

Theater in England Journal

Love Song

There are a number of compelling Buddhist elements in this play, which at first seems a bit odd for a play that trumpets living in the outside world as the ultimate act of bravery. Of course, Buddhism has a complex and varied history with regard to renunciation. Not all Buddhists are monastic, and indeed the Buddha himself rejected asceticism as much as worldliness as an unproductive extreme. Further, the later Mahayana bodhisattva tradition defined itself through the bodhisattva's vow to turn away from enlightenment and back to the world in order to lessen the suffering of all sentient beings. In this way, the idea of returning or going into the outside world as an act of bravery is certainly far from anathema to the Buddhist community.

The most striking of the play's parallels to Buddhism are the recurrent allusions to the myth of Prince Siddhartha's journey through the negative aspects of the world to enlightenment, and the use of unreal mental constructs to effect profound change in reality. According to early Buddhist mythology, the Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha of the Shakya clan. When he was born, an astrologer predicted that he would turn the Wheel of Law either as a mighty conqueror or a great religious leader. In order to bind him closely to this world so that he would not become a religious leader, Siddhartha's father sheltered him from all of life's hardships, and presented him with every imaginable worldly pleasure. However, after Siddhartha had married and his wife had given birth to a son, the Prince took a fateful chariot trip into the city, where he saw old age, disease, and death. Realizing the futility of life's pleasures against these undeniable

hardships, Siddhartha renounced his family and kingdom in order to find a way to end suffering. He went to a number of wandering religious teachers, practiced asceticism and self-mutilation, and almost starved to death in his quest to find a way out of the pains of the material world. Eventually he rejected the path of asceticism as too extreme, took food offered to him, sat beneath the bodhi tree, and vowed not to leave until he had solved the problem of suffering. After a number of trials and temptations, he realized the Four Noble Truths and reached enlightenment.

The most striking parallel between this story and Beane's is the emphasis on the need to solve the problem of suffering by passing through the worst of filth the world offers. Like Prince Siddhartha after he had renounced his kingdom but before he reached enlightenment, before his transformation Beane could only see the negative aspects of life. He allowed death, decay, and meaninglessness to oppress him and utterly devalue the rest of life. The fictionalized story of the first night he and Molly met enacts this theme even more dramatically, as the two literally crawl through the oppressive heat and darkness, over needles, vomit, broken pavement, and trash, to finally meet in a realm initially devoid of sensory input. This brief moment of no feeling parallels the Buddha's achievement of nirvana, which literally means 'extinction.' However, like the Buddha's, Beane's story does not end there; rather, he reappropriates the sensory world through his contact with Molly.

Indeed, Molly herself reveals an important Buddhist dynamic, for she is not real, but exercises an extremely important influence on reality. Since Buddhists hold that all of 'reality' is actually an elaborate construct of co-dependent mental formations, the boundary between real facts or people and imaginary constructs is extremely fluid. Rather than thinking of the external world as absolutely real, and the projections of the mind as fantasies, most Buddhists

acknowledge a shifting scale of levels of truth and illusion. Further, these hierarchies do not resolve to the reality of the world, but to the insight that ultimately all manifestation is an illusion. However, the Buddha's realization of nirvana stands as proof that there is a way out of illusion, even if it is not to reality as such. This stance that all perceivable, conventional reality is ultimately unreal initially poses a significant problem for Buddhists, because the Buddha's own teachings must therefore also be illusionary and unreal.

There is a very famous Buddhist parable that addresses this problem. Once an old beggar who had cataracts thought he saw flies clustering around the food in his begging bowl, and so he didn't eat his food but spent his time trying to shoo the flies away. A younger beggar sees this and asks why the old man isn't eating. "I'm shooing the flies," he replies. "But there are no flies," the young man responds. Realizing his error, the old man stops his futile shooing and begins to eat. Although there are no flies and never were, these unreal objects kept the old man from doing something productive, namely, eating. The young man solves the old man's problem by referencing these non-existent entities, and stating their unreality. However, the simple act of naming these constructs in the sentence "There are no flies," paradoxically both establishes and denies their reality. In this way, while something that is not real can exert influence on what is conventionally deemed reality, naming the unreal empowers the one who names it to change its influence. Buddhists adopt this strategy of "using a thorn to remove a thorn," as the great Madhyamika philosopher Nagarjuna explains, as their dominant paradigm to explain how the Buddha's teachings can lead to nirvana even though these teachings are themselves rooted in the illusions of language and every-day experience.

The influence of unreal objects plays itself out in a similar way in both Beane and Joan's transformations. Indeed, the realization that something does not need to be real to be important

is perhaps Joan's key insight. When she calls the boy who "rendered" her as a teenager a "paper bag," she also demonstrates the converse of this insight. Even though the boy was an objectively real person, his influence on Joan had very little to do with his reality, and everything to do with Joan's imaginary projection of him. In this way, she realizes that there is only a slight difference of degree between her first love and Molly. Joan's ability to smoke imaginary cigarettes, like the Zen monk's ability to drink tea out of an empty cup, therefore represents the empowerment that arises upon an individual's realization of the shifting, tenuous connections between the real and the unreal.

In this light, however, Beane's response to Joan's insistence that it doesn't matter if Molly's real or not, "It matters to me," is rather out of line with the rest of the Buddhist themes in this play. Although Beane's methodology of using the unreal to positively affect the real, and his journey through the filth of existence to reach bliss seem extremely Buddhist, his end decision to turn back to the world *in order to find himself* is almost an inversion of the bodhisattva's selfless renunciation of enlightenment. Classical Buddhists would definitely claim that Beane has fallen off the path to enlightenment in this quixotic quest for self. So in the end, I'm not quite sure what the play's relationship to Buddhism is. I can think of three possibilities: 1) the play really has nothing to do with Buddhism and my above discussion simply references a number of coincidences; 2) the play refutes the Buddhist conceptions of enlightenment—namely, that there is no ultimate distinction between the real and the unreal, but the act of realizing this non-knowledge creates an epistemic shift that liberates from suffering—by following Buddhist methodology to an opposite conclusion, namely, that there *is* an important distinction between reality and fantasy, even though one can effect the other; or 3) the play is actually Tantric: it so thoroughly accepts the lack of distinction between real and not real that it

returns to reality because there is no where else to go. I have a suspicion that the last possibility may be the case, as the emphasis on love and sex, as well as the scene when Beane imagines shitting and pissing Molly out of him, point strongly in this direction. However, that's a whole other paper.

Spice Drum Beat: Ghoema

Going into this play, I was not expecting a Broadway-style musical. By the end of the first act, I was utterly confused about what I was seeing, as the singing style seemed so conventional it was hard to believe that I was actually listening to South African music. The play's reliance on the same harmonies and same basic musical structures also had the telling effect of making all the songs sound the same. If all of the supposedly wildly diverse influences that blended together to create South African music in various different time periods sound alike, it seems that the play is not actually presenting these various musical styles, but rather is aiming at something else, perhaps something more easily digestible by contemporary Broadway fans.

The actors' physical portrayals deepened my sense of unease. Some of the actors' facial expressions and mannerisms were downright clownish: lips jutting forward, nostrils flared, they seemed to play into the offensive stereotypes of Africans I expected this show to subvert. The cover image on the play's promotional pamphlet contained a similarly jarring image: one of the lead actors, mouth and eyes open wide in a comical, somewhat stupid way, jumps up wearing a 'traditional' costume, complete with funny straw hat, and energetically beats his ghoema. The image looks like it could have been lifted from the days of slavery when slaves were forced to come into the big house and entertain their master's guests. Come see the funny African, it seems to shout. Then, in the theater – a theater in the middle of the Arab section of town – an

almost all-white audience happily watches all this clowning. Honestly, I was a bit shocked. I could hardly believe that this charade was being praised as an authentic look at another culture.

