

THEATRE IN LONDON

A Journal

Hilary E. Fox
Dr. Russell Peck
Spring 2002

12.28.2001, 3:00pm
 Star Quality (Noel Coward, 1966) Dir.
 Christopher Luscombe Apollo Theatre

A fairly interesting play, especially with respect to Coward's treatment of the disparity between the world of the actor and the play and the author of the play. Brian, although he's fumbling and uncertain in the world of Ray, Lorraine, and company, is the creator of the world in which Ray and Lorraine must involve themselves - and they are uneasy in his presence, as Lorraine repeatedly tells him. Coward suggests the existence of some sort of barrier that lies between the playwright and those who interpret his writing: there is general approval of Brian's work as being that of a great writer on the verge of public acclaim (although there is the concern that he may have lifted passages from a play he insists he's never seen before), but the company cast to perform it fidgets through a read-through in his presence.

The author encounters this barrier in not only the hesitance of the company in his presence, but in the way that the very business of acting is carried out. The director for the play, Ray, employs psychological warfare to get what he wants: instead of trying to bully Lorraine into giving into him, he plays upon her insecurities - the strength of her reputation and the security of that reputation. He recognizes that Lorraine's innate instinct to act puts him automatically at the disadvantage of being the audience, and therefore more susceptible to her presentation of reality. "Inept, soggy, insincere," he calls her after one of her dramatic fits - she is a bad actress, as he asserts again and again. Brian cannot comprehend the reason for such treatment of a woman he regards as being some sort of icon, but Ray somewhat breezily informs him that Lorraine is an actress: she needs to be managed.

In presenting *Star Quality* as a triangle of conflict, its major points being Ray, Brian, and Lorraine, Coward exposes multiple levels of superficiality in the acting business, with no party being entirely free from the stain of either taking things at face value or being more shallow than they think of themselves as being. Lorraine acts without feeling and puts on airs. Her maid, Nora, recognizes that this is because Lorraine is a star, and her conceit sets her apart from a "regular" actress, entitling her to the occasional histrionic display. Ray, as mentioned earlier, delights in psychological control over his unruly diva - he prefers to direct in more ways than one - and this control is thorough and absolute, but without experience. Lorraine accuses him of being a "new-fangled" director, one brimming over with theories and aphorisms but utterly devoid of knowledge of what the stage means.

Brian finds himself at the heart of their wrangling, caught between their demands that the script be rewritten: Ray wants Eleanor's suicide to be more believable, Lorraine wants the final scene to be Eleanor calling her exhusband on the telephone. Desperate to get the play finished, he trades unoriginality for unoriginality: the first ending, Ray tells him, sounds as if it were plagiarized from *A Green Hat*; the second, proposed by Lorraine, is a spin-off of *Sheila Goes Away*. What's a besieged and utterly naive author to do? How can he possibly win?

He does get his vindication in the end, in the climactic scene, at the height of his own triumph. The pivotal question of the play, proposed by Brian, is "Why can't people in the theatre behave like normal human beings?" and he gets his answer: because the theatre is not reality. Brian sees reality as the ultimate author, but the stage is a distortion of reality, a selective mirror, complete with its own laws and social division that is

perhaps a more distilled version of what it is in 'real life.' Lorraine and the other actresses, especially poor Marion ("the egoist's dream"), are all subject to a world ruled almost exclusively by men,, men who take a jaded view of the female race in general. Brian initially takes Ray's disgust with Lorraine to mean that he doesn't like women, but Ray's assistant hastens to assure him that "nobody can like the theatre without loving women": their temperamental flights, peevishness, and capacity for putting on a show - all under the direction of men - is what makes the theatre so great. There is an exclusiveness to this liking though, one defined by the parameters of homosocial bonding: men form one component and women another. This is perhaps increased by the strong homosexual component of the relationship between Ray and his assistant, and the frequent passes the assistant makes at Brian. "We like women," Ray tells Brian, "just not in that way."

With such a towering distinction made between the authoritative director mentality of men and the hyper-hormonal rantings of their female charges, Brian has a considerable hurdle to clear in voicing what he believes to be a better assessment of Lorraine's abilities or value than Ray has been able to propound. He does ,however, just as a back curtain on the stage rises and Lorraine can be seen standing there in the center of the spotlights, dressed beautifully and standing tall and proud, with the thunder of the crowd's acclamation thundering before her. Lorraine is an actress, yes, but she is a consummate actress, whose talent is beyond question.

12.29.2001, 7:30pm

Noises Off (Michael Frayn, 1982) Dir.

Jeremy Sams

Piccadilly Theatre

Even without the preparatory lecture on the ideas Frayn deals with in his work, especially his take on Wittgenstein's theories of phenomenology, I would have thoroughly enjoyed *Noises Off*, simply for the fact that it is possibly one of the most hysterical things I have ever seen in my entire life. The humor of the play, which at its most biting in the Director's annoyance with his fumbling company and its most pathetic in the company's spiral into self-destruction on opening night, almost obscures the deeper truths Frayn is attempting to work out.

The immediate impression I received from the play is that the actors were randomly-firing neurons, galloping about on a strict free-association only basis. Dotty chronically forgets her sardines; remembering the sardines causes her to forget something else. Selsden is perpetually late on his cue to climb in through the window: when he appears at last, none of the company can find him. Frayn seems fascinated with the possibilities inherent in the

~° human brain's ability to fixate on and then endlessly worry over an idea. The play darts frenetically around within the same strictly defined space: the first act *of Nothing On*. All of the company's interpersonal hostilities and agendas find themselves played out within that space, whether it be in rehearsal or onstage. There is little reference to the outside world, although there is enough of one constructed to give an idea of some external existence these people might enjoy.

The problem with this limitation is that, sooner or later, screw-ups happen and the mental apparatus begins to malfunction. As the tension of the approaching opening date increases and then comes, the company becomes increasingly hostile. Unable to exorcise their frustrations elsewhere, they have to use the space provided by *Nothing On* to vent their spleen upon each other. At the same time, though, they absolutely must put on this play - or else the Old Age Pensioners will be horribly disappointing - and they stick

to this resolution at the same time they devote themselves to self-flagellation.

Frayn's imaginative handling of perspective makes this possible. By staging the backstage of the play, he allows the audience to see what goes on behind the scenes, a somewhat illicit glimpse into what (to the fictional audience of OAPs) may initially seem to be a seamless, well-rehearsed production. Yet as the act wears on, with Fred becoming increasingly furious over what he sees as Gerry's involvement with Dotty and Poppy and Brooke at each other's throats competing for Lloyd's attentions, the audience (that is, us) sees things slowly begin to unravel into one disastrous sequence after another. The actors struggle on, desperately trying to avoid embarrassment, and find their true talent not in something rehearsed - as a production, *Nothing On* is a dismal failure-but rather in improvisation. As a piece of spur-of-the-moment art, their work is phenomenal, the height of an inventiveness incited by the desire to maintain the illusion that everything is completely under control. Everything is, obviously, completely out of control, and in their most dire straits, the company looks to the one man - Dotty introduces him to the audience as their social worker - who can save them: Lloyd.

Lloyd doesn't quite pull it off, but he does marshal his beleaguered forces for one last stand. As something like the superego, some psychological component responsible for overseeing orderly interaction between the combative forces of the subconscious, he fails to some extent. Yet he also does what every great director attempts to do: to understand his actors, to give them motivation, and finally, when all else fails, to guide them. The director's godlike distance at the beginning of the play, instructing his company as if from above - a disembodied voice - serves as a reminder, as the play progresses, of what inevitably happens when the divines become involved with mere mortals: disaster. Brooke and Poppy both suffer heartbreak, the company suffers discord, and Lloyd is called back from a production of a Shakespeare history play to salvage the production of Housemonger's *Nothing On*.

Indeed, part of the time there seemed to be very little 'on' mentally in the brains of the actors - their minds certainly weren't wholly on their production, yet it seemed as if they were trying very desperately to get the first act of *Nothing On* to work properly. Dotty particularly demonstrated a capacity for support, reminding Brooke to do her yoga/breathing exercises and intervening with Lloyd on behalf of the other cast members, asking him to understand Gerry is having difficulties due to his wife having just left him. Brooke determinedly tries to do her part despite the frequency of her nervous breakdowns and Gerry is sincerely apologetic when his bloody nose wreaks havoc with rehearsal.

The production as a whole was, I feel, superbly done. The set itself gave the actors the flexibility they needed to really utilize the fullest extent of the possibilities of their characters and the bizarre contortions Frayn demands of them: open space to run, doorframes that make doors stick, props that are continually moved, forgotten about, removed, and so on. Most especially, the proliferation of doors was suggestive of many layers to the production: as portals to other places, they lead not only to places elsewhere in the house of the play, but to the backstage where a whole separate drama is taking place. I'm not sure if Frayn specified it (I believe it was brought up in lecture that he did), but the program was, to put it unacademically, a riot. "A Glimpse of the Numenal", with doors that open up to revelation and epiphany? Ha! The Fall, or loss, of Trousers? Double Ha! Frayn pokes not-so-subtle fun at the pretensions of literary criticism that seeks to find meaning in what is essentially a collection of endlessly repeating symbols represented as endlessly-revolving infatuations within a

group of actors and actresses. Throughout the program, the author is very careful to avoid mention of plot, preferring to focus on defying Freud's own assertion that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I think my favorite part of the program-within-a-program was the caption for one of the two sardine pictures:

The common sardine. Britons eat an average of 13.8 million pounds of sardines daily. The word is derived from the French, sardine.

In mixing painfully obvious commentary with the pomposity of self-important critics, Frayn not so much comments on his own work as he comments on the human insistence upon making more out of something than there should strictly be. *Noises Off* functions well as a Wittgensteinian - or as Frayn suggests, Freudian - play in its use of frantic coverings-up and fanatical adherence to the idea of a tiny worldview, the brain's own form of self-limitation, as described within the limits of *Nothing On*.

12.30.2001, 3:00pm *The Lion King* (1997) Dir. Julie Taymor Lyceum Theatre

The first thing that caught me about *The Lion King* was, as I'm sure many people would say, the spectacle of it. I sat along the aisle in the third row and got to have a huge puppeteer-operated rhinoceros, beautifully swooping birds, and other creatures pass right by me. The diversity of animals represented within the small confines of the stage became, through what was undoubtedly Taymor's superb direction, just as spectacular as the huge 'animal kingdom' that turns out to celebrate Simba's christening in the animated movie. I also enjoyed the effective use of lighting that managed to evoke the wide range of the African wildness and the emotions associated with them: the airy brightness of the pridelands that darkens with Scar's abuse of it, the forbidding hideousness of the hyena's territories, and the serene blue-green shades of the refuge where Timon and Pumbaa make their home.

I would have to say that the kinesthetic aspects of the play were what I enjoyed the most about it: not being a huge fan of the movie (although I did enjoy it when I first saw it), I don't feel that I can comment constructively on the plot. Garth Fagen's choreography and Taymor and Curry's mask and puppet designs were what made this particular production of *The Lion King* expose some of what was glossed over or simply ignored in the movie - particularly *The Lion King's* concern with the humanity behind the animal world. Disney's preoccupation with familial insecurity, the constant worry over an illegitimate outside force robbing a rightful heir of his (or her) place in the world is - I feel - not as clear in the movie as it is onstage. The impression I got while watching this was much more immediate, more as if I was watching a Shakespeare history play or a political drama, *only* with people wearing lion masks. Taymor's use of human face exposure made me consider more deeply what it meant for Simba to take his rightful place as pride leader and eschew the careless 'hakuna matata' existence Timon and

Pumbaa embrace. In that light, the play became more of a *bildungsroman* than its movie predecessor - although, at this point, I feel as if I'm becoming like the author of "A Glimpse of the Numenal" and beginning to quote *Eros Untroussered*.

