

# Critiques from the West End



Theodore Chelis'  
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Written under the tutorship of Professor Russell A. Peck

*War Horse*

Olivier Theatre, National Theatre Complex  
Saturday, December 29, 2007

The use of puppetry was the most striking, beautiful, and symbolic aspect of Nick Stafford's theatrical adaptation of Anthony Morpurgo's touching children's novel about the quest of a boy to rescue his horse from conscription during World War I. The puppets allowed the director to create distinct personalities for the horses, thereby humanizing their emotions. It was a daring and incredibly successful directorial decision that could not have been accomplished without the astonishing skill of the Handspring Puppet Company; the level of detail achieved in the creation of the horses' movements amazed me.



**Puppetry as a symbol of war's effect on the autonomy of the individual in *War Horse*.**

Breathtaking spectacle aside, and more importantly, the puppets<sup>1</sup> worked very well as symbols of the controlling effect of war on human destiny. During war, Stafford suggests, we all become puppets, our will removed by the imposition of duty. We are controlled by forces other than ourselves: the Kaiser's imperial desires; the responsibility of defense; the forced hatred of a dehumanized enemy, who, in the person of Herr Mueller, turns out to be not unlike oneself (Albert). The horses become puppets of the armies' call to arms; the soldiers, puppets of their respective government's convictions; the civilians (especially the small girl), victims of circumstance with emotional collateral damage.

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<sup>1</sup> Image: Annand, Simon. 25 January 2008  
<<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=23070&dspl=images>>.

Perhaps the motif of puppetry extends beyond the realm of war. Albert's father becomes a puppet of his own materiality, his subconscious belief in self-failure, his competitive nature, his alcoholism, and a social preoccupation with money. Albert's mother becomes a puppet of her own pregnancy, her forced domestic life, and her marginalization in society (as well as the play) as a woman in a world where men make war. Herr Mueller is conscripted as an officer despite his desire to be home with his family and his disbelief in the purpose of the war. Indeed, the British officers themselves discuss their forced participation in a war that they did not instigate. In a tone full of both duty and regret, the men exhibit ambivalence toward war, recognizing the necessity of defending their families and country from an aggressor while expressing an aversion of conscience to violent conflict. One might view the dialogue as a type of *apologia* by which the men justify their actions to themselves. We are all puppets with little control over the forces of our lives, it would seem. *War Horse* largely deals with the loss of control over one's life and destiny in a violent, modern, mechanistic, and materialistic world.

Yet, despite the suggested loss of control over one's destiny, Stafford reminds us that choice and action remain within the realm of individual decision. The song of the lyrical storyteller reminds the audience, via narrative bookends, "We are only remembered for the things we have done." Contributing to the epic genre of the play, his words introduce the classical notion that action defines character. Albert joins the army to lovingly seek his horse, maturing into a compassionate adult in the meantime. Herr Mueller chooses to reject his duty, to him the senseless killing of an arbitrary enemy, and reposition himself as an orderly who caringly seeks to preserve life rather than destroy it. To his comrades he becomes a coward, hiding from death, but Herr Mueller substitutes his own code of principles for that forced on him by the violent military hierarchy and Kaiser. Viewing the play through the context of domestic

drama, Albert's mother calls attention to his father's courageous decision to marry her after they discovered that she was pregnant.

*War Horse* also juxtaposes classical and imperial idealism with the harsh and seemingly hopeless reality of modernity. The play begins by situating the plot in a peaceful domestic world where petty social competition and tensions within the nuclear family dominate life. Stafford does an excellent job creating the feeling of a safe insular space, physically fenced in and seemingly cut off from impending war. The subtle agrarian touches imposed on an otherwise sparse stage effectively established an atmosphere of rural security to be contrasted with the unsettling battle scenes (an atmosphere perhaps not wholly unlike the Ithaca that Odysseus abandoned for Troy). I particularly appreciate Stafford's decision to incorporate rustically attired actors in the creation of his set. He seems to say that we not only hold the reins over each other's destinies, but are in fact defined by the world we have created for ourselves.

Nevertheless, Morpurgo and Stafford seem to lament that the notion of human nobility, embodied by Joey's resilience and Albert's loyalty and love, has been relegated to the realm of naïve childish idealism, lost to the uncaring and increasingly mechanized adult world of war and survival. This mechanization, the threat of cruel and inhumane modernity, threatens to destroy the peaceful and idealistic rural world. Stafford successfully conveys this struggle for survival in the face of annihilation by climactically juxtaposing Joey and the German tank in a center-stage clash. The tank emerges as the central symbol of inhuman mechanization in the play. Yet Albert's world, Joey's world, survives the war intact, and the play concludes on a hopeful note for humanity with the Narracott family, including Joey, happily reunited.

As mentioned during discussion, *War Horse* is an unconventional, non-simplistic, and non-dichromatic children's story. I found this facet of Morpurgo's plot and Stafford's direction

to be commendable and progressive. They appropriately treat one of the greatest epic tragedies of history with a lens that has not been clouded by traditional pro-British, pro-imperial, pro-war, and pro-conquest propaganda. In place of a one-sided narrative, glorifying the defeat of a demonized enemy, they present a tale told from two similar, yet supposedly opposed, perspectives, those of Albert and Herr Mueller. The audience encounters a German humanized by his shared compassion for Joey. Not only does Stafford destroy the traditional simplification of war (good versus evil), but he stages battle scenes that are meant to rattle the audience (I found the slow-motion strobe effect, which accompanied the deaths and bombings, to be unnerving). Likewise, Stafford does not shy away from the murder of Ned, Albert's cousin, at the hands of the Germans, but blocks it center-stage and directs the boy to writhe on the ground, gasping for last breaths. In a society that traditionally indoctrinates young men to admire and pursue glory and honor through military exploits, the realistic exposition of war conducted by Stafford is unconventional, effective, and admirable—it should especially resonate with us in light of current conflicts.

*God In Ruins*  
Soho Theatre  
Saturday, December 29, 2007

Using a contemporary reworking of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol as his framework, Anthony Nielson provocatively employs dark comedy in this play to address relevant issues of modern masculinity as well as a host of other taboo subjects, including homosexuality, pornography, alcoholism, terrorism, and religion. The play took on so many current issues in such innovative ways—the staging of cyber-sex, narcotic-induced hallucinations, and a virtual reality world—that I hardly know where to begin. This was my first experience with the audacious genre of “In-yer-face” theatre (an experience that I hope to repeat

soon), which seemed to me to be the most effective and appropriate form in which to address an audience that epitomizes a largely sensationalizing, hyper-technological, and fragmented society. Like Nielson's protagonist, Bryan, people in contemporary society increasingly substitute forms of artificial instant gratification (e.g. reality TV and digitally filtered communication) for real relationships. *God In Ruins* was a fresh reminder of overlooked social issues, the possibility of creating new realities, the unfortunate condition of many men, and the ways we don't relate to one another in our world.

Nielson presents Bryan as a problematic archetype of contemporary male identity. Characterized by rejection, alienation, isolation, anger and despair, he becomes a type of postmodern everyman who fits incongruously into a fragmented society from which he is disconnected. We learn that this will be a story about male identity and feelings of worthlessness in the opening scene when Cratchit un-invites Scrooge to dinner, explaining that his presence undermines Cratchit's masculine social role as family provider. Cratchit may feel inadequate, but we soon learn that Scrooge's identity and self-worth are inextricably connected to his relationship with Cratchit's family. Like Scrooge, Bryan is cut off from his family, virtually friendless, and cognizant of his own apparent societal insignificance.

At first I found Bryan's alcoholism, apparent perversion, and mistreatment of his wheelchair-bound friend to be utterly contemptible; however, I soon realized that they were outward projections of his own self-loathing and discomfort with an alternative sexual identity. He then appeared as a hopeless, lonely, and pathetic character for whom I could not help but feel sorry. I also initially considered Bryan to be quite eccentric and extreme because of the unrestrained presentation of his character, but I believe that Nielson intends the audience to consider him an exemplar; the Bryans of the world are much more common than one might think

(likewise the mistreated pizza deliveryman). The exceptionally talented actor who portrayed Bryan embodied the traditional image of masculinity (tall, broad, full-bearded), contributing to the play's ironic exposition of superficiality.

The suggestion of multiple layers of reality offered at morning discussion led me to a meditation on the significance of Bryan's occupation: reality television producer. Bryan is a creator of alternate realities, both in his work and in his life. His life is empty, bleak, and insular (as the confinement of the action to his apartment suggests). The set decoration implies an attempt to coat his reality with a stylish and materialistic veneer (the lonely man surrounds himself with things). However, redecoration does not alter circumstances, so Bryan enters a drunken reality, dulling the pain of his isolation and creating a blurred world that is not any better. He indulges in a cyber reality to achieve some sort of stimulation or connection with another human being despite the technological and pornographic filter through which it occurs. Lastly, his drug use creates a brief reality of jovial and homosocial camaraderie.

Bryan creates these realities as a way to escape from his life and yet also satisfy the human need for interaction. How, in a world of disconnected realities, are we able to establish meaningful and intimate relationships? Is it possible to do this without some sort of interference and mediation? It is perhaps in this way that the audience can most relate to Bryan. Do we all not try to create realities for ourselves in which we imagine alternate versions, perhaps idealized versions, of relationships and ourselves that we perceive as unattainable in life? This is a definitively human act. Reading, or play-going, is perhaps another example, a brief escape that introduces us to new people with whom we establish relationships on our own terms.

The symbolic importance of Bryan's entry into the realm of "Second Life" best exhibits Nielson's thoughts on the creation of an alternate world. A present reality with futuristic

elements, *Second Life* offers individuals the chance to create a new identity and redefine relationships. *Second Life* represents the future possibilities of Bryan's current situation. Thus, the future becomes the true second life, the true alternate reality, in which we are able to re-mold our identities, to recreate our realities. This is a second life in which everyone may become an "avatar," the "embodiment of a god." Yet, Nielson insists that such a god is not external, but resides within all men, waiting to be recognized and revealed. A man may be a "god in ruins" (an appropriately bleak title and not-so-subtle allusion to Emerson's Nature), but he has the potential to bridge the gap between himself and his idealized form, whatever that may be.

Nielson suggests the attainment of that form as an alternate definition of masculinity. The gift from Bryan's "thoughtful friend," a picture of the "vitruvian man," the idealized man, becomes the "reminder of what we may all aspire to." *God in Ruins* is the story of Bryan's transformation and redemption through the recognition of his true self. The active recreation of reality puts him on the path to self-actualization by which he can connect with others, achieving intimacy with those about whom he cares. Aside from the implication that Bryan's father was heaven-sent (a clever re-imagining of Marley's ghost), Nielson presents the audience with a Christmas story from which our traditional conception of God and Christ are absent. In fact, he goes so far as to have one of his characters utter the words "Santa is dead," in a satirical echo—more appropriate to the age of materialism—of Nietzsche's "God is Dead."

I greatly admired Nielson's ability to mix so successfully the tragic and comic in this play, giving each scene multiple layers of meaning without being utterly morbid. His semi-farcical opening establishes this technique when Scrooge's jovial and comic behavior is replaced by feelings of rejection. However, Nielson achieves the effective and climactic use of this tragic comedy during Bryan's cocaine hallucination. This scene, which included an imagined sing-

along with men ridiculously dressed as reindeer, Santa, and other holiday characters, was at first hilarious. The mood only increased when the “Angel Gabriel” popped off the head of the Christ doll, replacing Marx’s traditional opiate with pills. “What’s next?!?” I wondered excitedly. Yet, the absurdity and conviviality of this sensory-overload soon gave way to deeper meaning. “And if there’s no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow,” indeed. The tragedy resides in the fact that there is no place for Bryan—for the men he represents—to go. He is alone, trapped in an empty and seemingly worthless life. “So let it snow...?” Perhaps this is a veiled reference to Bryan’s contemplation of suicide. Whatever one’s interpretation, it refers to some form of a death, be it real or temporary, and the sing-along becomes heartrendingly sad.

Nielson introduces a final layer of reality, one that includes his audience, when the fourth wall dissolves, the actors break character, and the “soldier from Tehran” enters the theatre. “The play’s the thing! Am I right? Am I right?” states the soldier, hinting at the meaning of his entrance (In which to catch the conscience of the audience?). Nielson seems to say, “Pay attention, this isn’t just a play!” This entrance was an in-yer-face reality check, a truncated denouement, followed by an abrupt ending. As with the use of the actors’ real names for their character names, Nielson uses the soldier scene to exclaim that these are in fact real men, dealing with real, life-altering/ending issues. We must be aware of the circumstances in which these men live, many of whom may indeed be veterans. It seems as though this soldier’s death was not enemy-induced. It seems like we need a new reality in which a fragmented society learns to reconnect.

