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Theatre in England

In My End Is My Beginning

Today I saw *Blood Brothers* and *Noises Off*, both of which challenge the audience's expectations of theatrical conventions in different ways. In *Blood Brothers*, the narrator's presence throughout the play alerts the audience to what will happen, and he even seems to interact directly with the character Mrs. Lyons. While the other characters seem unaware of the narrator's presence, Mrs. Lyons often turns to face him while speaking and even accepts his hand to lift her from the floor. By alerting the audience to the end of the play right from the start, Russell increases the dramatic irony throughout the play and allows actions and words from the beginning to have deeper layers of significance. When Mickey and Eddie meet as children, for example, their playing with guns and Mickey's pretend shooting of Eddie directly anticipates their final demise. Even the premise of the play, their being "blood brothers," carries the meanings of literal twins, connection through their friendship pact, and their deaths on the "selfsame day." Russell's skillful use of the dancing and Marilyn Monroe motifs throughout the play enrich the metaphor of life itself as an intricate maneuvering and a sort of performance. I found myself wondering how Russell thought of using Marilyn Monroe as a running figure, but I think that the idea fits because I associate her with beauty and tragedy simultaneously. Mickey and Eddie's youthful friendship has a sweetness and innocence while the audience can already taste the sorrow that will result. Innocent actions, like Eddie pointing the toy gun at himself, seem haunted since the audience knows the future.

The narrator's presence throughout the play surprised me because he formed part of the set itself by continually leaning against walls and out of windows during scenes. He didn't seem to be sympathetic to the mothers because their choice caused the terrible end he already knew.

With Mrs. Lyons, though, he acted like a voice of conscience and condemnation, contributing to her deterioration and possible insanity. It's interesting that she suffers much more visible torment than Mrs. Johnstone, who accepts the boys' friendship and encourages it. When the madness theme returns, it is for Mickey and not for Mrs. Johnstone. Mrs. Lyons also seems to adopt the superstitions she abhors about Mrs. Johnstone, particularly not putting shoes on the dining room table. Mrs. Lyons' character was single minded first in her desire to have a baby and then in her fear that she would lose Eddie to Mrs. Johnstone.

I enjoyed the music, but it didn't have the strong performance quality of many musicals. While it did have a "hummable" quality, as Russell writes about in the program, I didn't walk about singing the songs like a Rogers and Hammerstein musical. The staging of most of the

songs was very understated, with little movement and not much obvious choreography. I wished that the dancing theme led to more actual dancing in the performance. Many of the duets

included a character whose back was to the audience, which made it seem like a ghost singer in the sense of the unseen ways that people influence each other's lives. I also liked having the orchestra playing *in* the set; it felt like they were characters in the play too and more deeply involved in the action.

After the sadness of *Blood Brothers*, *Noises Off* was a thrilling reversal, but to me it also challenged theatrical conventions and required the audience to bend their expectations. I loved seeing the set from the front and from behind. By placing the backstage scene in the middle, Frayn allows the audience to know what *Nothing On* should look like, to appreciate the chaos

backstage, and then to contrast the first two rehearsals with the utterly messed up performance. Having the director begin from the back of the auditorium contributes to the "God" feeling and shows how much the director collaborates with the playwright in the production of a play. Intertwining the embedded play, *Nothing On*, confuses the characters in *Noises Off* with the parts they play to show how much of the actors' lives comes over into the play. I began to have trouble separating the offstage characters from their onstage scenarios; in fact, *Nothing On* would be little more than a slapstick act without the drama of the characters' lives oozing onto the stage and driving or disturbing the performance. Making the director an audience member in the production and then one of the three burglars also emphasizes the role shifting that happens. I don't think any play has ever made me laugh harder than this one, mostly because this play exaggerates the idea of theatre to an absurd extent. From the ditzy blonde to the inarticulate blockhead to the philandering director, this play blows characters types into massive proportions. The idea that there's "nothing on" highlights the intensity of the backstage drama and the noises, or rather the misunderstood pantomimes, that escalate the tension and lead to all the mishaps. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Player King claims that actors are the opposite of people; they exist only on stage, only in a part, only in performance. *Noises Off* seems to say that acting is an extension of what these people already are and that the things that happen onstage are somehow an extension of what happens offstage. While these actors are trying to do what is written, their jumbled and comic performance depends more on what is going on in the actors' own lives. When stuck, they appeal to the director and not the script for help. They've strayed so far from what's written that nothing can really bring them back. Just as in the play, our lives are performances in which we choose what part of ourselves to present and what to hide. We acquire experiences and form identities as we go and often have different groups of

friends with different interests. This play made me laugh until my sides hurt but it also made me question the nature of performance. The stunning timing and physical maneuvering was amazing; what a complex and virtuosic series of movements!

During class following this play, our discussion about coverings prompted me to think of T.S. Eliot because he writes in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" about the need to put on a face to meet the faces that we meet. Losing clothing, as in *Noises Off*, literally strips these characters of their facades, just as we begin to learn the details of their private lives. Viewing the backstage area likewise reverses the onstage/ offstage boundary and seems like a violation of decorum or privacy. The idea of mass and coverings also reminded me of Beijing opera because of the elaborate masks and costumes that characters wear. As in *Noises Off*, in which every character represents a different stereotype, so characters in Beijing opera fall into general categories and can be easily identified by their appearance.

The Lion King was a visual feast. During "The Circle of Life" I cried because of the beauty of the animal puppets and the music. From a plot standpoint, this musical didn't have anything new to offer, but the choreography, puppetry, and music made it an amazing experience. Whereas in *Blood Brothers*, the musical numbers were on a small scale and the choreography was minimal, in the *Lion King* the much larger cast and unique puppetry techniques made the music the main attraction. Sitting in the Grand Circle for the first half, I got a sense of the intricate choreography, the formations on stage, and the realistic effect of the puppetry. The animals' movements appeared lifelike, so much that I almost forgot the puppeteers. Seeing the stage from the top also revealed the enormous technical feat of raising and lowering parts of the stage throughout the play. The effect of raising Pride Rock at the beginning was exciting because, it corresponded to the crescendo in the music and capped the

ending triumphantly, a display of societal harmony and hierarchy at its most positive. Completing the musical with a similar tableau also provides a sense of closure and reminds us that the "circle of life" will continue through Simba.

From the stalls, I could appreciate the makeup and the techniques used for the puppeteering. Despite the masks, the actors' facial expressions also conveyed the characters. Eddie the Hyena, for example, had his tongue hanging out through his mask, but the actor also stuck his tongue out when not speaking. With the lions' headdresses, like Scar's, I liked the way the actor manipulated it to intimidate other characters. Most of the time, the audience saw the actor's face in elaborate makeup, but several times the actor moved so that the lion headdress took the prominent place.

In terms of singing, the actress playing Rafiki and the actor playing the mature Simba had the most powerful, rich voices. Rafiki's presence throughout displayed strength and wisdom, and I think the actress did well to present Rafiki as enigmatic but essential to the plot and to the spiritual well being of the community. Rafiki's role as seer and sage evokes references to characters like Tiresias in Greek drama, who act as guides and make predictions.

The choreography combined the dancers' movements with the machinery of the stage and the originality of the costumes to make a beautiful visual spectacle. The innovation of using small puppets for different sequences, like Mufasa and Simba hunting and Timon hanging from the waterfall allowed for the staging of scenes that would be very difficult for people to portray. The ballet in the air and costuming during "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," like the costumes with the colorful wings that unfolded, created an atmosphere of mystery and wonder; I felt like I was present in the scene because the dancing drew me in so much. Using dancers to create the mask of Mufasa in the sky also made the depiction of the supernatural more convincing.

With regard to plot, the story depends on tropes that have existed throughout drama and in, life itself- sibling rivalry, desire for power, greed, death of a parent, running away, suppressed identity, love, the prodigal child returning. I think that these common elements reflect the journey motif that occurs so frequently in Western literature, beginning with stories like the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. I'm reminded of the typical struggles of the hero having to endure a time of deprivation, darkness, or denial, facing temptations that draw him away from his goal, and returning as a mature leader. In some ways, this story parallels the journey we saw in *Monkey* as well because of the common search for enlightenment and learning that the journey itself contains the insight. Simba's time in the forest, though not exactly a period of punishment or deprivation, seems to parallel Monkey's five hundred year imprisonment because of the isolation from others of his own kind.' Both Simba and Monkey have to learn responsibility and the virtues of patience, kindness, and inner strength. I think the *Lion King* and *Monkey* are good examples of the commonality between Eastern and Western myth.

The dialogue of *Lion King* mirrored the movie closely and seemed targeted for an eight year old's mind, and the acting really served to link the spectacular musical numbers together. In spite of the trite dialogue, I loved seeing the musical for the blend of African song with the costuming, puppetry, choreography and stage effects. Even the lighting, from the yellow of the Savannah to the green forest and red death scenes, contributed to the tone and effect of the music. The choral singing, to me, far outweighed the solo singing in terms of beauty and power.

Swahili is a lyrical and soothing language because of its open vowels and tumbling rhythms, and I think it accentuated the fluid Savannah setting and props. Since the chorus members were often dressed as grass or other parts of the scenery, the whole natural environment seemed to come alive and become a character.

Royal Family was amazing for the comic timing and for the way that the actors portrayed cantankerous stars so successfully. The play seemed to me like a melodramatic statement about the artificiality that acting can have and the possibility of characters constantly upstaging each other. A play requires an ensemble of actors who can cooperate to produce the most effective dramatic moments, not a group of prima donnas who only want the limelight themselves. The Cavendish family desperately wants to continue their acting tradition but they also use their abilities to manipulate each other constantly. Fanny, as the head of the family, exaggerates fainting spells and temper tantrums to try to convince Gwen to pursue the stage and Julie not to get married. Fanny and the other characters make constant references to stage terminology, speaking about good entrances and exits, scenes, speeches, cues. Tony, especially, is consciously melodramatic, striking poses and drawing attention to himself. His disgust when the baby upstages him shows his own selfishness and childish behavior.