However, during intermission I noticed that the play's program and promotional materials hailed *Spice Drum Beat* as the "hit musical from Capetown." This initially confused me even more. If the origin country embraced this play, it must properly reflect that country's music and traditions, right? If Capetown didn't recognize itself in this play, it didn't seem very likely that the play would be a hit. On further reflection, however, I realized something that the location of our theatre inadvertently pointed out: the people who go to plays aren't necessarily the people who live where the plays are performed. I honestly don't know anything about theatre-going patterns in South Africa, but considering this play's musical style and the composition of our audience in London, I think it's safe to assume that this play is oriented towards whites. The people of South Africa whose ancestors were slaves, whom the play claims to represent, probably did not go to see this play. So it's rather possible that the people who made this play a hit in Capetown might have been members of the privileged white class of former-slaveholders. Maybe *Spice Drum Beat* plays to stereotypes and presents a clean, whitewashed version of South African musical history because that's what its target audience wants to hear. I realize this is an extremely cynical hypothetical conjecture, but I honestly cannot make sense of the discrepancy between what the play claims to represent and what it actually does any other way.

If a culture reveals and defines itself through performance, then this play seemed to tell more about its white audience than about black South Africa. It speaks to a wish to deny the magnitude of past horrors by acknowledging them in a superficial, melodramatic fashion, and to a desire to pretend that the other is actually just like oneself. In this way, while *Spice Drum Beat*

surprisingly has almost nothing to do with its avowed topic, it does say quite a lot about the state of racial relations, both in Capetown and in London. As an interesting aside, earlier on the same day we saw this play, I was walking in Portobello Market, and came across a jewelry stall tended by an old white man. Prominently framed on the wall behind him, there was a picture of a smiling young African girl's completely naked head and torso. To me, the most disgusting thing about this painting was the girl's expression: she seemed to bashfully enjoy and offer herself to the white man's gaze. In a way, I see the same kind of fantasizing at work in *Spice Drum Beat*: apparently some whites would still really like to believe that those Africans are such a joyous, simple folk that they don't mind what we've done to them. They'll still happily entertain us. No hard feelings, right?

Peter Pan

Continuing with the theme of surprisingly insulting portrayals of non-whites, I could hardly believe my ears when Tiger Lilly and another Indian – I think he called himself 'Great Big Panther' – began speaking in broken English, including the horribly stereotyped use of 'me' for 'I.' Maybe I'm being overly sensitive, but considering that this is a children's show, and that British children most likely do not have any interaction with Native Americans, these kinds of portrayals might be mistaken for reality. It irks me even more that this portrayal was meant to be funny.

I was also rather surprised by the un-accounted for use of copyrighted songs from other musicals. None of the online reviews, or even the play's own website, mention these lifted songs. In some ways, the play's use of these songs without acknowledging their original source reminds me of postmodern pastiche – except that the production was so horribly superficial that I

hate to dignify it with a reading of this kind. Perhaps if the actors had been sober, had actually acted, and had remembered more of their lines I could attempt an analysis. Given the lack of professionalism the actors showed, and the production's general lack of substance, I can only assume that the play was not trying to make a point about the impossibility of originality; perhaps they simply thought stealing famous songs would be funny, just like Indians who can't speak properly are apparently funny.

Further, this play only reminds me of postmodernism in terms of Fredric Jameson's analysis of this movement, which I don't really put much stock in since Jameson was an avid modernist who was completely opposed to what he saw as the decline of art into superficial play. Watching *Peter Pan*, for the first time I saw the reason why people following Jameson's polemic might mistake this kind of unprofessional tripe for postmodern pastiche, and develop a disdain for postmodern art. This, of course, is extremely unfortunate, but I suppose that great artists have lamented their work being misunderstood and vulgarized since humans began to make and talk about art.

The Lightning Play

This play effectively explores the power of liminality, a theme foregrounded by its use of various timespaces. The present, base time of the play occurs on Halloween, traditionally a day in which the universe's orders – both human social orders and larger, metaphysical structures – shift, allowing movement between various realms. Halloween is based on the idea that in order to remain viable, structured orders must contain a ritual outlet for disorder: human agency can forge cosmos out of the otherwise chaotic (in the technical sense of possessing too high a degree of complexity to be analyzed) world only if it periodically recognizes the larger aspects of the

universe its ordered reality denies. In this way, Halloween is a nod to super-rational truths that people regularly deny in order to create a world with which they are able to cope. Charlotte Jones does not simply set her play about coming to terms with loss on Halloween to provide a spooky atmosphere in which reasonable adults might momentarily believe in the return of the ghost of a dead child. Max and Harriett's relationship to Frankie, their dead son of whose existence the viewer isn't even aware until the last part of the play, mirrors humanity's relationship to the larger universe out of which it forges an ordered life.

The play's brilliant staging is extremely effective in establishing this motif. All the action takes place in the same living room, with the same couches, television, and rug seeming to irrevocably mark a definite location. Yet the lighting and the actors' behavior create alternate timespaces that simultaneously inhabit this primary space, leaving the viewer with a sense of the collapse of normal spatiotemporal distinctions. This leads to a heightened awareness of the ability to traverse boundaries, to subvert the normal order of reality, as well as to a sense that the character's lives are literally collapsing into themselves, their pasts and presents intermingling. As the play progresses, these subjective realities begin to bleed into each other, as Max repeatedly sees images of Anna running to the fateful tree appear on the television, and the storm clouds of the night Freddie died begin to swirl on the ceiling and the walls. When the set finally opens to reveal Max and Eddie sitting beneath the tree where Freddie died, this physical transformation eloquently marks the end to Halloween's liminality, and leads the viewer to realize that Max has finally reentered the conventional structures of reality. Time and space no longer collapse to haunt the order of the present, but rather expand outward to allow the possibility of moving on.

Jones' decision not to reveal Freddie's existence is also instrumental to the play's enactment of the passage through repressed chaos back into reappropriated order. Halloween is a time to remember all the things that life tells us we must forget: the nearness of death, the dead themselves, and the inexplicably larger universe in which we are embedded. Indeed, the elements that return to haunt the living on Halloween are often so thoroughly repressed that they cannot even be named or recognized until the day's liminal powers brings them undeniably before us. Although the viewer does not know about Freddie for most of the play, s/he does realize that some incredible lack haunts Max and Harriett, and that although the two talk about Anna as if she were the missing element, the loss goes deeper. This uneasy recognition prepares the viewer for the play's revelation of a second, long deceased, child. Further, naming what was always felt but never articulated provides the catalyst for Max and Harriett to break out of their half-lives and begin to forge a new cosmos, just as Halloween's recognition and naming of forces denied by conventional reality allows the renewal and reestablishment of order.

As a bit of a side note, Jack and Eddie play the wonderful roles of a witch and her familiar. The danger of a witch is that she creates her own order, rather than contenting herself with the limitations of conventional reality. Jackie therefore represents the empowered possibility of beginning anew, not as a compromise or a forgetting, but an appropriation of lost elements. Eddie, as her familiar, is the guiding spirit who is able to travel between realms, bringing back knowledge, understanding, and empowerment. He is the mediating force that connects and communicates with everyone in the play, just as a familiar is the messenger between the spirit world and the physical world. Together, the two add dynamism and possibility to an otherwise closed situation. If Eddie hadn't shifted the conversation to serious subjects with his story about his life in the monastery, and if Jackie hadn't upset Max and

Harriett's conventional sense of possibilities, then Max and Harriett may have continued to deny their past, rather than name and move through it.

Caroline, or Change

Cycles abound in *Caroline, or Change*. The enormous moon continuously reminds the viewer of natural cycles, of constant change and eternal return. The play's focus on generations, showing multiple sets of grandparents, parents, and children, tie human rhythms into these natural patterns. Caroline's husband and son successively being sent to war remind of the cycles of history, as do the play's lurking undertones of revolution. Even Caroline's predominant domestic duty, the laundry, involves cycles and rotations. But there are other, subtler and more complicated cycles hidden in this play as well. In the final song, Emmie sings of how her mother's strong blood seeps underground through hidden networks and reemerges as the rain, linking all these larger life cycles with the transmission of Caroline's bravery to her children.

This play revealed a completely different aspect of bravery from what other plays have praised thus far. Caroline's bravery is not Beane's: she does not put her uncertainties aside to live in the outside world. Instead, trapped in her underwater purgatory, she renounces her own life so that her children might live. Her bravery is closer to the courage to struggle that Eddie praises and Max lacks in *Lightening Play*, but with a crucial difference: Caroline does not struggle for herself, but for her children. She works to repress self-knowledge, not to gain it. She eloquently demonstrates that sometimes denying oneself and one's world is the bravest thing a person can do, and that extinguishing a fire is harder than lighting one.