*Nicholas Nickleby Parts I and II*  
Gielgud Theatre  
Sunday, December 30, 2007

This marathon production of David Edgar's adaptation of a classic Charles Dickens novel proved very uplifting, despite its scathing social commentary. In a typically Dickensian fashion, the convoluted plot, detailing the adventures of an unassuming, but exceptionally righteous, young man, is filled with eccentric and memorable characters (the good-hearted, but spastic and alcoholic Noggs, for example) whose interactions and obfuscated relationships provide for entertaining melodrama.

Nicholas Nickleby, the hero of the play, is a young man looking to beat a path for himself in the world while providing for his virtuous mother and sister. To do so, he asks for the help of his cold and judicious Uncle Ralph, who sets him up as the assistant to a cruel tutor named Wackford Squeers. With his wife and son, Squeers runs a boarding school for unfortunate children, whom they abuse and virtually starve. While inhabiting this prison, Nickleby, displaying his moral imperative, becomes the protector of the pathetic and lovable Smike—I admit to almost being moved to tears by Smike's question "Is away better than here?" After escaping from Squeers, Nickleby winds up joining an acting troupe, but is eventually found by his uncle, who accuses him of ingratitude and unprovoked abuse of his employer. My initial dislike of Nicholas' uncle was inflamed when, after Smike's tragic death, we learn that he is Ralph's son. Despite Smike's death and Ralph's unexpected (though perfectly logical) suicide, the play ends on a high note, with Nicholas and the Brothers Cheerible performing acts of altruism to improve the condition of society's helpless.

While I always enjoy Dickens' complicated plots and unexpected twists, it took me a bit to move beyond the surface level goodness and badness of the characters in order to recognize

their actual complexities. We know that we should admire Nicholas' fervor and desire to do good, righting the wrongs he finds in his path. Likewise, we should "boo" Squeers for his inherent evil. Much more intriguing than either of these extremes is the morally ambiguous character of Ralph Nickleby. Though callous in his decision-making, we might view him merely as an unfortunate construct of Victorian social mores. He is a prosperous, dutiful, and seemingly respectable gentleman trapped by his own rationality.

Edgar's play has the clear intent of shining a spotlight on the ills of society, much like Dickens' intent in the mid-1800s. The playwright reminds us that men like Ralph are getting rich off the misfortune of others while social "undesirables"—both the poor and infirm—have been marginalized and forgotten, possibly left to the whim of individuals like Squeers. Edgar hopes to reawaken social conscience and encourage "cheerful" actions that can improve everyone's lot. Moreover, Edgar advocates his message of selflessness with a socialist tone. In the concluding song of Nickleby's rewritten *Romeo and Juliet*, the chorus advocates the Marxist slogan of "from each according to his ability to each according to his need." Similar messages arise throughout the production always at moments of communal song.

Edgar also points a finger at the hypocrisy of British government. Rather than help those unfortunates whom Nickleby encounters, the Parliamentarians of the opening scene set the tone of the production while debating a token bread law that will not help the destitute and will hurt the bread makers (whose group presence suggests organized labor). In a parody of British nationalism (symbolized by the entry of a glorious Britannia figure), Edgar mocks the idea of national pride while there are humans falling by the wayside, starving, and becoming ill.

The magnificent set created for this production evoked a dirty and claustrophobic urban world in which the characters and unfortunates were confined and trapped. Similarly, as Ralph

fell victim to his own discipline (and the other characters discovered the skeleton in his closet) the rickety wooden structure and shadows seemed to close in around him. Viewed through the lens of symbolic externalization, the set transforms into the cell of Ralph's conscience.

*Glengarry Glenn Ross*  
Apollo Theatre  
Monday, December 31, 2008

One of the most remarkable aspects of Mamet's play is the terse and persuasive prose in which it is written. The overabundance of profanity, crude jokes, and tough straight-talk created a distinctly male idiom which characterized the ruthless and unforgiving world of Chicago salesmen. I sat marveling, uncomfortably, at the unprincipled and fast-paced dialogues of the first act, which took the form of extended sales pitches. Moss tries to sell George on helping him steal the leads; Shelley tries to sell Williamson on give him another chance to prove himself; Roma unscrupulously persuades Lingk to buy a property. Mamet reduces human interaction to manipulation and deceit. The only way to advance oneself, it would appear, is to dupe the next guy. Moreover, Williamson's unwillingness to help out Shelley suggests that once you've begun to lose, there will be no second chances. As a result, we find Shelley, George, and Moss stuck in a desperate cycle with little hope of improvement. In this cycle the owners get rich at the expense of their employees' sanity and ethics. It reduces these men to immorality and petty competition (emphasized by the chalk board chart prop) for a Cadillac—a superficial status symbol of materialistic America.

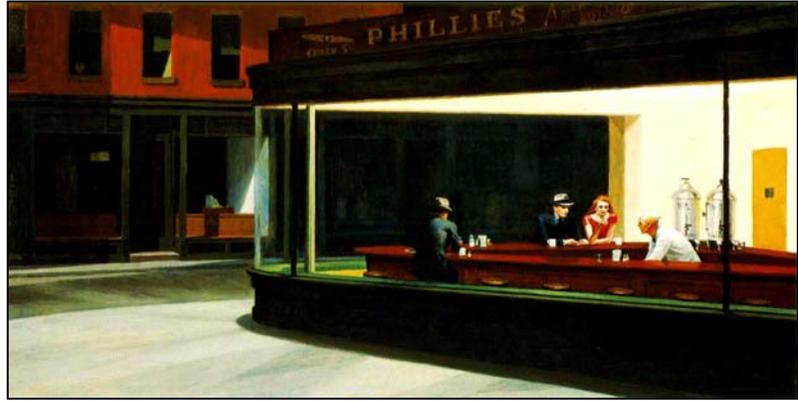
A play about men on the edge, *Glengarry Glenn Ross* exudes aggression and anger. Shelley, Roma, George, and Moss are independently embattled in a super-competitive industry, where the winner takes all. The self-worth of these men becomes tied directly to their ability to make the sale by pushing real estate developments on reluctant buyers. Failure to do so, a type

of impotence (exemplified by Shelley and George), renders the man worthless. Mamet clearly comments on the way in which the competitive world of business diminishes the individual. The relentless pursuit of the “leads” by the men suggests a type of enslavement to rules and industry. Shelley seems to be on the brink of a nervous breakdown and increasingly willing to do whatever it takes—lie, cheat, steal—in order to come out on top and affirm his relevance and primacy.

This ability to sell, however, relies entirely on luck—a major motif of the play. “One minute you are up, the next you’ll be down, so enjoy your momentary success,” it seems to say. Success is a fluke, not a skill. Even Roma recognizes this fact, admitting in one of his long, rambling, semi-coherent monologues that his lead in the competition has all to do with his good fortune. We might attribute his urgency at procuring the next set of leads to the expectation that his luck has peaked and will soon run out.

The play also deals with the myth of the “American Dream.” The names of the properties, as well as the images displayed during the scene changes, have a mystical, tranquil, and unreal quality to them (emphasized by their purposeful distortion through pixelation). Purchasing one of these properties represents the attainment of an ideal, of defining one’s place in the world (perhaps Gary’s Glenn and Ross’ Glenn would be more appropriate names). The harsh reality of the competition demonstrates that this dream remains distant and unattainable. Yet, it is the sale of this myth that all of the men rely on for their livelihood. The ideal is always just out of reach and the next sale will always need to be made.

The sets created for this production contrasted perfectly with the images of the lush, virtual properties. The muted oranges, reds, and browns of the diner characterized the gritty



commercial world in which the men

**The sets of this production invoked Edward Hopper's vision of American urban life.**

operate with a stark, superficial, plastic quality (I felt like I was looking at an Edward Hopper painting).<sup>2</sup> The level of detail achieved in the real estate office set was remarkable—everything from scuff-marked desks to semi-broken furniture. The disorganized and decrepit appearance of the office perfectly complemented the increasing chaos and condition of the frazzled men's lives.

The performances in this production were magnificent and moving—from Shelley's faltering ability to conceal his fear and loathing to Williamson's smug, managerial indifference; from George's innocent bumbling to Roma's manic tirades. I particularly enjoyed the monologue in which, after the robbery, Roma puts Williamson in his place—the closest any of them gets to retribution—and indulges Shelley, "Levine the Machine," in his story about baiting and finishing the sale. In a final twist, which crushes the spirit, we learn of Shelley's self-incrimination and that his sale doesn't count. Shelley, an embodiment of the twentieth-century working man archetype, has been trapped by a system that he is powerless to combat, driven to criminality in order to survive, and will be punished for trying to get back at the men who have conditioned him thus. Perhaps like Willy Loman, Shelley "had the wrong dreams."

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<sup>2</sup> Image: Hopper, Edward. *Nighthawks*. 1942. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [Media History Project](http://www.mediahistory.umn.edu/timeline/1940-1949.html). 25 January 2008 <<http://www.mediahistory.umn.edu/timeline/1940-1949.html>>.

*The Seagull*  
New London Theatre  
Tuesday, January 1, 2008

For my first experience with Chekhov, I cannot say that I was particularly moved, except to despondency. The characters inhabiting Sorin's estate seem overly neurotic, but somehow the most real of any we have encountered yet. They are catty, frustrated, jealous, angry, and lustful. But, they do not commit outrageous or grandiose acts; they do nothing except lament their own existences. The small and insular artistic setting remains a place of ennui where the characters do nothing but attempt to reinvent past glory, or contemplate suicide. Only Nina tries to create a new world for herself, but her attempts are pitilessly undermined.

Perhaps some of the characters in this play suffer the effects of an existential crisis (assuming that they are capable of such an experience). However, rather than developing a sense of liberated angst, they become overwhelmed with a sense of purposelessness. Again, only Nina has any dreams and aspirations, which remain unfulfilled when she returns from her tour around the country with a "sub-par" acting troupe. After the initial three acts, during which Konstantin fails to kill himself, we arrive back on the same estate two years later. Nothing has changed. The characters are more depressed, considering life hopelessly banal. Konstantin, after failing to become a successful author, has even less hope in his future prospects (unlike Nina, who insists she will be a great actress), resolving to kill himself again. Not even love and sex can rescue these despairing people from their tortured existences. The play is best encapsulated in the opening line when Irina suggests that she is in mourning for her life.

So what is the Seagull? Nina compares herself to the dead bird, which she receives as a gift from Konstantin. Trigorin creates a narrative in which a man kills a carefree girl (a seagull) out of sheer boredom. We soon learn, however, that Konstantin will become the seagull as he

tries to commit suicide between the acts of the play-within-a-play. The death of a seagull seems meaningless, as though nothing has been lost. Through the boredom, despair, and emptiness that defines these actors' existences, Chekhov troublingly transfers the same logic onto human life. With an escapist rationale in mind, Konstantin again attempts to put himself out of his misery; this time he reaches success. I don't know what Chekhov hoped to accomplish with this play, except to try and convince his audience of the worthlessness of their own lives. I can see why this type of tune would not appeal to Noel Coward's vivacity. Garry Essendine needs to introduce Sorin's guests to the notion of *present laughter*.

*Henry IV, Part 1*  
The Courtyard Theatre  
Wednesday, January 2, 2008

Michael Boyd effectively introduced the problems of Bolingbroke's reign by opening the play with the king washing his hands. Pointedly symbolic, this action represents Henry IV's attempt to cleanse himself of the deposition and murder of Richard II—an action that the King seems to regret in a way, or at least to question retrospectively. It was this act that destabilized the monarchy and the realm (“So shaken as we are...”), bringing into question the legitimacy of Henry's kingship. Henry IV contends with this question of legitimacy throughout the action of the play in the form of Worcester's betrayal (as well as that of Mortimer and Scroop), Hotspur's renunciation, and Northumberland's vacillation. Boyd did an excellent job conveying this theme visually. The sole feature of Henry IV's barren throne room (the set) was a rusty metal wall that seemed to imply a decline in the monarchy and kingdom—or at least the perception thereof. Boyd reemphasizes this point by having Hotspur, enraged at Henry IV's demand of the Scottish prisoners and his unwillingness to rescue Mortimer, throw the king's throne against the metal

wall, creating a loud, harsh, hollow noise. The echo symbolized Henry's hollow rule, an empty throne, and a kingdom devoid of leadership.