I think that *Royal Family* presents the contrast between actors and "real people." The characters reinforce stereotypes about actors even while being incensed by them. Their house reinforces the notion that "All the world is a stage"; these people can't contain themselves from playing a part. The most genuine scene is the closing death scene. Fanny Cavendish, after a life of being center stage and utmost in people's minds, dies alone with her back to us, the audience. Her silent, quick death out of the sight of her family evokes a feeling that even the best actors must relinquish their parts. When her family gathers around in their final tableau, the deliberate lack of noise shows that depth of their emotion and lack of pretension. The two instances of shattering glass in the play-Tony's throwing down the vase and Fanny's dropping cocktail glass in her last moments-contrast melodramatic fits with real life drama.

One of the ironies of watching this production is knowing that acting aristocracy are playing acting aristocracy. When Judi Dench entered the first time, the audience burst into applause at the mere sight of her. As an actor with a huge resume and prodigious number of awards, Judi Dench plays an aging actress who wants to go back on the road but ,can't. I found myself wondering whether the actors ~n this play encountered the same types of problems that their characters do, with people mob+g their houses, balancing schedules with people who have "normal" jobs, wanting to continue a part past its time of popularity.

In relation to *Noises Off*, I think that this play represented many of the same issues from a reverse perspective. Whereas *Noises Off* dealt with a play in production and the actors' lives bleeding through into the play, *Royal Family* shows the actors changing their ordinary lives into dramatic roles. The characters embody the stereotypical temperamental actors who launch into histrionics at the first sign of opposition, but they also show the loyalty and close knit nature of their family. When Gil Marshall talk disparagingly about dishonest managers and the artificiality of actors' lives, he describes stereotypes that apply to these characters but insults them because they see themselves as more than their roles on stage. The most direct parallel between *Noises Off* and *Royal Family* occurred, for me, when one character describes understudies as an "offstage noise," making me think of the chaos backstage in *Noises Off* and the difficulty of making a living in the theatre. In both plays, characters' personalities seem to suffer because of their professional attachments. Philip, in *Noises Off*, has just divorced from his wife and has no emotional stamina. Poppy and Brooke are manipulated by Lloyd, the director, and alternate between being ecstatic and crushed. The divided loyalties in *Royal Family* surface most clearly in Julie and Gwen, who must decide whether to accept more traditional domestic roles or pursue their acting careers. V hile Gwen does marry and have a child, she quickly wants ;

to resume her acting career because she has the means to leave her baby with a nanny. Julie's love interest, Gil, wants to take her away from stage life to his estate in South America, a possibility that she alternately embraces and rejects. Her final action, requesting to see Oscar's newest script, indicates that the stage life may well win over stability and domesticity. Part of the issue for these women is, I think, the lack of other career options available to them. They must either accept idle society life or pursue their careers on the stage, since that is a venue to which they have access. Without the capability of gaining education to put them in the "male" world of stockbroker and businessman, they have few other choices for their futures. They aren't complaining though. As Gwen reminds her boyfriend, a seventeenth century actor may still be famous, but no one's heard of any seventeenth century stockbrokers. Even though some actors' names fade as quickly as the burnt out electric light, others gain notoriety that lasts far beyond their own lives.

The fleeting, evanescent nature of dramatic performance reminds me of music because both occur in time and can never be fully recaptured. Unlike a work of visual art, which can be preserved and viewed again, music and drama depend on people interpreting an artist's directions on stage or musically. The actors collaborate with the author, the director, the set and costume designers, the lighting technician, and the audience to produce a performance. Each performance is unique and depends equally on the performers and the viewers to succeed.

Both *Noises Off* and *Royal Family* also seemed to be about the content of theatre. What makes a play worth seeing? Can a play survive on visual effects without a deeper philosophical thrust? *Royal Family* succeeds because of repartee and because of the great actors who make the dialogue and all the highly emotional scenes work. It critiques theatre and the actors who compose the theatre community-theatre as a cultural institution. *Noises Off* engages the tabula

rasa idea by showing the layers of performance and the accretion of meaning as actors continue to play a part and their personal lives change.

I enjoyed the dialogue and repartee of *Boston Marriage*. David Mamet has mastered the art of the unexpected endings, and his punch lines are fantastic. In the midst of very high diction, the times that the characters swear stand out as humorous but also significant turning points. From my past experience with Mamet in *American Buffalo*, I've seen that his use of language, and particularly vulgar language, is deliberate and often reveals the frustration of trying to communicate. Particularly from women of high class and manners, the instances of vulgarity emphasize the way that their language often conceals their meaning. They spend an enormous amount of time misunderstanding each other, especially considering the way that Anna carries on and creates emotional scenes. Her desire to dominate every situation shows in nonverbal communication, through her imposing gestures and deliberate poses. Anna's continual gesture of putting her hand over her breast is both dramatic and erotic, alerting us that these genteel characters represent sexuality as well as society. Claire's repeated reclining on the couch shows her comfort with Anna, her vulnerability, and her seductiveness.

Mamet reminds me of Pinter's way of presenting actions as sometimes disconnected and inexplicable. From my experience with Pinter, his plays, like *The Birthday Party*, sometimes contain violence that is portrayed in a humorous way, making the audience laugh but feel uncomfortable at the same time. In *N'q Man's Land*, we don't have a sense of a cohesive narrative or a linear plot structure; rather, events unfold and we have to absorb each moment as it comes. With Mamet, I think the language draws us into the rhythm and diction of the dialogue

and then surprises us with instances of vulgarity. These words aren't meant to be merely funny

or inappropriate for these characters; they are meant to show gaps in communication, frustration,

and lack of understanding. The high diction is also meant to be euphemistic, which is why we think it's so funny when Catherine, the maid, understands Claire's intent to seduce the young girl. The characters are a vehicle for the type of words that Mamet wants to use. He chooses upper class women from the turn of the century because they have the leisure time and intellect to be verbose and virtuosic in speech. Their conversations are rapid -fire exchanges of intellect that expose physical longings as well.

Catherine's character is a visual relief from the other two. Her plain maid's uniform corresponds to her plain spoken character and to the lack of frills and accessories she projects about herself. She knows her identity and hangs on to her family heritage, constantly trying to interject stories about her "Gran." Her perceptiveness comes out when she refers to Claire's hat by saying she wouldn't wear it to bed. She also enables the seance to take place by providing information from her Dad's stay in Bengal . While Anna and Claire have lavish appearances and imposing figures, Catherine's neutral colored clothing and the fact the Anne can't remember her name make her a part of the scenery almost. Underneath her bland-colored clothing, however, Catherine has a feisty personality and a sexuality of her own. Her relatively straightforward affair contrasts with the jumbled relationship between Anna and Claire and their various lovers.

Sexuality as a motivation for action abounds in this play. Claire's original request to use Anna's house as a meeting place leads to the conflict of loyalties that occurs throughout the play. Anna's manipulation of Claire and sexual advances both serve to secure their companionship and a possible sexual relationship. Anna, though willing to be a voyeur, clearly wants Claire's attention for herself. Her affair with her "protectors" seems mostly about securing financial stability and not about affection of any sort. Catherine's relationship, although much more

traditionally heterosexual, also impacts her because of the desire to be with her boyfriend and the abuse that she takes from her employer in order to stay.

These characters, although powerful in themselves, are also tools Mamet uses to convey his ideas. Mamet particularly draws on biblical allusions in an iconoclastic way in order to challenge cultural expectations for these women and question the efficacy of religion to provide peace or answers to their dilemmas. Mamet trivializes the religious by juxtaposing passages of scripture with references like the "sin of writing in purple ink. Claire's final promise that she will "never leave" Anna sounds like Christ's vow that he will "never leave us nor forsake us, even to the end of the age." I don't think that Mamet means this play to be a diatribe against Christianity, but I do believe he challenges the institution and mindset of religion as a way of concealment and a defense mechanism. Just as Anna wants to use a peephole to view Claire's seduction scene and participate vicariously, the literal wall of the house parallels the metaphysical wall of religion that shields characters from reality. Religious references in the play, though pervasive, don't show a system of belief but act as a literary vehicle for the characters' conversations. Anna's letter inviting her protector's wife for a seance ends with "in the name of various gods," which reflects the flippant yet pragmatic view that Anna and Claire have about the supernatural.

The Lieutenant of Inishmore was a wonderfully crafted play and a deeply disturbing theatre experience. Sitting so close to the stage evaporated a lot of the imaginative space between audience and character, making me feel implicated in the atrocities committed onstage. The set was very effective in the arrangement of inside and outside the house because it allowed the outside space to serve multiple purposes. By darkening one space or the other, the stage crew drew the audience's attention to the pertinent stage area. Technically, the performance

showed a realistic sense of the gore in the play. The models of the cats and the blood dripping from the brain showed that the play's material world would be difficult to handle. The verisimilitude of the dismembered bodies also made me uncomfortable because I found it difficult to distance myself from the play and realize that the bodies were mannequins and not real people. Even the shooting of Padraic was shocking because of the amount of blood spattered. Despite the fact that the guns didn't make their explosive noise at that moment, the spray of blood was surprising and unexpected.

The most difficult aspect of the play for me is the humor. We as the audience rightly find many parts of this play funny, but the gruesomeness of the subject matter makes laughter seem callous and perverse. Padraic and Mairead's fanatic attachment to their cats, at the cost of their own family members' lives, points to a neurotic commitment to a cause that breaks all other bonds of loyalty. I think that the playwright is trying to contrast familial loyalty with nationalistic loyalty to show that unbalanced devotion to either creates a frightening situation. Padraic's willingness to kill his own father over a cat and Mairead's shooting of him because of Sir Moger display a remarkable unbalance, callousness, and lack of conscience. The violence is so severe it becomes a ridiculous display, horrifying and unnerving at the same time; it is so excessive that it passes the bounds of reality-or so we hope.

