions to this production, though, was the Duke's control over the technical aspects, over the human "props" such as the lanterns, and his magic tricks. It not only played up the aspect of his character that is in control, but also helped the audience relate to him in the sense that we could (often) tell how his magic was performed, just as we were privy to his information about the "magic" he planned on doing in order to save Claudio from death and Isabella from eternal damnation. Also, as the first character on stage, with his first actions being to seemingly lower the house lights and turn on the "lamps," this magical quality was clearly emphasized as one of the highlights of this interpretation. This is a little bit strange, because the nature of a magic trick is to be deceptive, whereas the nature of the law is to provide order and clarity. This play's tribute to the law is written into

every character; from the commoners, Froth and Pompey, who twist the law to their own purposes rather than just disobey it, to Angelo, who submits to and even demands the just punishment he should receive after his crime has been revealed. And yet the Duke is the most deceptive character of all, in his disguises and magic tricks and manipulation of people such as the Provost to make sure a head other than Claudio's is sent to Angelo. In some ways this deception (and the joy he takes in it) humanizes Vincentio, just as Angelo's feelings for Isabella humanize him. Both characters have monologues in which they directly address the audience, and in both cases these were well executed in this production. While Angelo's monologue, like his character, was meticulous, thoughtful and somewhat restrained as he attempted to control himself, Vincentio's was playful, experimental and took the audience's reactions into account. The other, and most obvious case, of actor interaction with the audience was Pompey's interlude with accusations against various audience members, which actor Joseph Kloska did an incredible job with. As for the ending, I was interested to find out that it was left open to interpretation; since Isabella does not respond, in the script, to Vincentio's offer of marriage, the ending could include either her acceptance or rejection of him (although her acceptance is the conventional interpretation). In this production, her acceptance initially surprised me and seemed out of place. But in light of the comparison between Isabella and Angelo as new law (mercy) versus old law (revenge), it made sense that while Angelo received his merciful punishment of marriage, so too did Isabella, in a comedic version of "mercy," receive her release from the convent.

Written on the Heart, Swan Theatre – January 4, 2012

The circumstances in England since the translation of the King James Bible have changed in so many ways, and yet this play was still careful to deal with various issues in a politically correct manner. The hierarchy of the church, although confusing to follow, was delicately but realistically dealt with, both in the script itself and in the production. Although there was a clear tension between different factions of the church, the more striking difference was between those higher-class clergy members and the lower-class maid to Lancelot Andrewes, Mary. Her role seemed to be minor at first, but in many ways she was actually the point of the whole play; that is, the entire conflict centered on the ability of the commoners to have an accessible and understandable Bible available to them. Since this accessibility in many ways signified their individual spiritual freedom under government rule, the actual wording of the Bible was of great importance, due to the massive gap in education between commoners and aristocrats. Mary's importance became clear only at the end, when she threatened to burn her hand if Andrewes actually sent the letter with the corrections he had indicated to her. Not only was her role in the plot significant at that point as the one in control of the letter, but she also served to continue the motif of the burning hand, first mentioned by her in passing and then performed by Tyndale in his prison cell. The polar opposite of Mary was, of course, the crown, as seen when the Prince of Wales entered and tried to have the translation proceed "democratically," with different clergy members translating different phrases. This class hierarchy mirrored that of the church, and Andrewes' role as the one attempting to compromise between William Tyndale's translation and the new version represented the religious equivalent of the Prince. It was a nice detail that Andrewes' maid was of a

lower class, but that he valued her opinion and her ability to think things through; in a way, it foreshadowed the declining power of the royalty and the increasing power of the people to come in the future.

The title of the play originally comes from the book of Jeremiah (“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts”), but is used several times in terms of the phrase “love and mercy written on the heart.” The language of the play was of the utmost importance, being a play about language itself, and some of the debates between various translations are worth mentioning. Several times the debate between the words “church” and “congregation” was mentioned, a clever indication of different factions in the church. The contrast between obedience to God versus obedience to the law was clear in the discussion about the potential government objection to the phrase “dark rulers of the earth,” whereas the church’s close-minded opinions were expressed in a comedic moment through the case of using “love” versus “charity” in the passage about David and Jonathan. Interestingly, the phrase “God forbid” is what identifies the dead Tyndale to Andrewes, which immediately indicates that a phrase still used today was unique to Tyndale during Andrewes’ time and so perhaps there is hope that Tyndale’s translation might survive in the King James version. This culminates in Tyndale’s translation of the passage about God’s face being “a glass in which men see themselves,” nicely showing the two of them in their actual situation (that is, we see the two men seeing themselves in each other) and also tying into Tyndale’s closing line, “Well, I’m still here.”

The structure of the play was hard to follow in the first act, when the non-linear timeline did not emphasize enough that the two separate actors were younger and older versions of Andrewes. In several scenes, dates were mentioned, but since the audience

expected a linear timeline and was having a difficult enough time figuring out different characters' roles in the Church, it seemed like this wasn't enough to indicate that the second scene was set in time before the first. That said, once the timeline became understandable, the play became much more beautiful in its fluidity. The transitions, particularly the one involving a church ritual, were incredibly done with a live choir singing in Latin. The lighting, as well, played to the picturesque view of spiritual spaces, whether it was in the candle in Tyndale's prison, the stained glass windows, or the sacred light on the alter where Andrewes prayed. It all spoke to Andrewes' transitions in life, which the audience best sees in his repeated phrase in prayer about what a sinner he is. In particular, the merging of time periods was very effective after the timeline became clear, such as the transition from the scene in which an elderly Andrewes talks to the long-dead Tyndale to that in which a young Andrewes visits a prisoner. By this point the audience has understood that the two characters are the same, and the simple act of Tyndale placing his version of the Bible in the prisoner's hands as he prays to God gives the role of Tyndale's translation a whole new level of importance. Tyndale's action, and the moment just before intermission when a young Andrewes passes the chalice off to an older Andrewes, emphasized the importance of the past, but also the ways in which our actions shape the future.