However, Caroline represents only half of what this play has to say about bravery. Her daughter, too, is passionately, dangerously brave. Further, like her mother, Emmie's courage has

nothing to do with self-discovery. Both these women already know themselves, and indeed seem to take this self-knowledge for granted, as a simple foundational fact, much like being able to walk or breathe. From this position, the question of bravery becomes much larger than just one's own life. Whereas Caroline's bravery allows her to nurture her children's lives, Emmie's grants her the power of destruction, of toppling the old order to make way for new creation. Taken together, the two represent a full picture of bravery in both its sustaining and revolutionary aspects.

However, *Caroline, or Change* does not simply bifurcate the conception of bravery. Through the play's emphasis on cycles, it establishes that Caroline and Emmie's bravery are truly two aspects of the same underlying force. Like the waxing and waning moon, these two mindsets that externally seem diametrically opposed actually cyclically mutate into each other. Caroline extinguishes her spark in order to feed her child, creating the external appearance of submission and meekness; that spark is reborn in Emmie, who passionately acts out against the established order, refusing to bow to anyone, in order to create a world of greater respect and equality. But the underlying support that stays constant throughout is the same pulsating, arduous desire to create a newer, larger world that transcends, yet could not exist without, the individual. In this way, bravery plays out the dialectic between renunciation and responsibility, meekness and audacity, creation and destruction, and reveals these seemingly opposed pairs to be manifestations of the same underlying force.

Interestingly, this dynamic cycle of bravery seems fundamentally feminine. All of the strong characters in this play are women, and Rose, the weakest woman, is completely defined by the men in her life: her father, her husband, and her step-son. Emmie's reference to Caroline's blood flowing into the ocean and returning in the rain suggests that women may be

closer to the cyclic power that creates bravery because of their strong natural connection to other cyclic aspects of life. Western culture traditionally identifies women with the moon and the ocean for the very reason that they bleed in time with the moon's phases, and therefore with the changing tides.

Coram Boy

This play seems to exhibit an odd, contradictory relationship between money and freedom. When Otis tempts Mrs. Lynch to run away with him, insinuating that she must want his money, Mrs. Lynch replies that she'd like the freedom money brings. This equation of money with freedom and mobility certainly rings true on at least one level: in the play's historical context, if one lacks money, one has no choice but to serve those who have wealth. Further, as Otis' abuse of Toby graphically illustrates, the poor servant is completely dependent on his master. While, like Thomas or Aaron, a poor person can get lucky, s/he has absolutely no control over her/his fate.

However, Thomas provides an interesting counterexample in more ways than simply his luck in landing an apprenticeship into a field he loves with a good master. Unlike Alexander, Thomas is free to pursue his love of music because his family's lack of money does not bind him into any particular class duty. Alex's very wealth, which should theoretically allow him to do as he pleases, actually enslaves him in his filial duty as eldest son. Indeed, Alex even tells Thomas that he envies his poverty. In this way, both the lack and the possession of money seem associated with bondage, obligation, and the limiting of options.

Both these extremes seem to come together in the women who attempt to give their children to the Coram House. Although one would assume only a destitute woman would give

away her newborn child, in the hope that the Coram House will provide the child with a life her/his parents can not give her/him, many of the women who hand over their children are actually very well off, and could economically support the child easily. In these cases, the problem isn't money, but rather that the child is illegitimate, and the mother must rid herself of the unwanted infant in order to save her reputation. Here again, a question that seems to revolve around money, namely, whether or not a mother can afford to support her child, ends up being far more complicated. Not just poverty, but class and gender as well, drastically limit one's options.

In this way, perhaps the key to freedom lies in being an enterprising member of the middle class, neither so poor that one cannot eat, nor so rich that society strictly defines codes of responsibilities and proper behavior. Thomas, the one character who is able to follow his heart with relative ease, seems to support this idea. As the son of a shipwright, Thomas was never desperately poor, but neither was he rich enough to have a strong filial duty to an estate. However, this may be too simplistic, for Thomas is not an average son of a shipwright: he is a naturally gifted musician, and if not for this special talent, he likely would have simply followed his father's footsteps and remained one of the working class. This possession of a special talent is also, somewhat paradoxically, key to Alexander's mobility. Without his talent for music, Alexander never would have been able to escape his dreaded duty as eldest son of a very wealthy family. And indeed, although Alex feels trapped by his wealth, he still has enough to run away first to Switzerland, then to Germany. Such trips are hardly an inexpensive proposition, and although the play does not explicitly state how Alex financed his travels, the viewer can assume he either had his own assets set aside, or took money with him when he left his estate. Oddly, Otis also owes his rise in the world and his transformation into Mr. Philip Gaddarn to a special

talent of sorts: he is an excellent confidence man. Thus perhaps not money as such, or even class structures in themselves, grant or limit freedom. Rather, it seems that those people blessed (or cursed) with some kind of special talent will undertake the struggle of changing their lot in life, and with tenacity and a bit of luck, may find their freedom.

The Waves

This play's staging provides a very effective and intriguing commentary on the processes of memory and identity formation. No character was played by a single actor; while the face and voice were (as far as I could tell) consistent for each character, the entire cast partook in representing hands, feet, noises, and other bits and pieces of the various characters. One of the cast members would then film these pieces, projecting seemingly whole images onto a screen behind the actors. Perhaps because I have not read *The Waves* and am not familiar with the characters or Virginia Woolf's narrative styles, at first I didn't catch on to what exactly the actors were doing. Specifically, I didn't realize that the projected filmic images were meant to totalize the disparate actions being preformed below. In hindsight, however, I don't think that my confusion was simply the result of my ignorance of the original text. Rather, I think the production meant to elicit this type of confused response from the audience in the first act. At this point in the narrative, the six characters are going through childhood and adolescence. They have not yet differentiated themselves as individuals, and are still at the beginning of the process of identity formation. The chaotic uncertainty of the production's representation of these characters as the result of disparate sounds, images, and body parts mirrored the characters' own confusion.

As the play progresses, both the audience and the characters themselves begin to get the hang of forming whole entities from the fragments of experience. The filmic images become more cohesive, and the character's voices and images become more distinct from each other. In this way, just as the audience finally begins to understand the production's techniques, the characters find themselves within more fully formed identities. The production's decision to stage the events following Percival's death as a series of individual reactions finally completes the atomization of the cast. Whereas at the play's beginning, the characters' voices seemed to mingle and interweave, by the middle of the second act the production presents the viewer with five separate, distinguishable personalities. This mirrors the processes of identity formation, as the characters pass from indefinite formative periods into discrete adulthood.

However, the production constantly undercuts this sense that the characters have advanced forward to become real, discrete entities. Even though both the audience's increasing familiarity with the production's fragmentation techniques combines with increasing clarity in the final images themselves to present the illusion of coherence, the filmic nature of these created images constantly underscores that this coherence is indeed nothing but an illusion. Although the filmic image is the least real thing presented, it alone contains the coherence normally associated with reality. In this way, the production implies that the sense of coherent identity that comes along with adulthood is simply a masked construction, meant to imbue a desperately fragmented reality with some sense of connection, order, and wholeness.

The process of creating seemingly organic images from fragments of multiple actors also seems reminiscent of the process of memory formation. As the characters look back on their lives, and into their futures, they draw causal connections between past events and people in order to create a coherent picture of their present and future. Just as the filmed image draws a

seemingly simple, seemingly whole and real statement out of various fragments, memory creates the impression of order and causality where none in fact exists. I also noticed that there was a slight, barely perceptible time lag between the action onstage and its filmed representation. While this may have simply been the result of the types of cameras and video feeds the production used, I found that this time lag illustrated the necessary removal of the image, either in memory of oneself or the process of identity formation, from its referent. That tiny but impassible gap between the real and its representation came to represent the chasm between human longing for order and coherence and the fragmented chaos of reality.

Much Ado About Nothing

Hero seems to me to be a very vexing and ambiguous character. It does seem that from the beginning, her relationship with Claudio is purely political. She doesn't even really talk to him before she agrees to marry; instead, Don Pedro woos for Claudio, and it is unclear exactly when Hero realizes she's talking to Pedro, not Claudio himself. At any rate, the two young lovers certainly do not establish any kind of meaningful connection before they agree to marry, and the viewer gets the definite sense that Claudio wants Hero because she's beautiful, and Hero recognizes that a marriage to Claudio would be politically advantageous for her estate.