At any rate, Fagen's choreography did an excellent job of bringing the background to the foreground. One of my favorite moments in the play is when the grass becomes personified in the form of the dancers, shifting around the stage in time with Simba's agitated movements. His integration of Taymor and

At times I found myself wondering if Mamet wasn't channeling George Bernard Shaw when he was writing *Boston Marriage*. There were moments of repartee and sly remarks that reminded me of Shaw's cutting, dry Victorian style humor, with hints of misogyny a la *Pygmalion*. At the conclusion of that play, Shaw lays out all the reasons why Eliza and Higgins become friends but never marry. At the conclusion of *Boston Marriage*, I got the impression that Mamet was laying out his reasons as to why Anna and Claire stay together: like Shaw, it is a matter of realism. Shaw contends that Eliza marrying Higgins would be unrealistic; Mamet suggests that Anna and Claire have to stay together by virtue of the fact that each is wholly dependent upon the other.

It was a pity, therefore, that Zoe Wannamaker and Anna Chancellor didn't seem to be wholly dependent on each other. As other students pointed out, there wasn't much chemistry between two otherwise terrific actresses. I've seen Anna Chancellor in the BBC's production of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and in both movies she played the inferior (and scheming) competitor to Jennifer Ehle's and Andie MacDowell. It was a bit of a change, then, seeing her being so actively involved in a relationship, notwithstanding the fact that this relationship is somewhat strange. There was an element of distance between her and Wannamaker that was distracting at times, something that played up the Victorian artificiality of Mamet's setting.

The sense of artificiality comes, I think, from the fact that we as audience are staring into the private space of Anna's living room where two highly educated women are frantically piling allusion on top of allusion in a game of intellectual one-upmanship. The only person to hear them is Catherine the maid, who counts as a nonentity in Anna's book. Whether they be Claire's swift one-line interjections or Anna's discursive sermon-like wailings ("I am become as a sounding brass!"), their conversations all have an air of rehearsed lines, rather than being truly spontaneous. It seemed at times that Claire and Anna were playing out an old game, one in which they jockey for position against the other and try to wheedle favors out of the opposing party

Both of them are, however, bound together inextricably in this relationship, much like Frayn's hapless company of actors in their mutual commitment to get their play produced. Claire and Anna struggle to preserve their dignity and Anna's status with her protector by concocting an elaborate fortune-telling scheme in which the Protector has given Anna this brooch as a means to divine his wife's future. Like the increasingly bizarre and ineffectual efforts of the company, Anna's plot seems doomed to fail before it can even begin, a desperate attempt to cover her embarrassment and preserve her reputation. The farce is made clear as Catherine appears onstage and begins to wail and dance about to a vaguely Oriental tempo - a touch by Ms. Lloyd that I absolutely loved.

Other than the lack of chemistry between Chancellor and Wannamaker, I thoroughly enjoyed this production. Lloyd's direction brought out the best in what is a script stuffed with everything from puns, insults, and minor witticisms to long, scholarly diatribes. I thought Lyndsey Marshal's Catherine was wonderful, with her unexpected capacity for observing these women who take her so lightly, and the way she can hand the truth of the situation to two women who are too benighted with their own intellects to see it for themselves.

01.02.2002, 1:45pm

The Lieutenant of Inishmore (Martin McDonagh., 2001) Dir.

Wilson Milam

The Pit Theatre

Wow... to say that this is a `black comedy' is to understate the case dramatically. It's like calling Mt. Everest a molehill, that's how badly `black comedy' fits *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Not that it was bad: on the contrary, I thoroughly enjoyed McDonagh's bizarre (to use another understatement) worldview, especially his worldview as it pertains to the kind of psychos that infest such organizations as the IRA or the Taliban.

McDonagh demonstrates the ability to make his audience laugh at the various insanities he portrays but also to reflect more deeply upon those insanities. In between laughing and trying not to be sick, I wondered over the Machiavellian ideology in the play, that the ends justify the means, however horrifying they may be. Padraic and Mereid see their work as being necessary to the freedom of Ireland, no matter that Mereid's specialty is putting out the eyes of cows with her gun from sixty paces and Padraic goes after drug dealers as zealously as the opposition. McDonagh makes a mockery of this Machiavellian instinct, though: the three hitmen bicker over the evils of half-taking a cat's head off, Padraic bombs fish and chip shops and Mereid... it's cows. Maybe we should be glad that Mereid has a preference for dairy creatures and not men - killing other humans isn't as satisfying, she says. What kinds of terrorists are these people supposed to be, ones as bent on destroying other potential allies for the death of a cat?

Perhaps it's just that insanity seeps into all facets of a terrorist's life, especially if mental instability is a prerequisite for a person to be a terrorist in the first place. Mereid's offhand killing of the man who is ostensibly her fiance is perhaps the most shocking death of all: it takes place right at the end, when it seems that all those who must die are dead, and all earthly justice has been meted out. Padraic's death has the quality of subterfuge about it, as Mereid distracts him with a kiss while she pulls his guns out of their holsters. At least the three half-butchered corpses had the opportunity for an up-front gunfight. At least.

Danny and Davey are the only people, other than the audience, who know the truth at the end: that Wee Thomas is alive and well. We laughed - I laughed heartily - but at the same time, there is the knowledge that four men have died because of this cat. As ridiculous as it is, McDonagh uses the fanaticism over the cat - Padraic's for Thomas and Mereid's for Sir Roger - to illustrate the sum of expediency, revenge, and insanity: a lot of needless, bloody, death.

I once heard a singer comment, with reference to Lyle Lovett's "If I Had a Boat" (which talks about white chauvinism in *The Lone Ranger*), that people don't like having the hard, bitter truth laid out to them, and it turns them off it. But if you say it nicely - in the song, it's

The Mystery Masked Man was smart, he got himself a Tonto

`Cause Tonto did the dirty work for free.

But Tonto, he was smarter and one day said "Kemosabe, Kiss my ass, I've bought a boat, I'm going out to sea."

- people cheer and say, "Oh, yeah! Hey, it was that way! Yeah!" It works on the principle of reform or anti-war songs in the '60s and satire throughout the ages: by getting people to laugh or feel good, an artist (like McDonagh) might get someone to listen.

He certainly couldn't have chosen a better group of characters to do it with. Davey and Donny function as a befuddled chorus, trying to make sense of their world while hacking up three corpses and being pushed around by the man - or woman - with the gun and authority. Davey's defensiveness of his hair becomes a theme, with his repeated emasculation by his sister and Padraic (and everyone else) and his defiance of it. Padraic combines a terrifying

fanaticism (I absolutely loved his torture scene) with what are genuinely good aims: he wants a free and drug-free Ireland for children to grow up in safely, and he's willing to break more than a few bones - or fish-and-chip shops - to do it. Mereid is a skinny, post-adolescent Amazon with a pop gun and a penchant for singing her lullaby-like patriotic hymns. All the cast is intensely concerned with the sacredness of two things: cats and mothers. Any other human relation beyond that is subject to revision.

01.02.2002, 7:15pm

Twelfth Night, (William Shakespeare, 1601) Dir.
Lindsay Posner; Royal Shakespeare Company Barbican
Theatre

Disappointing.

That was what I managed to distill from this performance after I was able to divorce myself from the boredom (which was the first reaction) and then anger (which was the second) I had to Posner's production of what is one of my favorite Shakespearean plays. In my notes, I wrote that almost every technical aspect of this production was lacking: in casting, execution, setting, and the physical location.

Firstly, the most glaring source of discord was the bareness of the set and the massiveness of the Barbican stage. It seemed to me that sets on that stage had to be constructed in such a way as to fill either the entire space, or leave large swathes of space to be filled by people. *Hamlet* did this wonderfully, with its Spartan use of physical objects (only the lights, chairs, and video screen); *Twelfth Night*, with its huge cardboard effigy of shrubbery and constant interchange of tables, chairs, and furniture, did not. It gave the production a sense of being hastily thrown together. Additionally, it left a huge vacuum - basically this big hole behind the shrubbery, of which I was acutely conscious although I couldn't see much of it. People were running around on this huge, huge stage like gnats - and we were sitting fairly close to them, so they shouldn't (to my mind) have seemed so dwarfed by the stage.

The people on the stage were also a problem, with particular regard to the lead roles of Viola and Orsino. Jo Stone-Fewings turned in an infinitely stronger performance as the Bastard in *King John*, I thought, but here he just... languishes. Viola excited my antagonism more than Orsino, considering Zoe Waites's *whiny* interpretation of her character. I say whiny and mean it, unreservedly - it may be unscholastic, but that's what it is. Viola is a woman who makes the decision to fend for herself in this strange land and to depend on no one for her survival. Why, therefore, would she constantly sound as if she were on the verge of breaking down into tears? Her passionate speeches to Olivia become thoroughly unrealistic when set against her nearly tearful and miserable conversations with Orsino. Maybe my interpretation of Viola's character is too greatly influenced by Stoppard's *Shakespeare in Love*, in which young Will S. takes his inspiration for the intrepid Viola from the one who disguises herself as Thomas Kent and with whom he falls in love. Both Violas are shipwrecked, the one in the play lands in Illyria and Gwyneth Paltrow lands in the New World - and both are assertive, brave characters. Waites conveyed absolutely nothing of any kind of personal strength in her Viola; all she managed to produce were moments of near tedium.

I noticed that many of the cast members were also in other productions at the Barbican: Alison Fiske (Maria), Guy Henry (Malvolio), and Jo Stone-

lpm

~tt,4,y,

xc Fewings (Orsino) were in *King John* as Queen Eleanor, King John, and the Bastard, respectively; Ben Meyjes (Sebastian) and Christopher Good (Sir Aguecheek) were in *Hamlet* as Laertes and the Ghost. With the exceptions of

Henry and Good, the above actors performed much more strongly in either *King John* or *Hamlet*, as the case was. The supporting and comic roles, especially those of Feste, Sir Belch, and Malvolio, were the only things that kept me going through this production. Henry was brilliant as the austere and inadvertently amusing Malvolio and Hadfield had a sort of weary and put-upon air of the long-suffering jester who has gotten tired of pointing out to people what idiots they can be. Unfortunately, even their talents couldn't buoy my spirits; I found myself more and more weighed down by the difficulty of flat, uninspiring performances turned in by the leads.

Such flatness angered me because I've always loved the vitality of Shakespeare's writing, and it seems like a betrayal when a performance is either inept or uninspired. I enjoyed Geva's production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* much more than I did this, because there was such a sense of energy on the stage and excitement between the actors - that, and the choice to adapt the play to a sort of *Miami Vice*-type modern-day setting worked very well with the sexual and homosocial scheming of the play. Posner's production robs *Twelfth Night* of its essential humor and absurdity: even the nicely staged concluding scene, with kisses being exchanged all around (until Orsino and Sebastian are left) lacked the life that is obvious even on the printed page

JW

01.03.2002, 7:30pm

***The Merchant of Venice* (William Shakespeare, 1594/95) Dir.
Loveday Ingram; Royal Shakespeare Company The Swan Theatre**

Something happened to me.