Richard II, Donmar Warehouse – January 5, 2012

I was surprised by the simplicity of this production's unchanging set, but after seeing the entire production and its religious overtones, the church-like appearance of the stage and its connection to Richard's "divine" position as ruler, I realize it would have been somewhat less effective to attempt to portray settings realistically. What the production lacked in visual cues, it more than made up for in lighting, sound and costumes. Because the set was so unadorned, the changes in lighting and sound were much more noticeable, and the background noises of horses, seagulls, or birds in a garden really allowed us in the audience to use our imaginations. For a script as rich in imagery as this one, the choice to focus on certain technical aspects over realism in the environment was a crucial one, but it worked because of the religious imagery that found more than its share of representation in the visual set. Certain directorial choices (such as Richard's pre-show position in his throne, and his almost crucified gesture just before intermission) made Richard's religious authority a highlight of this production. These moments were also noticeably the only times when the audience saw Richard alone, during his time as King. This is significant in that the play focuses to a certain extent on Richard's identity crisis, and also the idea of loyalty: loyalty to kin, to the ruling monarch, and to God. In some cases there is no conflict (since the monarch is supposedly divinely appointed), but the play also shows the difficulty of choosing between king and kin, as in the case of the Duke of York. Bolingbroke's conflict was not so explicit, as he was not technically committing treachery by returning to England, but he clearly still opposed the King in Richard's justification for seizing Bolingbroke's inheritance. The separation between them was nicely seen in the use of the two levels of the set, which

could portray separate scenes or merge them together, as in the scene when Richard comes “down court” to give his crown to Bolingbroke. That scene alone was exquisitely done, not only in staging Richard’s conflict with Bolingbroke by showing them both with a hand on the crown, but also in Eddie Redmayne’s portrayal of Richard’s insecurity and uncertainty about his position and identity without the royal authority.

This goes back to the primary way in which Richard’s moments alone on stage were important; that is, his journey through the play is one in which he repeatedly questions his identity. During his last monologue in prison, he compares his cell to the world, finding the only real difference in the fact that he is not surrounded by people in prison. Instead, he is accompanied by his thoughts, which he compares to people (the children of his brain and soul) and, through this, makes himself into many people (“Thus play I in one person many people / and none contented”). Along the theme of loyalty again, the person who intrudes on Richard’s solitude is, notably, one of the few friends who have remained loyal to him. His insecurity is apparent before prison, however, as when he responds, “I have forgot myself” to Aumerle’s “Remember who you are.” The idea of flattery, as well, which is continually mentioned by others in their criticism of Richard, is clearly seen in his speech about the Earth after returning from Ireland, and the great pride that he takes in his position as King. One of the moments during which the contrast between this pride and insecurity was most clear was in the scene with the mirror, as Richard looks at his reflection and is no longer sure who he is before becoming so enraged that he throws the mirror down. The character of Richard is written as a complex web of these insecurities about his identity and difficulty making decisions, as well as a childish attachment to his authority and to the world of ideas he lives in. But he

also has a certain sensitivity that makes him a compassionate and sympathetic ruler, even in his imperfections. The emphasis placed on his development by accenting the King's religious position through his appearances at the beginning and end of the first act, and the church-like music, all alongside a spectacular performance by Redmayne, gave the play a very unique and three-dimensional central character inside a wonderfully flexible, though static, set.

***Huis Clos*, Trafalgar Studios – January 5, 2012**

This production was a welcome relief to the rather realistic storylines we've been treated to thus far. The play itself contained a lot of existential themes and generated a lot of philosophical questions for the audience, but I was more amazed at this specific production's method of framing the story, which in itself said a lot about the subject of the play. The use of a theater-in-the-round stage was an interesting choice, as it really provided human walls for the actors, just as the four walls of the room trapped the characters. This audience set-up also allowed a moment just before the beginning of the show, after the lights flickered on, in which the audience members simply gazed at each other. It was as if the audience was just as much a part of the action as the actors, and was also a nice foreshadowing of Inez's moment with Estelle, saying "Let me be your mirror." This initial image, and the flickering of the lights that illuminated the audience across the stage, was also to be given much more meaning in the discussion between Garcin and the Valet about how the ceiling lamp never turns off. Another aspect of the first image of the play is of course the set, which was rather simple with its broken furniture and unfinished ceiling, except for key pieces like the table with the infinitely heavy bronze statue. Each piece of furniture, however, became associated with one of the three in the room, and the staging of the characters as they sat together or apart nicely reflected their emotional states as well, and whether they were together or separate in their own versions of hell.

The lack of intermission was a crucial choice in that it would have broken up this kind of framing which made the play so effective. Against this initial image, the final image of the three characters is one in which they are all on their separate chairs, and yet

are working together. Garcin's final line is "Let's get on with it," a very different suggestion from the silence and separation he has demanded throughout the play. This is also after the three of them have had a momentary fit of laughter about being stuck together "forever and ever," which leaves the audience very much wondering what these characters know that we don't. As viewers, we moved through a journey beginning with total uncertainty about the setting of the play, then moved to having some idea about its characters and their location, and finally to again being unsure of what was going to happen and becoming outsiders once again. There is also the question of whether we are a part of "them," meaning the people who are thought to have put these three together. Garcin mentions near the end of the play that there are "many more" eyes watching him, and in this production he actually looked out into the audience, making us even more aware of our part in the proceedings. This "other," which perhaps the Valet is part of, is maybe the most uncertain part of the show: who and what are "they"? How do they place people together in hell? Where are they in the context of this very enclosed room which we have become a part of? By bringing us into the plot, we are almost necessarily integrated into this "they," and in a sense it provides yet another mirror image. That is, our complete and total uncertainty about "their" nature is just a reflection of our lack of knowledge about ourselves. Our only real encounter with "them" is through the Valet, and the total absurdity of Garcin's interaction with him provides yet another indication of how little we know. Garcin's questions about having a toothbrush, turning out the light and other meaningless details all show not only his character's insecurity but also our own self-deception and focus on things that, in the end, don't really matter. The only character who wants to be honest about their situation is Inez, and she is also notably the

only one who refuses to interact with the Valet at all. The other insinuated interaction with “them,” however, is during the moment when the door opens. Garcin, as the one looking for a way to escape, is the one who opens it, but also the one who closes off that opportunity. In his explanation for doing so, he indirectly justifies the dynamic between the three of them that makes them not only each other’s best torturers, but also each other’s best hope for redemption, and thus justifies “their” decision to put them together. The triangle between them, reflective of the various love triangles in all of their lives, made the relationships between any two of them somehow exclusive of the other, but also made each of them necessary for the absolution of the others. Along with the mirror theme, this might be representative of the idea of facing our fears and demons in order to really understand ourselves. With each of these details, this production did a fantastic job providing a framework inside which the play brought us on a journey of self-examination and discovery.

***Cinderella* Pantomime, Richmond Theatre – January 6, 2012**

This production was clearly most interested in the “spectacle” aspect of theater. The reliance on exuberant dance numbers and gaudy outfits made it much more a form of entertainment than regular theater, but considering the expected age range of the audience, this made a lot of sense. The hugely exaggerated set pieces and costumes of the evil step-sisters also played into this childish need to be kept engaged by surprise. Considering how short the attention spans were of most children in the audience, however, I thought this production did an incredible job of keeping them interested in the storyline. The character of the Fairy Godmother served as a narrator to keep the plot very simple and coherent even to very young ages, as shown by her short introduction and various rhymed “storyline” updates throughout the show. Buttons, meanwhile, acted as the “insider” for the audience, allowing us to participate in the action and also often to be able to predict what would happen because of the nature of his tricks. He also simplified the idea of dramatic irony down to a children’s-book level; that is, he was able to keep children engaged in the story by letting them be the only ones who knew the answers to questions like where the spider was or where the key was hidden. Buttons’ various games, as well, were clearly meant as a distraction from the story purely to keep youngsters entertained.