Further, Hero's political savvy alone seems able to justify her decision to marry Claudio even after his appalling conduct at their wedding. While it is understandable that Claudio would have been upset by seeing what he thought was Hero cheating on him on the night before their wedding, I find it rather unforgivable that instead of speaking with her in private, and making sure it was really her at the window, he shames her publicly during their wedding. Even if the viewer is to believe that Hero fell in love with Claudio at first sight, it is inconceivable that a

love with so little time and substance to sustain it should persist after he commits such a heinous act. Further, if she loved and was betrayed with such magnitude, it is hard to believe she could have returned to him without any signs of bitterness. So reasons other than love must have justified Hero's decision to marry, and given how happy she is to be reunited with Claudio at the end, it would seem that these other reasons motivated her from the beginning.

And yet there's the rub: if Hero's 'love' was actually always only political calculation, then she is certainly not the innocent young girl she pretends to be. One then wonders if Hero is so thoroughly a slave to the patriarchy and her father's politically motivated demands that she has no conception of love outside of doing her father's bidding. In such a case, I find her an utterly useless and bankrupt character, although I suppose she retains the nothing of her innocence. The only other reading of her character that I can see, however, is that she is a heartless, calculating, and manipulating person who is willing to marry someone she has every right to despise simply for her own advantage. I shudder to think how such a marriage might turn out. Luckily, I don't think there's much in the play to support this second reading; but unfortunately, that does seem to indicate that Hero is little more than an automaton.

I suppose that one could argue that Hero's apparent lack of will is simply the sign of an extremely well-adjusted woman in her situation, who knows the options open to her and masters the positions allowed her within patriarchal confines. In this way, her eventual marriage to Claudio could be seen as empowering, because despite her trial, she is able to successfully assume the highest patriarchal role for women: the mother of a large estate. Of course, I suppose if serving the patriarchy is what Hero really wants to do, then more power to her. I honestly just cannot bring myself to find this productive, especially when the play presents the counterargument of Benedick and Beatrice, who display an equal partnership founded on

common traits, interests, and love. Perhaps rather than simply the joy in watching Benedick and Beatrice's verbal sparring matches, this ambiguity in Hero and Claudio's 'love' is the reason why Benedick and Beatrice always seem to steal the show. They seem to offer a much more fulfilling and productive vision of the possibilities of love and marriage.

Rock 'n' Roll

I am extremely intrigued by the idea of 'not caring' in this show. Jan repeatedly talks about how the most wonderful thing about the Plastic People of the Universe is that they "don't care" about the political order, and explains to his friend that autocrats love dissidents because these people tacitly accept the premises of the ruling order by defining their lives through resistance to this order. This reminds me, on a much more trivial level, of the 'stereotypically different' pseudo-goth kids I knew in high school. These kids were so bent on not doing anything that mass culture or the popular kids deemed cool that they ended up utterly enslaving themselves to the reverse of popular standards. This desperate struggle to be the exact opposite of the dominant order actually entrenched the influence of the popular kids by providing a clear Other against which these idols of teenage perfection could define themselves. Further, the anti-popular crowd was forced to pay minute attention to popular trends to make sure that their counter-cultural positions didn't suddenly become mainstream.

In the same way, Jan sees dissidents as people who have already bought into the systemic ideology that supports absolutist governments. If one accepts the idea that these governments are the legitimate targets of protest, then one has accepted the power that these governments wield over all aspects of an individual's life. Jan realizes that a far more powerful position is not simply to react to the power that one does not accept, but rather to do something entirely

different than what the government may or may not be doing. The best way to deny a government power over one's life is not to actively resist and react to the government's actions, but simply to live life as one chooses without regard for the government. By refusing to allow the government to influence his actions in any way, Jan attempts to maintain a kind of radical independence from the ruling order.

However, while this position ultimately works out well for Jan, he does spend a number of miserable years in prison, and the government eventually denies the Plastic People's ability to perform their music. This reminds me of Foucault's contention that there is no outside of power: even individuals who look like they are completely refusing to participate in power structures are always-already embedded within them. As Max, the play's classic Marxist, slowly and painfully comes to realize, there is no pure, idealistic Marxist utopia in which everyone would harmoniously coexist. However, conversely, since everything always participates in the structure and exercise of power, the dominant order can never completely control or limit power's expressions. In this way, Jan's conception of not caring, which Esme rapturously embraces at the play's end, could be seen as a way of redefining ideology by refusing to accept the terms of the oppressor, thereby shifting the field of possibilities for power's expression. The play therefore does not replace Marxist teleology with an equally absolutist doctrine, but rather places value in the continuous quest to produce structures that are meaningful to the individual.

The Winter's Tale

I do not agree with this production's decision to set *The Winter's Tale* in some ill-defined, late-fifties to early-seventies time. Unlike *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter's Tale* never explicitly named or justified its choice of historical setting, in the program or elsewhere. Further,

nothing about the play other than the costumes and the decision to treat the happy announcements at the end like a press conference changed. All this led to a disjointed production in which the actor's costumes and occasional technological references seemed to float in a void, completely detached from the play's content. For, unfortunately, the play's content does not translate well to a vaguely contemporary setting without a frame story of some kind. People did not go to the Oracle at Delphi to make state decisions in the 1950s. I honestly have no idea what the production tried to accomplish with this historical framing.

Further, the decision to allow members of the audience to stand in the middle of the stage, and to have most of the play's action take place on the stage's edges, seemed rather stupid to me given the shape of the theater. Because of the way the seats were arranged, if the action occurred on my side of the stage, I couldn't see anything without leaning over the railing in an extremely awkward and uncomfortable way, and people sitting behind me doubtless couldn't see anything at all. In this way, half the theater at any given time couldn't see what was happening on the sides of the stage, where the actors were, while other spectators stood dumbly at center-stage, visible to all but adding nothing to the play. In theory, I think it could be interesting to have audience members on stage during a play, but in this particular play they simply seemed to be in the way. All these technical and production issues really obscured the play's content, which is very frustrating because the play did deal with a number of interesting problems and ideas.

As in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter's Tale* also features a woman who is presumed to die after being wrongfully charged with adultery. However, in *Much Ado*, all the principle characters, with the exception of Beatrice, basically accept Claudio's actions against Hero as being fully justified; even Hero's own father turns against her without any proof other

than Claudio and the Prince's accusations. On the contrary, *Winter's Tale* does not indict the woman who may have committed adultery, but rather condemns the husband's psychotic jealousy. No one believes that the queen could have done such a thing, and everyone tries to convince the king of his madness. As befits a tragedy, this conception of jealousy and adultery is more sophisticated, but also more dangerous, as it showcases how utterly powerless women were in the face of even an irrational accusation. In *Much Ado*, as soon as evidence surfaces that Hero did not commit adultery, she is completely restored to honor. In *Winter's Tale*, not even the word of Apollo from the divine oracle can sway the king in his fit of rage.

This conception of jealousy, while it seems to completely condemn the king as an irrational madman who destroys everything around him, actually paves the way for his character's redemption. Claudio represents socially-sanctioned, self-righteous male privilege; his relationship to Hero's alleged adultery, like his relationship to Hero herself, never moves beyond the bounds that society decrees. His reactions to her are completely impersonal. On the contrary, the king's bout of insanity at least represents a personal, deep reaction to his wife. He can truly repent for his sins because he recognizes his actions as his own aberrations. He did not follow society's dictates; rather, his own shortcomings led to his demise. Since his mistakes were personal, and rooted in his own character, he has the ability to change himself, and make up for his own sins. In this way, although at first it seems rather inconceivable that Hermione would return to the king after sixteen years of hiding, I actually find that this reunion makes more sense than Hero agreeing to marry Claudio. The passage of time has allowed the king to heal, and to become more of himself once again; Hermione does not return to the jealous tyrant who condemned her, but to the penitent man she loves.