Boyd did a wonderful job creating the three distinct atmospheres in which the bulk of the play's action occurs: Henry's castle, the tavern, Wales. The realm of Henry IV was militaristic (emphasized by the lords' black uniforms), dark, and illuminated by harsh florescent lights (though I did not care for the partial obstruction of view caused by these hanging from the ceiling). The beating of war drums during the scenes involving Henry also created a growing tension and suspense. Characterized by leisure, comfort, and jollity, the tavern contrasted entirely with the intense political world of impending civil war. It was the realm of camaraderie, "wenching," and sack—the realm of Falstaff. The lush crimson curtains of the tavern matched the color of Falstaff's garments, cleverly linking John to his own territory. It was also characterized by fun and sprightly background music. Using mystical blue lights, Boyd created a place of exotic and loving domesticity in Wales. Glendower's castle, in which he functioned as a type of patriarch, was a domestic space in which husbands and wives acted loving toward one another. I found the scene between Hotspur and his wife, in which she pleads with him to stay with her and not go to war, particularly touching. The blocking in this scene (reclined figures embracing their spouses) as well as the lighting created a mystical (Celtic?) and tranquil space, removed from the world of war. With the voice of a siren, Mortimer's wife beckons her husband to lie in her lap. Although conceived as beautiful in an aesthetic of "otherness," her shaved head and lengthy song fit incongruously into an otherwise coherent production.

This was also a play about Hal's development, his relationship with his father, and the fulfillment of his destiny as son to the king. The Hal we first meet seems to be an irresponsible drunkard, who wastes his days in the tavern with Falstaff and a posse of hooligans. Quick-

tongued, but apparently lazy and indecisive, he neglects his filial duty to help restore order to the kingdom. He would rather have fun. Averse to military life and killing, Boyd chooses to dress Hal in all white (a stark contrast to the black uniform of his aggressive and violent foil, Hotspur) and make him perhaps slightly effeminate. However, despite his father's criticism (I was not expecting the scene between Henry and Hal to become so violent), Hal does in fact reveal his own aptitude for government, a calculated political shrewdness. He explains that he is biding his time, enjoying himself, until the day when he will emerge. This will make his transformation all the more remarkable and his reputation that much more impressive. It turns out he is not the adopted heir of the lazy, deceitful, corrupting figure of John Falstaff. But, should he be considered merely an extension of in Henry IV's lineage?

By distancing himself from both father figures, Hal becomes the son of neither, substituting his own character as a counter-example to both. Hal proves himself in battle, fighting fearlessly against the Worcester-Hotspur coalition. Moreover, he establishes his own commitment to duty and justice, demonstrating his potential to become a great king. His presence is commanding and his actions are disciplined and merciful as he directs his brother to seek out and destroy the retreating Douglas. Hal transforms, revealing his latent political aptitude. He matures into an honorable man, a dutiful son, and a committed friend—not a counterfeit. The parable of the prodigal son seems to underlie this transformation.

The relationship between Hal and John Falstaff (the living image of vice and sloth) was difficult to comprehend. Act I, ii, in which Hal sits on the bed with John and wakes him with a glass of cold water, establishes a friendly intimacy between the two men. Yet, despite their friendly antagonism, Hal pokes fun at Falstaff constantly and his criticisms (though witty and funny) are very subversive. At the same time, we are presented with powerful moments in which

Hal shows deep care for Falstaff—he covers him over with a blanket just before intermission and kisses his forehead when he thinks he is dead on the battlefield. Hal seems devoted to this degenerate surrogate father figure. He is a friend with negative influence, who commits dishonorable acts—robbing merchants and raising an army of untrained peasants (a clever break in the 4<sup>th</sup> wall) who he believes will just be killed. Falstaff seems to be all self-seeking egoism.

The final climactic battle sequence was spectacularly blocked. The emergence of the squad of kings into the fog created an eerie and confusing atmosphere, an inventive staging for the death of the loyal and courageous Walter Blunt in the guise of the king. Boyd achieved an admirable intensity in this depiction of war.

Honor seemed to be another major motif of this play. Hotspur's chivalrous passion for revenge marked him as an unreasonable, but not dishonorable, character. If anything, one might admire Hotspur's seemingly outdated commitment to past ideals, displaced by Henry's political scheming—the king is more worried about Mortimer's claim to the throne than rescuing this loyal man from the enemy. David Warner brilliantly delivered Falstaff's battlefield meditation on the subject. Indicating a dead man, he asks if that is an image of honor. To Falstaff, honor is a meaningless concept, contrary to rationality and the survival instinct. John may not be honest with anyone else, but he seems honest with himself—at the least, an egocentric realist.

Though *Henry IV, Part I* is a dense historical play, dealing with heavy themes and tragic circumstances, it is impossible to overlook the brilliant humor that Shakespeare also manages to include. The insulting exchanges in the tavern scenes between John and Hal are a perfect example—especially when each takes a turn role-playing the king. Falstaff, like his gang of henchmen, is a comic character. The audience derives pleasure from watching his half-baked schemes fall apart. Boyd did a wonderful job staging this humor, especially in the robbery

scene, where Hal dupes John—the Groucho disguise was also a nice touch; the descent from ropes was an impressive example of spectacle). Moreover, Boyd’s inclusion of the audience as Falstaff’s ragamuffin army was hilarious, as was the instance where John seems to rise from the dead—“Emboweled?”—, stab Hotspur again, and concoct an unbelievable story to explain his life. Boyd appropriately extracted humor from every instance in which the potential was provided. Nevertheless, the humor of neither Shakespeare, nor Boyd is ever idle. The scene in which Hal robs the robbers—Falstaff, et al.—parallels the frustrations of Henry IV’s kingship. Perhaps Bolingbroke and Falstaff are two sides of the same coin.

*Henry IV, Part II*  
The Courtyard Theatre  
Wednesday, January 2, 2008

*Part II* was a very different play from *Part I*. It seemed to focus most heavily on comedy, with a majority of the scenes occurring in the country, far from the anxiety and fleeting health of Henry IV (and the ongoing civil war, for that matter!). I’m not sure that I entirely understand this play (perhaps *Part II* provides the intellectual complement to the straightforward action of *Part I*?), or what it tries to accomplish (to characterize the included historical actors more fully?) other than providing comic entertainment and filling a narrative gap between *Part I* and *Henry V*. I thought the entire production was very well conceived and excellently directed, but found the play itself virtually lacking in substance. Thank goodness for the brilliant comic blocking of inane buffoonery in Act II and the marathon tavern scene of Act I.



Shakespeare establishes the dissimilarity of the two plays immediately by having Rumour, an allegorical personification and narrator, contextualize the action. We learn that misperceptions of reality, based on false report and gossip, will provide the impetus for the progression of the plot. In a commentary on the misrepresentative character of rumor, the audience is informed that, rather than spreading news of Hal's victory, Rumour reports just the opposite. Appearing to have been inspired by the grim reaper, the director chose to interpret Rumour as a spectral figure cloaked in black. His appearance contrasted greatly with the primarily jovial scenes that followed. Perhaps we are to recognize Rumour's morbid subliminal omni-presence throughout the play (as indicated by the scenes in which characters acquire information and Rumour appears in the background). Or, should we understand that Rumour precedes and thereby drives action? I was particularly fond of the decision to have Rumour enter pulling a casket. It did not appear to contain Hal, so I interpreted this moment as foreshadowing the death of Henry IV, of which the characters learn prematurely through Rumour.

This production was particularly noteworthy for its skilled comic blocking, although I was not pleased to learn that Hal had fallen back into his slothful ways with Falstaff and his posse of drunkards. The director created a wonderful atmosphere of leisure in the tavern scene, where wenching and drinking provided distracting celebration for Hal and his friends after the victory over Hotspur. At this point I began to wonder if Hal really did have the capacity and desire to fulfill his destiny, as he claimed and began to demonstrate in *Part I*. The interaction between Falstaff, Hal, Bardolph, Pistol, Peto (et al.) and Mistress Quickly and the other maids, created a vulgar feeling of pseudo-domesticity. This seemed like a world entirely removed from the war. The musicians were an effective addition to this scene, contributing to the sense of festive lightheartedness. While the interactions between Falstaff and Hal were very witty (as

usual), this scene did not contribute anything new to the progression of the plot or the development of the characters. We only begin to doubt Prince Henry's potential.

In contrast to the cheerfulness of the tavern, we find Henry IV's physical and psychological condition rapidly worsening. I was particularly fond of the way in which the director showed Henry IV being haunted by images of Richard II. The wheelchair was a bit anachronistic, but adequately signaled the severity of his condition.

The brilliantly choreographed interaction between the fool and his ladder perfectly characterized the atmosphere of the farcical conscription that followed. This was simply well-done physical comedy that I found very entertaining. The director also took full advantage of the laughs to be gotten from the dialogue and names of Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, and Bullcalf. These characters were created very cleverly, but again I cannot come up with an adequate explanation for the inclusion of this scene other than pure amusement. I suppose we learn more about the mysterious character of Falstaff from Shallow and Silence. We also learn of his presumptuous intentions and expectations (Lord Chief Justice?!) should Harry become king. Falstaff, corrupt as ever, looks to take full advantage of his new friend's status by expressing his intent to deal out justice unjustly.

I found the staging of the scene in which Henry IV lies on his deathbed to be quite brilliant. Like Hal, I was deceived when Henry lost consciousness momentarily. The actor playing Hal was very convincing as he reluctantly, but assuredly, took the heavy crown from his father's corpse, conveying his readiness (though not necessarily desire) to fulfill his destiny as king (staging action in which Hal interacts with both Falstaff and Henry while they are in bed, connects them as father figures). I was surprised when Henry IV awoke and moved to pathos by his suspicion of Hal. Henry was a Machiavellian king, though tormented by the act that brought

him to power. His son displays virtue in coming to his father's deathbed, and likewise in the complexities of his inheriting the crown. I was glad that Henry and Harry could reconcile before his peaceful death.

The ebullience of the coronation scene was glorious, implying Hal's elevation (also emphasized by blocking the procession on the central platform) and the completion of his transformation into King Henry V. The arrival of an expectant Falstaff and his motley crew caught me off guard at this moment. I couldn't tell whether we were dealing with merely the image of a new Hal, or a character that had transcended his past self. Initially, I viewed Hal's rejection of Falstaff, who he had treated as a friend and compatriot until this point, to be absolutely awful. The imprisonment of the group (the cage descending from the ceiling was a great effect) struck me as a horrible betrayal; it seemed like Hal was trying merely to deny his past. However, I then realized that this imprisonment was conditional and that Hal perhaps looked forward to the day when they could reenter his court reformed, with a new appreciation for virtue. This moment characterized Hal as a just leader, ready to live up to his responsibilities, but aware of his old friends and past. I was left with the impression that Henry V possessed the judgment and potential to become a great king.



Comedy Theatre  
Thursday, January 3, 2008

Marc Camoletti's *Boeing-Boeing* holds the record for most performed French play in the world; I now understand why. This brilliant and carefree French farce—more risqué and surface-oriented than the usual paths of British comedy—had me in a three-hour belly laugh. It

was pure energy and enjoyment. Yet, the play transforms the genre of farce from mere inane slapstick and improbable situations (though there is plenty of this as well) into a comic reminder of the over-scheduled and fast-paced lives that we all lead. From our own chaotic world, we are ironically transplanted into the increasingly frenzied confines of Bernard's apartment, a room that can hardly contain the over-the-top personalities who traverse it, making sure that all of the doors receive plenty of use.

Largely a comedy of contrasts, much of the wonderfully light humor in *Boeing-Boeing* relies on the stereotypical caricatures who populate the stage, the differences between them, and the situations that arise from their interactions. In a nice stylistic touch, the play introduces this motif visually through the chromatic contrast of the set design. Against the stark whiteness of Bernard's walls, we find effulgent pink accents in the form of doors and lampshades. But these accessories only anticipate the three radiant love interests of Bernard's life, all of whom are unaware of the others' existences and involvement with their shared, self-assured, and middle-aged rake. The differences and similarities of these women are highlighted by the airline colors with which they become identified: Gloria/Red/TWA/American, Gabriella/Blue/Al Italia/Italian, Gretchen/Yellow/Lufthansa/German. The female characters, refreshingly strong-willed and self-reliant, are as loud as the colors they display, introducing the first category of stereotype employed: gender.

