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Critical Journal for *Theatre in England*

December 30th: Portobello Market, *Love Song*, and *Spice Drum Beat*.

I went to Portobello Market today with a few other students before heading to the West End for our first play. Having never been to the Market before, I was not entirely certain what to expect. I was shoulder to shoulder with other shoppers for much of the morning, but had a grand time looking at antiques, finding a toast holder for Leah, and observing the everyday drama of a Saturday marketplace (which can get quite interesting with price hagglers, and very energetic merchants wanting to sell their goods).

1. *Love Song*

This play, performed at the New Ambassadors theatre, addresses the complexities and vexations found in different kinds of love relationships. Romantic love is seen in the relationship between Joan and Harry, and between Beane and Molly. Familial love is evident in the relationship between brother and sister in the play, and Joan's strong sense of duty to and protection of her brother coupled with her frustrations and disgust at his behavior and manner of living. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in this play, is the emphasis on self-love and love of the world through determining where one should exist within it. The playwright addresses these latter two kinds of love through Beane most directly, whose symptoms of schizophrenia symbolically reference his utter disconnect from the world in which he lives.

In the first scene of the play, Bean sits in a chair in his apartment and watches the light flicker on and off and the ceiling slowly creep down towards him. While it seems to be a hallucination, it stands as a visual cue to his relationship with the world; he even describes it later as a place of decay, where he smells nothing but filth and where he feels almost constantly suffocated. This heightened sense of smell and of sensation, common

among schizophrenic patients, is used to emphasize this disconnect. Nothing gratifies him, can make him find any sense of appreciation for a place that is so mutable and filled with decomposition, and thus he decides to live with as little as possible.

He makes emotional progress when Molly appears, a mysterious figure who robs him, in her first moments on stage, of the few possessions he has. They fall in love and have sex, only for Beane to find out that she was a figment of his imagination — in effect, a hallucination. Again, the playwright utilizes a common symptom of schizophrenia to address Beane's need for awakening and acceptance of the world. A clue this symbolic aspect lies in *Beane's* control over his hallucination – *he* can call her into being or command her to leave, and hallucinations are usually uncontrollable by the one who experiences them. In creating Molly, he has rendered a character who asks the questions he is afraid to ask himself, and who criticizes the things he does not have the courage to critique. The first clue to Molly being an imagined woman is her near perfect and wonderfully derisive description of an apartment she robbed, one whose description matches that of the apartment of Beane's sister. To put it in Jungian terms, Molly is Beane's shadow and Anima combined and manifest in the guise of a lover. Through encountering her, he acquires a new appreciation for life, and begins to openly articulate and express himself in a way that he was never able to prior to her appearance. He is becoming, in other words, an integrated and self-aware being.

The play, as a result, centers around Beane's increasing self-awareness and love of himself and the world. He sees the world as beautiful for the first time after he has sex with Molly (effective masturbation). Sex with himself, emblematic of his acceptance of his shadow and anima, opens his senses to the beauty in the world, in addition to the

decay. He senses and experiences both from this point forward. It is crucial that *he* summons Molly after this point – she does not simply appear at will, emblemizing his increasing control over all aspects of his psyche.

Their dialogue on fusion can also be read in Jungian terms. Beane is effectively talking to himself, to those courageous parts of himself that he has refused to tap into. By effectively absorbing Molly into himself through words and through sex he not only *directs* their dialogue (or scene), but also attempts to become a self-realized individual. Once again, the schizophrenic hallucination emblemizes Beane's need to connect with all parts of himself.

This Jungian reading of *Love Song* seems initially vexed by the ending, where he breaks up with Molly and sends her away to become part of the world. It is obviously meant to be a satisfactory ending due to the staging involved – the light shining brightly through the now open door, etc. It would seem at first that he backpedals in his progress throughout the play and divorces himself from his inner feminine and his shadow in order to attempt a realization of himself as opposed to accepting its existence within him. The ending becomes less vexing if taken in the context of the other masturbatory moment mentioned by the sister. Her awakening began in a desperate act of self-love as well – as a young girl hysterical over the breakup with a boyfriend. While simultaneously sobbing and playing with herself, she suddenly realizes, in an almost out of body experience, the lack of control she has over her emotions and over her reaction to this stupid, “paper bag” of a boy. She decides to harden herself and face the world without being controlled by these factors. After hearing this story from his sister, Beane does the same by leaving the safety of his room and his own thoughts (including Molly) and goes to seek out the world