Merry Wives

In the production of *Merry Wives* that we saw, both the Irish priest and the Frenchman (already stock comic roles) are made even 'funnier' through songs and stage directions that make them appear gay. The audience laughed hysterically as the two sung of their plots together, frequently bending over, bumping butts, and ending up in sexual positions. At first, I was a bit put off by this portrayal of the least sympathetic characters as being gay, as if their implied sexual orientation somehow contributed to their status as secondary characters who oppose the play's heroes. Further, it seemed particularly odd to portray the Frenchman in this light as he is one of the three men seeking Anne Page's hand in marriage. The first reading I developed was simply that Shakespeare (if these kind of insinuations are in the original play) is simply unreflectively using homosexuality as a gag, and perhaps insinuating that the Frenchman will never win Anne's hand because he is not fully a man. However, just as I hesitate to believe that Hero and Hermione simply enact the patriarchal ideal of the good wife by returning to their respective husbands after being disgraced and exonerated, I think (or would like to think) that there's more to Shakespeare's portrayal of gays than simply calling on a cultural prejudice to get some laughs.

There seems to be a strong link in this play, and perhaps others of Shakespeare's comedies as well, between the gay man and the fool. Both serve as comic relief in a very complicated way. Shakespeare's fools always use their positions and humor to say things that no one else could say, the classic example being the fool in *King Lear* who alone is able to speak the truth to the king. Fools have this privilege because, through their humor, they make the truth safe, and something that doesn't have to be taken seriously. I think the gay man in Shakespeare's plays normally has a comic part for a similar reason. If the audience can laugh at gays, then they don't have to take homosexuality seriously. Interestingly, this puts the audience

in the same kind of position as the king who dismisses his fool's observations. In this way, I think that rather than condemning or mocking homosexuality by assigning gay men to belittling, comic parts, Shakespeare may actually be mocking his audience that refuses to see the deeper truth that gay men are men like any other.

In a bit of a roundabout way, this play's positive treatment of women lends some support to this theory. In the other plays we have seen, women accused of adultery faint, cannot defend themselves, and are normally presumed dead from the shock of the accusation. Here, in stark contrast, the man who falsely accuses his wife is belittled, while the wife is able to stand up for herself. The chorus line, "Wives, wives, merry wives, sugar and spice and honey too./ Wives, wives, merry wives, coming soon to a town near you./ We'll be the proof, we'll show it's true, wives can be merry and honest too," epitomizes the way *Merry Wives* represents empowered, multidimensional women who still fulfill the role of wife. This characterization of women seems to undermine some of the 'weaker' female characters in other plays, such as Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It also subverts the basis for common Shakespearean insults in which a man is called feminine, for here women are represented as stronger and more clever than men.

However, in line with my earlier discussions about the ambiguity surrounding Hero's actions, I think that this portrayal of women does not actually contradict other Shakespearean motifs, but rather reveals the tension that other treatments of women already contain. When a man is called a woman, or laments about the weakness and changeability of the other sex, these comments perhaps reveal more about the man and the audience that accepts them than about women.

In a similar way, my parallel of the gay man and the fool points to ways in which Shakespearean insults and jokes always work on more than one level. In addition to being straight-forward gags, these comments may turn against the character who says them, mocking

them man who would ignorantly mock another. Further, on a third level, the way these jokes play on the audience's prejudices may condemn the audience that laughs along with the character who makes the joking accusation. In this way, all Shakespeare's jokes surrounding sexual ambiguity, cross-dressing, and confused gender roles may turn as much on the audience preoccupied with such issues as the ambiguous character him or herself.

Swan Lake

I had very high expectations going into this ballet. The idea of casting the lead swan as a man instead of a woman – and therefore shifting the dynamic of the Prince's love relationship with the swan from a heterosexual to a homosexual romance – intrigued me greatly. I saw this as an opportunity to depict homosexuality as something beautiful, and to develop choreography that would highlight the specific power and beauty of the male form. From the general tone of the program, I get the feeling that this is what Matthew Bourne was trying to do, but perhaps because this show was a revival and didn't have the all original cast, the ballet unfortunately seemed to accomplish the opposite. *Swan Lake* ended up being strikingly and upsettingly heteronormative.

My first disappointment while watching the ballet was with the relative lack of difficulty, skill, and grace the lead swan's dancing displayed. His performance was extremely flat, and his choreography was rather disappointing, as he didn't perform any significant leaps or other feats that one would expect if this ballet was actually a celebration of the male figure. His dances with the Prince verged on boring, and all of the lifts were short and decidedly awkward. During intermission, I speculated that this relative lack of stunning pair choreography might be because the Prince, as a man, is so much heavier than an average female ballerina. Perhaps the dancer

playing the lead swan simply couldn't lift him in the same way dancers normally lift women. This seemed like a weak excuse even at the time, however. Men aren't that much heavier than women, and even from what little I know about contact dancing I realized that properly executed lifts, which use momentum, angles, and well-aligned body positions, absorb a great deal of a partner's weight.

Then came the second act, in which a man played by the same dancer who plays the lead swan enters a royal ball via the balcony, seduces all the women present, including the Prince's mother, and publicly rejects the Prince. The Prince is then sent by his mother to a mental hospital, given a lobotomy and perhaps castrated, seemingly in an attempt to 'cure' his homosexuality. At this point I was literally fuming, and suddenly the earlier lack-luster dancing between the Prince and the Swan made complete sense. The two did not dance well because two men should not work well together; it's just not natural for men to dance together. In this light, their awkward routine prefigured the play's return to the conventional couples showcased at the royal ball, where the male-female pairs had much more interesting and impressive dance sequences than the two men had together. I could hardly believe how thoroughly the ballet had turned on its protagonists to restore heteronormativity.

But then, in the play's final scene, the Swan returns to the Prince, and the two are killed for their love by the jealous flock of other swans. The Queen runs in and laments her dead son, while a vision of the two reunited in Heaven appears above the Prince's bed. In some ways, this final scene seems to redeem the Prince and liberalize the ballet's implied position on homosexuality. The Swan fights for the Prince valiantly, the two's reunion beyond death speaks to an eternal love. However, this final scene is also highly problematic. First, because it is set in the Prince's bedroom, with the Prince lying on his bed and the swans emerging from underneath,

it is very possible that this ending scene is the Prince's dying dream, and therefore that his redemption happens only in his own mind. This dream conjecture also helps to make sense of the lead swan's seemingly contradictory behavior: the swan actually rejects the Prince at the ball, but the Prince, unable to deal with this harsh reality, imagines his love coming back to fight for him. Since the ballet depicts the Prince throughout as a weak, ineffectual character, if the final scene is a dream, he ends up seeming more pathetic than sympathetic. Further, even if the final scene does happen in the play's reality, I still find it extremely problematic that the gay couple must die before they can experience happiness.

The Enchanted Pig

This modern-day fairytale adaptation opens with juxtaposed representatives of fate and science: the three sisters, reminiscent of the three fates, sit singing a song about fate's threads while they embroider, and four scientists walk around them singing about the intricacies of love. When the sisters open the forbidden door and encounter the Book of Fate, they also find the linking element between these two opening motifs. "Once you know it, it will surely be so," the Book of Fate sings to the girls. Both post-Heisenberg science and this play's representation of fate are linked to the power of knowledge to define and actualize potentials. The Book of Fate herself is rather like the box that encloses Schrödinger's hypothetical cat, which has a fifty-fifty chance of smashing a vial that would release a poison to kill it. Just as in a quantum world, the cat is neither alive nor dead until observed in one state or another, it seems that the contents of the Book of Fate are not fixed until someone reads them. Further, once someone opens the box and sees, for example, that the cat is dead, nothing in the world can restore the quantum, pre-observational potential and make the cat alive once more. In the same way, although it would

have been completely in the King's power to stop Pig from marrying his daughter, he acquiesces to his daughter's self-fulfilling prophecy simply because it has been made. In both a quantum world and the realm of fate, once one knows how potentials actualize into real events, there is no going back.

The operetta takes the role of knowledge a step further, however. Flora's quest to find Pig after he has been stolen away from her represents a journey to obtain knowledge about one's universe, and by extension about one's self. As Flora travels to the ends of her universe, she internalizes Mrs. North Wind's refrain that "Love is more mysterious than you know." In this way, Flora begins to see the way deep, inscrutable potentials create the conditions of the manifest world. This recognition of uncertainty and complexity allows her to mature into a fully-empowered adult, capable of creating possibilities instead of merely being subject to them. *The Enchanted Pig* therefore implies that self-knowledge is a higher order of scientific knowledge, for while objective knowledge simply brings potential events into reality, subjective knowledge is able to shape the events it actualizes. Indeed, Flora is unable to rouse Pig from his enchanted sleep until she stops relying on powers outside of herself and trusts her own knowledge, knowing that she will find a reflection of her own conviction in Pig.