It came in the climactic scene just as Shylock leaps upon Antonio brandishing his dagger, intent upon taking his pound of flesh - I felt, for an instant, terror that Shylock would actually do it, that his knife would actually pierce Antonio's skin, that there would be blood, Antonio would scream...

Just a moment it lasted, but it was a moment of pure fear - a moment of utter suspension of disbelief, when I thought I was watching something absolutely real. That was the kind of animalistic fury and triumph in Shylock, the fear and helplessness in Antonio and his compatriots. After that moment, of course, I got a grip on myself, but not before that second of complete and total fear that Antonio was going to die made its impression upon me.

That's why, next to my heading for 'The Merchant of Venice' (in shaky handwriting because we were on the bus home for Stratford) I have:

ONE OF THE BEST PLAYS I HAVE EVER SEEN!!!!

I meant it then and I mean it now. Everything about it contributed to the triumph of the production - the Swan itself, the acting, the set, the play... everything meaning everything. There was some sort of bizarre alchemy taking place on the stage beneath us that night, something that made not just great theatre, but something *great* in its drama, its expression of human passion, and its comedy.

Being in the Swan, despite its obviously modern furnishings and air conditioning, had the feel of stepping back into history - to really be in a true 'theatre in the round' situation was such a different experience from the sprawling hugeness of the Barbican or the columned and brocaded proscenium-type theatres in the West End. Even though we were high up, I felt closely drawn to the action on the stage, almost as if I were a god, looking

down onto an especially bare world upon which these people are moving, thrown into stark relief by the emptiness of their surroundings.

This emptiness didn't possess the 'vacuum' qualities of *Twelfth Night's* staging, though. On the contrary, the simple set pieces (leather seats, the wheeled tables, simple and mobile furnishings) made me concentrate more on the acting - or maybe the acting was so brilliant that a huge, lavish set would have gotten in the way (or maybe the set designer could have put an elephant onstage and it wouldn't have mattered). At any rate, I could easily picture the various milieus - a gentleman's club or private den in the first scene, the receiving hall of Portia's house, the streets of Venice, and so on. The stage's smallness, the closer and more intimate atmosphere, didn't allow the power of the play to 'disperse' as it were - there was always an element of engagement.

Not, I think, that the play's power could have dispersed in the hands of such a phenomenally talented cast - after *Merchant*, I could definitely see why the RSC is such a respected company. Ian Bartholomew's Shylock was absolutely poisoned with hatred for Antonio, desperate for vengeance against him but with a strange devoted streak for his miserable daughter Jessica. Ian Geldar's Antonio mixed contempt for Shylock with his genuine friendship and solicitation of Bassanio and his pals. The general camaraderie amongst the cast - in particular, the male cast - was one of them being 'a good old boy's club', looking out for each other, congratulating each other on sexual conquests (real, imagined, or upcoming), and supporting each other in their baiting of Shylock, who is blatantly and unashamedly Jewish (Ingram's interpolation of Jewish liturgy into Shylock's speeches was a wonderful touch.)

The conflicts that play out between the Christian band and Shylock's lone, defiant self were for me the centerpiece of the play, culminating in that one horrifying moment. Given this, I found the ending particularly disturbing in its implication of audience response and Christian hypocrisy as embodied by Portia/Balthasar and the Duke. When the Duke declares that Shylock must convert to Christianity in order to receive his pardon, I was shocked that the audience actually *laughed*. This was something I could imagine an Elizabethan audience doing, but a 21st-century - and supposedly less biased - one? For me, that was the most wrenching part of the postattempted-murder plot: to abandon one's faith under threat of life doesn't seem to be a laughing matter to me. Surely Shylock's enraged, despairing offstage howl is a testament to that.

Furthermore, Shakespeare uncomfortably complicates the matter of mercy and how it should be disposed, under what circumstances - and in which cases justice should be applied instead (or when justice can become perverted). Portia pleads with Shylock to spare Antonio, and Shylock fanatically insists upon claiming his 'bond' of the merchant's flesh. Very well - but then Portia springs upon Shylock the letter of the law, forbidding him to take one drop of *Christian blood* on pain of forfeiting property and life. Already the law is biased against infidels - to further compound it, when Shylock asks for the ducats instead of his promised bond, Portia refuses it flatly. A merciful and convenient interpretation of the law, certainly, for Antonio, but it marginalizes Shylock, as hideous as his claims are. When the pardon for attempted murder is offered, it is offered with the Duke and Portia's full knowledge that forced conversion is just as much a punishment for Shylock as the surrender of physical property. Is that justice? It certainly can't be mercy - mercy doesn't offer a person the choice between two evils.

Aside from mercy and justice, choice also underscores the play - choice and all its consequences. This is brilliantly illustrated in the trial of the caskets - something that only a particularly twisted mind could think up, I'm fairly sure. Portia's father presents suitors with a choice that is

essentially pre-determined within their own personalities and proclivities. The swaggering arrogance of Morocco and Aragon virtually guarantees that they will choose the incorrect caskets and be rewarded accordingly; only Bassanio, who is willing 'to hazard all he has' can choose correctly, being much more aware of risk in the hope of gain. There's that and Portia loves him, indicating some kind of felicitous predestination after Morocco and Aragon get packed off like idiots.

Our discussion on the significance of Ingram's addition to the final scene was quite intriguing. Antonio's cool lighting of the cigarette - a casual sort of post-coital gesture - seemed to be a gesture of a man quite satisfied with the way things have turned out. By all rights, he should be - he's alive and some of his ships have made it safely back to port. But there's a calculatedness to the action, especially in the presence of Jessica, that is deeply disturbing: his success is directly connected to the downfall and utter ruin of a man who he hates on the principles of ethnicity and religion. Jessica is calumniated in Antonio's judgment as well; his turning away from her signals his utter rejection of her, and suggests that he hasn't learned much from this near-death experience other than that the law, devised by the upper-class Christian majority, is on his side.

01.04.2002, 2:30pm

Aladdin (2001)

Told By An Idiot Productions

Lyric Theatre Hammersmith

After our first encounter with children's theatre, *Alice in Wonderland*, I was apprehensive about going into another production, and this despite the assurances of *Time Out's* review: if a company prestigious as the Royal Shakespeare Company could put me to sleep, what could Told By An Idiot do? Would *Aladdin* be full of sound and fury? Or would it signify... nothing? It didn't help that one of the descriptors attached to its title was 'A Christmas Pantomime.'

To my pleasant surprise, *Aladdin* was something I would sooner consider to be children's theatre than *Alice*: it was presented in a far more accessible manner and told a far more coherent story than Adrian Mitchell's adaptation of Lewis Carroll's classic. It didn't display the level of

..?we--AW- so histication found in *Alice* - on the contrary, it seemed to dwell in the

dwu v realm of sitcom humor mixed with standup comedy, but perhaps that's why it worked so well as a piece that admirably fulfilled the goal it set out to fulfill: to make kids, and adults, laugh.

I had a hard time finding any deeper moral message to *Aladdin*, beyond the traditional 'bad guys lose, good guys win' motif that runs through everything from video games to action movies, but the production's inventiveness did not seem to drift in that direction. Rather, I was struck by the manner in which the story was re-imagined as something completely different from any other version I've encountered (Disney is included in this statement): the evil sorcerer is accompanied by a mistreated camel and tries his best to get the audience on his side; Aladdin has a family consisting of his harebrained cousin and his massive mother, who dispenses Twanky Specials as a preferred form of punishment; the genie is Scottish and is definitely not subservient to his masters. Even the injection of obvious anachronisms differed wildly from Disney's treatment of the story, such as the fact that Mistress Twanky runs a Laundromat (complete with working washing machines) and refers to her newly-moneyed son as looking 'like a white rapper' when he comes home.

The level of audience interaction was part of what made watching *Aladdin* so enjoyable. There seemed to be a natural rapport between the actors

and their audience, one that surfaced most audibly when a little girl two rows behind me kept shouting instructions to Aladdin and insults to Abdunazzar. The characters were acutely aware that they were participating in a performance piece, yet the effect was not annoying or able to be overanalyzed (as in, say Hamlet's soliloquies) - it was simple interaction, an experience appealing to children of all ages, including myself.

Favorite lines:

Abdunazzar (or whatever his name is, to Gorgeous): You'll be transformed from a hideous camel-beast into a beautiful woman-person!" Twanky (to Aladdin): "You look like a white rapper." Gorgeous: "Women's things! Women's things!"

01.04.2002, 7:00pm

Hamlet (William Shakespeare, 1600-01)

Dir. Steven Pimlott; Royal Shakespeare Company

Barbican Theatre

Another tremendous production! Matt, Marnie, Jessica, Renata, and I had to practically fly from Lyric Hammersmith to the Barbican to make it, but we did, and in the nick of time (It is one *long* ride all the way across Zone One...) I think that if we had missed the first part, I would have had to fling myself in the Thames from bitter, bitter self-reproach.

Pimlott's adaptation of *Hamlet* immediately captured all the tension and fear of the first act. It's amazing that one of the greatest plays in English literature could start with a simple, and yet so very pregnant question, delivered after two bright spotlights sweep the audience as if looking for a familiar face in the darkness.

Who's there?

The rest of the play is devoted to exploring that question, and Pimlott's production of it highlights the sense of unease present within *Hamlet* - that there is someone watching, an undercurrent of voyeuristic perversion in a world where absolutely nothing is private. The security cameras that hover at the edges of the stage, the presence of Claudius and Gertrude's press-corps cronies, the huge video screen upon which reactions are broadcast all contribute to the idea of constant surveillance, that there is always someone interested in our performance.

Samuel West's Hamlet is acutely aware of this. His slouching black, hooded sweat-shirt first appearance conveys almost more an idea of a perpetual adolescent grunge preoccupation than that of 'formal' mourning. I'm not sure how old West is in real life, but he brought a decidedly 'collegiate' feel to Hamlet (who is, of course, supposed to be at school in Germany), appropriate perhaps in the context of Pimlott's adaptation. His comparative youth allows him to be detached from the intrigues of 'corporate' Elsinore but also to observe them. To an extent, it also seems to exempt him from having to behave according to company policy, as it were - Gertrude, at least, seems to make allowances. His friendship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has shades of an old fraternity relationship, with the three of them sharing a cigarette (or joint? I couldn't tell), and his flirtation with Ophelia has a school-type of crush aspect to it, although it obviously becomes more sinister. West's portrait of incipient insanity, real or no, is terrifyingly convincing, especially in the moments when Hamlet catches Polonius alone.

Polonius. What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet. (dancing around) Words... words... (thrusting the book in Polonius' face) Words...

Yet there is also a touching vulnerability to him, evinced in his soliloquies, which are not so much him talking to himself as they are a frank address of the audience, a working-out of the very real situations that plague him. His meeting with the ghost of his dead father carried so much more emotion in the production than it seems to in the actual text - the physical touching, falling, and embracing affected me deeply; the script itself, as it would appear in Norton's or Riverside, is cold and austere, almost, with none of the familial tenderness and pain evinced between West and Christopher Good. It stands in stark contrast against the fawning sycophancy of Claudius and Gertrude's press conference, or the hypocritical ramblings of Polonius to Ophelia.