Using a constant *forte* volume, the women command, demand, and whine. Overly suspicious of Bernard, they each wish to occupy all of his time, receiving ceaseless attention. However, these women are utterly lovable, kind, flirtatious, and devoted to Bernard. The three women are also over-sexualized, wearing tight-fitting clothes and short skirts. The hilarious stereotypes of these women extend beyond gender to nationality. Gloria, the American, has a

grating Western accent and speaks in a high-pitched squeal (she's from Texas). An utter materialist, Gloria speaks condescendingly to Bertha, and demands the most outrageous combinations of food. Gabriella, who only eats pasta, has an exaggerated Italian accent and volatile suspicions of Bernard's infidelity. Gretchen seems to border on insanity, commanding Robert and Bernard in angry, German-accented, bullhorn shouts (although the actress who played Gretchen could have used a bit more practice with her accent).

Bernard is a confident, glib, and wealthy womanizer, who thinks of his perfectly organized bachelor's life with three beautiful girlfriends as a male dream world. He is urban, professional, and stylish, a Don Juan wannabe and caricature of male egotism. Bernard's placation of his girlfriends, and the contrast between their extreme femininity and his masculinity, provide the play's initial comedy. However, a new stereotypical element arrives with the entrance of Robert, Bernard's old school friend from the country. Robert enters the apartment in conservative clothes, carrying a beat up briefcase. He embodies an old-fashioned country attitude and seems intimidated by the dishonest and complicated world that Bernard manages. The actor who played Robert was fantastic! The trepidation with which he caressed each of his lines created perfect comic timing. Moreover, his improvised interactions with each of the women, while awaiting Bernard's return, were hilarious (especially his uncomfortable and hesitant flirtation with Gretchen). He was also a very skilled physical actor, comically using his body to tweak every laugh out of the slapstick elements of the play.

Bertha added another element of contrast: social status. She was an archetypal clever servant (a character that seems to hail back to Greek comedy), utterly loyal to Bernard and willing to tolerate his eccentricities while comically griping and commenting on his lifestyle. The actress who played Bertha was wonderfully sarcastic and dry. Although Bertha is aware of

her role in the household, one she only plays for Bernard, her remarks and critiques are unrestrained, putting her on an equal, perhaps higher, plane than her employer and his friends. I particularly enjoyed the awkward exchanges between Bertha and Robert when she refused to leave the set or comply with his wishes. In the end, Bertha dominates all of the other characters with her wit and comprehension of the situation. Bertha becomes the effulgent pink that steadfastly colors, and is in fact a part of, Bernard's world. It is no wonder that the door to the kitchen, Bertha's kitchen, is this color. Nor is it coincidence that this is the only door with a porthole window, since Bertha is the only member of the privileged audience who fully understands the plot.

Despite all of these inherent comic effects, the timing of each line, each entrance, and each movement moved this production into the realm of extraordinary; every door opened at just the right moment. The verbal exchanges, the physical action (falling off couches, hitting with cushions) were all delivered with the perfect inflection and intensity. Moreover, the tempo of the play itself increased collaterally with the tempo of Bernard's life when the Boeing introduced its faster jet. I was on the edge of my seat during the final fifteen minutes of the performance, watching the rapid entrances and exits of the women from the side rooms, while Bernard, Robert, and Bertha bounce around like balls ("boing-boing"). The carefully constructed increase in speed left me with a fantastic tension about which door would open next, who would emerge from it, and when Bernard's game would finally unravel.

*Boeing-Boeing* ends comfortably and resolutely as Bernard matches with the spirited Gabriella, Robert with the vociferous Gretchen (his soon-to be "little wife"), and Gloria exercises her American independence and egocentrism by leaving and admitting her own infidelity. In this droll play, we enjoy the stereotypes with which we are presented, perhaps

laughing at aspects of the characters we find in ourselves. Yet, in the resolution, each of the characters has also evolved and matured in some way. Bernard becomes more secure with commitment, Robert discovers confidence and an enjoyment of frivolity, and the women find reciprocity for their devotion. The central couples attain romantic fulfillment while Bertha maintains her comfortable place as resident sage and critic. Nevertheless, the central message of the play appears in the final pillow-fight scene, reminiscent of schooldays past, between Bernard and Robert. On one level, the playwright capitalizes on the joke that men will never “grow up” and stop playing their boyish games. But, more importantly, he suggests that, though one may be getting older, the world getting faster, comedy keeps us young at heart.

*The Country Wife*  
Theatre Royal Haymarket  
Thursday, January 3, 2008

Two outrageously funny farces in one day! This was a refreshing change of pace from the dense histories and serious plays about male relationships with which the program began.

The thing that most attracted me about this unrestrained Restoration comedy was its total indulgence of lewdness (even the title is bawdy), double-entendre, and sexual promiscuity. How can a play in which the protagonist, Horner (named thus because he cuckolds, “gives horns,” to unsuspecting middle-aged men), pretends to be impotent in order to gain intimate access to many women not be absolutely hilarious? It would have taken a great deal to ruin this play, which instead had gushing amounts of energy and amusingly delivered wit.

It is interesting that both *Boeing-Boeing* and *The Country Wife*, though separated by three hundred years, both rely primarily on contrasting the city with the country and men with women for their humor. The wonderful actress who played Margery did a fantastic job conveying her

immaturity and unrestrained “rural” expressiveness. Likewise, Pinchwife was the perfect image of a distrustful and overly jealous husband.

Despite the hilarity of the production, I must admit to being a bit disturbed by this man’s treatment of his beautiful spouse. He locked her in a room (symbolic of her marriage) out of which she could not see, limiting her social interaction to Alithea. The scene in which the director chose to have Pinchwife dress Margery like a young boy with a lollipop was particularly bizarre, although perhaps appropriately representative of her character and his pinched disposition. I think the director and set designer had in mind Ibsen’s notion of a doll’s house while conceiving this production visually.

The simultaneity of the three plots—Pinchwife’s abuse of Margery, Harcourt’s pursuit of Alithea, and Horner’s debauchery with Mrs. Sqeamish, Lady Fidget, and Mrs. Fidget—kept the play’s action moving while creating plenty of potential for situational confusion. Particularly funny were the scenes in which Horner discusses “china” offstage, while Mrs. Fidget provides an alternate explanation of his meaning to her oblivious husband. The scene in which the three “virtues” arrive at Horner’s home and proceed to lounge and drink with him also had me in stitches. The humor in this scene seemed to rely on the casting off of social expectations by three women supposedly over-concerned with self-righteousness. The moment in which they ate grapes out of his lap was an appropriately bawdy and funny directorial move, consistent with the mood of the play.

In my opinion, the brilliant comic actor who played Sparkish overshadowed Horner’s performance (although Margery’s over-the-top energy stole the show). He invested Sparkish, Alithea’s fiancé, with just the right amount of extreme disinterest and vanity. Sparkish, a parody of the fops of Wycherley’s day, was so concerned with his own poor witticisms and clever

attempts at conversation that he didn't even notice Harcourt stealing Alithea out from under his nose. However, in a reaction atypical to the production, Alithea remains modest, despite Sparkish's suspicions of her compromising (though innocent) situation with Horner.

*Much Ado About Nothing*  
Olivier Theatre, National Theatre Complex  
Friday, January 4, 2008

Nicholas Hytner's opulent production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was hilariously funny, while still managing to be emotionally charged with tragic potential. It was also a pleasure and a privilege to study this production with Professor Russ McDonald.



I can see why Zoe Wanamaker and Simon Russell Beale are considered to be two of the finest living stage actors. Both have a great talent for combining brilliant comedy with absolute dramatic sincerity to create believable characters that run the emotional gamut of tragicomedy. For example, the witty and critical exchanges between Benedick and Beatrice were performed with consummate condescension and a rapier tone. Yet, the sad and lonely few words uttered after each of these by Beatrice, in which she expressed her love for Benedick, were truly moving. Moreover, both Beale and Wanamaker gave exceptionally funny comedic performances involving the pool. I'm thinking specifically of Beale strutting around on stage in skin-tight wet clothes, making statements like "The world must be peopled," after learning of Beatrice's true feelings via eavesdropping. However, their range becomes apparent when one compares this scene to the moment in which Beatrice, outraged and furious at Claudio's accusation toward Hero, demands that Benedick defend her honor, which he does, displaying his truly honorable nature.

Yet these two performances made it so that the Beatrice and Benedick subplot virtually eclipsed the horrible charge that Claudio makes against Hero. *Much Ado* is a peculiar play in this respect, since the supporting characters usurp the roles of the romantic leads. Although, at times these two characters frustrated me; I wished they would get over their own pride and fear, and proclaim their true feelings. But, I suppose so much of *Much Ado* relies on misreading others and misunderstanding situations (on “no-ting”).

I was utterly in awe of the way in which Hytner made use of the Olivier’s technologically advanced stage to complement the production. The action and tempo of the performance were wholly dependent on the perfectly timed rotation of the platform, which provided the performance with upbeat continuous movement that complemented the dancing and scurrying of the characters. Moreover, the tri-part set allowed Hytner to stage multiple scenes that could interact with each other (the visible feast, while Don John drunkenly plots, emphasized his exclusion from the festivities and love itself). Not only did the set allow simultaneous action, but it also provided a semi-obscured environment in which the characters could overhear one another. The warm yellow tones of Don Leonato’s home, as well as the sandstone tile of the stage, and the wood constructions created a perfect pastoral/domestic atmosphere in which the action could take place.

I was particularly amazed at the perfectly timed comedy created through the use of the pool, into which Beatrice and Benedick fall (a wonderful parallel, perhaps a visual depiction of their falling for each other and reemerging as lovers). I thought both of these were wonderful directorial additions to the substance of the play. I greatly enjoyed Hytner’s use of music and song to narrate the romance of the production as well. Like all of the characters, the musicians

seemed always to be on stage somewhere, providing just the right note to intensify the feeling of the scene.

Like Iago, Don John seems to be a “motiveless malignancy,” intent on destroying the character and pleasure of others. What could be the possible reasoning behind his actions, his evil and unfounded denigration of Hero? The only explanation I can find is his exclusion from love. In another wise directorial move, Hytner chose to open his production at a banquet table, complete with a great feast. Is this the feast of love? It would seem so. At the arrival of Don Pedro’s men on the domestic scene (itself a source of comedy and delight since they seem to fit into it incongruously; perhaps this is a comment on the differences in gender-stereotyped personalities) we assume there is enough nourishment to go around. However, we soon learn that this is not the case. Benedick and Beatrice accept their invitations reluctantly, Hero and Claudio hastily, but the two princes do not receive any. Lacking esteem as a bastard and uninvited to love, Don John turns to distraction (he seemed to be frequently drunk during his monologues) and destruction. Don Pedro himself, though Hytner chooses to give him a certain ambiguity of character (we were to be suspicious of his motives in pursuing Hero for Claudio) ends the play standing alone off to the side. Yet Don Pedro seems to indulge in a larger love of group companionship, responsibly regarding his role as leader foremost.

I thought that setting Hero and Claudio’s marriage in a church worked well. It created another beautiful set, while also establishing an ominous atmosphere of moral judgment (though I didn’t care for the echo effect). The black and white floor tiles seemed to reflect the deluded dichotomy of Claudio’s thinking. Yet, it was most impressive to watch Beale abandon sacrosanct protocol to put an end to the accusations of dishonesty leveled at Hero. I was particularly moved by the indefensible and crushing position in which Hero found herself.

Beatrice's bold outspokenness against not only Claudio, but also the prince was also awe-inspiring. The graveyard scene, in which Claudio demonstrates regret by hugging Hero's alleged grave, was a great directorial decision that intensely provided a final misunderstanding from which the characters could grow. Hero then appears, almost resurrected, as a new form of herself; likewise, Claudio's penitential experience transforms him.

The play ended on a heartwarming note, complete with dancing and song. Though a bit contrived, this peaceful resolution to the "Merry War" (battle between the sexes, perhaps?), in which all of the characters' feelings were finally unmasked, filled me with compassion. I agree with Benedick's final lesson learned, "Man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion"—or at least he can be, and should be.

*Women of Troy*  
Lyttelton Theatre, National Theatre Complex  
Saturday, January 5, 2008

I was emotionally jarred by Katie Mitchell's production of Euripides' *Women of Troy*. Her in-yer-face style (complete with explosions, flames, and nudity) effectively and blatantly communicated her message about the horrors of war for women, controversially connecting a play over two millennia old with present global conflicts (namely the Iraq War).