Just as in *Love Song*, however, this self-knowledge is never complete, clean, or sterile. Flora's decision to roll in the mud with Pig catalyzes her ability to see more than just his filthy animal nature: one must pass through all aspects of life, not just the pretty ones, in order to find a self capable of loving another. Mr. and Mrs. North Wind's duet about all the quirky and disgusting things they still love about each other re-emphasizes this point. In addition, the old lady witch who enchants Pig represents the danger of absolute certainty in justifying one's own actions. Although she is able to manipulate reality in striking and powerful ways, her witchcraft

fails her when she confronts Flora and Pig, who are empowered by their realization of the inscrutable complexities of love. In this way, the operetta implies that although self-knowledge is the key to successfully navigating life's conditions, such knowledge must also contain a recognition that there are larger, more mysterious structures creating reality than an individual alone can control. One must remain open to the possibility that there is more at stake than one's own self-interest.

Along these lines, I found the operetta's portrayal of its villains particularly productive. Rather than resorting to the ridiculously simplistic formulation in many children's stories and fairytales that the bad guys are simply evil, and just have some irrational desire to destroy everything that's good and beautiful, *The Enchanted Pig's* old lady and her daughter who steal Pig away from Flora do so out of (albeit selfish) love. Their duet establishes both that the daughter is unsure if drugging her fiancée to make him forget his previous love is really the right thing to do, and that her mother acts only to make her daughter happy. These villains have reasons for their actions that reveal a complexity to evil that mirrors the complexity of love.

The Seafarer

It seems like it would be easy to read this play as a condemnation of alcoholism. Ivan and Nicky are both estranged from their families because of their excessive drinking. Sharky committed murder while drunk, and tried to hide his crime from himself through drink for twenty-five years; now that his brother has gone blind, Sharky desperately attempts to stay sober in order to take care of him. Indeed, in his review in *The Daily Telegraph*, Charles Spencer comments, "Like most recovering alcoholics, McPherson can't forget where the booze took him ... The play strikes me as McPherson's own personal thanksgiving for escaping alcoholism"

<http://www.theatre.com/story/id/3003973>). However, I think this reading drastically oversimplifies the play. Both the humor and brutal honesty that come from drinking play extremely important roles in allowing these men to continue living.

Rather than taking a simple, moralistic stance on drinking, *The Seafarer* seems to view drink along the same lines as the ambiguity it assigns to the “hole in the wall.” Normally, “hole in the wall” is a slang term for an ATM, a place from which one can receive the gift of cash. In the play, however, Mr. Lockhart uses this term to indicate the gates to Hell, telling Sharky that once Sharky loses the poker game for his soul, Lockhart will take Sharky to “the hole in the wall.” This ambiguity emphasizes that the hole in the wall is foremost a portal that reveals the state of one’s accounts. If one is in good shape, the hole in the wall is a confirmation of prosperity; however, if one has accounts that need to be settled, the hole in the wall refuses to yield its blessings, and instead sucks one away to Hell. Alcohol seems to work in a similar way: it makes manifest the state of one’s soul. Before Sharky has the courage to settle his debt with the Devil by wagering his soul in a game of poker, he has to start drinking again, because alcohol reconnects him to his own past. Further, the same alcohol that emboldens Sharky befuddles Lockhart: one is either intoxicated or inspired by the intake of spirits depending on one’s own relationship to the spiritual world.

Going along with the varying function of alcohol, the play seems to indicate that relationships, more than actions, define a person’s life. Although many of Sharky’s actions are far from admirable, his relationships with his brother and Ivan ultimately override his sins. What matters is not so much that one drinks or abstains from drink, or gambles, or goes to church, but that one maintains deep connections with one’s friends and family. Lockhart’s ending comment to Sharky, encouraging him to keep gambling because “someone up there likes you” similarly

implies that God himself values people whom others value, as if Richard and Ivan's love for Sharky persuaded God to spare Sharky's soul.

Laughter seems like the audible manifestation of both the positive aspects of alcohol and the intense bonds of friendship. The most remarkable thing about this production to me was the tone: although the subject matter is depressingly heavy, the actors effectively recreate the safe, comfortable feeling of hanging out with a close group of friends. Even when serious outbursts threaten the group, the viewer intuits that people who can wake up drunk on each others' sofas, and laugh together over the course of many decades, exist in a deep enough social space that they can deal with just about anything.

Therese Raquin

It seems rather appropriate to me that this play was the result of the same kind of 'scientific,' pseudo-genetic analysis that led Enlightenment thinkers to deem Africans and women inferior races, people with mental illnesses dangerous, irredeemable madmen and criminals, and basically anyone who was not a white Christian male some kind of biological deviant. This play's utter uselessness and complete inability to meaningfully reflect on any aspect of (at least my) life could only come from such smug righteousness hidden under the veil of 'objective' observations. Its observations about human psychology are no more valid than nineteenth-century studies claiming, for instance, that Africans do not feel pain the same way whites do; indeed, the spectacle this play makes of *Therese* reminds me of the way nineteenth-century scientists paraded Sarjite Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus,' around to various European cities. There is nothing 'scientific' about this play; it rather seems to me like an almost masturbatory fantasy hijacking scientific discourse as a pretext of legitimacy.

Neither Therese nor Laurent is ever given sufficient psychological depth to explain their actions. Although there are a number of 'reasons' given to explain how the two could decide to commit murder, these reasons seem extremely abstracted from the individuals themselves, more like rationalizations than actual explanations. Therese's long statement to Laurent towards the beginning of the play completely fails to justify her character because it seems so out of context. There's no good reason why she would be telling Laurent, who after all grew up with her and has been her lover for some time, the details of her childhood. This speech is obviously and transparently a way to bring the audience up to speed, and for this very reason, sounds like an invention that doesn't have any real relevance to Therese's life. Laurent's later protestations that he was just a good, simple farmer boy before Therese corrupted him ring equally false. Further, the domino discussion about unsolved murders that prefigures Therese and Laurent's act seems entirely too convenient. This play, in line with its 'scientific' outlook, is obviously trying very hard to justify itself from every angle, but since these moves are so heavy-handed, they only succeed in making the entire play feel false and unbelievable.

I suppose it could be possible that my harsh condemnation of this play has as much to do with my own views on adultery, as with the play itself. Recognizing as I do that loving a single person does not blind one to the beauty of others, and that individuals in a relationship can change, sometimes falling out of love with each other, I do not put much stock in monogamy and eternity as the defining values of a relationship. In my mind, wishing to commit adultery, or having one's spouse commit adultery, is never a justification for murder. If Therese never loved Camille, or no longer loves him, then she and Laurent should just leave him. I know that in the historical context of the play, this wasn't as easy as it is now, but I found it rather unbelievable that the two would move directly from wishing they could be together, to deciding to kill

Therese's husband, with very little consideration of the idea of simply running away together. Here again, the play rationalizes itself quite well, for, as Therese keeps repeating, she has never said no to her mother-in-law aunt. All this really seems quite ridiculous, however. Therese hasn't the strength to run away from an old woman, but she can assist in killing a man?

I think that here I return to my initial position: my own propensity to become frustrated with plays about the horrible effects of adultery notwithstanding, this play simply does not hold together as a psychological portrait of the criminal mind. Another aspect of the play's portrayal of Therese that particularly strikes me as being more likely the result of Emile Zola's fantasies than 'scientific' observation is the sudden and inexplicable change in Therese's mental state on her wedding night. Immediately after the murder, Therese describes how incredibly happy and at peace she feels. Far from appearing tormented, other characters even remark on her glowing face and altered appearance. However, on her wedding night she suddenly begins to be tormented by Camille's dead spirit, and from then on cannot deal with what she has done. I seriously doubt that this disparity is based on actual case studies (if, indeed, any of the play is). Rather, it seems that Zola is enacting slightly modified form of the virgin/whore dichotomy, portraying a woman as a deliciously tempting and powerful figure, who flirts with the forces of darkness but is, of course, punished in the end.