Despite its obvious pandering to a very young audience, however, the tale of Cinderella and the Prince is a nice case illustrating the idea of mistaken identity. While the Prince purposefully conceals his identity in the hope of finding true love, and then reveals himself to find Cinderella, Cinderella is forced to disguise herself in order to lose her true self and find the mistaken Prince, or “Dandini,” and she also only reveals herself

because she is forced to by Fate. The suspension of disbelief required by the story is rather extreme (how would the Prince not recognize Cinderella even though he had danced with her for hours?) but for a fairy tale, this is only to be expected. The importance of costume, not only in the matter of their disguises (the Prince's sash and Cinderella's dress), but for all characters, was overwhelming. Beatrice's and Eugenia's range of costumes contributed to their positions as mutual villains, but two who couldn't stand each other. Although they were often themed to match each other (lemons and oranges, Christmas tree and ornament) they were often visually contrasting in the same way that their characters were conflicting. And of course the role played by Cinderella's slipper is crucial to the resolution of the entire plot.

This particular adaptation, although somewhat superficial since it consisted mostly of bright costumes, exaggerated scenery, dancing and mediocre acting, was well suited to its audience. The songs chosen were usually from recognizable children's movies or pop culture, such as the *Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and the well-known Christmas song "Sleigh Bells." The occasional references to cultural icons like Kate Middleton and adult subjects like bank processes, meanwhile, were clearly beyond the children's range of understanding. While these occasional socio-cultural references kept adults paying attention, the show engaged its younger viewers through a combination of audience participation in games, in helping answer questions to advance the storyline, and of course with rewards for randomly selected children at the end.

The Charity That Began At Home, Orange Tree Theatre – January 6, 2012

The subject matter of this play was very revealing in its use of extremism to show a fundamental problem that is just as relevant to today's society as it was when it was written. The serious theme inside the script was well-hidden behind its comic banter, which was subtly immersed in this production's historical appearance. In several different cases, the seemingly superficial appearance of a character or an issue gave way to a much more complex person or situation, which was seen primarily in Mr. Hylton's philosophy of charity, but also in the issue of the maid Anson's pregnancy and eventually in Hugh Verreker's choice to cancel his marriage to Margery. While these complexities were there, in the end, the appealing nature of the production was its lightness while managing to portray such issues. First, Hylton's form of charity, at first justified by the Denisons, became in the end almost devalued because of its over-use. It seemed interesting to me that the play left the audience without a concrete verdict on the controversy of charity. On the one hand, we see that the pity which charity implies has hurt those it was intended to help, in that they believed themselves to be wanted as the Denisons' guests. On the other hand, the sweet innocence of Margery and the good intentions of Mr. Hylton show us that charity is still as morally right as we always thought it was. The contradiction was perfectly captured in the character of Mr. Verreker, who concedes the ultimate act of charity in order to forsake the whole commercialized idea of "charity" forever. Mr. Verreker represents the epitome of the production's complexity behind an appealing, even comedic face; while the audience sees at first only his brutal honesty and selfish charm, we find later that he has understood the idea of charity better than any other character.

One of the disparities the production presents, along the same lines of complexity hidden in comedy, was the issue of the rape of the maid by the butler. While Lady Denison's despair at all the things going wrong around her came off as comedic, in reality her frustration was rather self-centered, in that she was focused on the failure of her newfound philosophy rather than the well-being of her servants or guests. It also highlighted the class difference between the servants, who played a minor role in the script, and the Denisons and their guests. The fact that Lady Denison had attempted to apply her charity to her employees, which in a sense made them equals to her aristocratic guests, and yet still treated them in a very objectified manner (such as speaking about Anson in the third person while she was in the room, or telling her to go cry elsewhere) showed that the problem was in more than just her adaptation of Hylton's ideology. In fact, the real problem appeared to be society's focus on the extreme "charity cases" and neglect of the common poor. This production's use of the house servants, in full costume, to do an elaborate, half-lit scene change (rather than using stage managers) was a nice emphasis of this societal split.

This problem with social class was also an illustration of what Lady Denison described as "true versus false hospitality." Although her description of the two was applied to house guests, and was based on the idea of what people want versus what they deserve (another idea that came up repeatedly throughout the play), it also applied to her hospitality towards her guests versus her employees. While the charity case of the servant is eventually rejected (in the end, Lady Denison fires the butler responsible for the crime), the charity case of each house guest becomes almost out of control, as Margery assents to marry Hugh purely for the sake of bettering him. Ultimately, the ending scene

between the two of them proved to be illustrative of not only the play's moral, but also the production's greatest strength. The conclusion drawn from Hugh's moment of clarity and Margery's confusion about his sudden withdrawal is one of unchangeable human natures; while Margery will never understand that Hugh's cynicism is real, he will never get over that cynicism, expressed perfectly in his earlier monologue about the world being best off when left alone. This, the sad nature of things, is seen everywhere in the play, from Mrs. Eversleigh's traditionalism to the former army officer's stories and even to the actions of the butler. The play endorses the idea of second chances as a part of charity, but does not leave us hopeful about either concept. Meanwhile, this ending scene also showcased some of the best staging in the production, as Margery and Hugh circled the table in order for everyone in the round seating arrangement to witness what was probably the most emotionally charged scene in the play. This sort of staging, always difficult for theater-in-the-round, along with the scene change and the use of the entire space to represent the house, really integrated us into the play in a way its time period could not. Along with the staging, the delicately witty dialogue and genuinely written characters made this production not only interesting and entertaining to watch but also relevant to society today.

Billy Elliot, Victoria Palace Theatre – January 7, 2012

For a very politically centered story, this production made a wonderful comment about the place of art in society and how class difference shouldn't necessarily dictate a person's exposure to different parts of culture. My favorite part of the show was one that captured not only the conflict between the working and middle classes, but also the difference between the "cultured" and "uncultured" groups: the choreography of the song "Solidarity." At the same time that we were treated to Billy's introduction to ballet class, we also saw the clash between the miners and police officers in an elaborately choreographed dance. The integration of ballet moves into the workers' march, and the exchange of police hats for miner's helmets, both emphasized one of the points the play tried (and succeeded) to get across to the audience: the common humanity between different people across lines of class, culture, social norms, and even gender and sexuality, within a fractured mining community. The same sort of dancing was used in the fight with the police just before intermission, but it was more than a revival of the earlier song: it became an emotional expression of Billy's anger. In general the choreography of this show was amazing, as would be expected for a play about dancing, but it could be seen in more than just Billy's ballet scenes. The song "We'd Go Dancing," which in content simply a nostalgic number by Billy's grandmother, became a revival of her youth through the use of multiple actors serving as her memory of his long-dead grandfather. The impromptu nature of much of the dancing, as well, made its imperfection perfect – Billy's and Michael's "Expressing Yourself," for instance, was much less complex and simply about having fun.