I was struck by the comparison between how Ireland was presented in this play and the stereotypes revealed in Mamet's. Anna's description of families huddling around their peat fires and abusing the soil, vainly fighting for independence from the British, came close to some of the scenes in this house. The sparse conditions and crass behavior of Joey and Donny is strangely fitting. On the other hand, the setting in 1993 and the militancy of the characters, with guns and bombs, points to a new Ireland that doesn't correspond with the dates and stereotypes

in *Boston Marriage*. Still, I wonder if this play is meant to revoke or reinforce previously learned notions of Ireland. The characters seem bitter and unhappy, fighting for their cause but just as often with each other, losing in the end because of two cats. By the end of the play, only three

people and Wee Thomas remain alive- a telling end to the amount of violence portrayed here.

The characters' appearance and costuming reflect their personalities and behavior. Mairead's boyish haircut and clothing juxtaposed with the lipstick and dress portray an image of uncertain femininity and militant intentions. She obviously has sexual desires, as shown by her unabashed advances toward Padraic. Conny's scruffy appearance with the bedraggled hair and initial entrance wearing shorts and tan top are as crass as his character turns out to be. Joey's long hair, which is his chief symbol of identity and also his sore point, leaves him open for

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mutilation and disgrace.

The music throughout, with its strong drumbeat and patriotic lyrics, effectively conveyed the militancy and pride associated with Irish national identity. I liked Mairead's singing and Padraic's joining in at his first entrance¹ their singing together immediately created a link between those two characters and the breed of zealotry. The music for scene changes, with its strong drumbeat, also increased the tension because the audience doesn't know what to expect next.

Twelfth Night would have looked better on a smaller stage. The scenery, like the tall hedges, dwarfed the characters and made them appear smaller than they were-particularly Viola/ Cesario. Still, I liked the performance of the storm scene because it helped the audience to grasp the sibling relationship between Viola and Sebastian. The waving curtain from the ceiling and the lightning gave me goosebumps because it simulated the violence and excitement of a storm. Viola's dress after the storm, with its twenty foot train, seemed incongruous with the

costuming of the rest of the play, but it did look like water streaming from the sea and could point to water as the source of life and death. Viola's transformation to Cesario worked physically because of the actress' natural haircut and square-shaped face. I don't think, however, that the repeated crying and attempts to cover it up help to develop her character; these episodes merely remind the audience of the cross-dressing, a point that we can't forget anyway. Although I know this crying was a device for reinforcing her hidden femininity, it seemed forced after a few times. Olivia's transformation from wearing black to red after her night with Sebastian showed her change from mourning her brother's death to joy and fertility for her own life. The other costuming was ambiguous in time period and didn't seem to play a role in making the play seem more modern. The characters could have been wearing any costumes with the same effect.

I question the director's portrayal of sexuality in the play. Although it may be quite appropriate to portray Antonio as gay, I don't think that including Sebastian as a consensual partner adds anything to the play, and their kiss at the beginning confuses Sebastian's relationship with Olivia. Olivia herself also seems to have bisexual leanings, as evidenced by kissing Viola at the end and exiting the stage with Viola instead of Sebastian. I don't think that adding more sexual dimensions to the play adds to its meaning; even the factor of shock value has significantly decreased in portraying homosexual relationships.

Malvolio played his character brilliantly. His monologue in the garden was humorous because the audience has the sense that we're watching someone who thinks he's alone and has let down his inhibitions. All his body language, even during entrances and exits, stays in character and conveys his haughty personality. His somber speech at the end contrasted with his earlier histrionics, but it held my attention despite the quietness and lack of movement. After his animated attempts to attract Olivia before, this final speech shows how deeply he has been hurt

and how much reparation needs to be made. I also like the Fool's role because of the clown shoes and suit, which give him a Charlie Chaplin hobo look that he accentuates through his mime-like mannerisms. His singing throughout the performance and skills on the guitar and banjo make me listen harder to hear the actual wisdom of what he says. The epilogue, in particular, has great orchestration that, on the practical side, allows Sir Andrew, Sir Toby and Maria to exit. The other musicians on stage and the orchestration are some of my favorite parts of this production because the combination of guitar and clarinet is beautiful and because the music shows how multidimensional and interdisciplinary Shakespeare's plays are.

Alice was a great visual production for me. Like *The Lion King*, it was colorful and lively. The spectacle of the brightly colored scenery and elaborate costumes made it visually attractive, but the plot itself lacked the depth of Carroll's book. I think that the stage machinery, and particularly the moving props and backdrops, worked smoothly to create a variety of captivating scenes. Dressing Alice in white made her an innocent little girl in a world of brilliant color. In fact, all of the characters in the "real" world wore white, and the initial boating scene

seemed airy and light but washed out in comparison to the vividness of the looking glass sequences. I appreciated the way in which Alice could climb through the looking glass and then the stage reversed perspectives to reveal what occurred in the other world. In terms of stage machinery and appearance, I liked the alternation between red, white, and green as ways to

express life or danger and the device of changing perspective to achieve the differences in size when Alice supposedly grows and shrinks.

The costumes reminded me at times of Dr. Seuss illustrations because they were fanciful and creative in their use of bright colors. The visual effects made the lack of cohesion between episodes bearable, but I don't know if children watching the show could grasp the

connection between these events. The dancing, although well-executed, required no special skill and didn't impress me in comparison to later musicals we saw like *Kiss Me Kate*. Musically, the songs reminded me of children's choir music that I've sung in the past. The leaps in interval and unexpected harmonies reveal innovative composition, but the songs weren't catchy in the showy musical sense. I was impressed with the choral singing because the songs had difficult rhythms and harmonies, and the cast stayed together admirably well. In ensemble members, the cast often had to enter the stage quickly and start singing immediately, so I think their ability to stay in synchronization and in harmony showed skill that the average child wouldn't notice. All of the songs had clever choreography, like the walrus and carpenter eating the oysters in synchronization and then hiding from the oyster ghosts. Tweedledee and Tweedledum also executed their motions in perfect timing and coordinated their shared lines with alacrity. Alice had the difficult job of being amazed at everything that occurred, and she kept up her energy level throughout the production. Her voice was clear and well suited to play a little girl part.

For children, this production had lots of entertaining moments, but I think it lacked the layer of meaning that would help it pertain to adults. Even Disney productions usually include many jokes aimed at the adults in the audience, but this production largely ignored the political satire that Carroll intended. I find the episodes too disjointed and the story line incohesive.

Even the overriding motif of dreaming on a golden afternoon downplays the serious nature of the episodes and presents them purely as fantasy. I wished for a more multi-layered production that could engage an entire family on levels appropriate to different ages and levels of maturity. Unlike the *Lion King*, which relied more on mythic journey motifs, this show seemed devoid of a journey scenario. Alice was simply enjoying the fruits of her imagination and playing children's games.

The poems' musical settings, to me, drew attention to the words and made the poems a prominent focus of the production. On the down side, however, sometimes music obscures the words or places too great an emphasis on an element that wouldn't gain as much attention in print. During high school, I had a district chorus conductor who spoke about choral music as the marriage of text and music with the text making the music more beautiful and vice versa. Overall, the musical settings of *Alice* complemented the text, in my opinion, and made the play more ethereal and fanciful. Compared to the *Lion King*, I didn't leave *Alice* with the same level of excitement; I never got goosebumps or felt close to tears as I did in *Lion King*. After *Alice*, I'm looking forward to a production with more emphasis on the plot rather than the visual spectacle.

The Merchant of Venice had a much clearer directorial focus than *Twelfth Night*. From the beginning, the smoking and drinking scene produced a camaraderie that formed the basis for the male friendships throughout the play. The matching purple suits suggest both a likeness of character and a royal disposition—these are men of the highest class who run in the company of like people. The physical displays of affection between them show a high degree of comfort and trust, anticipating the amount of faith that Antonio places in Basanio. Dim lighting in this initial scene evokes a club atmosphere like smoking salon or another male meeting place. In the second scene, the shift of light to mimic sunlight and the birds singing makes Porsche's house immediately bright and feminine. Porsche always wears bright-colored clothing, which elevates her above Narissa and adds to her highly reputed beauty. As an intelligent and beautiful woman, Porsche could have chosen her mate herself, but she chooses to follow her father's wishes, even though the plan makes her seem like a commodity that can be bought and sold. Her cunning, though, clearly helps her discriminate between suitors, and she offers to help Basanio choose

correctly. Her verbose speech at this entrance shows her excitement and nervousness that he has come.

Basanio also improves his chances by presenting the appearance of wealth, which he finances by means of Antonio's bond. He comes with the intention of catching a mate, and he tells Antonio that his venture may give him great monetary rewards. He does appear to regard Porsche highly, but I still question whether his motives are more from love of Porsche or her fortune.

Shylock's complex character makes the audience alternate between empathy and contempt for him. His hate for Christians comes from long experiences of prejudice, and I felt that his attitude was in large part justified. In his behavior toward Jessica, however, we see the conflict between blood loyalty and the preservation of his livelihood. In a society that detests him for being a Jew, Shylock hangs on to his money as his chief means of security and defense. His wealth gives him power, status, and authority that his religion cannot, so he cherishes his wealth as his dearest possession-perhaps even more dear than his daughter. His tender moments with Jessica, such as giving her the jewelry, show that he loves her; he holds her hands and gazes at her with obvious affection. He displays his love through this source of power-money-so Jessica's betrayal undermines both his love and the only security he possesses. As his legacy, Jessica must be protected and restrained to prevent contamination from Christian revels and traditions. His store of pain makes him doubly protective of her, which probably contributes to her wanting to leave. On the other hand, she upholds Jewish tradition by helping Shylock in the ceremonial hand washing and clearly grieves the loss of her faith later in the play. The director's decision to include Shylock praying in Hebrew at home and in the courtroom shows the depth of the Jew's faith and makes Jessica's later singing in Hebrew a more poignant expression of missing her father. Judaic tradition and religion cannot be easily discarded, even

though Jessica resents her father's behavior. When she rejects her father's way of life to marry Lorenzo, she doesn't realize the extent to which her Judaism contributes to her identity and will be difficult to relinquish.