Amy's View

It's a bit hard to tell what this play's relationship to Amy's view—that one just has to love people unconditionally, and hope that eventually one will receive love in return—actually is. To the extent that unconditional love is identified with indiscrimination, and to the degree that the viewer can extend Amy's view on people to encompass art as well, the play seems to reject this

idea. Both Dominick and Esme attempt to harness the powers of discrimination in favor of their respective artistic causes. As a professional passer of judgments, Dominick makes his living by valuing some cultural objects over others, and even relishes the chance to debunk what he deems an over-hyped work. In this way, although Dominick constantly harangues Esme for her snobbery, and disparages elitism in art in general, he participates in the same type of enterprise through his criticism. Rather than relying on a platitude, such as art is in the eye of the beholder and all forms of art deserve equal attention, the play's end at least partially vindicates the idea that some forms of artistic expression are higher than others. The play does not seem to imply that one should love Dominick's bloody blockbuster and Esme's small, emotionally truthful theater production at the same level.

On a human level, Amy's own fate seems to invalidate her mantra. Although she loves Dominick basically without conditions, acquiescing to his every demand, Dominick eventually leaves her, and she dies alone in a freak accident, seemingly estranged from her mother and ex-husband. Further, while Amy lives she is never able to reconcile Dominick and her mother. After her death, her words seem to have more power over the ones she loved, but it seems like this transformation is a bit late as far as Amy herself is concerned. While she lives, her hope to receive some love in return for her outpouring seems futile.

This, however, is where things get a bit more complicated, for Amy tells her mother that she always knew her relationship with Dominick probably wouldn't last forever, and that he would likely "trade-up" at some point. Even though she recognized all this, she saw enough in Dominick to believe that loving him and spending time with him would be worth it. In some ways, I suppose this could be read simply as more acquiescence, and as a sign of weakness, as if Amy did not place enough value on herself to believe that she was worthy of holding Dominick

for his entire life. I don't think this is the case. Rather, this view that an act of love is worthwhile if the object is important enough to the lover, no matter what future that love entails, or what its conditions may be, seems extremely sophisticated to me. Rather than making a calculated investment focused only on a profitable return, Amy chooses to vest her interest in a particular object simply because of what it is, not because of what will become of it. In this way, understanding Amy's view of unconditional love as a metaphor for the appreciation of art takes on a number of unforeseen dimensions. Unconditional love is intimately linked not to blind acceptance and unthinking affirmation, but to but to carefully considered judgment. However, this discrimination is based on the object itself, not on the object's popularity, profitability, or critical acclaim.

This reading resists further elaboration, however, because of the fragmented and contradictory way that the characters espouse various opinions. Amy herself says a number of things which seem to contradict both Dominick's articulation of her "view" of unconditional love, and my contention that she loves the object, not its reception. When Esme asks Amy if she's staying with Dominick because of her "famous view that love conquers all," Amy replies, "Oh, God, no. It's not that." Either Amy's view of love has convinced her that it was time to move on, or she repudiates her former doctrine when she realizes that it failed to save her marriage. Further, Amy later chastises her mother for not realizing that what one does and what one is are the same thing. Applied to art, this assertion completely contradicts my claim that Amy invests in the object rather than its hype. If what something does is what something is, then what is called art is art, and therefore one cannot invest in an object apart from what is said about it, because the object is what is said about it. The play also gives most of the lines supporting

and defining 'Amy's view' to other people, so it's rather unclear if the viewer is really getting Amy's view at all.

bash

The middle section of this play powerfully and sickeningly demonstrates the danger of certainty. John and Sue, the two young college students in "A Gaggle of Saints," seem completely at ease with their world. Their parents are rich, they go to the right school, and Sue repeatedly claims that the two are planning to get engaged the upcoming summer. Everything in their world has been comfortably and irrevocably ordered by their social position and religious beliefs. Questioning this order would not only be unnecessary, but might undermine the privileges the two enjoy, so of course they refuse to see anything that could lead them to question what they have been taught to believe.

The gay man in Central Park forces John to confront aspects of his entrenched beliefs that would normally remain out of sight. John sees the gay man almost as a challenge or an opportunity to prove himself. John's inability during the dance to forget his chance encounter with the man seems to show that John believes that if he is really certain, he would do something about the abomination he had witnessed. Indeed, this is exactly what he does: by later beating the man to death, John proves the extent of his conviction both to himself and to his friends. The most sympathetic excuse that one could possibly provide John would be that he is terrified of being gay himself, and that by beating the gay man to death he symbolically beats down a part of himself that he cannot allow himself to recognize. In this case, uncertainty, not certainty, would motivate his attack. However, I don't think this is so. John is not pulled along or coerced into this act. He does not seem conflicted about what he has done. Rather, the murder excites him.

Earlier in the play, John tells of how he beat Sue's ex-boyfriend unconscious for absolutely no reason, and both John and Sue are excited when John pricks his finger putting Sue's corsage on her, and gets a drop of blood on his white tuxedo shirt. Both these events point to John's obsession with — and love of — violence. During the murder, he describes how it was difficult to get a clear shot at the man with all his friends there beating the man, but he managed to get a few good ones in anyway. He is not repressed or conflicted; rather, he uses the cover of his religious certainty to act out his violent fantasies.

John also frequently describes the murder in religious terms, claiming a number of times that beating the gay man to death was like going to do mission work. He clearly sees his actions as advancing the cause of his faith, and therefore as morally laudable. He and his friends even recite a prayer over the dead man's body, consecrating their actions as if they killed the man for his own sake, so that he would sin no more. This portrait of violent certainty is absolutely terrifying in the way that it does not try to offer hope that John is really bothered by his actions, and will someday break down and repent. It even seems like John let the gay man kiss him because he enjoyed the danger and excitement, and knew that he could justify partaking in this forbidden action on the grounds that had to be certain the gay man deserved to die.

John's lack of remorse is precisely what makes this play so terrifying. We would like to believe that committing murder would destroy the murderer — that no one could be so unequivocally certain of his own righteousness that he could kill another and think himself justified. But this comforting idea that the criminal will repent is an illusion as often as it's true. Certainty often comes at the price of absolutely condemning the other: if I am right then you must be wrong, and I must punish you for your transgression.

Billy Elliot

This play highlights the discrepancy between Marxism's ideal of an enlightened, artistic, and cultured workforce and the actual attitudes of much of the working poor towards art. This theme has recurred in a number of the productions we've seen, from Max's vision in *Rock 'n' Roll* that all people can be workers in the morning, politicians in the afternoon and artists at night to Dominick's frequent assertions in *Amy's View* that art should be brought back to the people. Classical Marxism does seem to hold to the idea once workers are educated, the poet and the statesman will spring from the heart of every man, and indeed this redeeming vision of human possibilities is one of the most uplifting and positive aspects of Marxism.

However, many disillusioned Marxist theorists, including Max in *Rock 'n' Roll*, come to at least partially blame the working class's seeming inability to care about the grand, noble projects of art and human advancement for the failure of socialism. Indeed, the quickness with which people tend to abandon artistically challenging works in favor of mass-produced, mindless entertainment seems to indicate that the masses really don't care about art, and that Marxism's high sentiments cannot compete with the cheap thrills of capitalism. *Billy Elliot* shows another side of this working-class reflexive rejection of high culture. When Billy's father and brother first hear about Billy's audition, they begin to mock him, then grow increasingly angry that he could waste his time on such nonsense in the middle of what Tony deems "class warfare." Further, both immediately assume that Mrs. Wilkinson must be an enemy since she's a member of a (slightly) higher class – something that she immediately calls the two out on.

Although Billy's family's initial response to his dancing would seem to play into the stereotype of the culturally ignorant worker, both Billy's dad and his brother quickly come around when they realize how talented Billy is. In this way, the musical does not represent the

workers' rejection of art as the result of stupidity, or being seduced by cheap entertainment, but rather as the temporary knee-jerk feeling that preserving their jobs and way of life is simply more important. After Billy's dad sees him dance, he realizes that Billy deserves a chance. He goes to Mrs. Wilkinson, and upon learning that he will need money to send Billy to London to audition, he is even willing to betray his class by working for the police. Of course, the community assures that this is not necessary, and they all raise money to send Billy off, taking great pride that one of their own should reach such heights. This musical therefore both justifies the working class's apparent rejection of high art, while simultaneously holding up the Marxist ideal that when someone is exposed to beauty, they will rise to embrace it.