The political message behind the miner's union, while written into the script, was particularly powerful in this production. Small details, like the opening of the show with its historical footage from the strike, set up the concept of community strength as the real theme behind the show, more than simply a boy's dream to dance. Tiny costume details, as well (such as Tony's Che Guevara shirt) were a nice touch and added to the feeling of revolution (which was particularly applicable for his character). The universal humanity behind even the enemies of the community, as well, was apparent in more than just the choreography and design. While Billy's family and the miner's union condemned the "scabs" or strike-breakers, the show also portrays one of them donating all his money to Billy's cause, purely, it would seem, out of compassion. Also, as the audience sees what Billy's family goes through in order to get him to his audition, we are tempted to sympathize with his father even as he goes to become a strike-breaker himself, suggesting that the two sides are not as black-and-white as characters like Tony would have everyone else believe.

The spectacle of this production was by far its most appealing aspect for modern audiences, in particular the flexibility of the set and its ability to morph and indicate the passing of time even while action was happening on stage. The obvious example was Billy's bedroom, which was a fantastic square staircase that could move vertically in and out of the stage. Many of these set "changes," however, were initiated by actors themselves, as they would tug pieces out of the sidelines to indicate closets, bathroom stalls, or pieces to make up Billy's family's kitchen. One of the most spectacular scenes was the very first scene after intermission, the "Merry Christmas, Maggie Thatcher" pantomime. The technical aspects of this mini play-within-a-play were so incredible that

the audience was overwhelmed with energy and had too many places to look at once. And, of course, the “Swan Lake” dance between Billy and the older dancer, with Billy’s flying trick, was amazing from both a technical and theatrical point of view.

Finally, the different vantage points during Billy’s audition were, to me, one of the more appealing parts of the show because it really captured the different perspectives of various characters on this kind of culture (that is, our perspective after following Billy’s story, his father’s acceptance without really understanding why, and the perspectives of other students at the audition). While we never actually saw Billy’s audition, we were treated to both his opinion of it and the judges’ eventual opinion, just as we saw the theater he auditioned in from both the wings and the house. Despite its deep political message, the emotional aspect of Billy’s self-expression through dancing (especially, of course, the “Electricity” sequence) was definitely the appeal for most audience members, but I think the ability to not only balance but also integrate those two aspects was the best part of this production.

The Kreutzer Sonata, Gate Theatre – January 7, 2012

Undoubtedly the most remarkable part of this production was actor Hilton McRae's portrayal of the protagonist, Posdnyshev. Since it becomes clear later on that he is a murderer, he should be dislikeable even from the beginning of the play, as he devalues women and objectifies his own wife. And yet McRae made the character oddly riveting, so that, far from condemning him, we almost sympathized with his near-insanity and wondered at the lengths to which jealousy can drive people. The nature of this play as a monologue brought up some interesting questions that this production left unanswered. Who is Posdnyshev speaking to? Why would he confess this story to them (or us)? Why does he ask them repeatedly to forgive him, clearly an important point since it constitutes both the opening and closing lines of the play? And then there is our uncertainty of his sanity, which calls the validity of the entire plot into question. His only indications of insanity are in the script rather than in his character, and the subtlety of McRae's portrayal here was even more impressive. For example, his initial comment about hearing music all the time, even in silence, seems strange to us, but is ignored at first because he seems to be coherent in telling his story. However, as we see more and more of his nature, the possessive quality of both his love for his wife and his appreciation of her music becomes clear, and the stability of his mental state becomes questionable. Along the same lines, we never really find out the truth of his wife's infidelity, but this actually seems appropriate, as we never really find out the truth of the entire story either. The magic of presenting a plot from a single perspective is that what appears to be the "truth" can be as complete or incomplete, or even false, as the storyteller wishes. This was nicely illustrated in both the set itself and the use of two

other, silent actors as Trukhachevski and Posdnyshev's wife, staged behind the screen to represent Posdnyshev's memories. The stage was set up to represent a single train compartment, but in a way that made the audience very much "looking in" on something private. The seats and walls of the compartment were damaged or even broken, suggesting similar qualities in Posdnyshev's recollection of events. Meanwhile, the memories depicted by his wife and Trukhachevski, while often for the simple use of illustrating a certain point or providing music to underscore his memory, were sometimes fragmented and contradictory. In Posdnyshev's recollection of the day he came home early to find them practicing together, we were treated to two very different and rapidly juxtaposed truths: first, in their embrace, his enraged perception of their desire; and second, in their upward glance from the piano, what was probably meant to be the actuality of his memory, unclouded by jealousy. Although this sort of staging threatened to suggest there was some truth behind his suspicions, I think that by placing the two moments right next to one another, the audience was allowed to wonder for themselves what the truth was. Other small details, like McRae's presence on stage before the audience had settled, and the pre-show technical aspects that made it very clear he was in a moving train, showed us the very transitory nature of the show. That is, it begins *in medias res*, so to speak, even though the play itself has little or no action, and ends without telling us the purpose of Posdnyshev's journey or how his story concludes. For an extremely simple technical production, the use of lights to show the motion of the train was remarkably effective without distracting from his speech.

The connection between Posdnyshev's recollection of the music and his love for his wife was clear from the beginning as well, and also played a prominent role in the rest

of the storyline. Posdnyshev's associations between his wife and her music were very apparent, not only in his passionate moment during the performance of the Sonata, but also in his own account of his first sexual experience and the relationship he creates between such an act and listening to a symphony. This link suggests that the play was focused less on the truth or content of Posdnyshev's story and more on his masculinity. Such a musical (and romantic) undertone provided a context in which the content of the story could unfold, while the philosophical and surreal aspects of the production, highlighted by the tech, were left up to the audience to figure out.

13, Olivier Theatre – January 8, 2012

The National Theatre's production of Mike Bartlett's play *13* might have been one of the most spectacular productions we watched, due mainly to the flexibility of the set and its reflection of the complexity, darkness, and changeable nature of the play itself. The revolving stage and moveable cube nicely accented the play's rapid movement from one storyline to the next, while providing a huge, symbolic edifice as a sort of continuity between them, just as the mutual nightmare united its characters. It was no coincidence that different "boxes" appeared as crucial props as well, from Dr. Crosley's "God" box to John's various "soapboxes" to his initial speech about the hen in a box not knowing or believing in what is outside. Lighting, as well, provided an important emphasis on the dream at the center of every storyline; by using spotlights to illuminate actors, the rest of the set (and the characters coming in and out for their very short scenes) was kept in near-darkness, relating back to the original repeated monologue about the dream itself. The structure of the script and staging was beautifully done, with set pieces such as the table transitioning smoothly from one scene to another, and characters passing through scenes from other storylines on the way to their own. The culmination of this was in the argument between Amir and Rachel, integrated into a similar argument between Ruth and Dennis. The connection between these two mirroring situations was an example of the sort of connections in every part of the play: subjects brought up in passing by one character (such as multiple universes existing side by side) became issues of emotional importance to another (such as John's suggestion of an alternate universe where Simon would still be alive). It speaks to Bartlett's attention to detail that the same happens with the opening "dream" monologue: the way the narrator talks about dreaming versus being

in others' dreams exactly reflects each character's being in the center of his or her storyline versus being a minor character in others' storylines. And every so often, we see the bigger picture with that repeated dream monologue and a rather terrifying recurring image of people in the cube, frozen in time and space and grisly green lighting, just as every so often, we become aware, in dreams, that we are dreaming.