The more jaded view of Hamlet (as I think Olivier said) is that he's a man who can't make up his mind between life and suicide, vengeance and passivity, and so on. This production, though, did not present him as being indecisive, but as being trapped between a rock and a hard place. His depression prods him to suicide but he's trapped by the very Catholic knowledge that suicide is the one sin that cannot be purged and by the very human fear of death. He is justly worried that the ghost is a hallucination, or some type of trick sent from the devil to tempt him into wrong action. That he is indecisive, however, is to miss the point: he eggs and goads, harasses and instigates others into action and examination of their own consciences, or into rash behavior upon which he can capitalize. The particularly inept Polonius is an example of this: Hamlet *knows* exactly how to manipulate him, and does so without compunction. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths are not on his conscience, he tells Horatio, because they brought it upon their own heads - such ruthless practicality doesn't jive with a waffling, noncommittal character.

Pimlott's modernization of *Hamlet* is effective because it incorporates and peLitieates every level of the play, from West's portrayal of Hamlet to the stark and lifeless uniform-type clothing of Elsinore's press toadies. The opening scene, with its searching lights, was particularly powerful. The dress of Barnardo, Francisco, and Marcellus reminded me more of Nazi-era military uniforms than anything, with their straight severe trenchcoats, caps, and casually conspicuous semi-automatic rifles. When Marcellus remarks that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" it has the ring not of specifically a nation undergoing turmoil, but of a more general moral malaise; in making his Denmark a modern corporate-type entity, Pimlott - well, to say it one way, capitalizes on capitalism. Osric, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Polonius (and the assorted background toadies) seem even more mercenary and self-seeking than they do in the text.

I've read *Hamlet* many times since my first encounter with him in high school, but I've never seen the play actually acted, and now I think that I might have to regard this production as paradigmatic - whatever other productions of it I see will have a high standard to which they must aspire.

01.05.2002, 5:00pm
 Art (Yasmina Reza, 1994)
 Dir. Christopher Hampton
 Whitehall Theatre

My favorite moment in Art came at the very end, in Mark's closing soliloquy, in which he discusses the painting that has brought such discord to his friendship with both Serge and Yvan. His words echo those he spoke at the very beginning of the play: "My friend Serge bought a painting. It's a canvas, five foot by four..." Only instead of following up his description of this white painting with white diagonal stripes with a stream of outraged and

irritated invective, he says that the painting is of a man moving across a white space... and disappearing.

The foundation for this unexpectedly powerful moment - coming, as it does, so soon after a hysterical argument between the three men - takes place when Serge offers the felt-tip marker to Mark in a demand that he do whatever he wants with the painting. In placing his friendship with Mark before his love of the painting, Serge offers Mark the chance to conceptualize, and so tacitly wins the battle that has been waged since the play's beginning. Mark draws a skier going downhill - odd and funny enough, especially in a very funny play - but it embodies the entire thrust of what Serge has been attempting to tell Mark: that concrete representation isn't necessary; it is possible, if one works at it, to discern a private and significant meaning in what seems to be white noise.

Serge and Mark, throughout the play and right up to that pivotal moment, embody what I saw as Mark's staging of a debate between modernism and classicism (respectively). Yvan the stationery guy, who is stationary in his desperation to not belong to one side of the debate or another, acts as a helpless audience or mediator. The representational aspects of Mark's world are reflected in his painting, a Flemish work of a view out of a window, a painting that is framed both by the window in the picture (which limits what is seen) and the frame that borders the painting. Serge's painting is abstract and modern, without borders and utterly open to interpretation. Which one is better, however, is strictly a matter of taste - but taste, Reza argues, has to be developed on some sort of education. Mark refuses to accept Serge's arguments on modern art, Serge is annoyed by what he sees as Mark's stubborn provinciality. Yvan, meanwhile, doesn't know much of anything.

Restriction of worldview, not the painting, damages this 15-year friendship. As we discussed in lecture, the painting deconstructs this relationship and examines the questionable architecture on which it is built: why are these men friends in the first place? Their abuse of each other over the painting (the presence of which seems to goad them on) and questioning of why they still even associate with each other both indicate that these men are headed for a break-up in alliance - but it is Serge's challenge and Mark's response, and ability to recognize the significance of that response, that saves them.

At the end, Serge refers to their reinstated friendship as a trial period, but Reza suggests that friendship is never anything more than that: a constant exploration to see if this intimacy really will work. The interaction between the three men seems stable at first, but as the Antreas painting preys on Mark's sanity, it becomes apparent that there are many unresolved conflicts that were never worked out. I believe that Reza's use of the last scene, especially with regards to Serge's admission that he lied concerning the washability of the felt-tip pen, confirms that, but offers hope that with Mark's newfound open-mindedness, such a trial period can be conducted peacefully.

If friendship is a trial period, then can the same be said about marriage? I found it interesting that Reza depicts the relationship between three men and Mamet the relationship between two women. Although these two dynamics are predicated on different grounds - the men are all 'just friends' while the women are in a definite monogamous relationship - both are based largely on minor deceptions that are relied on in order to keep the relationship going. Claire selectively withholds the truth of the brooch's being found from Anna in order to provide her with what Anna seems to need: a dramatic exit into the perils of incarceration (although she will probably never get there). Serge perjures himself when he tells Mark he's not entirely sure if felt-tip pen will come off of the painting; this is, he admits to us

in his last soliloquy, a lie he feels obligated to make. It is, perhaps, as the group effort involved in restoring the painting may be responsible for the restoration of their friendship.

With regards to the set, I enjoyed the flexibility of it, and the way the neutral white of the furniture and walls was broken only by the three separate paintings meant to give some hints as to the personalities of Serge, Mark, and Yvan. The light coming from stage right, barred to look like Venetian blinds, actually reminded me of the bars on jail cells, implying that these_ were three men locked forever into one, cramped space.

01.05.2002, 8:00pm

Complete Works of Shakespeare (abridged)
The Reduced Shakespeare Company
Criterion Theatre

I'm hard put to say which play I found funnier: *Noises Off* or *Complete Works*. Both made me laugh until I thought I was going to faint with it, and exhausted me for the rest of the night. Both had casts as wild and enthusiastic in the portrayal of their characters that I found myself completely taken in by what was happening onstage - or, as it was with the godlike Director and the wayward company members in *Complete Works*, off of it. *Complete Works* offers, I think, all the humor of *Noises Off* without offering a glimpse of the numenal. What it does, though, is poke fun at the one man who probably made it possible for English majors to exist at all: Shakespeare.

The rsc (typed in lower-case, because they're reduced) plants part of its humor - particularly with regards to the comedies and romances - in the more formulaic aspects of Shakespeare's writing: identical twins, mistaken identities, cross-dressing, exiled kings and princes, woods, long journeys, fairy people, and so on. Being an American company, it can comfortably adapt what is to a non-history student a thoroughly confusing history of English kingship into a (American) football game. King John gets the snap from the center, and he passes it to Henry IV... but it's intercepted by Richard III! And he laterals it to Richard II, who gets leveled by 1 Henry VI - it's fumbled and Lear comes up with it! At this point, the referee steps in and eliminates Lear from the game on the grounds that no fictional characters are allowed on the field.

Often, the action onstage revolved around the company's puzzlement over how to perform certain plays, or if they should at all. There is considerable consternation over *Othello*: none of the company members, are black, and they don't feel right about trying to portray a Moor. But, because this is the *Complete Works*, they come up with a solution: a rap. In their depiction of *Hamlet*, they find themselves foiled by not being able to identify with their characters. What do they do? Turn to the audience and pull a volunteer out of the audience to portray Ophelia. She can't scream very well, so they enlist the rest of the audience to help give her some psychological motivation: various sections portray the desperate ego, the sexually-desperate id that wants Hamlet to give in and give Ophelia some loving, and the confused but authoritative superego.

And boy, does Ophelia eventually produce a prodigious scream.

I found the level of audience interaction to be incredible, and the rsc's ability to improvise around our response amazing. It made for a satisfying experience - as if I had almost participated in something meaningful, but not quite, being too busy laughing to extract any deeper message from the play(s). Yet, I'm sure it might be there amidst the vomiting virgins and bad wigs - it *is* Shakespeare, after all.

01.06.2002, 4:00pm

Private Lives (Noel Coward, 1930) Dir.

Howard Davies

Albery Theatre

Whenever I think of Coward, I think of elegantly be-suited men posing by chairs and the fur-draped women *lounging* in them, and a general sense that there is a lot of money somewhere nearby. The set for this production of *Private Lives* reinforced my predisposition. Boy, was it spectacular. The huge, gleaming white edifice of the hotel gave the impression of it being much taller and impressive than it really was, and the spacious interior of Amanda's Paris flat oozes drapery, mahogany, and thick carpeting.

If nothing else, Coward is an expert at catching people behaving badly - especially people who know they're behaving badly and do it anyway. My initial reaction to the play was to think of St. Paul's diatribe in Romans, in which he writes that he innately knows the difference between right and wrong, and knows that he should do that which is right - but his baser nature compels him to do wrong and he goes along with that compulsion, all the time knowing that he is sinning. Elyot and Amanda reminded me of this, as they frequently returned to the subject when worrying over Sibyl and Victor's reaction: "We've behaved terribly," Amanda says constantly, and Elyot doesn't dispute that much.

They do dispute, of course, and when they do it has the potential to turn into something spectacular. Rickman and *Duncan* know how to work their roles to the maximum. Elyot is cool, calm, and detached until Amanda pushes him a bit too far, and then his calmness evaporates into fury. Duncan's Amanda has an underlying tenseness to her, as if she's just spoiling for a fight, and even their mutually decided 'safe word', 'Solomon Isaacs' isn't enough to stop her.

Behind this fiery passion (love or hatred: it's up to you), however, are two very rich and obnoxious people. Elyot is completely self-absorbed and impatient with Sibyl's annoying questions, romanticism, and insecurity; as a jaded veteran of divorce, perhaps he has some right to be, and Sibyl *does* become grating after awhile. Likewise, Amanda detests Victor's stubbornness and unwillingness to let her have her own way when she pleads for them to leave. By the end of the play, with Sibyl and Victor fighting, I became convinced that Elyot and Amanda are two people who either should not be married, or are two people who deserve each other. I'm inclined to think that they deserve each other, simply because they end up, through kismet or horrible coincidence, next-door neighbors in their honeymoon hotels.

The set makes the coincidental nature of their reunion very stark, as the two couples move in and out of their seaside porches, disappearing into the inside like clockwork. After it's made clear that Elyot is the former, benighted husband of the villainous Amanda, he and Sibyl go inside... and then Amanda comes out, much to the delighted horror of the audience. What follows is a wonderful series of near-misses that finally ends when Elyot and Amanda realize with horror that they are thrown together again... and, after initial desperate attempts to escape each other's company, want to be together again.

I thought Susan had a good point when she mentioned that Elyot and Amanda's relationship is one of endless foreplay: neither of them wants to quit playing, settle down, and get serious. Their 'affection' expresses itself not only in lovemaking on the

couch, but throwing things at each other: their fights start slow and then build, their intensity increasing exponentially. Usually, these fights came in response to the

threatening presence of too much sentiment, around which they both feel acutely uncomfortable; whenever the scenario teeters too close to sentiment, such as

when Elyot begins to play an old favorite song on the piano, Amanda remarks that she finds it amazing how `cheap songs can be so potent.'