The first thing that struck me about this production was its modern adaptation. Staged in what appeared to be a dilapidated bunker beneath the streets of Troy, Mitchell's set and costumes immediately transplant her audience into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With this in mind, I was prepared to experience a temporally coherent interpretation of the tragedy; however, I found myself initially confronted with disconnected anachronisms. These items included ball gowns and suits dating from the early twentieth century/1920s, a radio playing songs from the 1940s, and cell phones on which the Greeks received their orders.

I soon realized that these carefully considered details simultaneously set the action in several particular moments of history. The costumes placed it at the conclusion of WWI and the music, bunker, and radio at the end of WWII. The cell phones were a stinging reminder of our current military engagements. With the mention of an “expeditionary force,” we also heard a specific allusion to 19<sup>th</sup> century British imperialism. At first, I did not consider these details appropriate, but soon realized that Mitchell was more intent on communicating a message than remaining traditional. She explains that the horrors of war are temporal ubiquities. *Women of Troy* becomes a play about all women in every violent conflict throughout a history epitomized by war. Thus, the era of the adaptation takes on a timeless quality. It is the Trojan War, yet it is all wars, including the present one.

As the title states, this is a play about the way in which war differs for women—a remarkable composition for Euripides, considering this issue remains infrequently addressed today. For men, war may mean death and a glorious elegy, but for women it means life as a living hell. It means rape, bondage, and servitude. It means you may become the concubine, the unwilling whore, of your husband’s murderer. It means watching your children torn from your arms and dropped to their deaths to ensure that vengeance will not be sought in the future. It means death is better than life because there is no agony. Moreover, the hopefulness with which Hecuba stared at the sand she poured out of her glass (echoed by the sand falling into the unsafe bunker) suggested a desired and imminent return to dust.

With this in mind, I consider Cassandra’s tattered dress and full-frontal nudity. Initially shocked by this directorial decision, I now believe it to be consistent with Mitchell’s message. Cassandra’s body symbolized vulnerability, the probability of future abuse. Adding to the message of the murder of Astyanax, this moment says that the play is about rape and the death of

the innocent at the hands of men making war. *Women of Troy* shows how war transforms sex into an act of violence, the victims of which are helpless to defend themselves. The women have a choice between a life of sexual enslavement—to Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus, et al.—or death. The instances in which the women danced violently alone also convey this notion of powerlessness and being partnered by “unreal” partners.

However, this dance, as well as the constant application of make-up, did not, in my mind, undercut the image of women depicted by Mitchell—she was not putting them down. If anything, these instances seemed to convey an attempt to latch onto a semblance of the peaceful, orderly past, to memories of life and civilization before it was crushed by war, while also indicating strength to face whatever horrors the future might hold (putting on a face to “meet the faces that we meet,” as T.S. Eliot puts it).

Hecuba appeared as a pillar of this unwavering strength (especially as she performed the burial ritual over the corpse of Astyanax), remaining outwardly collected at all times. I only wish that I could have understood more than a few of the lines that she spoke. I found the play to be very frustrating in this regard, and think it would have been possible to emphasize visual images, while keeping the essential dialogue in tact. In this way, Mitchell’s production sacrificed the play to her agenda—but perhaps that’s her intention. I was also a bit surprised at Hecuba’s rebuke of Helen, who Mitchell designed to look more like a wild women than a harlot. I would have thought that Euripides would portray Helen as another victim of male-dominance and sexual aggression. But, he does not. Rather, she becomes an egoistical figure, intent on self-preservation (no matter what it involves), and unwilling to take responsibility for her participation in the cause of the war. But, is this instinct for self-preservation not a result of the militaristic male world in which she lives? The common emulation of aggression in Hecuba and

Helen suggests the struggle to find a mode of survival to endure the disasters that men have wrought upon their worlds.

The set had a harsh, stark, industrial feel. It was dimly lit and confining, inescapable to the women. At first I thought we were located in the hold of a large Greek warship, but it became clear that this was a subterranean bunker beneath the streets of a crumbling Troy. By setting the action underground and filling the space with large menacing flames, Mitchell succeeded in creating a hell on earth for the characters to inhabit while awaiting their horrifying fates. The feeling of imprisonment, of being trapped, was compounded by the emphasis placed on the locking and unlocking of doors through which only Talthybius (a surprisingly sympathizing figure, though certainly not atypical in his conscience-cleansing passing of the war crime buck to his subordinates) and his attendant could pass. The sirens, flashing red lights, and background explosions likewise contributed to the creation of this hellish atmosphere. Perhaps it was the women's psychological anguish, their fleeting sanity, that made them seem most like lost souls. In the face of war, Hecuba suggests, "Only the dead shed no tears; for they are beyond weeping."

The final explosion provided the tragedy with a nihilistic ending in which the world and lives of the Trojan women were utterly obliterated. While physically shaken by this effect, I can only say that this final exclamatory punctuation left the audience nowhere.

*The Woman-Hater*  
Orange Tree Theatre  
Saturday, January 5, 2008

I'm glad we were able to include a production in-the-round on our itinerary; I found this experience to be engaging, intimate, and unique. Seated so close to the action, it was impossible to not be entirely absorbed by the play, especially during Mr. Waverly's many asides, which

seemed directed at specific audience members. This type of intimacy added an ineffable quality of participation and enjoyment to the production.

Initially, I did not recognize the important place of this work within the canon of British literature, nor its significant effect on the prominent writers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was struck with admiration for Fanny Burney's forward-thinking women's liberation message and her adroitness at constructing a comedy that would both appeal to the humor of contemporary audiences, while making them reconsider existing social relationships. It is certainly unfortunate that this play has just received its world premier, but that fact perhaps contributes to the message of gender inequality that the play addresses, reminding us of social arrangements that may not have completely changed since 1802.

In this comedy of errors, Burney constructs a delightful play of confused relationships with a progressive feminist agenda. The action followed a traditional marriage plot; however, instead of one or two couples getting together, Burney provides us with fulfilling reconciliations between 8 individuals in addition to Joyce's discovery of her true mother.

Like so much comedy, Burney successfully relied on the amusement derived from gender stereotypes. First, the men: Lord Roderick, Mr. Wilmott, Mr. Waverley, Jack, and Bob. Roderick, the apparent misogynist from which the play gains its title, was a stuffy, condescending, elderly man, whose surly demeanor results from his being jilted by Lady Smatter many years before. Taking Jack as his heir, Roderick seems to try to make Jack into a monk, forcing him to live in isolation and indoctrinating him with misogyny.

Wilmott typifies an austere puritanical ideology focused on oppressive study and limitation of opportunity—Sophia should do as he says in an obedient manner appropriate to a lady and avoid her own inclinations. Wilmott raises his daughter this way to ensure that she will

not end up like her mother, who he believes left him for a sea captain—“is this what we are to expect from free women?” he seems to ask himself. Roderick and Wilmott seem relatively harmless, unless, like Burney, we recognize that these men control society and largely determine the lives of the female contingent.

Jack, on the other hand, embodies the bold and incorruptible romantic spirit of youth, which seeks to break free from a cloistered life. Bob represents earnestness and kindness, but Burney presents him as a bit simple and lower-class. Ironically, it is Bob who is most respectful and generous in his treatment of women; he would do anything for Joyce and acts gentlemanly toward her.

Burney contrasts these men with her equally diverse and numerous female characters. Nevertheless, in a play about woman-hating, what are we to make of these figures? Lady Smatter regards herself as a self-educated and independent woman. She believes that she has the perfect advice for any problem or an applicable quotation to complement any conversation. Smatter, however, comes across as a garrulous fool because she confuses all of her lines, frequently delivering them with incorrect diction. From these malapropisms, are we to question the capacity or legitimacy of educating women? Mrs. Wilmott is presented as a virtuous, though dependent figure, who longs for her missing husband. We learn of her fidelity, but she seems utterly depressed and helpless.

Joyce, another spirited youth, should be commended for her rejection of paternal tyranny, but is herself a vain and spoiled child. Some may have found her actions and voice annoying, but I thought her enthusiasm and joy in unrestrained expressiveness were an appropriate interpretation of her desire for autonomy. However, she also struck me as an immature, boy-crazy adolescent girl (this would perhaps be an appropriate interpretation of Miranda in *The*

*Tempest*). Within this pool of femininity we also discover the real Sophia, who Mrs. Wilmot has raised on her own. Burney depicts Sophia as a reserved, thoughtful, and articulate young woman—truly a “Sophia” in the classical sense. She was lovely, virtuous, and relatively quiet, but still managed to convey a sense of both daughterly duty and independence. Sophia embodied the ideals of strong-minded womanhood that Burney advocated.

Education was a major theme of this play—or more precisely: Who is allowed to receive it? Who needs it? In what form? Roderick rejects education as a waste of time, revealing sustained ignorance not only of books, but of social protocol. Wilmott is a pedant, who forces his daughter to read things she doesn’t understand, while misinterpreting the world himself. Mrs. Smatter teaches herself by memorizing quotes, but can never comprehend the message that they contain or remember their sources. Burney seems to suggest that education requires social interaction. We learn from each other and cannot grow and mature in isolation, subject only to our own constructed prejudices. Moreover, she advocates the fulfillment of romantic relationships, even when they seem implausible and confining. The unification of Roderick and Smatter, the Wilmotts, Bob and Joyce, and Sophia and Jack convey the message that love is for all people at all ages, irrespective of the past.

Despite its light-hearted mood, *The Woman-Hater* addresses a serious social issue of the period: oppression of woman, consignment of their roles in society, and restrictions on behavior. All of the female characters in this production were subjugated in some way, be it verbal (Smatter), familial (Mrs. Wilmott and Sophia), educational (Joyce), or social (Bob’s sister). Burney’s play about female oppression, though in line with comedy of the day, was too far ahead of its time to get produced. Though Roderick is the play’s obvious misogynist, Burney identifies Georgian society as the true, palpable “woman-hater,” defined by oppressive and restricting

social norms. Dressing Joyce and Jack in contemporary clothes—a punk-rock tee-shirt and leather jacket respectively—tied Burney’s message to the present, suggesting a current society that remains not entirely equitable between the genders.

*Marianne Dreams*  
Almeida Theatre  
Sunday, January 6, 2008

Through Moira Buffini’s ingenious direction, this adaptation of *Marianne Dreams* managed to be both a captivating phantasmagorical story for young girls, a more general discussion of maturity, and an intellectual conversation on human psychology. Ashamedly, I admit that I was not expecting to enjoy this production—but I absolutely loved it!

Foremost among this director’s brilliant artistic decisions was the way in which she used projection, lighting, and sound to manipulate the atmosphere of a virtually empty stage, constructing a double-reality in which Marianne lived while ill. The colorless, grey world of Marianne’s dreams provided a blank space in which she could explore, create, and mature. The atmosphere created by simple surreal props—a distorted window frame, a pendulous clock—as well as the constantly changing sketches that served as a backdrop, evoked the atmosphere of an unstable dream-world (reflecting the instability of her illness). It was an alternate reality into



which Marianne could escape from her convalescent anxiety and bedfast loneliness. I thought it a particularly nice touch that all of Marianne’s movements in her dream-world were choreographed dance—I greatly enjoyed this aspect of the production; the fluidity of the young actress’ movements were a pleasing contrast to her bedridden immobility. On a psychological level, it fulfilled a fantasy beyond confinement. Sometimes it seems, when faced with adversity, we need to create other worlds for ourselves, perhaps confidantes who can empathize with us.

The play was largely concerned with making notions of maturity and adversity available to a young audience—a message simultaneously transmitted to adult guardians. Rather than receiving a pony for her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, Marianne becomes infected with a life-threatening illness. In the beginning of the play, Marianne is self-absorbed, immature, and bratty. She whines about her illness, complains to her mother, lacks confidence about her ability to understand math, and has a depressingly negative attitude, reacting pessimistically to her mother, doctor, and “governess.” However, through her work with Ms. Chesterfield, a wonderfully receptive friend who manages to bridge the disconnect between adult and child perspective (a gap emphasized by the inability of Marianne’s mother to understand her daughter’s sketches), she learns empathy and selflessness. Marianne begins to think in terms of doing for others—she asks her mother to buy flowers for Ms. Chesterfield, wants to help her imagined friend Mark, and even gives the real Mark her pencil. Marianne learns how to interact respectfully with others and how to cope with her illness-induced fears and frustrations. By the end of the play, even though Mark is unfriendly and critical of her, Marianne is undeterred and insists on helping him. She has begun to grow up.