My only criticism of the play would be that, in attempting to show so many different kinds of people from so many different backgrounds, it inevitably oversimplifies their situations and the issues it addresses. The script attempts to keep from stereotyping its characters, but to a certain extent it can't help it. Of course Amir, the protester, is unemployed (although they indicate that he used to be a university lecturer). Mark, although he fits the typical heartless lawyer mold, is also struggling with a mid-life crisis. Susan, the typical American housewife, fits every stereotype except for her sociopathic justification for killing her daughter. The list continues into plot lines as well. The play seemed to advocate, through the complexity of its characters and the presentation of both sides, the idea that what is "right" or "good" is difficult, if not impossible, to determine, and that evil, if it exists, is impossible to recognize before it is too late. Ruth says exactly this in her monologue about the grey area between "black-and-white" arguments: that what she believes in most of all is that complexity, the truth of that merging between right and wrong, and the basic responsibility of protecting one's own above all. Her speech, along with the many points throughout the play where belief is linked to responsibility, seems to indicate that the grey area is something Bartlett believes in too. And yet, the play presents what appears to be a one-dimensional view of the two sides of the war argument, siding almost unarguably with John in his stance promoting belief and

criticizing war and the free market. Up to a point, John serves as a Christ figure for both other characters and the audience, and regardless of the play's religious overtones, his ideas are put in a much better light than those of Dr. Crosley. It is not his strange omniscience or even his mass following that make him seem "better" than Crosley – these are merely ways of advancing the religious comparison. Rather, it is his demeanor, and the positive, inspirational tone of his message against Crosley's brutal honesty and negativity that make him appealing. Also, the fact that there is a clear parallel between Sarah's choice to kill Ruby and Ruth's choice to go to war, as advised by Crosley and against John's wishes, makes the act of war seem abominable, as no sane person would rationally understand Sarah's act or its justification. In all, the only really three-dimensional character was Rob, the soldier who followed John's speeches but who also went to war, who tells the final story of an act of violence meant to prevent future violence, and the uncertainty that follows. He alone seemed to actually represent that "grey area."

Maybe, however, I'm missing the point of presenting the issue in a black-and-white context; by overwhelming the audience with what looked like biased information, this nightmarish aspect of the production was really just attempting to reflect society itself. The fact that I agreed with John on many points, despite my disagreement with him on religious preferences, made me wonder why I did, and that alone, the ability to provoke critical thought, may be the play's greatest strength.

The Pitmen Painters, Duchess Theatre – January 9, 2012

The use of art, and theater in particular, to express social and political statements is not a new idea; but this production's portrayal of that use, and its embodiment of such statements itself, was neatly done in a way that somehow followed through on both its artistic and socio-political messages. The first noticeably unique aspect of the production was the screen on which the title of the play, the titles of various scenes, and the setting were written, which was also used to show the miners' paintings in detail. This, along with the efficiently (but very definitely) staged scene changes, added to the idea of time passing between scenes, which was crucial to understanding the story of the Ashington Group's growth. One of the best aspects of this production in my opinion was the audience's treatment to different kinds of art; that is, the way in which the miners' paintings were portrayed against the exhibition of the art of Ancient China or Ben Nicholson's carving. While the miners' prints and finished works were almost always physical props as well as projections, the museum and gallery paintings were only "seen" through the eyes of the characters, as projections on the screen. It represented in some ways the same kinds of socialist points brought up by the dentist, Harry, about the working class; that is, Marx's theory about "alienation of labor" applies to those who have made art their labor, but not to the pitmen painters, who, in the words of Ben Nicholson's character, "can't be bought." It was also slightly comparable to the pitmen's discussion on perspective while looking at the Chinese paintings. Ian Kelly did an excellent job portraying Robert's fake criticism of the paintings in order to provoke George into admiring them for having no real perspective – for looking at the subject from all angles. For the character who was so persistent at the beginning of the play about

figuring out what art “means,” his moment of clarity while looking at the Chinese paintings was not only comedic, but also ironic in that he directly opposed his instructor and at the same time followed his instructions, by finding the meaning in the relationship between subject and object.

The idea of transformation, both of material into art and also the transformation of the self, was apparent throughout the play, and yet the set was very static in its use of a small space, a few chairs, some paintings, and the projector screen. The different settings were somehow all very easily portrayed, showing again that the production took its own advice well in its ability to transform simple materials: with the exception of some smoke to show a train station, nothing was added to or taken from the space to show different places or times. The transformation of characters was most clear in Oliver, whom Trevor Fox played in a wonderful illustration of a man with incredible talent and opportunity but with a very simple view of himself. The audience’s connection to Oliver began right away, as his linoleum carving was the first shown to the group during their first exercise, and his painting was first as well in their next exercise about “the deluge.” He provided comedy in his modesty and simplicity, but also his rationality (such as justifying the proportions of his carving with space restrictions). But he also became the character who we related most to, in that he chose social integration over the financial gain and potential fame offered to him by Helen Sutherland. By the end of the play, he was the most admirable, in that he had stuck to his instincts and had also transformed the most, as we saw him constructively criticize Robert for sketching him in a way that signified nothing about their friendship.

The sociopolitical message was apparent in more than just Helen Sutherland's offer to Oliver; George's nameless nephew also makes a certain point when he condemns the miners' war paintings, which relates to art on a much larger scale. In his passionate attack on their work, and his praise of Picasso instead, the nephew indirectly asks the other question running throughout the play: can art really change anything in the world? While the reality of the Ashington Group's story, and his opinion of their paintings, would suggest the answer is no, this production in many ways created its own work of art that came to the opposite conclusion. The play's statements about art as a commodity, but one which belongs to everyone, made for not only an entertaining and morally grounded show, but also a commentary on class structure today. The major success of the production was in providing a show that was, in the words of Lee Hall, "accessible, straightforward and full of life," exactly what made the paintings of the Ashington Group so appealing.