Shylock may gain sympathy because of the blatant prejudice against him, but his refusal to show mercy and willingness to kill Antonio also make him contemptible to the audience. His knife-sharpening and deliberate display of the scales to weigh the flesh, his obvious thirst for Antonio's blood, and the stabbing attempt all make Shylock unlikable. During the courtroom scene, however, we see Gratiano's deliberate taunting and Portia's legalistic adherence to the law after her stirring speech on receiving and giving mercy. Does mercy discriminate between the undeserving and the deserving? This scene also complicates Portia's character because she reinforces the same type of legalism that Shylock attempts first. His agony at the end of the scene and anguished exit through the audience made me more sympathetic to him than I thought I would be initially.

Musically, the play was innovative in incorporating songs like Nerissa's solos and the choral singing at the end. The purity of the sound and the tonal harmony made the ensemble seem more unified in their gathering and forgetful of their prejudices for a moment. Jessica and Shylock's Hebrew singing created a greater cultural distinction between them and the Christian characters and reminded me that their tradition and heritage of song would also be lost if they gave up their religion. Following the chorus at the end, the silence and isolation of Antonio onstage and his refusal to forgive Jessica reinforces the twisted, contradictory forces within each character and operating in society. Antonio exercised some mercy to Shylock by refusing his half of the property award, but his feelings and resentment obviously run deep and extend beyond Shylock himself.

Lancelot's behavior, compared to the Fool in *Twelfth Night*, was cartoonish and hugely exaggerated. His role-playing between the fiend and his better conscience was agile and entertaining, but to me it seemed overdone and unnecessary. I liked the portrayal of Lancelot's character better in the scene when he tricked his father and tried to secure a blessing. Obviously, the old man was loquacious and indirect, as well as blind, so Lancelot could easily fool him. I wasn't sure whether to feel more sympathetic for Lancelot because of his nutty father or more sympathetic to the father because of his inconsiderate son. Perhaps the father's blindness shows the way many parents are to their children, blind of faults or blind of accomplishments.

The stage itself was a great performance space for this play because of the multiple avenues out to the audience, balconies from which to speak, and the swinging doors in the backdrop. These doors served multiple purposes, including Porsche's suitors lining up, Antonio's gang of friends entering en masse, Lorenzo and Jessica's playful chasing, the entrance of the caskets, and the final cast exit after the bow. For a small performance space and minimal set, the versatility of this backdrop helped to create the illusion of many different places; in fact, this set is like a more subtle version of the huge number of doors in the *Noises Off* set and the *Royal Family* set. Whereas those productions were confined to a traditional stage space with a stationary set, the side aisles and swinging backdrop at the Swan made Shakespeare more interactive and accessible. In the Barbican main theatre, I always felt removed from the action of the play, but the intimacy of places like the Pit and the Swan mimic the closeness of the Globe and allow the audience to be more active in the play.

This play displays the capacity that people have to do great good and terrible evil. Our natures are such a mix of potential and vice that our motivations are clouded and our actions tainted before we make them. Mercy, as Porsche says, is a gift dropping from heaven, and

prejudice, as we see in this play, seems to rise directly from hell. I think this play convicts Shylock and Porsche equally for their blindness, even though Porsche and Antonio seem to have the happy ending. Not all evil is as obvious as Shylock's scheme to trap Antonio, but sometimes the subtle vice is the hardest snare to break. *Merchant of Venice* continues to be challenging and intriguing because of the way Shakespeare makes our sympathies swing because of the characters' own conflicting natures; its genius is in denying us easy conclusions.

Aladdin was much more interactive and fun to attend than *Alice* because the genre of pantomime is so geared toward audience interaction. I liked having music playing as we entered the theatre and during the interval because it set the tone and maintained it through the play. The curtain, made of a quilt-like menagerie of fabrics, caught my eye and corresponded to the colorful, overstated acting. One of the reasons pantomime works so well is its repetitive nature. The audience learns to take cues and respond in a certain way to those stimuli. Examples of this kind of classical conditioning include the eerie music and change of lighting when anyone mentions the temple of solitude. The audience learns to sing that tune and be ready for the glassy-eyed expressions of the actors at that point. The audience also learns to respond to questions that characters ask, and there the actors reinforce that response by improvising from it. Of all the characters, Abanazar responded the most humorously to the audience's responses, telling us to save our booing for the second act and trying to trick us into cheering for him. He and Wishy Washy both manipulate the audience to achieve sympathy or revulsion.

The cross-gender casting, which is characteristic of pantomime, seemed both ridiculous and funny. Double casting one man as Mrs. Twanky and the key holder in the castle and one woman as the camel and the Sultana showed how versatile and shameless the actors have to be to play these parts. I didn't enjoy the actress playing Aladdin because her voice was too breathy

and tight. Although she was small enough and looked pubescent enough to play the part, she still didn't convince me as a boy. Maybe she wasn't supposed to be convincing, since the genre itself is so exaggerated and contrived.

The singing was decent but not overly impressive; *Alice* had a much higher voice quality and level of musical difficulty. Compared to the complex harmony and rhythm in *Alice*, the songs in *Aladdin* seemed even more like the stereotypical pop songs they imitated with no vocal range or skill in harmony required. As a musical production, I valued *Alice* much more highly. For its participatory element and puns on pop culture, however, *Aladdin* contained more levels of meaning that the adults of the audience immediately grasped. Some of the jokes were obviously not children's humor, like characters making reference to 80s pop songs and white rappers that young children wouldn't recognize. On the level of plot, I was a bit surprised at the sexual threat I perceived when Abanazar pursued the Princess, but I'm equally sure the young audience would never grasp the possible implications of his pursuit.

The children in the audience, and all of us as well, loved responding to the characters. Their conscious references to themselves, such as the repeated introductions in the middle of the play and their improvisation off the audience responses, distinguished this theatre experience from the "adult" plays that we saw. The humor was overtly slapstick, such as the chase scene through the marketplace, the "Twanky special," and the fight scene in which Aladdin becomes the accidental target. Aladdin's dream sequence in the cave also uses the stage well by having the actor spiral in and out of the dream so that the audience knows what is real and imaginary. Having the Genie be a long haired Scot draws on stereotypes that all Brits recognize concerning the barbaric, uncivilized behavior of their northern neighbors. The woman playing the camel also did an admiral job of mimicking, in a cartoonish way, a camel's mannerisms, even while

vertical line

serving as a talking sidekick to Abanazar. Compared to *Alice*, this production engaged the audience more and created a more pervasive atmosphere of mystery and adventure.

Hamlet used the Barbican stage much more effectively than *Twelfth Night*. The spotlights scanning the audience in the beginning immediately made us more active participants in the production, rather than being removed from the action on stage. The ghost's emergence onto the stage ramp also brought the play closer to a theatre in the round experience and allowed for the characters and groups to have access to the stage different ways. The sequence with the ghost differed from other productions I've seen because of the amount of physicality involved in the encounter. I think that having Hamlet hug his father added strength to this grief and fueled his anguish at not being able to exact revenge quickly or easily. From this first scene, the presence of guns also added a startling sound effect and a lethal edge to Hamlet's depression. His drawing the gun so early made me aware of the possibilities for him to inflict injury on himself or others. I also wondered if the final dueling scene would take place with guns instead of swords.

All of the scenes with the courtiers struck me with the corporate identity that the group seemed to have, wearing gray clothing, in professional attire, with ID tags, standing in a row. They seemed like mirror images of each other, like clones rather than separate people. Hamlet's first appearance in that scene, seated with a hood over his head, showed his disapproval and made him seem younger and moodier. Even though he's thirty years old, his student status and lack of official responsibility makes him seem like an older adolescent still trying to form his identity. The marriage of Gertrude and Claudius feels, at that point, more like a corporate merger or a business deal more than a love-based relationship. The courtiers' wild applause

signals that they approve of anything that maintains their status, regardless of the personal results for those involved.

Ophelia seems like an innocent child, manipulated and confused by her brother, father, and Hamlet. Her pastel-colored clothing corresponds to the blue and purple lighting to make her seem much younger than the corporate courtiers. Her part, to try to catch Hamlet in his madness, becomes the scene of her own undoing. Hamlet's erratic behavior, like putting his hand up her skirt and simultaneously denying his affection, confirm to Claudius and Polonius that Hamlet is unstable, but it also dooms Ophelia to a mental and emotional breakdown. Ophelia's insanity scene, wandering the stage in a light-colored shirt, possibly nude underneath, showed the extent to which she had been wronged. I think her white shirt confirms her innocence and the fact that she had been put in peril by those who were supposed to care for her most. Ophelia lacks the strength and wisdom to manage her own welfare, and her father's mishandling of it contributes to her death.

I loved the way that "The Murder of Gonzago" used the camera and screen to record Gertrude and Claudius' reactions, thereby adding another dimension to the spectator element since the audience and Hamlet watch Gertrude and Claudius watching the players. The pantomime part of the embedded play, with music and choreographed movement, made that scene more exciting and tense in its scheme to catch Claudius. The harsh black and white projection and close up shots of the faces revealed every wrinkle and defect; Gertrude and Claudius couldn't mask their feelings or reactions from our scrutiny. This type of direct lighting occurs at several points in the play, giving a sudden illumination of the whole stage and changing the shades of gray that the shadows cast. In a play that depends so much on finding the truth and keeping masks in place, like Hamlet's insanity, the changes in lighting mirror the changes in

perspective and nuances of interpretation that make it difficult to know who to trust and believe. I also think it's significant that Polonius hides behind the same screen when Hamlet kills him because it makes Polonius seem like Claudius' pawn and models the way that Polonius hides behind his torrent of words.