I particularly admired the scene in which Marianne and Mark realize that the horrible “eyes” are watching them. These cellular creatures seemed to be unconscious manifestations of the viruses that threaten both Marianne and Mark’s lives. It was a clever way to discuss the phenomenology of the brain as it processes reality by transforming the unknown into something more comprehensible. Having these cells take on a monstrous quality seems like a perfectly logical dream for an ill child to have. On another level, the eyes, which possess a quality of otherness, may represent the adult world looking in on the world of the child, or, more simply, perhaps, the ever-present obstacle of the illness as it perpetually holds you in its sight.

Additionally, I believe there to be a conversation based in Freudian psychology operating here. The “eyes” might represent the “I”s of the human superego. The creative world of the unconscious is a remarkable place of freedom and creativity where the rules of reality do not exist, where individuals can transcend themselves. Yet, it is also the realm of the unknown and the chaotic. The eyes may symbolize the constructing influence of the superego, of consciousness, over imagination and the creative process. It represents an invasion of the dream world by the human need to understand through organization. Perhaps there is also a message here about the individual’s egocentricity disrupting relationships with others (e.g. Marianne’s carelessness in letting the eyes see her leads to a turbulent relationship with Mark).

*Dealer’s Choice*  
Trafalgar Studio 1  
Monday, January 7, 2008

In our third play about dysfunctional men, Patrick Marber constructs an insular world for five restaurant employees suffering from various forms of addiction. The men who participate in Stephen’s weekly game of poker cannot stop gambling in spite of the ways in which it is ruining their lives—Sweeney even gambles away the \$50 he sets aside for the day with his daughter. Gambling is the opiate on which they are dependent to escape their ordinary and static lives. In the poker room, Sweeney (T.S. Eliot’s Sweeney character? Stephen identifies him as “all aggression”) can shed his chef’s uniform, something he’s too scared to do in reality because of the insecurity it would mean. Likewise, Mugsy and Frankie become unique characters rather than waiters. For a few hours each Sunday night the men can feel like “real men” rather than cogs in an occupational machine. In the world of the poker room, social barriers are leveled and every man deceives himself into believing he possesses a certain independence and skill that will put him above the others. The uncertainty of poker not only gives them all a momentary thrill,

but sustains each man's hope of becoming the winner—possibly winning the pot that will free him from his service to Stephen.

Stephen's character struck me as cruel, sadistic, and power-hungry. In the tiny restaurant world—one which he created for himself and cannot now escape (Stephen remains in the basement, staring out the door after the game against Mr. Ash)—he plays on the weaknesses of his employees to persuade them to participate in his weekly poker game, which he generally wins and follows his house rules. In doing so, he manages to keep all of the men in financial debt to him. This debt forces them to keep playing the game, which in turn only causes their debts to continually increase. Thus, the men must continue to work for Stephen. A type of indentured servitude results from this relationship that the men cannot escape and Stephen intends to perpetuate.

Stephen likes people to be dependent on him because it makes him feel powerful. For example, the moment in which Sweeney loses all of his money allows Stephen to display false largesse by giving him a loan to take his daughter out for the day. Stephen needs to feel needed, to play the father figure to the men he employs. He does so to make up for his own difficulty in controlling Carl. Or perhaps making others dependent on him gives him a false sense of autonomy, masking his own dependency on gambling. This dependency makes him feel powerless, and so he compensates by giving himself power over others. Though Stephen struck me as a bit despicable, he remains a completely devoted father, willing to do whatever it takes, pay whatever it costs, to get Carl out of trouble. So *Dealer's Choice* also becomes a commentary on the difficult relationships between fathers and sons. Yet, his willingness to do anything to protect Carl does not allow his son to learn from the consequences of his own actions.

Mugsy functioned as a hopelessly idealistic figure amidst the gloom of the poker world. His constant cheer and foolish disillusionment provided much needed comic relief to the tragic situation in which the other men find themselves trapped. Nevertheless, I would contend that Stephen lets Mugsy win to satisfy his own pride, not to make Mugsy feel good.

The gambling motif around which Marber constructs the plot suggests the unpredictability of life, something the individual cannot control. Despite Stephen's disciplined business practices, his wealth, and his austerity as a father, he cannot control Carl's impulses or the situations out of which he must bail him. Nevertheless, the form of "dealer's choice" gives each character a brief opportunity to manipulate the rules of his life, to turn the ordinary rules upside down—like Mugsy's crazy game—resulting in momentary authority.

The poker room set created the perfect feeling of inescapable confinement; it was dark and cell-like. The ominously hanging ceiling created a wonderful tension, representing the potential of each gambler to be crushed by the game. It gave this self-contained world a claustrophobic feeling, which complemented the play's theme of dependency appropriately. The way in which the lighting changed to create two contiguous spaces on stage—the kitchen and the dining room—was also an innovative design feature.

The intensity achieved in the final climactic game between Stephen and Ash had my heart pounding. Stephen's discipline in the game and his willingness to take chances leads him to surprising victory over Ash, but it is not one that matters because Ash takes the money regardless. The interaction between these two men—Carl's two father figures—conveyed a sense of mutual understanding and trust (as Stephen states blatantly when Ash asks if he would like to count the \$4,000). Both men suffer from addiction, but also seem to have a greater knowledge of the world's ruthless reality—a knowledge that Carl's naiveté cannot fathom.

Perhaps the lesson to draw from Dealer's Choice is that in the gamble of life we are all mugs in a way—like Carl, Mr. Ash, et al. we all have some debt to pay. Even though luck may allow us to win (like Stephen), it may not matter.

*Present Laughter*  
Lyttelton Theatre, National Theatre Complex  
Tuesday, January 8, 2008

During Act 2 of this production, Garry Essendine proclaims “She feels like she’s in the middle of a French farce;” I felt likewise. Trying to determine whether I enjoyed *Boeing, Boeing* or *Present Laughter* more would be a futile task—the consummate wit of this comedy had me in a constant state of elation. Both comedies employed many of the same types of jokes—improbable and confused situations, extreme characters, gender/class contrasts, and very witty dialogue— but I think it was the gravitas added by the layers of depth which Coward assigns Garry that set this production on a slightly higher pedestal.

Before Garry even enters, Coward builds up our expectations through the dialogue of the servants and knowledge of his affair. We expect an egocentric, vain, and charismatic character, which is exactly what we get. Though he is hopelessly narcissistic and self-interested, we can't help but like Garry and want to remain in his presence. He exudes a lightness of being, says very clever things constantly, and makes those who surround him feel like the center of attention—we know that Garry would never sacrifice this position, which belongs to him (as indicated by the elevated, disproportionately large, center door through which he enters). Coward also amusingly satirizes the character and genuineness of actors through Garry.

Although Garry provides a center of gravity around which all of the other characters revolve, he seems to have a certain grimness about him. Sadness lurks under his jovial façade. He seems unhappy and jaded, pursuing meaningless sexual relationships with his adoring fans.

Garry longs for something, but we don't know what it is and neither does he. Despite his fame, the Garry we see doesn't seem to be the real Garry, but rather one of his many roles; his identity seems fluid as he shifts in and out of characters, reciting lines from past performances. At this midpoint in his life, Garry floats along, powerless and disillusioned—an performance tour through Africa should hardly be desirable for a famous London stage actor. While lamenting the ways in which others impose on his life, Garry also constantly muses on the past and future, indicating the presence of both regret and foreboding. He is dissatisfied despite the decadent life he leads. Garry seems to love all of the women in the play without really loving any of them.

One notion presented by the play is being in love with an illusion. Garry embodies this idea by morphing into the desired ideal of each character who surrounds him. To the women, Garry is the perfect vision of romance, the perfect man. To Rowland Moore, he is a brilliant artist and inspiration. Garry becomes all of these people while pointing out that many of the extravagant characters we encounter are in fact deceiving themselves.

The idea of Garry's constant performance (as well as that of his seductress) and the deceptions he and his wife create interested me greatly. Rowland Moore observes, "You're always acting. You act sane while I act mad." Coward seems to suggest that in a way we are all acting, all the time. Though Garry's performances may be more melodramatic and insincere, this is the way that humans interact. Or, perhaps acting is merely a survival technique, one that is not necessarily manipulative or malicious but natural.

*Present Laughter* also addresses the idea of interdependency. Despite Garry's gripes about being perpetually harassed by friends and fans, he loves it and needs it. Garry is an actor, and he requires an audience for whom to perform. Indeed, playing "Garry" and acting out the complicated scenarios he has created for himself, seems to be the only thing from which

Essendine derives pleasure. Garry is dependent on those around him—he needs his wife to rescue him from the consequences of his own philandering, his secretary to keep his life ordered, etc... Gary's jaded attitude toward everything and the unexpected decisions that he makes to complicate his life (e.g sleeping with the actress whom his wife loathes) surprised me. However, it is these “present” complications, the “present laughter” of the title, that distract Garry from despondency and boredom—likewise they distract the audience from their own lives.

I absolutely loved the decadence of Garry's apartment and wish I lived in one just like it—plush leather couches, stacks of books everywhere, musical instruments. Garry's world thrives with abundance and overindulgence. Aside from his possessions, Garry also employs a maid, chef, butler, and secretary, leaving him virtually nothing to do. He surrounds himself with caretakers. The two extra rooms provided the doors needed for the play's comic tension (who is inside? Will s/he emerge?). The emerald color of the walls (the color of money) was an appropriate detail, as was the wall of mirrors, which reflected Garry's narcissism.

*Statement of Regret*  
Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre Complex  
Wednesday, January 9, 2008

I really admired this production because it used the stage to engage in a current and controversial political discussion. Taking its title from the suggested “statement of regret” for slavery rejected by British parliament, this play explores current divisions in identity that permeate the black community in Great Britain as well as the idea of “reparations.” Kwei-Armah promoted these discussions while expressing his own perspectives and making progressive suggestions (such as the creation of a Minister for Race cabinet position). Most prominently, the play raises the question of how historically abused and marginalized peoples, who remain disadvantaged, “can get a healing?”

Kwei-Armah addresses the question of group identity by holding the prism of Identity Politics Theory up to scrutiny. On the surface, Kwaku's firm symbolizes the entire community of black Britons who share an experience of marginalization in society. However, by revealing inner-fragmentation—the schism between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans—Kwei-Armah exposes the fallacious assumption of unity that has been superimposed on different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, he also rejects the antagonistic disconnect between these groups because of its counter-productivity. Identity politics fragments groups into smaller groups, establishing animosity and competitiveness where there should be cooperation. Kwaku's family—half African through his marriage to Lola and half Caribbean through his affair with Adrian's mother—becomes a metaphor for this discussion of identity politics. Kwei-Armah admirably inserts himself in this conversation, rejecting the alleged benefits of this philosophy.

Kwei-Armah confronts us with Kwaku's difficult question, "How do we get a healing?" While indefinite on an ultimate answer to this question, he suggests that before anything can be accomplished, the African and Afro-Caribbean demographics must stop creating internal divisions within the black British community. They are trying to achieve the same end, to make the government cognizant of overlooked issues, which affect them both. Why should they fight? Battling each other only weakens their cause so that nothing will be accomplished. The most beautiful moment in this production was when Junior extends a brotherly hug to Adrian—who he still despises for being Kwaku's preferred, "Caribbean" son—in order to create a new cooperative peace within the think tank. Though the others distrust Junior and continually disparage his intellectual capacities, he is the only one that can move past his prejudices in order to try and achieve their mutually desired goals. I read the play as Kwei-Armah's own "statement of regret" for the current divisions and resentment that exists between Britain's black

populations. He recognizes and illuminates the differences between the experiences of these groups while proposing reconciliation.

The set of this production gave it a modern and sophisticated feel. Kwaku's office, his think tank, is a place of idea generation. As such, it functioned as a stylish debate forum—appropriate since the entire play was, in a sense, a debate on current issues—in which the characters could argue their various strategies on how best to promote issue awareness. I also thought that the inclusion of a separate office space for Kwaku worked well. It conveyed a sense of isolation, of being physically, mentally, and ideologically cut off from the group. In a way, Kwaku's office represented the space of his mind—a space inhabited by the ghost of his father, Soby (a type of conscience of inheritance). It was in this space that Kwaku delivered his inner-thoughts through soliloquy and in which he accepted the demands of his father to never forget.