***Noises Off*, Old Vic Theatre – January 10, 2012**

In this play, the idea of the beginning, middle and end of a story was clearer than in any other production we watched. While following the Aristotelian idea of “plot” very well, however, this show portrayed each of the three parts very separately, building on the last in order to make the audience feel more intimately part of the play-within-a-play. This was also done through the use of the entire theater space, such as when the director Lloyd appeared from the back of the audience as if the rehearsal were really happening in the Old Vic. While integrating the audience into the backstage feel of the show, the three separate “acts” also allowed us to change positions with each transition. In the first act, we were a part of the rehearsal; in the second, we moved between being completely isolated from the other “audience” to becoming that audience ourselves. Taking us through these different perspectives really made the inner play’s title, *Nothing On*, much more meaningful, in that there really was nothing playing for us as the audience: we were insiders on the whole scheme and so *Nothing On* meant nothing to us. The three levels of audience perspective were also nicely reflected in the detail about one of the main characters of *Nothing On*, in that we were watching a play about a play about a playwright.

The stereotypical characterization in the show also pandered to the audience’s illusions about not only theater but also the people that participate in it. Lloyd’s self-centered attitude and relationships with multiple women (Brooke’s dim-witted nature, Garry’s incapacity to finish a sentence, Belinda’s gossip, Selsdon’s forgetfulness and Tim’s lack of sleep) all play into our typical views of actors, stage managers, or directors.

The passive-aggressive use of terms of affection for one another even in very stressful situations was wonderfully acted and consistent throughout the show, and played into these stereotypes as well, since they were used only by Lloyd and the actors. Other minor details, such as the company's lack of money and use of stage managers as understudies, furthered the exaggeration just enough to make us fully aware of the nature of the show as a farce.

These stereotypes also made the characters predictable in some ways, which added even more to the show's comedy as it gave the audience a whole new kind of anticipation about what would happen next. For example, we got the impression right away that Brooke is no genius, and as we saw the "third act" from the audience's point of view, the anticipation of her complete inability to improvise made her delivery of those moments all the funnier. The characters' various predictable qualities also made the second act much more comprehensible. Even the foundations laid by the first act were enough to let us understand each character's motivations and intentions as the silent drama unfolded backstage. It is a credit to all of the actors that they were able to portray such a wonderfully complex and hilarious inner story with very little dialogue as their "real" production was being simultaneously acted on the other side of the set.

Of course, just as great farce has been compared to great tragedy, the irony of shows like *Noises Off* is that they must be a perfectly executed mess in order to succeed. This production not only contained some of the very ideas of tragedy in disguise, as we spoke about in class, but also did an excellent job keeping order in a very disorderly play.

***One Man, Two Guvvners*, Adelphi Theatre – January 11, 2012**

At the same time that this production was open about its nature as pure entertainment and stand-up comedy, it also played with more serious issues in a comedic manner and its appearance gave deeper meaning to its subject matter. The very structure of the production suggested that it centered on being entertaining, from the opening band to the small musical acts between scenes to the majorly exaggerated caricatures of each character. The rich and self-centered Stanley, the overly-dramatic actor Alan, and the somewhat brainless Pauline all served as stereotypical characters fitting their roles and furthered this goal of distracting the audience from the real world. Francis' interactions with the audience were also primarily for entertainment, and since his method of direct address constituted a large part of his character, it made sense that the point of this production would be amusement rather than critique.

However, there were certain qualities that showed there was more beneath the surface than just pure comedy. The set was based on very well-constructed, but deceptive, pieces that made the show appear to me more dimensional than it was. Even the "curtain" behind the band and small in-between acts were painted on a two-dimensional wall. This was clearly a conscious choice on the part of the design team, and it showed in a very physical way the two-dimensionality of most of the play's characters. But it might also have been a representation of the play's adaptation from Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*. Just as this adaptation reduced Goldoni's original script from its *commedia dell'arte* form into a nearly-modern farce set in Brighton, the three-dimensional setting was reduced to layers of two-dimensional backdrops. Furthermore, the perspective on these was often exaggerated, making them appear even more skewed

than did their flat nature, just as the exaggerated characters were even more ridiculous in this adaptation than in the original. The five typical *commedia* characters, Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, Pierrot, and the Clown were all very much represented in this show, but taken to an extreme in their characterizations. The comparison to such a basic structure of farce also highlights the importance of the visual set once again, since the “harlequinade” or pantomime in which the Harlequin character originated was often a mime in which much of the plot was based on visual cues, music and dance. Even in this production with dialogue, the use of such cues (and of course the intermittent music and the musical finale) linked the play back to its pantomime roots. Another added method through which the plot was advanced in this case, though, was the frequent use of character “asides,” not just by Francis but also by Stanley and Rachel, who would very plainly inform the audience of their intentions.

Even with all of its focus on entertainment and exaggeration, however, the show highlighted again the connection between farce and tragedy, as also seen in *Noises Off*. Francis’ hunger, although a plot device to keep his character motivated to find work, also made a tiny statement about his class in comparison to Rachel’s or Stanley’s. Dolly’s position as the love interest for Francis made her something of a sexual object, but the time period in which the play was set allowed her to sometimes turn it into a feminist argument. The complete disregard for Stanley’s murder of Roscoe and the lawyer’s manipulation of the law to his advantage were both treated in a comedic manner, in the sense that right and wrong are not really relevant as long as the show ends in three marriages and everyone is happy. The extreme use of violence as humor in the case of Alfie pandered to a very de-sensitized audience, who are especially susceptible to the

humor of repetitive “accidents.” These sequences found victimization easy, since the old, senile stereotype has already been victimized by society.

Most of these issues, however, were behind the real action of the show. The improvised, unpolished feel of much of the comedy would have felt very thrown-together but for the musical pieces that kept it consistent and contributed to its primary goal: that of entertainment.

Matilda: The Musical, Cambridge Theatre – January 11, 2012

What really amazed me about this production was the amount and quality of detail that was gone into to show Matilda's world from her point of view. To this end, the fantastical nature of the set and much of the staging was more than just entertainment; it also portrayed the setting of the play in an imaginative way, as it would appear through a child's eyes. The written labels on set objects like "LIBRARY BOOKS" or "SOOT" nicely illustrated Matilda's reality, while the words formed by letters in the overarching set (like "DYNAMITE," "TRAGEDY" or "ACROBAT") represented her imagination. It was nice that much of the staging and technical aspects also emphasized this child's point of view. For instance, the use of other child actors to move set pieces and props (often in costume, such as those in doctors' coats in the hospital room at Matilda's birth) put children in the role of adults as the people in control of the story, just as Matilda controlled her own. There were several instances, as well, in which spotlights were used to roam the audience to make the space appear even bigger, which really indicated the importance of the audience in any story.