Lighting and color were significant because of the visibility of the spotlights that the actors controlled and the moving lights on the set walls. The constant moving of these lights and changes in their brightness and direction illustrates how characters manipulate the setting and each other to create their own version of the truth. When Hamlet faces interrogation after he kills Polonius, for example, the police atmosphere with spotlights and armed men showed the attempt, from Claudius' viewpoint, to control Hamlet and make him confess. I think the emphasis on lighting including the numerous instances of sweeping lights into the audience and Hamlet's control of the lighting places emphasis on the visual in a similar way that *Art* does. In *Hamlet*, the amount of spying done by Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

combined with the spectator position of the courtiers and the players proves that we believe *what* often comes from what we see, whether or not those impressions are accurate. I think *Art* engages the visual similarly through the all-white set, the figures in black, the different paintings representing each man's worldview and lifestyle. Like *Hamlet*, the set of *Art* draws our attention to the brief snatches of color that appear—Marc and Yvan's paintings and the tri-colored lighting at the end. The characters' black suits put them in stark relief of the set and correspond to Marc's drawing of the man on the painting because all of these men move across the space of the stage and disappear. *Hamlet's* gray background was less monastic and more indicative of the unrest occurring in the play. The flat-colored stage is like a shadow in itself, unsure whether to be black or white and unable to be either.

In *Hamlet*, Laertes' white costume at the end made him seem like the righteous figure compared to Hamlet's customary black. Laertes has conspired in this scheme to murder Hamlet because of his anger over his father's and sister's deaths. Despite his anger and desire for retaliation, Laertes might not have gone to such elaborate and cunning lengths to ensure Hamlet's death without Claudius' urging and arranging. Hamlet has ruined Laertes' family by shooting his father and seducing his sister, but we're never sure whether to blame Hamlet for his rash actions in feigned madness. At the beginning, Laertes appears very protective of Ophelia and adamant that she should take his advice regarding Hamlet, so her insanity seems to be a direct result of her not following his advice and Hamlet taking advantage. Hamlet may have suffered his father's murder and his mother's remarriage, but Laertes suffers his father's murder and his sister's probably suicide. Is Hamlet less culpable than Claudius for the wrong that has occurred? Should we expect Hamlet to be vindicated at the end? I think the choice to dress Laertes in white makes him the least culpable character, an honest-if sometimes misguided sufferer who is trying to cope with his family's breakdown.

As a Shakespeare spinoff, *Meat and Two Veg* wonderfully transplanted *Twelfth Night* to post World War II. I think the idea of using a clothesline as such an integral part of the set was the key to this production because it allowed for the silhouette scenes, the tea scene, the singing in the boat, and for costume changes. The clothesline and the early rock and roll also provides cultural identification by situating the play in familiar middle class territory. The music intruding into the tea scenes and the parents' resistance to it shows the advance of popular culture and mass media without anyone's permission. The parents' dislike of the music-I even caught the term "devil's music"-corresponded with patriarchal, meticulously stifling repetition of the tea sequence. The songs on the boat reminded me of the instrumentation we saw in

Twelfth Night because both used guitars and other instruments that would have been available in the setting of the play. The mellow-sounding court music in *Twelfth Night* may differ from the 50s sound of the skiffle band, but both showed the importance of music in expressing characters and cultural transition. The clever way that the music in *Meat and Two Veg* advanced the story of John on the sea made those episodes one of the highlights of the play to me. I enjoyed the audience interaction of singing on the last song and having the tea in the middle of the play. The informality of this theatre experience set it apart from the more traditional theatres, but it was a refreshing return to the sort of participation we enjoyed in *Aladdin*. I also loved having a man playing the Violet/ John role because it reversed the usual cross-dressing of the play and made the scenes in the dress and hair clips even more i
ridiculously funny.

Private Lives had a repartee that reminded me of *Art* because of the intensity of the characters and the way in which the show had crescendos and decrescendos of intensity. Coward has structured the play so that the action rolls in cycles, building and then receding. Elyot and Amanda's relationship thrives on conflict, the need for witty exchanges and tension to fuel their passion. They can't be content with the status quo, the sedate and steady love that Sybil and Victor both exhibit until the end. Like the friendships in *Art*, Elyot and Amanda have to consider what the basis of their friendship and affection is and what keeps them connected. In *Art*, we learn that Marc's conception of his friendship with Serge is as a mentor who molds the other like a director. He depends on the assurance of admiration and obedience for his emotional stability, the structure of the friendship clearly defined by his terms. In *Private Lives*, the connection between Elyot and Amanda is intensely physical and intellectual at the same time. Although they are passion-driven people, they need the stimulation of repartee to make them satisfied even that that repartee often occurs through conflict. Part of the humor of this play is watching the

satisfaction that Elyot and Amanda get from their fights. As a kind of foreplay, their fighting seems to strengthen the bond between them even as it threatens to tear them apart. As passionate people whose words often come out spontaneously and in the height of emotion, the content of what they're saying is often caustic and destructive, even though their underlying feeling is one of care or concern. Their mutual jealousy about the other's relationships during their time apart shows that they value each other over their other lovers and probably use other people as temporary replacements for the person they really miss. Even their new marriages serve as a way to mask loneliness rather than consummate a new-found love. Each of them is able to respond to his or her new spouse in an appropriate and even affectionate way, but their real personalities emerge only in the company of the other.

I loved the Elyot and Amanda's dancing because several times recently I have imagined being on stage and dancing while carrying on conversation. When I saw these characters doing just that, it corresponded perfectly to what I had already staged in my mind. Dancing has a rhythm and color that mirrors the way relationships work. It requires cooperation, giving and receiving, harmony, common purpose, and individual action. Just as two dancers often change positions so that one person is moving forward while the other moves back, so relationships require the trust for one person to direct the other and change the course of the relationship. For a dance to be beautiful, the dancers must coordinate their movements and respond to the nuances of the other person. One person, usually the male, must take initiative to direct, but in a gentle, unobtrusive way. Dancing doesn't work by force, but by persuasion. Both people must agree on the goal of harmonious movement work to achieve it. The beauty of Elyot and Amanda's dancing reminded me that their relationship can have a lovely rhythm and that they work on equal levels of skill and talent. They are a match intellectually and in personality,

notwithstanding the amount of friction between them. Their dancing sequence visually represents the amount of parallel action they have throughout the play. They respond similarly to their initial predicament and when Victor and Sybil arrive. Their common tendency to exaggerate and to try smooth awkward situations with witty remarks shows the way their minds function alike. Victor and Sybil simply wouldn't be satisfying for them after a short period of time; sheer boredom would drive the couples apart.

In regard to the morality of the play, I think the validity of Elyot and Amanda's relationship depends on the hierarchy of personal, social, and religious contracts. Having taken the step to legally marry their new spouses in the sight of God and other people, Elyot and Amanda have no legal right to pursue each other. Their obvious love for one another, however, and the probability that they would have been miserable with their new spouses,,and quite possibly made the spouses equally miserable, speaks to the "rightness" of discontinuing their present marriages before they get underway. In the long run, Victor and Sybil will recover much better from an immediate abandonment than a gradual stagnation. As the audience, we can clearly see how much more compatible Elyot and Amanda are for each other than for their new mates. Victor and Sybil's love of conventionality and fear of expressing strong emotions would have stifled Amanda and Elyot, and it's fortunate, in a way, that Victor and Sibyl finally release the anger that they have been hiding from everyone else.

Coward's music in this play lends an element of suspense and complements the ebbs and swells of the characters' relationship. Having Elyot and Amanda sing together confirms their attachment and gives them a commonality that Elyot and Sybil never have. Even though Sybil plays the piano, it doesn't seem like a talent that brings her and Elyot closer together; rather, it's a source of pride and individual achievement. Elyot accompanying on the piano with Amanda

singing shows the way in which they can support and complement each other, while also being in a competitive relationship. They seem to attract and repel simultaneously, but both emotions stem from an underlying need and affection. Love and hate, in their relationship, are really extremes of the same emotion.

I also liked the perspective and color of the set. The way that both sets opened out at the front shows the explosive and trumpeting nature of their exchanges. I think the set also points to the limited nature of our own viewpoint, the way in which we see from one perspective and find it difficult to change our opinions. The predominant white of the hotel set made me think of the sterility of the new marriages, or conversely, the clean start and lack of hurtful history in them. The parallel sides of the hotel also represent the parallel relationships that Elyot and Amanda have begun with people they don't really love. The parallel sequence of events between the two couples after Elyot and Amanda meet also builds toward a conflict between them later. We know from the conflict scenes at the beginning that Elyot and Amanda argue at a much higher intellectual level and feed off each other in their arguing. Although their equality causes their conflicts to escalate, it also draws them closer together.

Art, Boston Marriage, and Private Lives are beginning to connect because of the way each deals with intimate relationships being threatened. In *Art*, Serge's decision to buy the Antrios challenges the values that each character brings to their friendship because the painting represents an aesthetic evaluation that the other two can't-or won't-grasp. To Marc, Serge's buying the Antrios devalues their friendship and prioritizes aesthetics over relationships. Besides his dislike of the painting, Marc's arrogance and thirst for structure make him want to control Serge's taste and shape his personal life. Serge, as the "critic" character, wants to evaluate the work of art, to examine and make personal judgments about it. He enjoys

discussions of deconstruction because it's post-structuralist, not

like the new critical *arc who sees binary oppositions as fixed and immovable. The white painting, for Serge, may be a subversion of classic painting values, a system-as Yvan calls it-that works against the system. Marc can't recognize the motivation behind the Antrios because it doesn't correspond to the aesthetics of the "well-wrought urn" mentality. He wants a painting with frame and picture in detail and unity, with content he can easily analyze and about which he reach conclusions.

Yvan, on the other hand, sees paintings for their affective value, whether they can move him, not whether they show talent. His daub, painted by his father, evokes memories and emotional response rather than issues of organic unity and paradox. Yvan doesn't want to see his painting on a philosophical plane; he wants to view it as an avenue to his own past and family.

Boston Marriage also comes to mind because of the dynamics of power and manipulation between Anna and Claire. Anna, as the older friend, has a Marc-like capacity to shape Claire, and she holds the power because Claire wants to use her house for the liaison with the young girl. Anna and Claire also carry on a sophisticated repartee and seem to gain emotional and intellectual strength from each other. Their relationship has the long-lasting friendship qualities of *Art* and the sexual tension and jealousy of *Private Lives*. They're both concerned for the happiness of the other and terribly jealous of the other's relational triumphs. Unlike the dissolution of the new marriages in *Private Lives*, Claire and Anna make a commitment to stay together based on loyalty rather than passion. They do seem like Elyot and Amanda, however, in the way that they respond to each other and go through rapid changes in mood from fighting to making love.