My first opinions of the play disputed between my appreciation of Coward's ability to construct brilliantly cutting dialogue and my annoyance at his electing to lavish this ability on two people who remind me of those `cheap songs' in their repetitive bad behavior and weary unrepentance - yet the play, by the end, achieved a certain potency I had not expected. They admit that, in leaving their spouses, they've transgressed the laws of both God and society in electing to live adulterously together, but then, they know full well that they would be miserable living with the insipid Sibyl and domineering Victor.

The comic scene at the end, with Elyot locking himself in his room to get ready and Amanda trying to sweet-talk Sibyl is undercut later by Sibyl and Victor brawling on the floor. Have Amanda and Elyot corrupted them? Coward seems to suggest it. Will Sibyl and Victor end up getting together? Some in the class speculated it, but I don't believe Coward intended that to be the case. With Elyot and Amanda there seems to be some genuine love, although at times they can't stand each other. Sibyl and Victor, by contrast, make it clear that their alliance to find their wayward spouses is one of convenience only - other than that, they find each other thoroughly repellent. The mercenary quality of their `union' contrasts with the passionate one of Elyot and Amanda, who can only sit back and watch bemusedly as Victor and Sibyl explode. We must do that, too, and come to the conclusion that Elyot and Amanda are far more suited to each other than they will ever be to Sibyl and Victor - and than Sibyl and Victor will ever be to each other.

01.07.2002, 2:00pm

Monkey: A Tale from China (Colin Teevan, 2001) Dir. Mick Gordon
The Young Vic

"Time to play!"

I don't think I'll ever forget that phrase - or tone of voice - for the rest of my life. Seriously. I doubt I'll forget that as much as I doubt I'll ever forget the terrifying proliferation of Monkey's body hair.

Anyway, I found that I liked the play just seeing it: the cast had great energy and physicality, with the constant motion and martial arts effects, and even the techno music (which I do not normally like). The set up in the Young Vic was really stunning, giving the impression of a small space upon which action and characters converge - yet this small space serves as the majority of the space where travel takes place and where revelations are had. The constant in-and-out from four corners of the theatre meant that there was always something new to look at, from different quadrants, such as the various martial-arts attacks or the manifestation of Sandy in his ravenous sea-monster.

Monkey, whose nature is irrepressible, reminds me of a trickster god (such as the Coyote or Fox of Native American myth, Loki, or Mercury - albeit more exalted than some of these), one who defies convention. He seems to be a sexual and certainly egotistical character, with his "signature", tight pants, and frequent reminders that "I'm a handsome monkey." Monkey's defiance earns him 500 years in a prison under a mountain, but it also affords him the chance to obtain what a god cannot do: obtain enlightenment on a long journey with Tripitaka and two other similarly fallen creatures - Pigsy and Sandy, ex-warriors of the Emperor of the Western Skies.

Teevan peppers his enlightenment, however, with a mix of wordplay, scatology, and anachronism.

Monkey marks his territory to prevent any `funny

business' and defeats his enemies by farting. A demon asks his superior, "What's it going to be, General Yin?" and he answers, "Boiled eggs, and soldiers all around", then follows it up with a description of a `continental breakfast.'

I found the discussion of *Monkey* as being comparable to *The Wizard of Oz* very interesting, and I believe that it has merit. The idea of a long journey through a strange country in order to gain some kind of sacred knowledge from a higher being certainly has universal appeal, and a significance that sometimes gets glossed over by its presentation. I know that my initial reaction to *Monkey* was more enjoyment than intellectual reflection, so I was grateful for the opportunity to think of what, exactly, must have happened on that long journey from China to India to collect sacred scriptures.

Buddha informs Tripitaka and her companions that they have become buddhas as well, masters of enlightenment. They do not need the scrolls to give them any deep spiritual message: it has already been written in them by the difficulties of their journey. This was such an unexpectedly powerful idea that it made me stop and think for a few moments. Here is a kid's show that, although the idea of `buddha' is presented as being some kind of reward, does not hesitate in letting us know that being a Buddha is a *big deal*. More subtly, however, Teevan plays with the idea of the internalization of experience and the unconscious way in which we learn. Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy never pause to reflect on how they're learning selflessness or bravery. Monkey doesn't even realize that the metal band around his head has been removed - he behaves himself on his own. He behaves even after he ceases to consciously think of the band tightening on his head for any misbehavior. Likewise, Pigsy doesn't back down from what Tripitaka demands of him, and Sandy quickly takes advantage of his ability to be in two places at once in order to get Monkey's help. By the end of their journey, they all learn to function as one unit under the guidance of Tripitaka, whose humility and insistence upon violence only in the name of self-defense helps temper the... tempers of her companions.

Tripitaka herself is an interesting study in contradiction; she is humble, but she also displays some arrogance in her ability to command Monkey. She is kind, but she also mercilessly tightens Monkey's head-band on him when he misbehaves. Yet, she is very much the center of the group and the undisputed leader, this monk who is technically a powerless member of her society.

I found the decision to cast Tripitaka as a woman to be an interesting one, but very effective. Actually, the role of Tripitaka is almost archetypal - a role belonging to that of a reluctant questor who travels under greatest necessity. This would have worked in for either a man or a woman, I believe: the role and its demands are universal.

01.07.2002, 7:30pm

The Good Hope (Herman Heijermans, 1900) Dir.

Bill Bryden

Cottesloe Theatre

And when the broken people
Living in a world of grief
There will be an answer:
Let it be.

The Beatles, "Let It Be"

(I'm listening to this song right now)

Like I did with King John and The Lieutenant of Inishmore, I went into The Good Hope not knowing much about it (only that it concerned a boat that sank; but this is about as edifying as knowing King John is about King John). I came out of it deeply impressed and disturbed, disturbed to the point that I spent all night thinking about it and people kept asking me if I was okay. I was, and I wasn't.

Despite my awful seat, crammed into the restricted-view corner of the right side of the stage, I found that I could easily concentrate on the story both Hall and Heijermans were presenting; from Hall's introduction of the simple folk verse to the reiteration of it at the end, I was hooked. Hall's selection of an English fishing village, and even his alteration of the socialist promise at the end kept what seemed like Heijerman's essential message of human strength and weakness, its susceptibility to what the Bastard Falconbridge might call 'commodity' and its tremendous capability to withstand loss. I think that today an audience might recoil from Heijermans's original ending, having viewed with suspicion the rise of Communism and reflected on the close linkage of socialism with Mussolini's despotic rule. The Good Hope presents something more significant, on a personal level, than political dogmatism: the trials of a fishing village forced to pay too high a price for fish, a cost in lives and livelihoods that seems to never be properly reckoned.

Given the size of the village, the casualties suffered in the wreck of the Hope are almost crippling: twelve men, mostly all of them with families, have died. Many of them have wives and children, one of them leaves a girl behind who is pregnant with a child born out of wedlock - a precarious situation, one that has to be hushed up in order for her to receive any money. Nowadays, when lives lost usually has to be in the dozens for decent notice in the paper, that number might not be significant - but to these people, twelve lives is a terrible personal and financial loss.

Finances underpin the reason why "the Hope is rotten": Makepeace has a certificate of seaworthiness from his insurers, a relationship that William and Kitty implicate as being not wholly legitimate. The advance on Ben's pay that Kitty receives overrules any familial obligation; her youngest son is torn from her, sobbing and protesting - and this after she has pinned illomened earrings on him, earrings belonging to his dead father and brother. In order for Jo to receive any money at all from the Widows and Orphans Fund, she has to keep her illegitimate child a secret from authorities - otherwise, Makepeace warns Kitty, no one in the family may be eligible to receive aid.

Heijermans's more socialist leanings are reflected in his treatment of Makepeace as a former member of this fishing village's society who is now divorced from them by the fact that he is a moneyed man. No longer participating in their risks - hiding out in his office, as William puts it - he is no longer entitled to receive any sort of indulgence from them. His defense of himself is based on the 'intoxicated' ship carpenter and the legitimacy of his ties to the insurers, yet that defense is complicated by the fact that he is keenly aware of fiscal responsibility, including his responsibility to turn out a profit. Perhaps because the distance between him and the rest of village is so emphasized that it makes Heijermans's original ending seem forced somehow, a kind of optimism not entirely warranted.

01.08.2002, 1:45pm

King John (William Shakespeare, 1595[?])
Dir. Gregory Doran; Royal Shakespeare Company The Pit Theatre

The first note I made in my rough journal for *King John* was that I found the Bastard to be somewhat annoying. I'm not entirely sure now why I wrote that, or what inspired it, and now I look at it with annoyance for myself, because Gregory Doran's production was probably the most exciting one I saw during our time in London. I have the Complete Works here at home with me, but while in London I couldn't wait - the next day when we went to the National Theatre to see *No Man's Land*, I plunked down £7.99 for RL Smallwood's New Penguin edition and devoured it that night after *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Dr. Peck, you mentioned to me that Doran had produced the *Henry VI* trilogy at Stratford one year, and now I'm infuriated that I never saw it! Doran's production of *King John* - initially annoying Bastard notwithstanding - left me cursing myself for my consistent skipping over of *King John* whenever I looked through my Norton's edition of Shakespeare's corpus. It was right there, sandwiched conveniently between *Richard II* and *The Merchant of Venice* ... which, I suppose might explain why I frequently passed over it. I had heard from various sources that *King John* is not Shakespeare's best play and that it deals with what modern audiences would consider fairly esoteric history: there's nothing in it about the Magna Carta or even Robin Hood, or anything cool like that. No one knows what it's about because, as the program says, no one ever reads it and no one ever sees it.

Doran's stripped, bare set forced me to concentrate on the plot more intensively than I think I've concentrated on any other stage production. I found myself responding very quickly and contemptuously to the naked powerbrokering taking place between John and King Philip and the victory of what the Bastard terms 'commodity' over moral right.

King John seems to me to be about the gradual breakdown of the state and the process of entropy that's begun once a ruler gives into the hunger to preserve and extend power at any cost. The fact that John is firmly identified as a usurper (and by his mother, no less) initiates this; his desperation to cling to the throne in the face of Arthur's challenge, the Church's interdiction, and eventual armed French invasion nearly brings England to its knees. He abandons his claims to the five English satellite provinces in France as a means by which to preserve his power - 'willingly departed with a part', as the Bastard scornfully puts it (II.i.563), -parting with some of the disputed territories in order to keep the chief prize. Despite his initial resistance to Pandolph's excommunication, he gives up the crown to him in order to receive it back as a Church-recognized ruler and stave off the Dauphin's armies.

John's usurpation and continued self-abasement prompt Salisbury & c. to revolt to Arthur's cause; the lower he goes, the more the country rises in unrest against him and turns to French sympathies. He falls apart with increasing speed throughout the play; as ruler whose power is preserved through the loyalty of others (the discontented nobles, the Bastard, Queen Eleanor), his influence crumbles at an exponential rate once it becomes clear his chief props are falling away from him: only the Bastard remains faithful (or, as the case may be, alive), but even his support isn't enough to prevent John from slipping into cowardice, fear, and what the Bastard sees as being generally unkingly attributes. It is only after John's death that England is released from the fear of being conquered; with Prince Henry as the clearly legitimate male heir, England's line of proper succession - and its safety - is secured.