Since the whole set was integrated into a library-like space, I saw Matilda's moments in the library with Mrs. Phelps as some of the most important moments in the show. This production definitely highlighted them by building on Matilda's story more and more as it progressed – first with actors reading along behind her narrated dialogue, then with music and a tiny dollhouse prop, and finally with real actors appearing beside her in their own mini-production, complete with lights, costumes and dramatic sound effects. I thought it was a nice contrast that while the characters' imaginations (such as Mrs. Phelps' while listening to the story) were actively portrayed all around them, the

audience's imagination was allowed to roam a little, through the somewhat surreal set and even certain musical numbers like "School Song." Of course, our imaginations would not have been nearly as stimulated if those of the characters hadn't been portrayed so effectively – that is, by setting up the space in both a mental and physical way, the show allowed us to create our own visual interpretation of the realism of the play's content.

Everything that happens in the story, of course, also follows the idea of showing the world through a child's point of view, so this scenic interpretation of the story was particularly fitting. In a child's eyes, they *are* a miracle, they are special, and the world is actually subject to their control. The transition from Matilda's bedroom to her parents' bathroom (how one would vanish into the back or into the floor as soon as she left it) was a nice indication of the childlike illusion that the world only exists as far as we can perceive it. This idea, of course, came very much into play during the revelation that Matilda's story has been the story of Miss Honey's life. Only through a child's eyes would imagination become truth and would everyone be allowed to narrate their own stories and choose the ending. But since this entire production invited us to become a child again, such a moral was only fitting.

The black-and-white view of a child means that in their eyes, every story has a villain, and these were clearly seen in the figures of Miss Trunchbull and Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood. What really surprised me (and, in the end, what made Matilda special, more than her intelligence or magic powers) was that none of these figures, at least in this production, were purely evil. Miss Trunchbull, of course, is arguable, but even she was given her own song ("The Hammer") and, through it, some small justification for her actions through her worship of the rules, whether they be in Olympic hammer-throwing

or elementary school. The Wormwoods, meanwhile, although nasty to Matilda, come off in the end as having simply misunderstood themselves and her. Her forgiveness of her father and his choice to let her go, although a happy ending, seemed different from the usual “triumphant-over-evil” ending that a childlike story would have. Matilda’s story, and this production’s depiction of it through her eyes, showed us that children are not necessarily the self-centered and innocently ignorant people we see them as, despite their reliance on imagination. In fact, it showed us that imagination can be as great an intellectual and moral advancement as anything else.

***Comedy of Errors*, Olivier Theatre – January 12, 2012**

This show continued the trend of modernized Shakespeare plays providing both a fresh interpretation and a visually engaging production. The combined elements of set, lighting and sound were most effective in this piece, as far as telling the story, although they often overshadowed the comedy the work is focused on. To begin with, the terrifying almost-assassination scene at the very beginning of the show and the complex story that it contained in Egeon's monologue provided an introduction that was very different from the rest of the play. In a certain technical way it prepared us for something extremely different from what we got, but in terms of its interpretation it provided a smooth foundation from which we could base our understanding of the rest of the plot. The "fishermen from Corinth," for example, were shown as modern rescue helicopters, while the Duke's treatment of Egeon (with the typical black-bag hood and abandoned-warehouse space) was very much a modern covert-operation twist on the original scene. The exchange of the Dromio twins between their biological mother and Egeon, in which the actors used long, wound cloths to indicate the children, was an interesting directorial choice. It contributed to the smoothness of Egeon's tale (as the actors didn't actually have to exchange them in order for the story to be understood), but also may have been somewhat symbolic of the twins being, in a sense, "cut from the same cloth." Egeon's story was also very different in that it lacked the realism of the rest of the play, while somehow managing to be more effective; for example, the portrayal of the shipwreck on the same warehouse-type set was clearly and nicely done, although there was nothing ship-like about any of the actors' surroundings. After such an elaborate beginning, the familiar and realistic story that followed was somewhat surprising. But that may have

also been a strength of the production, in that it separated the background story effectively from the present plot in both time and visual space.

The distracting nature of the set was not always necessarily a negative aspect of the production, because often scenes were staged so elaborately that multiple stories seemed to be happening apart from the one being played out by the main characters. The complexity of the moveable set reflected the same complexity in its characters, who despite being often superficial (Adriana), prone to anger (Antipholus of Ephesus) or immature (the Dromio twins) seemed to be slightly more three-dimensional in this interpretation of the play. Adriana, despite appearing as the celebrity-type figure who is objectified by other men in the scene around the pool table with Antipholus of Syracuse, seemed to genuinely love her husband but also take a certain pride in her own independence, as shown by her final exit with her sister before (presumably) forgiving Antipholus. The Dromio twins, as well, are seen throughout the play to be victimized by their masters, as if they are dim-witted, but the play ends with the two of them reuniting in a heartwarming message of brotherly love. The other noticeable aspect of the set that seemed symbolic of the play itself was its symmetry – the two physical sides often mirrored each other in a very twin-like way. This, of course, was completely turned upside-down during the chase scene with the police van and scooters, just as the worlds of its characters were turned upside-down with the revelation of the “other” set of twins.

The only complaint I would have about this production, however, would be in its assumption of its audience knowledge of the content of the play. I felt somewhat behind for most of the show, having not read Shakespeare’s original script and not knowing the details of the story. After the imaginative illustration of Egeon’s story at the very

beginning, which made it easy to follow along, the complications of following the two sets of twins became almost too difficult. Luckily, the production made heavy use of its modernization to make us understand the plot, from Antipholus's bed scene with his twin's wife to some of the unspoken exchanges between the Dromio twins as Antipholus of Ephesus is locked out of his house. In some cases the script made this modernization tricky, as in Antipholus of Syracuse's asides to the audience, but this was done by freezing the rest of the action for a moment, which was only effective because it was done so rarely. In many ways, the script relies more on its puns and the comedic misunderstanding of its characters than the real facts of the plot, and in the delivery of such puns and heartfelt comedy this production excelled completely. The urban greyness of the set, the scene changes integrated into the street band playing modern pop songs, and even Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse's snapping fingers to ward off the evil spirits that he feels are controlling their lives, all brought the play much closer to home than just its modernized literal interpretation.