of reality as opposed to the imagined version of it in his head. Importantly, this is *his* choice — and perhaps his leaving Molly is not so much a betrayal of his anima as it is a recognition of what is within him and a desire to seek out an earthly match for himself beyond the confines of his room. Molly even tells him that she is not good at going outside, a statement that suggests her place *within* him (though it will be predominately in memory, indicating her need to exist less explicitly inside of him in order for him to be whole and yet not overtaken by her presence). The last line of the play (“Live”) suggests his final and correct recognition of his anima and shadow, as does the uplifting acoustic music and the beams of light that emanate through the (finally) open door in the closing scene of the play. Whereas the room closes in around him in the very first scene, Beane has, by play’s end, made an exit for himself.

2. *Spice Drum Beat*

We spoke in class of this play being more of a musical or cultural review than an actual play, a comment that helped greatly in my attempts to write something substantial about this production. It was quite a departure from *Love Song* which heavily focuses upon the fleshing out of individual characters (Beane in particular). This play did little more than skim the surface of the characters involved — every actor on the stage played several different characters in a series of vignettes about the history of South Africa.

The staging was minimalistic but effective, and the instrumentation truly enjoyable, though Jaime might have said it best when stating that she was concerned we were getting a “Disney-fied” version of South African history and culture. One of the more disconcerting aspects of the show was the consistent overlay of energetic music in a

major key with lyrics focusing on the slavery and racism and their numerous effects upon a culture. This difference between music and lyrical content *could* be a very powerful statement in and of itself — a representation of the triumph over adversities through the persistent seeking-out of life's joys, as well as the triumph of cultural integration so evident in the music and song performed during the show. *Spice Drum Beat* did not, unfortunately, reach that level of depth, in part due to the reliance on clichéd lyrics. It is difficult to empathize with the pathos presented on stage with the actor sings without genuine conviction and when the predictable rhyme scheme makes each line easily predictable. Had the lyrics been more visceral, as was the case with *Caroline, or Change*, disparate musical tone and lyrical content would have become a powerful component of the play.

Another limitation facing both the actors and the audience is the play's structure — a series of small vignettes broken with song. This technique allows the playwright to cover a wide range of history; however the brief swatches of dialogue or monologue preclude character development, and, as a result, prevent any kind of deeper empathy or feeling on the part of the audience.

Despite the limitations and problems described, the production did reach some moments of excellence. The strongest songs throughout the production were the “period” folk songs. The ensemble was far more energetic and involved during these segments. Zenobia Kloppes was by far the strongest presence throughout the production, and her performance of the older woman who had a daughter from a relationship with her slave master was particularly moving. The entire ending, with the full cast on stage was amazingly energetic and highly enjoyable, and perhaps if the same energy had been

sustained throughout the play would have possessed more conviction and power.

December 31st: Westminster Abbey and *Peter Pan*

Mass at Westminster Abbey

I have been to the Abbey several times before but never for a mass, much less sitting directly beside the choir! It was an excellent experience to precede the Medieval Drama course this Spring semester, as it illustrated the performative elements to the mass.

Whether religious or not, seeing a Mass helps an individual understand the complexities of performed ritual as well as the theatrical elements of the play.

Sitting next to the choir was wonderful. The mass that they sang was gorgeous (I had never heard it before), and their voices were impressively blended. The acoustics in a gothic cathedral are hard to surpass, and the last time I heard a choir with acoustics that did it justice was at Canterbury Cathedral in 2003 at High Mass.

3. *Peter Pan*:

Perhaps the best place to begin this entry is by confessing that I had no idea what to expect from a pantomime. I knew it was a family play, but not much else and had never experienced a pantomime when little. I have, since childhood, been fond of the Peter Pan story, and took a lot of enjoyment in watching all of the little ones bustling around with excitement prior to the start of the show. The most impressive aspect of the production by far was the sets themselves. Each one was positively dazzling with a myriad of colors and dimensions, obviously meant to evoke a sense of magic and wonder so integral to the story of Peter Pan. Each set was meticulously crafted, with particular detail paid to the

sets of Neverland itself.