The Good Hope moved me because of the realistic portrayal of tragedy that society allowed to occur for commercial purposes at the cost of hundreds and thousands of lives. The

disregard for the sailors in the play in the unsafe sailing conditions serves as an example of mistreating workers, similar to factory laborers and even slaves. As the head of the shipping business points out, every occupation has hazards, but mostly because the adequate precautions weren't taken to prevent the tragedies. I felt like the tragedy presented in this play extends even to events like the Holocaust, in which the world's action came too late to prevent the deaths of millions of people.

The singing, live instruments, and dancing brought me into the village and made me like part of the lives of these people. It's amazing to me that people who live in the constant fear of death find reason to dance and sing. Their merriment reminds me of the end of *King Lear* when Lear says that he and Cordelia will sing like birds in a cage, with joy even in imprisonment. Like the slaves' work songs and gospel ballads, the music in this play is a coping mechanism against the unbearable grief of so much tragedy. Like in the *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, in which the comedy is the only way to face the brutality and horror, the music in this play seems the only way to go on with life and express the combination of tragedy and comedy that pervades existence. Framing the play with the same song and standing in the same pose gives the sense that this scene has been and will be repeated countless times, the grief of the people continuing and time moving inexorably forward. In the midst of such terrible suspense and the possibility of tragedy, the music and dancing on the eve of the men's departure was a last gesture of support and hope, a way of staving off the possibility that the men would ever return. I loved the dancing and the way that the entire town could be involved. Their sense of community and the need to depend on each other came through clearly in this play by the way that they drew together in song. Having the musicians onstage, at least some of the time, made the music more

authentically part of the community and less like the artificiality of a musical with a pit orchestra.

In the face of such overwhelming sadness, the choice of the *Good Hope* for the boat and title seems ironic and almost cruel. Without prior knowledge of the play, the audience may expect a positive outcome rather than the tragic one that occurs. It strikes me, however, that these characters must cling to a hope that makes everyday life possible and sustains them through difficult times. As Anne Tyler writes, we must "keep on keeping on." In her novels, the strings of love and need and worry that bind people together and the web of relationships that bind people together are both intensely painful and essential in giving everyday life meaning. Without the love and care of family and friends, we would lack the motivation to continue. I think the characters in *Good Hope* demonstrate the efficacy of communal bonds to help them survive the loss of family members. In my privileged life, I have experienced virtually none of the grief that these characters have suffered, and I find it hard to imagine losing so many friends and family members to the sea. Even with my faith, I find it difficult to imagine staving off bitterness and retaining a will to survive in the midst of so much suffering. The idea of grief lasting for a night and bringing joy in the morning comes to mind, but such verses don't eliminate the grief of the present or make it easier to continue.

The storm scene was essential to the powerful emotional draw of this play, from the flashes of lightning to the sound of howling wind to the lamp blowing out when the door opens. The incredible tension and anxiety or wondering whether loved ones will survive permeates every moment of the scene, particularly as stories of past deaths come out. I feel sorry for Clementine because her higher social status and relationship to the shipping authority block her attempts to identify with the other women and become one of them. Her life has held little of the

grief of those around her, as they quickly recognize. What seems like fantastic stories to her are people who have lived and died, leaving gaping holes in the lives of their family members. Jo's hysteria in this scene is so genuine, and her nudity so well portrayed as a symbol of her duress and vulnerability, that I felt the gall rising in my own throat and the racing of my pulse as I thought about what angst she endures. Like the storm scene in *King Lear* in which Lear rages on the heath, this storm represents the physical destruction of their loved ones and the emotional, psychological turmoil that they continually face in coping with so much grief. -

After the news of the ship's sinking, Kitty's reaction showed the incapacitating shock of losing family members. I couldn't distance myself from the stage because the situation and the grief cycle are so universal and inescapable. The anger and sadness onstage shows how we "speak what we feel/ not what we ought to say." Kitty's prostration on the floor and the final song, posed with stoic faces, reminded me of the human tragedies that result from social injustices.

In *Monkey*, I liked that choreography of the fighting scenes, the costumes and set, and the messages about peace and control of the carnal nature, but I was unsure whether the representation of Buddhism was over-simplified over overly propagandized. My interest in this story stems largely from own experience in China two summers ago teaching English. During that time, I heard of the monkey legend but never got a complete explanation of the story. I did visit several Buddhist temples and began to learn some aspects of the religion. Since the rise of Communism, I think the cultural knowledge of Buddhism has decreased because people are taught to think of religion as unnecessary. Still, Chinese culture carries on many traditions and superstitions that originate in religious rituals-much like our culture has done with major Christian holidays. During my time in China, I bought an illustrated map of the country that

showed the regional costumes of all the provinces and also has a picture of the monkey king over the top of the country, looking down at it in a position of authority.

From the play, I now understand that the monkey represents our personal journey toward enlightenment, a goal that I believe is valuable no matter what religious basis we have. I was reminded of the novel *Siddhartha* because of the protagonist's journey through a carnal stage of desire prior to reaching the self-denial and unity of enlightenment hearing the voice of the river. As I remember the novel, the character has both an extremely greedy, carnal stage and an excessively ascetic stage before journeying to the river and finding the ohm in the sound of the water. The process of reincarnation so central to Buddhism emphasizes the amount of time and

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effort it takes to reach perfection.

The play also reminded me of *Pilgrim's Progress* because of the allegorical conceptions of the characters and the types of obstacles that they encounter. The Despair corresponds to the Slough of Despond and the last obstacle of the river is common to both. The characters must have faith to complete their journey to reach, in one case, the West, and in the other, the Celestial city. One major difference between the two journeys is that the pilgrims who accompany Christian are already virtues, like Faith and Hope, who help him while vices like Fear and Greed lead him away from the path; in *Monkey*, the travelers are characters who seek fulfillment and must overcome their faults. Each of them is a component of the characters of a person: Monkey, the carnal, Sandy, the intuitive, Tripitaka, the spiritual, and the magician, the intellectual perhaps. Like the Freudian ~ id, ego, and superego, these components of a person must be set in the correct proportion in order to reach enlightenment. The ordering of characters also seems to correspond to Maslow's hierarchy of needs because Maslow puts physical needs at the

base of the pyramid and leads upward through emotional, intellectual, and spiritual to reach self-actualization.

I enjoyed seeing parallels between Buddhism and Christianity in this story. The creation ex nihilo and the concept of Buddha holding the universe like a grain of sand corresponds to the Christian concept of a sovereign, omnipotent God who created all and rules all. I also conceive of my life as a journey in which everyday struggles are the heart of the substance rather than the inconsequential means to an end. The subjection of physical desires and the self-discipline of mind and spirit are also utmost in my daily walk, but of course Christianity presupposes that fallen people require salvation to atone for original sin and make the journey possible. I'm glad to have seen this play and hope to learn more about Buddhism, so this production introduced me to some of the topics I want to research in more depth.

King John did a great job of conveying how fragile the monarchy can be. From the beginning, the literal crown is a source of discomfort and visual attention. John continually takes it off and puts it on, carries it around, hangs it on the side of the throne. His physical discomfort with wearing the crown mirrors his uncertainty about being king and the difficulty he has in maintaining authority. At the beginning, his mother bolsters his claim and gives him strength for the battle with France, but her death leaves him without her strength and counsel; she, rather than he, had been the warrior. His physical deterioration because of the poison shows how the structure of the country itself weakens and becomes as tainted as the king's body.

The church's role in controlling the monarchy shows the political motives of the papacy and the intertwining of church and state. Pandulf appears as a silver-tongued emissary who knows how to manipulate people for the interests of Rome. His rapid excommunication of John precipitates the break between England and France and allows him to urge the Dauphin toward

the throne. Pandulf knows how to appeal to the Dauphin's pride and sense of masculinity in pursuing the English crown. By urging the claim of his newly made marriage ties and the havoc created by the struggle between John and Arthur, Pandulf pushes the Dauphin toward war and hopes that England will reconcile with Rome to avoid the conflict. Pandulf's equal willingness to reinstate England at the expense of France's suit reveals the plan that Pandulf harbored from the beginning. During the Mass scene, I noticed that they chose to sing the "Agnus Dei" and end on "dona nobis pacem"-give us peace- which carries the double entendre of relief from the destruction of war and a potentially harmful compromise with Rome. Visually, the red cross on the English flag represented, to me, the blood and conflict so often associated with the church and the division within and between countries because of religion. Especially seeing John draped in the flag reminded me of the nationalistic conflict, the fight to retain the monarchy, and the religious implications of being God's elected leader.

Pinter reminds me of Beckett because of the absurd or surreal quality in their work. Despite the fact that Pinter gives this play a definite time and place, the characters-if we can call them that-enter and exit as in a dream, without explanation. As in *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the people wonder what purpose they have and why they are in that particular place and time. In *Godot*, Vladimir keeps reminding Estragon that they can't leave because they're waiting for Godot, who never directly appears. In *Ros and Guil*, the only assurance they have is the limited memory that they were summoned and have responded by going to Elsinore. This play begins with a similar situation, the chance meeting of Spooner and Hirst while meandering on the heath. The "no man's land where they met also reminded me of the idea of the wasteland presented by Eliot. Tiresias' tired confession, that he has seen all before, enacted in the same scenario, with-the same futility repeating, makes me think of

Spooner's lines about experiencing the same situations before-the locked room, the call from a distance, the door ajar. Like the situation in *Ros and Guil*, Spooner's fuzzy, incomplete memory leaves us with the disconcerting sense that we are emerging from a dream. Hirsts's dream of drowning, in fact, reminds me both of the physical disappearance in *The Good Hope*, and the metaphysical disappearance of men in *Art*. Wallace Stevens writes of "the nothing" that makes up the world, a white snowman in a white world, birds flying in sinking undulations toward the sunset. His somewhat pessimistic view of the world seems to align with the existentialist notion that we appear and disappear. Like the series of moments in *No Man's Land*, life occurs as a sequence of events that is erased almost as soon as it is completed. This past semester, I spent a long time thinking about Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and it strikes me that this poem applies as aptly to drama as it does to the practice of poetry. The guitarist tries to represent "things as they are" on the blue guitar, but he knows that he can't complete the task. Like a "metaphysician in the dark," he twangs on the guitar trying to make sense of the world around him and reconcile the reality of what he sees with his imagination. Pinter's plays, and especially the instance of turning out the lights, show his characters trying to understand their lives and their own creative impulses.

if

No Man's Land and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* seem connected by the thread of alienation and illusion. In *No Man's Land*, the sense of loss and disorientation, of being alone in an icy place, corresponds to the discomfort and removal Maggie feels as the character who knows the truth and can't make others understand it. In *No Man's Land*, the lack of memory, the disjointed communication between characters, and the voyeuristic tendency of Spooner become personified in the family interactions between Brick and Maggie, between Brick and Big Daddy, and between Big Daddy and Big Mama. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* contextualizes the difficulty of

communication and the problem of deceit by placing it within one family. This play evoked more emotional response for me than *No Man's Land* did because I identified more with the family scenario.