***Haunted Child*, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs at the Royal Court – January 13, 2012**

The one thing I took away from watching this production was its amazing handle on the art of deception. Not only were the actors spectacular in their portrayal of two parents engaged in two very different kinds of deception in order to do what they thought was best for their child, but the production itself was a sort of act of deceit. It portrayed itself very simply and easily as a realistic storyline when, in actuality, there were aspects of it that suggested otherwise. Everything in the set and the relationships between characters suggested a modern, working-class family, from the small details of Julie's painting project in the living room to the rather significant symbolic act of Douglas fixing Thomas's shoes (since Thomas walks around in his father's shoes later in the play). Every character, even Thomas, expressed a certain futility about life that is also based on a very realistic, depressing view of the world. Julie explained it in her justification for how she had been raising Thomas in his father's absence; Douglas expressed the idea in his explanation for why he quit his job; and Thomas said nearly the same thing in his question of why life is worth living at all if we are all going to die in the end anyways. Nothing about the interactions between the characters suggested anything other than realism, and yet the single choice to manipulate the ceiling during crucial decision points in the storyline seemed significant enough to me to call the interpretation of the entire plot into question. The slowness of the ceiling's downward movement might have had a debatable effect on the audience (who may not have noticed it at all), but its specific placement in the story made it hugely significant for those who did see it. The two moments in which the ceiling lowered were during Julie's moment of weakness in which she almost agreed to go back with Douglas to his group, and during the final scene where

he returned to her asking for help: two times in which we acutely felt the suffocating impossibility of her position, and so the idea of the walls “closing in on her,” so to speak, was most effective. It also linked the two scenes together in a way that might be suggestive of what happened next; while in the first case, Julie ends the scene by pulling a knife on her husband before the lights go dim, in the second case we never find out whether or not she will take him back or even what the reasons are for his return. The ceiling trick, for me, provided a foundation upon which to build an alternative interpretation of the story, as it effectively shattered the previous, detailed realism of the production. It was only after observing this trick that the audience could realize how little of the realistic appearance was actually based on known facts, in that there was no background given about Douglas’ disappearance. This opened up a whole new range of ways to interpret the title of the play itself. In either interpretation, the “haunted child” could represent any of the characters. Realistically, Julie is haunted by what her husband has become, as seen in the production’s tagline: “We thought you were dead. In many ways, this is worse.” Douglas is haunted by his delusions about reincarnation and the mutual exclusivity of science and religion (a nice mirror of his relationship with Julie), and Thomas is haunted by a phantom figure that turns out to be his father. After looking at the play through a less literal lens, however, there are even more possibilities of haunted children. Douglas’ discussion of his own father’s reincarnation in Thomas suggests a different kind of haunting of the child, while the lack of background details, and the uncertainty about whether or not Julie actually uses the knife, could even suggest that Douglas is not alive at all and so both mother and child are haunted by his ghost. This was highlighted for me in the two instances in which Thomas asked the forbidden

questions that the entire audience had been asking itself: first, while Douglas was still missing, if he was dead, and then later, after seeing her with the knife, if she had killed him. Her responses, and the action of the story, would suggest that he was still alive both times. But the fact that these questions were still posed was significant in itself.

Considering the different ways of looking at this production, I don't think we can assume she was telling the truth either time, regardless of Douglas' appearance in the show afterwards. This would certainly underline the same art of deception mentioned before, in that she has succeeded in covering the truth from Thomas just as the production has hidden it from us.

The talent of Sophie Okonedo and Ben Daniels in their roles as Julie and Douglas was most apparent in the silent scene in which Julie dances, attempting to get Douglas to bed, while he resists on spiritual principles. While nothing was said for at least several minutes, the tension between the two of them was overwhelmingly clear. Her frustration with him was easily relatable and understandable, while his rationality was almost convincing. The breakdown of the two characters was in their treatment of Thomas, as neither of the two extremes they provided were actually helping the child. Maybe this helplessness and its effect on Thomas is what the title actually refers to, and what makes it, in the end, such a tragedy, despite the uncertain future of its characters.

***Crazy For You*, Novello Theatre – January 14, 2012**

This production was not only an excellent one to close with, as it was both funny and uplifting, but it also related back to a number of other shows that we've seen. The exaggeration of the set was effective in portraying the essence of a certain place through just a few backdrops, very much as in *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Also similar to that production, the two-dimensional set pieces were slanted in a way to make them appear three-dimensional, but in this case, even the projecting pieces (such as Lank's saloon) were raked on a slant to add to the illusion. The movement and fluidity of the set was much like that we saw in other musicals, such as *Billy Elliot* and *Matilda*, in which the setting of a particular scene would be changing even as the actors performed various songs. In this particular musical, however, the two-sided nature of the set was not only very useful in that it could be rotated around to represent either New York City or Deadrock, Nevada, but also very theatrical, as we saw cowboys bring out cacti almost as if they were stage managers simply placing them there as props. This was a nice reflection of the play's focus on theater itself, which was an indication of the various perspectives it showed us (another common theme with many other productions). I saw this in the way in which the theater itself was portrayed. First we saw the stage from the back, as Zangler addressed an imaginary audience, just as in *Billy Elliot* we saw the audition stage from the wings before seeing it head-on. Also, just as we never saw Billy's audition, we never actually see the musical that Bobby and the inhabitants of Deadrock work so hard to put on.

To this extent, the commonalities between *Crazy For You's* play-within-a-play and those of other productions deserves mentioning. The physical perspective of the

theater is of course most similar to *Billy Elliot*, but there were also elements that tied into the inner play of *Noises Off* and even *Hamlet*. The very stage-like, showbiz nature of everything, from the costumes of Bobby's backup dancers to the names of theaters in lights, made this production very aware of itself as theater, in the same way that *Noises Off* drew conclusions about itself through its inner play, *Nothing On*. The stereotypes of the characters in *Noises Off* were also seen in *Crazy For You*. Polly's fiery temperament as the "wild" woman of the West, the ignorant talent of all the *Follies* Girls, and most of all the hilarious portrayal of the English travelers, were all indications of this. But just as in *Hamlet*, the inner play was meant to be a reflection of the one we were watching. Although we were never treated to its performance, the attempt to get Bobby to act as the lead, and replacing him with Polly, was reflective of *Crazy For You*'s transformation of Bobby. In the end, Polly's inability to complete the show without him was representative of her actual situation in the real production; namely, that she felt unable to go through life without him.

This production even had some similar themes to very different shows, especially in its depiction of the effect of love on individuals. Most notably, the insanity that love can drive people to was also seen in a comedic way in *Comedy of Errors* and in a tragic way in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Outside of its obvious tribute to the insanity of love through its title (which is also the song to which Bobby performs in his audition), there were many other moments in which such insanity was presented in a comedic manner. The ridiculous way in which characters, once trapped by love, began to act, was more than clear in Irene's sudden launch into the song "Naughty Baby" with a silently stunned Lank. But Bobby's and Zangler's hilarious "What Causes That?" was also a tribute to the

craziness of love. It reminded me in particular of the pop songs played by the street band in *Comedy of Errors*, which were all themed to have lyrics about going crazy. Similarly, in the moment in which Posdnyshev justifies the murder of his wife in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, he says she died “because of him... no, because of love.” In this way, he links his own mental instability inextricably to the love of his wife in a much more serious way than *Crazy For You*’s antics.

All in all, this production made for a wonderful conclusion to an enlightening journey of plays, addressing the same issues of identity, perspective and even meta-theater that many other shows had also looked at. The spectacle of it, as well, was similar to some of the other technically advanced plays we saw, all while contributing to the showbiz theme behind the story.