The frenetic pace of the action heightens the sense that Shakespeare is seeking to determine, through a *sturm and drang* methodology, fitness to rule. As the stress of constant challenges to his power increases, John can't hold it together; his sense of political self-preservation forces him into bad decisions. His attempted execution of Arthur gives the nobles every reason

they need to openly claim their rebellion and alienates the populace, and he realizes this too late. Guy Henry, as John, was particularly convincing of his; he jitters about, plays nervously with his crown, wavers indecisively even as he makes great, kingly pronouncements to Chatillon that he'll show the French the old what-for if they try anything.

The speed with which John opens the beginning of the play, descending on the French proceedings with unnatural haste, puts the French at a disadvantage, and it is Philip's fitness to rule initially put to the test. Like John, he proves adept at turning a bad situation to best advantage (for him) - in this case, avoiding war by persuading Lewis to marry Blanche and incidentally bringing five of `Arthur's' provinces into his own sphere of influence. That this is a cold, savage betrayal of Constance and Arthur is a matter of secondary consideration; Philip considers the possibility of Constance being outraged at the deal he's just struck, but doesn't seem to give it any real weight. When put on the spot by Pandulph, he more or less confirms the self-serving interest he has in the whole enterprise, falling away from John under the threat of Papal curse - what he gets in return is his armies soundly thrashed and subdued on their own ground.

As RL Smallwood points out in his Introduction, the only person who can make his way through political intrigue with a measure of moral certitude is the Bastard - who I did end up liking very much. It seems to me that Shakespeare has produced a tremendous character here, one who serves as not merely an audience-play interface by making the course and consequences of political treachery clear, but one who finds himself rising to the challenges imposed by what he initially can only trenchantly observe. Jo Stone-Fewings, turning in a performance much stronger than his Orsino, gave to his Bastard a life completely lacking from other characters - or, rather, a mind that isn't fixated on damming all to keep power. His kneeling his brother right in the privates is something one would not expect in polite company, his persistent taunting of Austria irritates John to the point of rebuking him.

The Bastard's challenge of courtly conventions and power politics initially comes in the form of commentary - sharp and devastating commentary, to be sure, but Shakespeare's innovation in his character is not simply giving such trenchant wit, but the opportunity to use it constructively. He is, after all, the son of King Richard Coeur-de-leon - illegitimacy is a legal, not genetic, concern, and he seems to have inherited the honor, valor, and loyalty for which his father was legendary. He moves from being audience/commentator to being actively involved in the action, and as he becomes increasingly enmeshed in what becomes a struggle for the survival of the state (rather than John's crown), the audience is drawn in alongside him. With the change of English fortunes for the worst, the Bastard is the `good soldier', who keeps the faith and whose loyalty, even if it doesn't preserve the crown, preserves the hope of his country's freedom.

Shakespeare uses the Bastard to make an appeal to patriotism, rather than to any specific ruler, I believe: the Bastard is made de facto king by John, and it is right that he do so - out of all the characters, the Bastard is the only one both trustworthy and skilled in military matters as Eleanor has died. The Bastard's actions are directed to keeping England out of the hands of the French; with the Dauphin breathing down his neck and John dead, he prepares to rally the defense in what may be a hopeless cause: in his credo, it's far better to go down fighting than to submit, as evidenced in his last address to both the nobles and the audience - that an England united together for its own sake can `shock' the `three corners of the world'

(V.vii.116-7).

What is ultimately touching, though, is the genuine regard the Bastard has for someone like John, who the audience is clearly supposed to not like. In a play where family is more a political than private entity, with uncle

scheming against helpless little nephew, brother plotting against brother, and husband and wife divided by national loyalty, the Bastard's attachment to both Eleanor (calling her 'grandam') and his uncle John is truly startling. I found the interaction of Stone-Fewings and Henry particularly indicative of this in two places: when John gives the Bastard royal authority after giving up his own to Pandulph and when John dies. Their physical closeness and embracing reminded me of that between Hamlet and the Ghost in the RSC's *Hamlet* a few days ago, the Bastard's solemnly re-crowning John after John offers him the crown an implicit rejection of the power John implicitly thrusts upon him. John himself believes he's already damned, damned in his flesh and then in eternity - but the Bastard, in contrast with Prince Henry's meditations on death and the nobles' reserve, says without qualification that John has gone to heaven. His speech has shades of his being "more an antique Roman than a Dane", with his vow to first avenge John and then to follow him to his reward. Filial and feudal duty are transferred to Prince Henry without hesitation - although all the time Shakespeare implies that it is the Bastard, illegitimate son of Richard or no, is the rightful claimant to the throne by virtue of his demonstrating an honor absent from all the other political contenders of the play. *

01.08.2002, 7:30pm

My Fair Lady (Lerner & Lowe, 1956) Dir.

Trevor Nunn

Drury Lane Theatre

Having seen *My Fair Lady* with Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison about 2 million times and read Shaw's *Pygmalion*, I thought that the real-live musical production would fail to impress me: I know the songs, the dialogue by heart almost, and I do prefer Shaw's play to its adaptations. I do have to say, though, that this was a wonderful production.

Most of my amazement is reserved for the set (not being a musically inclined person, I can't make judgments as to the quality of singing). Its flexibility put to shame pretty much all the other big sets we've seen previously (*Royal Family*, *Private Lives*). The frame for the set is the colonnade from Covent Garden, where the play opens, and it remains in place to suggest the columns for Henry Higgins's library, the terraced walkways of Ascot, and the elegant interior of the ballroom. All other set pieces moved around them quickly, seamlessly, and elegantly, so that scenes ended up weaving into each other, such as when the ball is closing out and Eliza, the Professor, and Pickering arrive home - as the last of the ballroom set moves out to be replaced by the library, the last of the couples at the ball dances out the door. Matthew Bourne's choreography weaves in this set movement so beautifully that it was just as fun to watch scene changes as it was to watch anything else.

We discussed in class the reasons why Shaw's play is so persistently Victorian, and why *My Fair Lady* was kept in that same period. I have a difficult time imagining *My Fair Lady* set anywhere else; there have been modern versions of it in the movies, but they have taken *My Fair Lady* for inspiration only - the boy who bets his friends that he'll make the school's resident nerd into a prom queen by the end of the year is only related to the erudite professor and his flower girl by commonalities in plot and motivation (simple ego). Unlike the archetypal brilliance of Shakespeare (for example) that allows *Hamlet* to be set in 16th-century Denmark or a 1980s corporate climate, *My Fair Lady* has something in Higgins's misogyny and erudition and Eliza's eventual suffragette-like defiance that keeps it squarely in the early 20th century. Perhaps the musical itself is so iconic, with the performances of Harrison and Hepburn being the standard by which all others

are judged that makes it difficult to see *My Fair Lady* being anywhere other than where it is in time.

01.09.2002, 2:30pm

No Man's Land (Harold Pinter, 1975) Dir.

Harold Pinter Lyttelton Theatre

Just after seeing *No Man's Land*, I wondered how I was ever going to write a journal entry on it - or, at least, one that made any sort of sense. Fortunately, lecture the following day helped clarify a lot of what had been static to me in the play itself, and also the half-formed ideas I had regarding the play when I first saw it.

Our discussion of Pinter's using these four 'beings' as a method of illustrating the despair of the creative process brought to mind something reminiscent of the old medieval dialogues between Soul and Body. Hurst brings in three other individuals - Spooner, Foster, and Briggs - to his space, this small, alcohol-permeated study, and engages them (most notably Spooner, who gets picked up in Hampstead Heath) in dialogue. What he arrives at, after one bout of fervid speculation in the beginning of the second act, when he and Spooner toss accusations of infidelity and betrayal of friendship at each other, is the no man's land alluded to earlier on: a place of static, where everything is cold and sterile... where nothing is produced. This comes after Hurst realizes that he's talked himself into, as Briggs puts it, changing the subject for the last time. There can be no more changes of subject after this, and Hurst's mind is stuck interterminal contemplation of the final subject as Spooner intones that he is now in no man's land.

Given the discussion of *No Man's Land* as a particularly horrible case of writer's block, I found the presence of that obscene amount of liquor more explainable (and why Spooner gets champagne with his scrambled eggs). Alcohol functions as a depressant, suppressing inhibition and the mental 'controls' the human mind places upon itself and allows impulse to flow more freely. Spooner and Hurst's dialogue has a sort of drunken, weaving quality to it that might mirror their intoxication - and, as a writer desperate to write, Hurst may very well be willing to try any sort of mind-altering substance to get the job done.

Liquor, however, can't cure the problem of these characters simply having nothing to talk about; their dialogue is everything from Spooner's self-aggrandizing sermons on the benefit of not being loved (it makes one stronger) to his fervid speculation on getting Hurst to do a poetry reading one night - and Hurst's blunt suggestion that they change the subject. Is there really a subject, though? I got the impression that Hurst and Spooner circled around some indefinable, main point, but never actually got around to touching on it - their dialogue was like some kind of dance around a topic Pinter stubbornly refuses to allow his characters to discuss. However, I'm not entirely sure what that topic would be, or even if there was one in the first place, but there was a vacuum to Spooner and Hurst's ramblings that I could sense.

As everyone else has said, not much sense could be made out of the play as a whole. Pinter seems to demand that the individual see the play and react to moments that are significant on a highly personal basis. After finding such a moment, it gradually becomes easier to impose some sort of individual significance on the play, some general impression of what's going on. After thinking about it for awhile, I was able to generate that impression of a conversational vacuum discussed above; although I can't articulate it very clearly, I nonetheless have the sense that it is there, and that Hurst is desperately trying to fill it with Spooner's grandiloquence, Foster's

impertinence, and Briggs's youthfulness. Our discussion of *No Man's Land* also made sense, especially because as a writer I struggle with my own no woman's land constantly - the annoyance of writer's block, the anal-retentive groping over a sentence, the terrifying conviction that I honestly have nothing of interest to say and no way of creatively expressing myself should I ever **have** something of interest to say...

The last paragraph produced an unexpected reflection. The general term 'no man's land' refers to land that is controlled by no particular party, a dead space usually placed between warring factions, and a space heavily populated by landmines, tripwires, and traps. It can also be applied to wastelands (or maybe "The Wasteland"), places unfit for habitation. At the end, when Spooner pronounces that Hurst is trapped in no man's land, is he trying to trap Hurst in a mental minefield of his own devising? Is he in a mental 'waste'? The reference to ice and snow, and sterility, seem to reinforce this second interpretation - but sometimes, I think, we are in constant danger of stumbling into the deceptively neutral area of a warzone composed of our own ideas, afraid to move amongst them for fear one of them will simply... blow.

01.09.2002, 8:00pm

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (Tennessee Williams, 1955) Dir.

Anthony Page

Lyric Theatre

Maggie, aptly nicknamed 'the Cat', first brings up the image of clinging painfully onto something of less-than-certain salvation: like a cat that finds itself trapped by dogs atop a hot tin roof, she has to choose between throwing herself to her death and holding on despite the pain. Her hot tin roof is Brick, her alcoholic and depressive husband, and his dysfunctional, wrangling family - and despite the pain, she tells Brick, she's going to hang on.