One of the major issues is the idea of male friendship between Brick and Skipper. Since our discussion of *Art* and the suggestion that American men can't identify with this form of friendship, I've been thinking more about same-gender relationships. *Boston Marriage*, for example, presents a lesbian relationship in an extremely open way, and the play appears to be doing well on a major stage. If the play were about two men, I wonder if it would be able to run as successfully. The homophobia we see in *Cat* suggests that the American public, at any rate, might have greater difficulty seeing a homosexual relationship on stage. From the evidence in the performance, I thought that Brick and Skipper's relationship was platonic until other people started suggesting otherwise and undermining their confidence in it. Skipper's affair with Maggie as proof of his heterosexuality actually proved his ruin because it was unsuccessful. I'm inclined to think that his dismay over betraying his best friend would be enough to doom the affair, but the influence of other people convinced Skipper that he had homosexual feelings. We never learn the exact content of Skipper's "drunken confession," whether he reveals the affair only or a romantic love for Brick, but we do know that Brick's response led to Skipper's death. My mom has recently done huge amounts of research on the socialization of boys and the so-called "boy code" operating in the United States. Brick and Skipper's situation exemplifies a beautiful friendship that society ruined by denying the possibility of genuine, non-erotic affection between two men. The resulting behavior of both of them, becoming alcoholics, is a defense mechanism designed to mask displays of grief, vulnerability, and guilt. As we see in Brick's confrontation with Big Daddy, his drinking problem comes from a disgust with

mendacity that leads all the way back to himself. People have so many layers of protection that must be peeled back in order to share the raw vulnerability at the core. Brick's lack of sexual intimacy with Maggie is as much a reflection of her adultery as it is with his self-disgust. It's obvious that she loves him desperately, and perhaps her jealousy of his friendship with Skipper prompted the affair in the first place. Sexual intimacy, of course, is the physical representation of the emotional intimacy that it should accompany. Brick and Maggie have neither as the play opens; they are sleeping in separate beds and don't share any authentic communication. The most encouraging aspect of the play is the willingness to endorse Maggie's pregnancy and concede that it could become a reality. Brick's confession to his father and his vulnerability to admit he needs rehab attest to progress in breaking down the barriers that separate these people.

If *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* questions the definition and characteristics of masculinity, then I think *Top Girls* asks what constitutes femininity. The opening act of *Top Girls*, in which women of the past share their experiences, illustrate how each of them defines womanhood and the behavior that must accompany being a woman. For Griselda, femininity means accepting her husband's choice and obeying his will regardless of its consequences. Only by agreeing to give up her children and her husband does she gain the entire trust of her husband and her children. Her husband, her "lord," makes all the decisions about her life and fate. We remember Griselda for her patience and her willingness to obey; for her, the duties of being an obedient wife supercede everything else. For the geisha, her greatest sense of femininity comes from fulfilling her years of training by serving the emperor. Like Griselda, her children are taken from her, but she never has them returned. Her life depends on whether she stays in the emperor's favor, and when she falls out of it she becomes a Buddhist nun. Pope Joan denies the cultural notions of femininity and takes on masculine form to attain schooling and status within the church. Her

masculine form allows her to become a renowned scholar and leader, and she might never have been discovered except for her baby. Despite her masculine exterior, she retains her female sexuality and uses her chamberlains to fulfill it. Lady Isabella pushes cultural boundaries through her extensive travelling, but her speeches focus on retaining virtue even in her varied circumstances. Her sense of propriety prevents her from staying with Jim Nugent, and her lines convey a strong sense of duty toward the Church and toward her status as a lady. Dull Gret takes on the warrior's role, denying notions about female strength to lead a band of women against Satan. Her dirty appearance and silence distinguish her from her dinner companions, but her feats of battle do garner respect. Marlene also negotiates a difficult world and forges new paths for women. As a highly motivated career woman, her first duty is really to herself-or at least, she has arranged her life that way. She has given up Angie and had two abortions to prevent hurting her career, and she refuses to marry a man who expects her to be domestic. Her notions of the feminine have to do with beauty and power, attaining status and proving herself capable in a man's world. Her office resembles a literal "no man's land" because it's so female-dominated and charged with the goals of advancing women. The double casting of characters shows how problems in defining the woman's role have carried through from time past to time present. Wynn, or patient Griselda, claims independence by having an affair with a married man, but she agrees to hide in the car so that no one else will know. The other office worker has different men on different nights but her number of conquests doesn't bring her any closer to stability. Is stability a virtue for these top girls? The job candidates also depict women who have problems advancing in their workplaces: Pope Jean comes out as a woman who acts masculine to prove her competency; the secretary wants a management position but plans to get married; the black woman lies about her qualifications to get a job she isn't prepared to do. Joyce displays an

entirely different notion of femininity devoid of glamour and high on self-sufficiency. She sees no need for a man in her life and likes the idea of getting along alone.

Marlene's secrets, Angie and her two abortions, attest to the problems that sexuality poses for women trying to be top girls. Even though Marlene and her co-workers try to accentuate their physical attributes, they want to keep their sexuality as free from consequences as possible. They have many affairs that aren't serious, but won't commit to any one person.

This play makes me feel torn between the values of having a family and a committed marriage and the desire to pursue my career as far as I can. I don't want to become a permanently unattached woman because of my career aspirations, but I don't want to give up my goals to have children. I've watched people succeed and fail at maintaining a balance between the tough, goal-driven top girl attitude and the need for stable, nurturing relationships. I think femininity has to include a mix of strength and gentleness, assertiveness and submissiveness,

concern for family and career goals.

The strained communication between Joyce and Marlene also brings to mind, the relationship between Brick and Big Daddy. When Marlene goes to visit Joyce, we learn that they have barely spoken in years and don't even know the major events of each other's lives, like Joyce's husband leaving. The major difference between their conversation and Brick's is the speed with which they begin to talk honestly about themselves and their lives. Their level of vulnerability takes Brick and his father much longer to reach and is harder to maintain. When Marlene cries, she recognizes it as a good sign and a therapeutic event; Brick's tears seem more of an embarrassment to him and a momentary admission of weakness. Brick and Marlene deal with pain differently-Brick by drinking and Marlene by working harder, but both of them are struggling to reconcile the lives they have with the lives they want.

Privates on Parade and *Rita Sue/A State Affair* are both about exposing the underside of the British empire in some sense. Terry's song about "losing the war we won," meaning World War II, epitomizes the sometimes ambivalent and sometimes blatantly negative results of the war on Britain's colonial holdings and the psyche of the British people. The Song and Dance Unit of Southeast Asia, pronounced "sad you see" in its acronym form, is a humorously serious statement about the confused moral of this company of entertainers unsure why they're still stationed in Malaysia. The protagonist, Steven Flowers, exhibits a youthful naivete and idealism about his role, but his name belies the fact that he is one of the few heterosexual men in the company. His blooming and wilting, figuratively, occur in his relationship with Sylvia, which starts as an eager young love and ends because of the well-intentioned, misguided Major. "Steven Flowers" brings to mind the conflation of Stephen Dedalus and Henry Flowers (Leopold Bloom's pen name) in *Ulysses*. Whether or not intentional, *Ulysses'* status as a nationalistic work that deeply engages the identity of Ireland, the oppression by the British Empire, and the Catholic church complements the way in which *Privates on Parade* questions what it means to be a British male. Leopold Bloom's and Stephen Dedalus' erotic experiences of masturbation, letter-writing, and fantasizing about sexual liaisons coincides extremely well with the highly charged sexual atmosphere of this play. Both works also have conflicts with authority figures: for Stephen, his father and Mr. Deasy embarrass and manipulate him, and in *Privates on Parade* Reg and the Major are corrupt and overly didactic, respectively.

Privates on Parade seems to struggle with the issue of metanarratives as well. Can we be moved "through art to virtue," as Spenser claims in *No Man's Land*? Does virtue exist and can it be defined? I think that this play is about the deconstruction of metanarratives and asks some of

the same questions about art that *No Man's Land* does. This show, as a pseudo revue, depicts i

and satirizes that genre by placing these artists inside of a situation in which their art seems pointless. They perform for audiences who don't understand a Word of their performance, and they fight with mysterious enemies. They are completely unengaged with the native culture and live outside of the social norm because of their homosexuality. Living as fringe on the edge of the British Empire, they embody the militaristic "no man's land" because of their obscure mission and sexual identities. While *No Man's Land* had an obvious surrealism, *Privates on Parade* seemed so ridiculous at times that it could also be surreal. The cross-dressing, the enigmatic Asian men, the oblivious Major, and the comical choreography all drew the play out of the realm of the everyday.