Despite Kwaku's life-long commitment to advancing the agenda of Britain's black population, he was presented as a very human and flawed character. He has become merely a remnant of his former incendiary self. Kwaku's womanizing—with Issimama, Lola, and Adrian's mother—and uncontrollable alcoholism transform him into a morally ambiguous character. Perhaps, Kwei-Armah is trying to show the damaging effects of “post-traumatic slave syndrome” and the way a lifetime of virtual ineffectiveness has destroyed this man. With a staff of Oxbridge educated men and women, the idea of this syndrome seems to become their continued marginalization and disadvantage despite having achieved the apex of western academics.

The prominence of education in this production provided another angle from which to assess fragmentation. It creates a sense of legitimate “family”—perhaps lineage—from which

Junior becomes estranged. Through Idrissa's snobbishness—"What degree did you take"—Kwei-Armah exposes an educational divide in British society. One can only participate in the think tanks work with appropriate credentials. At first these credentials are academic, but they soon become ethnic as well. Kwei-Armah suggests that education is merely another superficial boundary that has gotten in the way of progress.

*Doubt: A Parable*  
Tricycle Theatre  
Wednesday, January 9, 2008

In this brief, thought-provoking, and controversial play, John Patrick Shanley addresses the socially relevant, though taboo subject of clerical child abuse. The plot was simple, but the characters and message were incredibly complex (for a parable).

Shanley masterfully paints both Father Flynn and sister Aloysius with ambiguity. On one level, Father Flynn is portrayed as a likable and compassionate, if slightly effeminate, down-to-earth priest. He communicates well with his audience in an affable working class accent and seems to be a positive role model for the students for whom he cares greatly (as opposed to Aloysius' harsh discipline). At the same time, there seems to be something not quite right about Father Flynn, who continually emphasizes his own uncertainty and loneliness. We don't know if his kind words are sincere or predatory affectation—this ambiguity is most pronounced in the scene where Flynn tries to convince Sister James of his innocence. Flynn seems to be a good priest with progressive ideas, looking to move the Church forward. However, at the same time he is a part of the male church hierarchy who expects female subservience—"I'd like another cup of tea sister"—and presumes his own inherent superiority. Aside from his apparent crumbling at Sister Aloysius' pronouncement of having called a sister at his old parish (for me, proof enough of his guilt), we are never given any indication whether or not he abused Donald,

and so we are forced to impose our own prejudices and morality on the situation subjectively. The actor who played Flynn gave an outstanding performance in this regard; he had me constantly questioning whether he was a perverted sociopath, or merely an unconventional church figure who liked three lumps of sugar in his tea.

A skeptic through and through, Sister Aloysius was the embodiment of doubt and discontentment—“Satisfaction is a vice. Do you think Socrates was ever satisfied?” She attempts to impose her own dispassionate principles of education and distrust of the students on Sister James, an enthusiastic though naive teacher. We don’t like Aloysius for that reason, or for her cold demeanor and condescension. She seems to be an intolerable voice of unwavering Catholic discipline. Moreover, we can’t be sure whether Aloysius’ own prejudice against Father Flynn’s untraditional ways predisposes her suspicion. Maybe she is just resentful that he undermines and threatens her authority within the parish. Is she calculating? It’s tough to say. The interpretation offered by the director and actress establishes Aloysius as a sincere, righteous, and kindhearted figure, if only a little old-fashioned. She views herself as a defender of the helpless—a characteristic emphasized by the scene in which she covers the plant to protect it from the winter. She must protect the “isolated” and “sheepish” from the “wolf.” Moreover, I found it incredibly admirable that she was willing to sacrifice her own position to protect Donald from Flynn. Standing up to the Church hierarchy, against which she would have no recourse if disciplined, was a very brave and atypical act. Yet, we are never sure if she actually cares about Donald or if she merely uses him as a tool of destruction.

The play also sent a larger message to the audience about the troubling nature of moral dilemmas in general (I particularly liked the way in which the play included the audience by having Flynn preach to us at the beginning of each act). As Flynn asks in his opening line,

“What do you do when you’re not sure?” This seems to be the question anytime the individual, like Sister James, finds himself sandwiched between the innate moral compass and the blurry details of reality. Is it better to act on suspicions and potentially ruin a life, or to let circumstances continue? Shanley seems decisive on this point, while pointing out that morality is hardly a black and white dichotomy in reality and that the individual must be prepared to accept the consequences of an action before carrying it through.

Authority provided another of the play’s major motifs, and I found it appropriate to set the action contemporary with the reforms of Vatican II. The disagreement between Aloysius and Flynn stemmed not only from the possibility that he gave Donald wine, but from issues of power. As head of the school and a veteran nun, Aloysius represented a hard-line conservative approach to religion, supported by her commitment to tradition. As a woman in the Church, the school provided the only means by which she could attain influence. Father Flynn, however, represents a new and sympathetic approach to religion, for which Aloysius does not have patience. Moreover, he has authority, connections, and protection as a man within a male hierarchy, as demonstrated by his receipt of a promotion after being removed from the school. The interaction between these two authoritative figures seemed to stem from their different positions of power and views of moral instruction.

I was particularly surprised by the response of Donald’s mother when she met with Aloysius. Rather than pull her son from the school, she informs us that Flynn is the caring father figure that Donald needs (in contrast to his real father who physically abuses him). Shanley reminds us that the Muellers are forced into such a difficult position by society because of skin color that Mrs. Mueller is willing to allow this abuse to take place if it will provide her son with greater opportunity in life. Mrs. Mueller’s reaction was a startling reminder that society remains

largely racist 45 years after the action of the play is set; it is not unreasonable to assume that there are still Mrs. Muellers forced into similarly difficult positions.

*The History Boys*  
Wyndhams Theatre  
January 10, 2008

In this comedy about the development of intellect, sexuality, and character, nine young men preparing for both their Oxbridge examinations and the rest of their lives begin the transition into adulthood, establishing unique ways to understand history in the process. Alan Bennett displayed a remarkable talent for weaving together laugh-out-loud comedy, touching sentimentality, and unexpected tragedy in this play, which combines and legitimizes the genres of popular culture and cerebral theater, while transcending them both.

First and foremost, this play concerns itself with various forms of education. The transmission and absorption of historical facts in preparation for examinations becomes the most obvious example of this theme, but it is only the starting point, the establishing motif for a complicated discussion. This education, the type that looks good on paper, is sufficient for the “square” business-oriented brain of the headmaster, but it lacks the depth that the boys require to make sense of their individual experiences.

From Hector, the boys receive a random sampling of anything and everything. He is an English teacher with whom, in a delightful scene, they practice the French conditional (an appropriate tense for this forward-looking and indefinite time in their lives; there also seems to be a discussion of mores, of “shoulds/and should nots” operating here with regard to Hector), for whom they perform cinematic skits and show-tunes, and against whom they argue the legitimacy of an education in popular culture. Hector values learning for its own sake, for the inherent pleasure that one can derive from knowledge. His methodology of randomness is unquantifiable,

but this is the difference between education and knowledge. Knowledge is ineffable. You can't put your finger on it, but it prepares you for when you will need it. Hector explains this phenomenon best during his response to Timms' obstinate questioning and in the beautiful passage when he describes the way in which a hand can reach out from the pages of a book and grab you. Yet, Hector embodies an educational philosophy (a notion of intellectual transmission that seems to hearken back to Socrates) that rapidly becomes obsolete during the action of the play. His fall from the motorbike not only provides the boys with a tragic experience from which they learn about life's unpredictability, but symbolizes the unfortunate death of an age of education that valued learning for personal enlightenment.

The education offered by Irwin does not nostalgically focus on personal growth and the pleasure to be derived from literature and popular culture, but on the realistic application of information to get ahead in the world. From Irwin the boys learn that insincerity, lying, and hypocrisy are as much a part of life, as necessary to understand, and as effective in reaching their goals, as the facts contained in a textbook. It is this lesson that leads Dakin to blackmail the headmaster, threatening to reveal his own unacceptable predilection for Fiona. Irwin represents a new age of education. It is a sensationalized version in which innovative theses, though perhaps entirely disingenuous, are valued over substance. Yet, Irwin also teaches the boys to analyze history from an untraditional perspective, to "think outside the box." Maybe he is right in thinking that we can learn more about medieval history from monk's toilet rags—but maybe not. As Irwin himself admits, "God is dead. Shit lives." From Irwin the boys absorb disillusionment.

Nevertheless, we find out that it is the strategies of both Irwin and Hector that help to get the boys admitted to Oxford, while gaining a personal understanding of life in the process. They

need Irwin's "edge" and knack for ironic interpretation, but it is the randomness of Hector's instruction that gives an unpredictable flare, allowing them to stand apart from the crowd. We must not, however, forget Tottie, whose untraditional feminist approach to the subject—"History is women following behind with the bucket"—is equally important to the boys' development. From all of these different sources, the boys develop their own individual relationships to history. Someone, like Posner, might follow in Hector's footsteps while adding his own "cold detachment;" or, perhaps like Rudge, who gets into Christ Church by lying about a family legacy, view history as "just one fucking thing after another." We must develop our own perspective of interpretation based on individual experience.

I found just about every aspect of this play remarkable, but particularly admired the use of film and pop music to establish the atmosphere in which the boys received their education—the Orwell and Fellini posters on Hector's wall were also a nice touch. These elements emphasize the important popular culture motif, but also seem to suggest that we receive history filtered through various mediums, and can only begin to understand it as a composite. The play also asks us to consider the way in which we receive history in comparison with the way that we pass it on.

I think that the notion of a changed educational system resonates with all students preparing for collegiate life today. Though my preparation was certainly not as rigorous as that of the history boys, it was exam-centric. I find myself biased toward Hector's approach to learning and believe this transformation in education to be incredibly unfortunate. It leaves many, like Posner, feeling as though "All of the effort went into getting there."

*King Lear*  
New London Theatre  
Thursday, January 10, 2008

Trevor Nunn's production of *Lear* was simply magnificent; Wow! Obviously, the first thing that struck me about this performance was the visually opulent set, which can only be described as palatial. With the sweeping arced balcony (that extended offstage), ceiling high columns, crystal chandelier, and lush red curtains (foreshadowing the blood to be spilled), Nunn creates a mammoth space truly fit for a great king. The decadence of the initial set provided a wonderful contrast with the dilapidated structure in front of which the production concluded. Nunn made a brilliant directorial decision by visually representing the decline of the kingdom and the degeneration of Lear's mental condition. Moreover, I'm glad that he allowed the audience to experience the violent destruction of the set, rather than have it occur during scene changes. The effect of watching the hunting party tear down the curtains and the storm break open the roof and windows created an intense spectacle on stage and tension in the audience.

In terms of costuming, the ornate military uniforms and ball gowns in which the men and women were respectively dressed seemed to set the action in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the imperial feel of the set reminded me of czarist Russia, we are perhaps dealing with the madness of King George III. In any case, Nunn achieves the same sense of deterioration by first dressing his cast in rich garments, which become more frayed throughout the performance.

During discussion, we were asked to consider Lear's transition from a king into a man (a change symbolized by Lear sloughing his regal robes for tattered rags). Viewing the play as Lear's quest for self-knowledge, I believe it is through this transition that he eventually attains wisdom, becoming a king once again. Regen first introduces the notion of Lear's lack of self-knowledge, stating " 'Tis infinitely of age: yet he hath slenderly but known himself." The fool

picks up on this point, observing, “To be such men as may besort your age, which knows themselves and you.” He implies that a man of Lear’s years should know himself, though he does not. Even Lear himself exclaims, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” Lear does not understand what it means to be king. This absence of knowledge leads him to desire the fragmentation of his kingdom initially (his *hamartia*), while retaining his title and privileges. His lack of understanding guides him to a rejection of Cordelia, the daughter who loves him most genuinely. Consequently, Lear must first lose everything—his kingdom, his family, his sanity—and become utterly poor to realize that man is poor, or rather mortal.

Lear only comes to know himself through suffering and recognition of his own mortality. The time spent with the Fool and Poor Tom, “the philosopher,” in the wilderness could be read as a pilgrimage of introspection through the tempest of Lear’s mind. It is during his time spent with them that he becomes cognizant of himself.