Having just seen *King John*, I couldn't help but think of the similar manner in which Williams subverts everything we would term 'good' about human relations in the name of one catchword: mendacity. The Bastard points out, somewhat lightheartedly, the basic rule of what he calls **commodity**, which is basically 'every man for himself', and Big Daddy's 'mendacity' is governed by the same principles. In the name of commodity, the French who have been engaged in a 'just and honorable war' abandon their theoretically high-minded ideals in favor of a quick and easy peace that brings five English-held provinces within King Philip's grasp. Williams's commodity is accessible through the mendacity that Big Daddy sees as perverting basic family values: the 28,000 acres and thousands of dollars in hard cash are enough to set his wife to running things for him and Gooper and Kitty to scheming on how to cut Brick out of the inheritance. There is also the further destruction of a friendship: something Brick insists was pure and sacrosanct **is** made out to be perverse.

To a certain extent, everyone in the play is guilty of mendacity, even Big Daddy himself. He admits freely that he has had absolutely no sexual interest in Big Mama (and has a 'letch' for Maggie) and, now that he's supposedly cured of cancer, plans to go out and sow some wild oats. He can't stand Gooper, or his overbearing wife and their obnoxious 'no-neck monsters'. The only person he can be honest with, he confesses, is Brick, and he insists upon Brick's being honest in return.

Williams plays mendacity and honesty off each other, and explores the fine line between the lie and the truth. Maggie 'has life in her' at the end of the play. Taken as an implication of pregnancy, it is a patent lie - Brick and Maggie haven't slept together for months. But taken simply at its surface

value, that Maggie is a person who is alive or has spirit, it's true enough. v Brick's careful restatement of Big Daddy's reverently-whispered invocation indicates the ambiguity of words, and how the audience shapes truth out of them: Kitty and Gooper take it to mean that Maggie is pregnant, and shape their own truth accordingly - although the truth of the matter is glaringly different. Furthe-Liuore, the attribution of motive to characters' actions implicates them in this interchange: is Big Mama's hovering and concern mendacity - that is, is she hoping to get a piece of Big Daddy's inheritance - or is she honestly worried for his health? Gooper and Kitty are the only people who have a naked, mercenary interest in Big Daddy's health and the downward spiral of Brick and Maggie's marriage, and they attack the latter couple with all the vituperation of true enemies.

The spying and intrigue surrounding this scenario truly astounded me, once I had the chance to assimilate it. Gooper and Kitty's self-righteousness in being in a fertile and stable marriage drove me up the wall; Gooper's attempt to dupe Big Mama into signing the draft of a living will to place him in legal control of Big Daddy's estate is a move more worthy of an especially inept power-broker rather than a son. As a 21st-century individual who values her privacy, I found the casual way various characters barged in on what was an implicitly private space (especially during Brick and Big Daddy's conversation) deeply revolting. Williams carefully writes in this thorough lack of a private space: Kitty makes it clear that the wall between her bedroom and Brick's is thin, and she can hear *everything*. No doors are locked. The set itself reflects this: slats form the walls, through which colonnade can be seen and voices can be heard; the audience is physically situated on the other side of such a wall, peering into the bedroom like voyeurs.

I found the performances of Ned Beatty and Brendan Fraser to be particularly powerful, and Frances O'Connell's after I could get past her inability to construct a convincing Southern accent. Brick's pain for the loss of his friend is the only emotion left uncomplicated by the prospect gain and the possibility of mendacity... and the jealous maneuverings of Gooper, Kitty, and even Maggie (who has had an affair with him) seek to taint it against his will. Maggie bitterly refers to his football days as being a way to avoid growing up, but given the family climate, the Brick's desperate determination to hold onto a status quo seems like the only logical thing to do; deprived of the ability to do it, he turns to drink and self-destructs. Beatty's 'nasty old man' was horrifying, morally disturbing, and also honest; as a man marginalized by his own family because of cancer, he nonetheless can attribute solid motives and explanations for those who want to take over for him. However, he plans to make up for years of forced sex (or non-sex) with Big Mama by going out to find some young girl - like Maggie, for example. Frances O'Connell's Maggie was a wonderful mixture of frank sexuality and deep concern; her love for Brick, despite her affair, has a ring of truth to it. "You beautiful people," she tells him, "who give up so gracefully..." is, for me, one of the truest lines in the play. Although the motive of procuring pregnant complicate her words, I the essential truth: she loves Brick

01.10.2002, 2:30pm

Top Girls (Caryl Churchill, 1982)

Dir. Thea Sharrock; Oxford Stage Company
Aldwych Theatre

Big Daddy's estate by way of becoming is that it was three separate oneact plays
couldn't help but feel that she spoke and united by the figure of Marlene: the ways in
wants to help him. which Churchill

approached femininity, women in power, and other topics differed in each act's handling of them.

I enjoyed the first act, in its representation of women who have traditionally taken backstage roles in history and are not as well known as, say, Joan of Arc or Susan B. Anthony. They represent every possible arena of human existence: Pope Joan who occupies a political and spiritual world, Isabella Bird the Victorian traveler and adventurer, Dulle Greit the folk heroine and subject of a Breughel painting, and a geisha woman who becomes a Buddhist nun and then writes her own autobiography. In such a company, Marlene seems to be the next step in woman's inevitable march to the top: she is a corporate woman, assertive and feminine because she elects not to wear trousers. In the confused arena of the dinner party, each woman jockeys to tell her story. As the dialogue wears on, one theme becomes clear throughout: that each of these women have sacrificed a basic sense of what it even *means* to be a woman, complete with her own identity and sense of purpose. Pope Joan forsakes her womanhood to the extent that she doesn't even know that she's pregnant and gives birth in public; Dulle Greit is a Viking-type figure, a heroine who participates in the implicitly masculine activities of pillaging (Hell, in this case); and so on. Churchill suggests that succeeding in a man's world is not wholly a good thing: it confers status, but what else?

This suggestion runs through Marlene's tenure at Top Girls, and the exploration of the sacrifices she has had to make. Most explicitly, as the play tracks backwards through the years, we see that Marlene has given her daughter to her sister, to be raised as if she were the child's aunt and not her mother. She frequently tells Joyce that she had to escape from their family situation at home, and this serves as her justification for the abandonment of family in the distant and recent pasts. This is not acceptable to Joyce, who informs Marlene "when the revolution comes and they're kicking you in the streets, I won't stop them." Marlene's drive to succeed has caused her to break with something even more important: she has forsaken family and society for capitalism. However, I believe that Churchill stops short of fully advocating socialism: Joyce's fury and vindictiveness towards Marlene is as much a break with family values as Marlene's pursuit of money is. The theme of loss of family that runs through the play reinforces this: it is only in the third act that we find out that Marlene is like those women who achieved greatness at the expense of family - all of them, in some way, seem to recognize that loss.

The set impressed me, partly because I had been told that this was a smaller company's production, bordering on amateur. The large monolith-type thing with the circle in it served a variety of functions throughout the play: backdrop for the posh restaurant in the first act, background for the Top Girls office, giving it an air of corporate-art snobbery, and the treehouse for the girls. It was in this third function that I found it most effective, with respect to its symbolism.: as Jessica pointed out in lecture, the moon is the traditional Western symbol for femaleness, especially regarding the menstrual cycle (most vividly portrayed in Kit's sticking her hand down her underwear and producing some menstrual blood). Some of the time, especially near the end, it seemed to take on the aspect of a huge eye - even when it wasn't illuminated - but giving the impression that Some Being is watching how events play out.

Boston Marriage is probably the play that springs most readily to mind when searching for a comparison. Both are 'women only' scenarios, although Mamet explores the monogamous female relationship and Churchill the familial and social interactions of a group of women. Yet Marlene and her cohorts, Joyce, Claire, and Anna are all women who are pulled out from the background of any other male relations: men's things are peripheral to what *Boston Marriage* and *Top Girls* address. However, the uniting concern Mamet and

Churchill share is that there is always some specter of male presence. Claire and Anna jockey for domination in their relationship and have to resort to duping men in order to survive together. Joyce has 'had an abusive husband, and the ladies at the dinner have all sacrificed their femininity on the altar of trying to be more like men. The total effect created in thinking, even generally, about these two plays together is one of women and their interactions all taking place against a very masculine background, however remote they may be (neither play has a man anywhere onstage, for example): it seems more difficult to banish the influence of masculinity in an all-female play than it is to banish women from a male-dominated one.

a

01.11.2002, 7:30pm

Privates on Parade (Peter Nichols, 1977)

V0 Ec

Dir. Michael Grandage

C4

he

Donmar Warehouse

From Nicole Kidman to William H. Macy, the Donmar certainly has a great reputation, and the production of *Privates on Parade* definitely lived up to it. Scarlett Mackmin's choreography worked very well on the Donmar's small stage, and it felt (I would imagine) as if I were at one of SADUSEA's productions, a tired and confused soldier huddled under a tent to watch a group of people try to lift my spirits. The earnestness of all the characters, especially the naive and eager-to-please Steve Flowers, was engaging, and there is an inherent candor in Nichols's writing - a refusal to sugar-coat - that was echoed in all the performance.

SADUSEA, as a group of actors, is probably more mutually dependent on each other than most. There are relationships - be they homo- or heterosexual -- that have formed within it, ones in which members provide each other mutual support. Indeed, I think it a fair assessment to say that the homosexuals, who are horribly derided by Reg Drummond and the fanatical Maj. Gen. Flack, convey more human quality and caring than their heterosexual counterparts. Swindon's death almost destroys George, and Capt. Dennis marries Sylvia when Steve abandons her in a crushing demonstration of youthful (and masculine) irresponsibility. Dennis's proclivity for exchanging masculine names for female ones (Stephanie, Jessica Christ) has an air of almost maternal affection, especially when contrasted with Reg's black-market profiteering and Flack's determination to use SADUSEA as a means to his own glory.

Although his main character is staunchly heterosexual, Nichols roundly disapproves of heterosexual orthodoxy and the constant demand it makes upon every human being to abide by its rules: the men of SADUSEA have to conspire and lie in order to cover up their involvement with each other - involvements that are, in some cases, more fulfilling than their marriages. If one was being especially pioneering, it could be said that *Privates on Parade* anticipates the 1990's backlash against the order imposed by heterosexual politics: a division of One against the Other, the stigmatizing of the different, the justification of imperialism. The heterosexual men in the play - the tyrannical Reg, Flack, and adolescent Flowers - all behave badly, whether it be gun-running or running out on a pregnant woman and responsibility. It is left to Dennis and his cohorts to uphold some kind of moral ground, a moral ground traditionally denied to them by religious conservatives.

Nichols's indictment of imperialism seems to be closely tied to his black view of Drummond and Flack, who are responsible for SADUSEA's losses. The building of empire is entirely predicated upon the subjugation of a lesser force - in this case, the South Pacific - for the betterment of the greater. The building of Drummond and Flack's egos require either beating

Sylvia or subduing and converting the pagan inhabitants of Malaysia: that both of these activities are carried out by the company's senior officers is highly significant.

In lecture, we discussed Nichols seeking to depict the identity crisis the British suffered when relinquishing the last of its empire as imperialism fell out of favor at the close of World War II, and I could definitely see that. Flack is hide-bound in his fervent embrace of the White Man's Burden, and is terrifying in his devotion to the cause. His soldiers are much more realistic; they know that they aren't soldiers - they're artists, privates on parade - and aren't cut out for the war Flack is casting them for. Dennis's takeoff on Marlene Deitrich mocks 1930s Germany and its preaching the gospel of Nazism. Ironically, Flack's speech following the surprise attack on his camp mocks his own blindness: these people do not want to be converted, his soldiers are not trained for this sort of thing (although they do exhibit considerable bravery), and he is not fighting to build an empire - he's holding onto a tiny island by his teeth.