Still, *Privates on Parade* comes across as being remarkably accessible. It shows a group of people thrust into a comical situation in a foreign culture, trying to cope with their lives and discern some meaning. Their journey ends in disappointment with the final shoot out, and each soldier's injuries show the weakening of the British empire itself. The soldier with his balls blown off reminds me of the protagonist in *The Sun Also Rises* who endures the agony of being in love without the ability to consummate the relationship. Virile Britain has lost its sight and its reproductive power.

Sexuality plays a crucial role in *Privates on Parade* and *Rita Sue*; both plays contain nudity and sexual content that could be seen as very offensive. In *Privates I* think the nudity adds to the verisimilitude of the military situation and shows a high degree of vulnerability of the characters involved. Each of the three characters who appear nude experience sexual or romantic problems, so I think the nudity foreshadows their later issues. For Steven, his time in Malaysia includes a sexual awakening with Sylvia, her pregnancy (even though he isn't the actual father), and the choice to break off the relationship. His friend who later has his testicles

shot off also appears nude earlier in the play, which can be seen as virility that never has a chance to mature and produce offspring. The man with the prickly heat who runs into the rain nude later faces his fiancée choosing mother man, so his nudity seems a symbol of his cuckoldry. Terry, who never appears fully nude, as a flamboyant and obvious sexuality, but ironically only he retains a genuine sense of loyalty to Sylvia. While Steven apparently returns to his original girlfriend and the other two return defeated, only Terry, who has no interest in women, proves the depth of his friendship by marrying Sylvia.

In *Rita Sue and Bob Too*, the sexuality points to the degeneration of families within this dying town. Bob's willingness to seduce two teenage girls and to have sex with each of them in front of the other girl, and - what's even more astonishing to me - their lack of stigma and inhibition about it shows, perhaps, what the thirty years since the time of *Privates on Parade* has done to British culture. The sex scenes in this play are deliberately grotesque, as unattractive and degrading as possible, played in a comical way because they're so horrifying. Like *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, this play presents awful situations in a humorous way so that the audience can handle the content. I'm glad that *Rita Sue* shared billing with *A State Affair* because it drew the attention away from sexuality and dysfunctional homes to the arena of wider social problems. While *Rita Sue* was a depressing story without much chance for redemption, at least in *A State Affair* we can see the attempt at rehabilitation and some faint possibility of improvement. *A State Affair* was more openly didactic and perhaps had less craft as a play than other plays we saw, but it was an eye-opening social commentary. My upbringing, in a county with a high level of poverty, illiteracy, and domestic violence has made me aware of these problems before. Seeing these issues enacted so vividly reminds me of the huge social inequities present in both Britain and the United States and the difficulty of making any permanent changes for the better.

Interestingly, *Privates on Parade* and *A State Affair* had very different depictions of Christianity. In *Privates*, Christianity was part of the imperialist mindset, an institution trying to convert "heathens" and impose Christianity as an agent of Western culture. The degrading attitude toward the two Asian men, seen in the different names they're called, the constant commands given then, and the fake Chinese accent used to speak to them, places them in the inferior cultural position. The Major's attitudes, while well-intentioned, deny the integrity of any culture but his own and display an assimilation mentality of trying to create a uniform world. In *A State Affair*, the woman who runs the halfway house espouses Christian principles but also meets a social need in her own culture. The portrayal of her character doesn't seem propagandistic or derisive but simply declarative. Since this play draws on accounts given by real people, I'm inclined to see this woman as a good example of the "keep on keeping on" mentality. To me, Christianity doesn't appear as a cultural institution or a weapon in this play, but as the genuine belief of one person trying to make a difference in her community. *Faith Healer* also engaged faith on the level of miraculous powers in a fallible person and the use of those powers both to heal people and to make money. By hearing the story from three distinct viewpoints, we piece together a nomadic existence that had some moments of profound joy and many of disillusionment. We see that Francis and Grace had different perspectives about the miracles despite the fact that they loved each other. Grace's background in law and her family's wealth antagonize Frank because he can't explain with logic or rhetoric where his powers come from or even where their next meal will materialize. Grace's devotion to Frank makes her willing to forget even his most painful mistakes, like being absent at the birth of his child, if we can believe Teddy's version of the story. Frank believes that her lawyer's mindset and rationality scoffs at his power, and so the two often quarrel and hurl insults at each other.

Teddy, the faithful, eccentric agent sums to love Grace quietly and resents Frank's treatment of her at times. I think the conflict between Frank and Grace shows one way that the supernatural invades the commonplace and creates questions that can't be answered. Frank's peace finally comes when he faces his own death and accepts the end to all his questions.

Each of the actors expressed the essence of his or character and kept my attention despite the length of the monologues. The genius of the play is, in part, the order of the monologues, beginning and ending with Frank and contrasting his wife's and his agent's perspectives in the middle. By gaining different perspectives on the same story, we see the subjectivity of any one person's viewpoint and the way memory can be manipulated. In particular, the story of the baby's birth comes first from Grace, who claims that Frank helped deliver the baby, bury it, and paint the cross. Teddy's version, that Frank disappeared for the duration of the birth, makes Frank seem like a coward who couldn't or wouldn't face the possibility of death in birth and knowing that his own healing power might not be able to help. Grace's version may be tainted because she idealized Frank after his death; her obvious grief and later suicide show a mental and emotional instability that might have led her to lie. Teddy's telling of the story may be an attempt to make himself look heroic, way of expressing his love for Grace, or the unembellished truth. We never know, and I think the ambiguity displays the very human way in which we mold the past to conform to our own wishes.

This play reminds me, in subject matter, of a novel by Lee Smith called *Saving Grace*. Set in the southern Appalachian Mountains, this book recounts the story of a preacher involved in the snake handling movement. The protagonist, his daughter Grace, lives in awe of her father's charisma and power at first but becomes increasingly disillusioned by his philandering and swindling of people. The book addresses the corruption of power and distortion of miracles

to manipulate people into becoming part of a movement, but it does leave room at the end for Grace move toward a genuine faith of her own. *Faith Healer* also focuses on the immediate family of the healer Frank and his relationship with his wife and child. In Frank's monologue, we learn of supposed affairs and acts of disrespect that he has committed, about the difficulty of travelling from place to place with barely the means to survive. Both Frank and the preacher in *Saving Grace* have a power that other people want to experience, but neither of them knows how to balance that power with his personal life and family relationships. The ending of *Faith Healer* is a combination of the tragic and the comic because of Grace's suicide and Frank's account of his own violent but strangely peaceful end. We also see Frank's grief about his child's death, which softens Teddy's account and makes us realize that Frank feels deeply grieved about it too.

My Fair Lady and *Kiss Me Kate* both had wonderful dancing, choreography, and ensemble singing. *Kiss Me Kate* had more vibrant, powerful soloists who acted their parts with more enthusiasm and made the show more exciting than *My Fair Lady*. Part of my opinion may come from our much better seats in *Kiss Me Kate*. Being able to see the actors' facial expressions without having the balcony overhang, as we did in *My Fair Lady*, made the show seem more energetic and well-acted. In *My Fair Lady*, the two scenes that most impressed me were the stomping sequence at the end of "A Little Bit of Luck" and the equestrian choreography during the Ascot scene. Both of these dances showed ingenuity that I haven't seen in past productions, so I do credit the choreographer for giving this production new life. In *Kiss Me Kate*, I liked the mix of contemporary songs and Renaissance music. Porter combines jazz, like "Too Darn Hot," with waltzes, like "Wunderbar," with highly ornamented Renaissance or Baroque-sounding music. The level of dancing, as in the competition between Bianca's suitors and all of Petrucchio's acrobatics impressed me because the cast didn't seem to have weak links.

The issue of language that *My Fair Lady* presents reminds me, in some ways, of Spooner's line in *No Man's Land* that the English language is all we have left. In *My Fair Lady*, language serves as a class divider that helps to keep people in their "appropriate" social position. As Higgins learns, correct pronunciation must accompany correct grammar and etiquette in order for Eliza to gain entrance to high society. Once she has made the transition, however, she can no longer return to her former life; if the lower class has a glass ceiling, then the upper class, to some extent, has a glass floor. Eliza's newly acquired language skill helps to illustrate how hard it is to move between classes; in fact, when her father becomes wealthy, he suddenly has to conform to the "respectable" rules of middle class morality, which he abhors. In *No Man's Land*, I think that language serves as a vital means of expression that allows people to communicate their fears and the uncertainty of the world around them. Spooner and Hirst spin tales about their school days, not because the stories are true, but because the act of telling them is perhaps what Frost would call a "momentary stay against confusion." Every line in *No Man's Land* conveys significant content; nothing is superfluous or misplaced. Pinter's precision in writing the play and the exact way in which the characters delivered their lines seems to indicate that language itself, the act of communicating, is vital in trying to maintain the integrity of the self. Words capture thoughts in this moment to sustain us until the moment.

Kiss Me Kate parallels *Noises Off* in presenting the tension between onstage and offstage drama. In both cases, romances between the actors and private problems, like Petrucchio's gambling debts, seep onstage and threaten to end the performance. The type of romance we see, however, resembles *Royal Family* in the tension between actors and "real" people. Kate's romance with the General resembles Julie Cavendish's relationship with Gil Marshall because, in both cases, the men want to keep the ladies away from their crazy stage life and domesticate

them to become supportive wives with normal schedules. For both women, the stage life seems to have a stronger draw than their outside relationships, since Kate returns at the end and Julie asks to see Oscar's latest script. The implication in both is that the adrenaline and excitement of stage life, not to mention Kate's relationship with her co-star, overrule the urge to settle down and become traditional wives. All three of these plays *Noises Off*, *Kiss Me Kate*, and *Royal Family*-compare performance onstage with "scenes" offstage. In all three, I think we get a sense of way people perform constantly to manipulate situations to our liking. Having seen twenty-five plays in two weeks, I realize, more than ever, that plays always reflect dilemmas and aspects of human nature that we can apply to ourselves somehow. Although we may not have faced the scenarios we see or find a character with our exact personality, still I think we love theatre because it mirrors us. This elementary observation may not be the most profound, but I think it brings me back to the place I started-as a theatre lover who appreciates each play we saw and looks forward to many more!