There Came a Gypsy Riding

For me, the most poignant moment in this play came when Leo told Margaret that when he viewed his son's coffin, he whispered to his dead son that if Leo had one wish, he would go back in time to before his son was born, and he would not change anything. Margaret responds to this by asking, "You loved him that much?," and when he replies in the affirmative, she responds, "Me too." This sentiment, that one would not change anything about one's life, even if such changes could avert a tragedy, strongly reminds me of Nietzsche's conception of the eternal return. Explaining this conception, in "The Drunken Song," Zarathustra, Nietzsche's fictional prophet and mouthpiece in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* posits, "Have you ever said yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted a thing twice, if ever you said, 'You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted it *all* back" (Z 435). In this view, because of the intimate entanglement of all events in the flux of becoming, to affirm a single moment actually

affirms all of creation, including its deepest suffering. Nietzsche expands on this observation to realize that the key to a deep and ecstatic life is to recognize this interconnection, and therefore affirm the entire spectrum of experience. “My formula for the greatness of a human being is *amor fati*,” he comments in *Ecce Homo*, and continues, “that one wants nothing to be different – not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it” (EH 258).

There Came a Gypsy Riding powerfully illustrates this idea during its emotional climax. Since Margaret is a humanities university professor, it is possible that she is familiar with Nietzsche’s ideas, and recognized the full pathos of Leo’s comment that he would not change his son through the lens of the eternal return. However, whether or not the two were aware of themselves in this fashion or not—or indeed if McGuinness himself has any knowledge of Nietzsche—is rather immaterial. Their affirmation of their son despite his tragic suicide powerfully illustrates the depth and pathos of Nietzsche’s conception that one must love the pain, the suffering, and the tragedy of life in order to affirm life’s joy.

I also appreciated the way *There Came a Gypsy Riding* managed to illustrate these ideas while implicitly refuting the common misconception that Nietzsche’s eternal return amounts to either masochism or at best delusion. Many claim that it simply isn’t possible to love, affirm, and revel in suffering—that the best one can be is indifferent to these negative aspects of life. However, Margaret and Leo are certainly not indifferent to what has happened to them. Indeed, their breakthrough and deepest connection comes when they finally allow themselves to feel the full weight of their son’s death. Margaret’s question to Leo after the two have affirmed that they would not change anything about their son, “What are we going to do?,” reveals the way that she

has finally allowed her grief over her son's death to break through the ordered structures she uses to support herself. This moment of instability is the prerequisite for reordering her life in a way that incorporates, rather than denies, the depth of her experience of her son's death. Her willingness to allow this knowledge to permeate her life compellingly illustrates how one can productively affirm suffering.

The play may even go a bit further, and point to the ways in which a person faced with a personal tragedy not only *can* learn to affirm what has happened to her or him, but actually *must* come to this kind of acceptance in order to keep on living without repression or duplicity. Margaret in particular embodies this realization that not only is it possible to affirm life's suffering, it is absolutely necessary to do so if one wants to continue to experience life's joys. Throughout most of the play, Margaret continuously, and in a very self-aware manner, puts off dealing with the reality of her son's suicide. She even admits that she has only been able to continue her day to day life by compartmentalizing her feelings and losing herself in the rigid structures and rules she created to give herself a sense of control and order. Although this produces the appearance that she has come to terms with her son's death, as the play goes on this façade crumbles, revealing her immense emotional instability and complete inability to move on with her life. She is only able to begin living again when she and Leo bond over their realization that both would still choose to have their son again, even knowing that his birth would lead to his suicide. In Nietzschean terms, by affirming this sorrow, she reclaims the ability to affirm joy.

Don Juan in SoHo

Although I appreciated the Don's philosophical positions about the right of an individual to live how he chooses, I thought he failed to realize his own high standards. He claims to loath

hypocrites, and celebrates an individual's right to live his or her life as s/he pleases. But perhaps I'm being a bit too polite with inclusive pronouns, for the Don actually doesn't seem too concerned with women's right to choose the course their life will follow. For example, Elvira chose to live by a certain code under which she would not have sex until marriage. If the Don were really that concerned with the individual's right to self-determination, he would have respected Elvira's choice and stopped pursuing her once he realized that they want fundamentally incompatible things. Indeed, Elvira herself realizes that the Don's promiscuity isn't itself the problem; rather, his propensity to deceive women in order to sleep with them is what makes him a morally reprehensible figure.

The play itself seems to at least partially realize that its hero is not an unambiguous figure. The statue that haunts the Don and ultimately delivers him to the place of his death names itself not "Death" or "Judgment" but "Recognition." The statue is like a cultural mirror that reflects the Don back to himself through an understanding of something greater than himself: it is the part of the Don that acknowledges his implication in a larger order, for it is the part of him that feels the need to be punished. In this way, it is fitting that Recognition should bring the Don to the dark alley in which Elvira's brothers kill him. At some level, the Don recognizes that he is not the great individualist he pretends to be, for to be a true individualist, one must respect the positions of others, and deal with others honestly.

Even with all these neat justifications of the Don's fate, however, the play definitely does lionize him and his ideals. His refusal even when faced with death to apologize for his actions seems very heroic, and the viewer is left applauding him for not renouncing his views. The parallel between the Don and the Muslim who refused to profane Allah is painfully obvious, and the play seems to fiercely celebrate conviction. In light of the way the statue seems to function

as the Don's own condemnation of himself, however, I wonder if the play does not mean to celebrate the Don's irrational refusal to apologize, but rather to comment on the way certainty and conviction are perceived as positive traits even when they lead to disaster. By getting the audience to side with the Don, the play achieves a bit of a coup, for presumably the majority of the audience, like the majority of Westerners in general, affirms monogamous values and would certainly side with Elvira if she were a friend or sister instead of simply a foil for the Don's philosophizing. Just as he tricks women into abandoning their loved ones with false promises of marriage and wealth, he seduces the audience into condoning his lies through his unapologetic bravado.

Throughout the play, Stan serves as an Everyman with whom the audience can identify because he is also under the Don's spell. However, Stan knows more about the Don than the audience does, and his additional knowledge leads him to condemn his master, therefore prefiguring a savvy viewer's ultimate rejection of the Don upon further reflection on the play. In this way, the play manages not only to condemn the prudish repression that the Don rails against and exploits, but also the Don's hypocrisy in claiming that he alone is not a hypocrite, and further chides the viewer who would be naïve enough to fall for the Don's act.

Spamalot

I thought it was interesting how the least effective parts of this musical were the gags lifted word-for-word from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Considering the intense love that many have for this original, and the fact that many people in the audience have probably enacted these parts late at night with their friends while laughing hysterically, it would seem that sections of the musical that closely paralleled the film would have a guaranteed positive reception. And yet

many of these skits, including the Holy Hand Grenade bit, one of my personal favorites, fell rather flat. I wonder if the audience's intense familiarity with the genius of the original may have actually hurt the production at these points. Since we know every tone, every inflection of every word, I guess it's easy for us to be put off by slight changes in delivery, almost as if we still feel like we're in our dorm rooms, and can jump up and yell, "No! You did it wrong! It's supposed to be like *this!*," promptly executing the gag ourselves.

In this way, the most effective parts of *Spamalot* were not the verbatim jokes from the *Holy Grail*, but the show's satire and parody of musical content and form. Although I am not a musical expert, I've seen enough musicals to recognize the genius with which the music and lyrics in general, and specifically Hannah Waddingham's wonderfully distorted virtuoso vocal performance, mocked the form. The only addition to the plot of the original that I did not particularly like was Sir Robin's insistence that one must have Jews on board to be successful in show business. This struck me as odd and slightly anti-Semitic. At first, the Lancelot-is-gay subplot also seemed unnecessarily stereotypical, but this gag completely redeemed itself with Lancelot and his lover's hilarious one-liner about how their marriage will still be controversial in 500 years.

The audience interaction was also a nice touch, as was the shower of confetti that ended the show. I know that these are kind of cheap tricks, but honestly, I've never been showered with confetti before, and I really enjoyed it. All in all, *Spamalot* is much more of a feel-good production than *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, but it preserves enough of the original's spirit of gleeful mockery to be highly entertaining on its own.