This truth is realized in the final song, as SADUSEA's members climb aboard their steamer home. The news announcer paints a happy picture for each hero as he (or she) walks up the gangplank, but there is still visible

tension between Flack's self-aggrandizement and the sorry state of his troops, the joy of Sylvia and Dennis's marriage and the look she shoots Steve as she walks past him. Nichols eschews any sort of patriotism in this final scene: our devotion belongs not to Flack but to the people who finally get to escape being pawns in Flack's campaign of self-deception.

01.12.2002, 3:00pm Stones in His Pockets

I was originally not going to see this play: having spent the morning galloping from St. Paul's and All Hallow's-by-the-Tower (a wonderful little 7th-century Saxon church) to Kensington, I had planned to spend the afternoon packing up. On my way back to the hotel from the Russell Square stop, though, I ran across Matt N., who - only after promising he would go with me to get a sandwich from the Alara natural food place - corralled me into going along with him.

Utilizing the considerable powers of direction-finding that only English and Film majors possess*, we found the theatre, got a program, and sat down. It was only after the play began, however, that we realized Bronson Pinchot, who played Charlie, had once played Balky of the 'epoch-forming' *Perfect Strangers*, a sitcom that '80s children such as Matt and myself watched endlessly, both in its original run and then in about 10 years' worth of reruns. This became, we mutually decided, the high point of our trip: forget Judi Dench, Jonathan Pryce, and Brendan Fraser... we got to see *Balky*.

We also got to see him in an absolutely wonderful play. *Stones in His Pockets* - an odd title to be sure - is characterized by its unique demand that two actors play about 10 parts between them. Pinchot and Christopher Burns play not only the main characters Charlie and Jake, who are two puzzled movie extras, but also the domineering Irish-American director, his beleaguered and sexually-discriminated assistant, the fluttery associate director, the macho male lead, the swooning Southern belle star actress and her looming bodyguard, a priest, a father... and a local boy who commits suicide.

I should note that they do not change costumes for these roles; body language, vocal inflection, and the occasional vest serving as a towel indicate which character is being presented. Pinchot, as the star Catherine Giovanni, can produce a much more convincing Southern accent than Frances O'Connell - and can exude, in a strangely twisted way, just as much

*his impression
must you say
it's great & appear
it*

sensuality as Maggie the Cat. Burns, who dwarfs Pinchot, can make himself seem timid, skinny, and hopelessly adolescent when playing the director's (Pinchot's) assistant.

The irony and power of the play, however, is embodied in Charlie and Jake, the main characters. Charlie aspires to become a film writer, following a failed stint as a store owner, and the local boy Jake desperately needs to make some money. They immediately sign up for the chance of a lifetime: to be movie extras for 40 quid a day (plus food). Jake wants to see some stars and Charlie wants to get his script noticed, and their wishes are met - although not in the way they expect. Catherine Giovanni falls for Jake's macho Irish rusticity and, after Jake tells the little white lie to her of his being a poet, asks him to recite some of his compositions. He obliges her with some lines lifted from Seamus Haney - and she calls him on it, reproving him for assuming that she knows nothing about his culture.

What she and the rest of the Hollywood cadre don't realize, however, is that they *don't* understand the small town into which they've crashed. Jake bitterly calls Catherine on her blindness; this tiny place, once fairly self-sufficient, now subsists on the hope that American movie makers will continue to stop by and pump money into the economy. The evidence of this becomes painfully clear when news comes that a local boy has waded into the local pond and drowned himself after being excruciatingly embarrassed by Catherine during an encounter in the local pub.

Jake, as a childhood friend, finds himself deeply shaken by this (appropriately, Burns plays both roles), and angered by the movie crew's insensitivity. The director begrudges the extras time off for the funeral and charges them to stay away from drinking - if anyone, even Old Mickey (another role by Burns), comes back smelling of alcohol, they get sacked. In a conversation with his priest, Jake comes to the conclusion that it was the movie that killed his friend: in its intrusion into his pastoral life - a life amongst cows, with which he would be perfectly content - there was suddenly nothing left. And so he waded out into the pond, intent on taking his own life and turning back only once - to fill his pockets with stones.

The title of the play carries with it deeply serious overtones once the meaning behind it becomes clear. The community's loss is made unimportant by its fiscal commitment to the movie - the director makes it clear that all the extras' asses are *his*, and they will perform, funeral or no funeral. Jake goes along mostly due to Charlie's goading, but he deeply resents what he sees as Charlie's blind desperation to get into the movie business. Having read Charlie's beloved script, he pronounces it a piece of trash - and Charlie admits that that's what it is, but it's his only hope.

Stones in His Pockets, like its title, carries unexpected depths to its hilarity. Charlie is dirt-poor and trying to pull himself up; he hides his difficulties behind a mask of cheerful indifference. Jake initially comes off as being hapless and somewhat doofy, but he is far more sensitive to personal and social concerns than his first appearances suggest. Together, he and Charlie foment a plan to take Hollywood by storm: under the aegis of their co-created Canvas Productions (named after Charlie's pup tent), they'll make their own movie about this boy's life. It will begin with his vision: cows, cows, endless cows - and be a movie about movie extras.

As I've said, Pinchot and Burns produce each character with close detail, and their enjoyment of their production works into Charlie and Jake's enthusiasm over their nascent movie. The physical comedy is wonderful: Charlie and Jake as they try to follow the sight-lines provided by the assistant director (they bob their heads exaggeratedly in time with the up-and-down motions of the director's hand - which is supposed to represent a horse galloping), as Catherine, Pinchot writhes sensually when Jake recites

poetry, Burns fawns and twists nervously as the director hands down orders, and so on. It's something that truly has to be seen to be believed.

* that is to say, not very considerable at all

01.12.2002, 7:00pm

Rita, Sue, and Bob Too (Andrea Dunbar, 1982) and **A State Affair** (Robin Soans, 2001) Dir. Max Stafford-Clark
Soho Theatre

Going into *Rita, Sue, and Bob Too* I knew to expect 'in-your-face' theatre. What I wasn't expecting was stadium-style seating, which took a bit away from the intimacy I was expecting, something more along the lines of the Donmar Warehouse. I did get another kind of intimacy, though, in the form of Bob having sex (or trying to have sex) with Rita and Sue at various points throughout the play. Not that I was alarmed by it or anything - it had been something I'd also been expecting - but having to look at Bob's rather pathetic, skinny butt shaking like a jell-o mold got very old after about the first five seconds of him and Sue banging about.

That pretty much underscores my first sketchy and then confirmed opinions about the play. I had a very difficult time extracting any sort of message from it - maybe Dunbar intended one, as Soans seems to suggest in the closing lines of *State Affair*, but the only thing I could think while watching various parties shriek and curse at each other was that I was watching the British version of *The Jerry Springer Show*. As an American fairly used to this sort of thing, maybe it just wasn't as shocking as it was being made out to be, or maybe that this was really cutting-edge for 1982, which was 19 years and many censorship laws earlier.

Bob's getting off scot-free and not going to prison for statutory rape was the only thing that bothered me: the guy was a scumbag (although Rita was not much better) and deserved to be locked up, as was said repeatedly. Again, though, living in a country with TV shows that routinely explore underage sex and dysfunctional families has hardened me somewhat to whatever message it was that *Rita* was attempting to portray.

After awhile, though, I managed to divorce myself from the plot somewhat and develop an interest in the set: the use of the television screens to reflect either changes in setting or the mood of what was happening onstage was an interesting touch, a sort of innovative lighting pattern. I also liked the quick, rough-and-ready impression of the set, with the car seats doubling as chairs and a sofa, giving the idea of a community just eking by on patchwork hand-me-downs. The interest of the set, though, was offset by the histrionic and uninteresting drama taking place on it.

A State Affair was, however, much more effective.. Drug use, especially use involving hard drugs like cocaine and heroin, is a pressing social problem today, and its psychological ramifications still horribly misunderstood by the one agency most empowered to help addicts : the state. Soans has, I feel, a much more direct social message in her play's composition than Dunbar: both plays deal with the sordid underbelly of existence, but *State Affair* deeply involves itself in the exploration of the myriad of reasons why people get into drugs, the many ways in which people try to help them... and the many reasons why addicts can never break their habit.

Soans certainly seems very thorough in her collection of young people who populate the non-profit rehab center: children from broken homes, victims of abuse, rough and reckless kids who try anything once, a woman for whom alcohol and mood elevators are a necessity of life. As they all rush madly

through the center's lobby, telling their stories to the audience or negotiating with each other, they each achieve an identity and purpose that is startling and compelling. As a chorus they are dissonant, but what they have to say resonates as one great collage of suffering, anger, and despair. All of them have experienced the death of a friend or family member to drugs, but this has not been enough to break them of their habits; the only way their physical dependence can be alleviated is by cigarettes or methadone prescriptions - and those are only poor substitutes. The center is a temporary haven at best, and there is a painful awareness of it in the proprietress's acknowledgment that none of her charges stays there very long, and most of them go back to their drug use very soon after discharge.

This felt almost like a 90-minute commercial, but one so powerfully effective that it puts to shame any 'Don't Do Drugs' public service message concocted by a government agency. The play is an indictment of a massive failure to not only find ways to make drug treatment more accessible, but the gross negligence in the state's allowing to flourish the conditions in which drug use becomes a form of physical and psychological escape. The center's inhabitants are all caught in a vicious cycle and are condemned to stay there unless there is some way for them to get out. Often, the requirements for such a release are unrealistic. A major change in attitude and living circumstances, solid assistance from outside sources, hope for something different... where would a kid, child of divorced parents living with a battered mother and having to steal for clothes and food, get hope? Or help? Anything?

Soans's characters demand answers to these questions: the audience's answer is... we don't know.

Does the state know?

One would hope.

MISCELLANEOUS THINGS

PLACES GONE:

British Museum, British Library, London Eye, Tower of London, Kensington Park & Palace, Buckingham Palace, National Gallery, many used bookstores, St. Paul's, St. Mary le Bow, the Guildhall, All Hallow's-by-the-Tower (a 7th century Saxon church), Jack the Ripper tour, Thomas a Becket's birthplace (completely by accident), Parlaiment, Westminster Abbey.

COOL NEW WORDS & PHRASES:

Wagamama
Mind the Gap

WIERDEST PLACE NAMES:

Tooting Bec Wapping
(WAPPING?!) Ealing
Broadway

PRODUCTIONS I WANT TO SEE AGAIN:

Noises Off, *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *King John*, *Complete Works (abridged)*, *Aladdin*, *Private Lives*, *Art*, *Privates on Parade*, *Stones in **His** Pockets*

PRODUCTIONS I WANTED TO SEE BUT COULDN'T BECAUSE OF SICKNESS:

Kiss Me Kate

L~ t y,,,~a

~, ~

MOST MIRACULOUS MOMENT:

Matt Natanson and myself finding our way from *Stones in **His** Pockets* to Soho, which really was a miracle, considering we were completely lost most of the time.

MOST IRRITATING MOMENT:

Thinking that I had lost my week Tube pass a day before its expiration, I paid the 4 pounds for a day pass... and then, somewhere on the Central Line, found my week pass wedged between two credit cards.

MOST UNFORGETTABLE MOMENT:

(among others, but this is the first that came to mind) Seeing the *Beowulf* manuscript and realizing for the first time how TINY it was.

Oh, yes, and the Samantha thing.