I believe that the idea of “nothingness” becomes a major motif of the play as well. The first instance in which we learn of its importance comes when Lear responds to Cordelia, “Nothing will come of nothing.” Though this is perhaps only a witty retort, I read Lear’s statement ironically. Without self-knowledge, Lear himself is nothing; thus, the loss of his kingdom, lordship, and position as father, his nothingness—or in the wise Fool’s own words, “I am a fool, though art nothing”—results from his own initial condition of ignorance. With Professor McDonald’s definition of nothing in mind, we might say that Lear consequently has “no-thing” as well, with lack of kingdom and self-knowledge representing a form of impotence. I think this notion of nothingness explains Nunn’s decision to include full-frontal nudity symbolically (with Lear’s prosthesis possibly emphasizing the irony of his physical and mental

impotence?) in the scene when Ian McKellan begins to strip. As the former king acknowledges, “I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus.”

Only once the king becomes aware of his own condition of nothingness does he regain his mind, allowing him to transform back into a king, “I’ll resume the shape which though dost think I have cast off forever.” Lear’s former condition has created tragedy, however, as the Fool regrets, “Thou should not have been old, till thou had been wise.”

Despite a very strong cast overall, the performances of Ian McKellan as Lear, Jonathan Hyde as Kent, and Sylvester McCoy as the Fool, really stood out for me among the rest in this production. McKellan’s portrayal of Lear was simply marvelous. As king he embodied royalty, as man he was the ideal image of frail mortality. His wide-eyed madness and tender words to Cordelia’s corpse displayed remarkable range and had me utterly absorbed in the tragedy.

Kent radiated nobility, loyalty, and virtue. Hyde’s performance brought Kent into a starring, rather than supporting, role in this production, which eclipsed Edmund, Goneril, and Regan. His sonorous voice was almost melodic, but also possessed a powerful command unrivaled by any other stage actor I have heard. Kent’s stoicism and moral integrity reminded me of the classical figure of Cato. Both men, caught in the throws of civil war remain incorruptible and loyal to the ideals and virtues in which they believe. Rather than live in a world from which Lear and his own ideals are absent, Kent, like Cato, goes off by himself with the intent to end his life.

I was surprised at first to see that Nunn had cast an elderly Fool. However, McCoy was wonderful! His songs, aphorisms, and interactions with Lear were all brilliantly delivered (especially the parable of the egg). His age gave him an air of sagacity, and increased the believability of his understanding relationship with Lear. On an interpretive note, the Fool (as is

typical of Shakespeare) is a figure of wisdom, who can reveal truth to the protagonist (Lear in this case), which will heighten his understanding. The Fool also represents a form of innocence, like Cordelia, becoming an unfortunate victim of tragic circumstances. Though Lear's line "My poor fool is hang'd" could apply to Cordelia, I agree with Nunn's decision to hang the actual fool. The inclusion of this startlingly violent image had a significant effect on the audience and symbolized not only the sacrifice of innocence (as the case would be with Cordelia), but also the death of truth and wisdom as a result of the family's actions.

A final thought: although I did not initially care for the organ music that commenced the production (expecting Count Dracula to enter instead of Lear), the effect began to grow on me as the action proceeded, creating an intensity that would have been otherwise absent. The organ pipes accompanied the royal procession that began the action, creating an eerie atmosphere in which Lear seemed to lead his own funeral march (a symbolic self-fulfilling prophecy).

*Othello*  
Donmar Warehouse  
Friday, January 11, 200

From "Tush," this performance of Shakespeare's *Othello* reached out, grabbed me by the emotions, and did not let me go until the final curtain. Though we saw so many wonderful productions during the course, I can say without hesitation that this was my favorite. To begin, the consummate performances, and interpretation of character, offered by every member of the cast consumed my attention and illuminated aspects of the text I had not noticed before. Ewan McGregor's flat portrayal of Iago surprised me at first because I have always envisioned this unscrupulous Mephistotelian character as an embodiment of unctuous affectation, rather than a manipulative non-entity (although his black costume and goatee did make him demonic). McGregor was an absence, an evil whisper in *Othello's* ear. His deadpan was a perfect vision of

calculated duplicity—there is something beneath the surface, but those around him would never know it. When Iago is acted, I believe, the audience should in part be deceived by him. What I mean is that when Iago puts on the mask of loyal and trustworthy “ancient,” we should believe it too, if only for a moment. Such was the case with McGregor: looking at him and watching him interact, you read sincerity on his face and hear it in his tone. At times, the subtle and restrained nuances of his acting were perfect—his cold quick look of disdain directed at Cassio when he kisses Emilia, for example. Perhaps McGregor’s Iago does emote, but it is only motiveless hate and jealousy concealed by a brilliant, dispassionate façade—he was the quintessential Machiavel.

Chiwetel Ejiofor’s Othello<sup>3</sup> was a vision of strength, honor, and nobility, richly emphasized by the beautiful, colorful, and regal robes in which he was clothed. A stately and courageous figure, his careful attention to movement radiated power, but not aggression. The attention, patience, and loving glances he showed to Desdemona established him as a good husband. His attention to Cyprus’



*An illustration from The New Yorker’s review of the Donmar Warehouse production that we saw. With Chiwetel Ejiofor as Othello and Kelly Reilly as Desdemona.*

fortifications proved him to be an able governor. We believe that this is an honorable and noble man whose greatest virtue, the trust he willingly gives to others, becomes his tragedy. One of

<sup>3</sup> Illustration: Srinivasan, Divya. *Majestic Moor*. The New Yorker. 21 January 2008. 19 April 2008 <[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2008/01/21/080121crth\\_theatre\\_lahr](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/theatre/2008/01/21/080121crth_theatre_lahr)>.

Michael Grandage's many brilliant directorial decisions in this production was the subtle and climactic progression from disbelief to utter credulity with which Othello responds to Iago's implied, but unspoken, suspicions. I also agree with his decision not to over-emphasize Othello's seizures. The restraint of this production was one of its greatest strengths.

It took me two acts to warm to Kelly Reilly's coquettish characterization of Desdemona. Previously, I had envisioned her as an idealization of generosity, innocence, beauty, morality and incorruptibility—as a pillar and exemplar. Reilly held true to this vision, while creating a more human, a more realistic figure. Her character fulfills my original image of Desdemona, but not in an obvious way. She is virtuous and benevolent in her actions, but exudes human corporeality—she is not the angelic figure we saw in Stratford, Ontario, but a realistic, vital woman. It is upon these very facets that Iago plays in order to rouse Othello's suspicions. There was definite romantic and sexual chemistry between Othello and Desdemona in this production, as there must be.

James Laurenson dynamically portrayed a worried Brabantio, whose effective emphasis on Desdemona's original deceit planted the necessary seed of doubt in Othello's mind. Tom Hiddleston's Cassio showed a true and believable range of emotion that ran the gamut from utter discipline to unprovoked violence. I was even moved by Edward Benett's gullible, though lustful, Roderigo, for whom I couldn't help but truly sympathize, instead of merely laughing at his exploitation.

The slate-covered stage and metallic wall provided a beautiful, malleable, yet minimalist set, from which the director was able to extract two distinct atmospheres using lighting alone. It allowed him to emphasize the dark, callous, and austere feel of mercantilist Venice, creating wonderful shadows in which Iago could lurk. The inclusion of a stagnant gutter—through which

Iago tramps—was an innovative and symbolic touch that reminds the audience of his perpetual reduction of love to bestialities. Having the actors track water over the stage, creating footprints and puddles, also produced an effective, distinctly Mediterranean atmosphere. At the same time, the warm feeling and golden colors of the Cyprus set created a rich-feeling and idyllic locale, beautifully accented by Persian rugs and lush curtains. The exotic music composed for the production significantly contributed to the beauty of this other world, perhaps best represented by Martina Laird's alluring and sympathetically genuine Bianca.

The performances had me so emotionally involved with the characters by the final scene that I feel as though I experienced a true catharsis for the first time. The intensity began when, in a touching and chilling scene, Desdemona seems to sing her own death ballad, prophesying her future murder. The muffled, feeble, yet strikingly beautiful song emphasized her vulnerability (symbolized by her disrobing) and understanding of fate. I do not think her singing was directed this way because of a vocal deficiency, but to set an unnerving tone for the bedroom scene, while piquing sympathy for Desdemona—it was not until this scene that I truly felt for her.

Desdemona's death was a theatrical triumph in acting. I took issue, however, with the director's decision to block this scene off-center and out of my view. While I appreciate my physical involvement in the production to some degree, the murder should have at least occurred center-stage if it was not going to take place on the marital bed. Despite the non-traditional staging, Ejiolor delivered his lines with a perfect combination of a hate, love, and reluctance. It is always during Emilia's speech, however, that I am most moved. Michelle Fairley stole the scene with her denunciation of Iago's plot and the revelation of the handkerchief intrigue. She was completely physically invested in the performance, and the concluding moment in which she finally breaks free of her marital oppression to reveal the truth was heart-wrenching.

*The Tempest*  
Arts Theatre  
Saturday, January 12, 2008

This greatly reduced production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* had a simple message: forgiveness is best. Director Jatinder Verma gave the play a fresh social relevance by re-contextualizing the plot to deal with Islamic religious extremism. In Prospero, Verma saw a parallel to intelligent leaders of current fanatic movements, determined to seek revenge against their enemies. In his playbook notes, he even suggests that Prospero calls to mind a major supporter of Osama bin Laden. At first I perceived this reading as ludicrous, but then intriguingly innovative. Verma tries to convey a peaceful message to both Eastern and Western audiences, inspiring a reconsideration of social divisions—divisions that are very local and real in a city and nation with both a growing middle-eastern population and hateful nativist movement. I greatly admire Verma's commitment to breaking down cultural barriers through art, as well as the message of non-violence that he was trying to convey.

Although I deeply appreciated Verma's socio-political commentary and the lovely middle-eastern music, I did not otherwise care very much for this production. The cuts and selected dialogue seemed entirely arbitrary, giving the action a disconnected feel and making the play virtually incomprehensible. A skeleton of the plot remained, but could not have been understood much by an audience member who had not studied the play intimately.

Although the magical and pastoral atmosphere of the play was entirely absent, the vertical sheets of plywood did manage to express the condition of the characters' imprisonment on the island. They created a cave-like world in which Prospero could brood and contemplate his power over the others. The use of these panels as projection screens was clever, although the dimly lit stage made it difficult to see the displayed images.

The ropes that dangled from the ceiling functioned as a central visual metaphor of the play. I can only assume that they were supposed to get increasingly tangled, representing the way in which the characters lives intertwined. The integral motif of magic, virtually absent, also seemed contained in the ropes, which Ariel uses to induce sleep on Alonso. Additionally, they represent the romantic relationship into which Ferdinand and Miranda knot themselves. Despite the fact that the play is a romance, Verma might have cut this element altogether since the sole emphasis placed on Prospero's contemplated vengeance against Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian made it seem superfluous. The flirtation scene in which the lovers each awkwardly hung from the ropes seemed utterly ridiculous and out of place. Moreover, the chess game between Ferdinand and Miranda, the inherent romantic/sexual metaphor, was missing except for projected images of chess pieces that were displayed at the wrong moment. I suppose that the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda was kept in tact only to emphasize the peaceful union of two formerly antagonistic groups, becoming the ultimate symbol of forgiveness and peace.

Verma troublingly underemphasizes the relationships between Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel. I found Caliban's characterization very problematic in that he was not at all monstrous or in any way different from the other characters. We aren't given any explanation of the relationship between Prospero's cruel treatment of Caliban, or even a hint of what it entails. By accepting Caliban as "his," Prospero further contributes to the theme of forgiveness, but we don't understand why Prospero should forgive him, because he doesn't seem to have done anything except appear on stage and mumble a few times. Verma also does nothing with the character of Ariel—she certainly isn't sprightly or particularly magical. Moreover, the scene in which Prospero releases Ariel, one of the most important moments in the play (it confirms and

demonstrates Prospero's transformation), becomes simply devoid of meaning and robbed of its significance.

Thank goodness for the skilled performance of the actor who played Prospero and Trinculo. As Prospero, he was meditative and commanding, articulate and lordly. The delivery of Prospero's monologues—the only coherent bits of the performance—was magnificent. His ability to switch to an inane comic character instantly demonstrates his impressive range. This dual casting also created an interesting juxtaposition that emphasized the foolishness common to both characters, the component of Trinculo in Prospero. Verma seemed to have great skill at directing comic scenes, but little practice with anything else. The scenes with Trinculo and Stephano—especially when they discover Caliban and create the mock court—were very funny. But, because the play was so disconnected, this scene seemed unimportant and arbitrarily selected for inclusion.