The music was more than a bit bemusing, frequently taking me by surprise throughout the production. Many of the songs were familiar to me from the traditional theatrical production of *Peter Pan*, but I was not expecting to hear the “Imperial March” from Star Wars as the theme for Hook’s ship, “Nothing’s Going to Harm You” (Sweeney Todd) sung by Wendy, or the rather offensively depicted Indians dancing to “Eye of the Tiger.” I imagine that this blending of contemporary culture with a more traditional story is a typical component of modern pantomime, a technique not unlike what Disney does in so many of its cartoons to make them enjoyable as opposed to simply bearable to the parents who have to watch them for months on end (I am reminded, in particular, of the casting of Robbin Williams as Genie in *Aladdin*, and the many multi-layered jokes he interwove into the narrative). Many of their animated films (*Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Lion King*) have that kind of layering, and I wonder whether the technique was not first introduced in this kind of children’s theatre.

One of the most entertaining aspects of the performance was the audience participation, whether hissing at Captain Hook, or a family in the balcony having to pull out umbrellas because the Pirates have decided to spray them all with high-powered water guns. Short of a black-box performance of the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s *Complete Works* (where a best friend caught a rappelling actor posing as Juliet in his lap during the balcony scene), I have never experienced anything quite like it. The audience was the most participatory during the vignettes between scenes, ones typically commanded by Smee. I had initially thought that they were serving to keep the audience entertained during set changes but, according to Ruth, they are a much beloved element

of the pantomime in and of themselves.

I have chosen to focus in this entry on the experience of the pantomime itself, mainly because the acting left a considerable amount to be desired. Henry Winkler was a bit of a disappointment, not being nearly gregarious enough for the part of Hook. Perhaps it was not his best night, but I was expecting, at the very least, a bit more dynamism. This is not the kind of production that allows for character depth, but the parts, particularly his, might have been played with more conviction.

January 1st: National Zoo and *The Lightning Play*

We had the morning off since it was New Year's so I decided to make my way out to Regent's Park and the National Zoo. I often wonder, while at these places who the actual observer is ... this became particularly evident as I as stood in front of the squirrel-monkey enclosure and was being just as closely scrutinized by the creature on the other side of the glass. Other highlights included the tigers, one of which kept staring at people as if it were choosing which one to eat for dinner, and, the scores of tropical penguins fending off the seagulls from their afternoon meal.

4. *The Lightning Play*

This play was similar to *Love Song* in the sense that it was also a "character" play – one focused on the development and unfolding of particular individuals in the play, Harriet and Max in particular. I was mainly struck by the theme of absence in the play, and the numerous ways in which it is addressed.

The set sharply emphasizes the sensation of absence. There are no personal effects in the room, only a select and sparse number of collectible items, most of which were probably picked out by Harriet. "Aesthetically Sterile" might be a way of describing it. Everything seems to be in its place and yet something in the room seems dramatically awry]. Both Harriet and Max contribute an item to the room in the beginning of the play:

Harriet brings the Turkish rug and Max the TV/DVD set, and both items will dramatically affect the events of the play. While both of them attempt to complete the space, they are equally ineffective. As Harriet herself said to the rug seller, she sees the rug as her “anchor” and needs it to be in her home as a result; perhaps she thought it would give her hope given the accident with her son, reminding her of life and of the world outside. Her husband purchases the TV to distract himself from all that is not in his home (love, his children), and yet it is that very machine and rug that will wrench his feelings of loss to the surface. The rug in a sense, does the same thing to Harriet. It is, after all, depicting the Tree of Life and, as the audience learns later in the play, the lightning that killed their son by passing through a tree. The rug and TV, as catalysts of the couple’s feelings of absence, are important characters in and of themselves, reminding the protagonists of what has been lost to them.

The relationships in this play evoke absence as well. Max and Harriet buy items to compensate for their losses, throwing themselves into any other kind of activity save communication with each other. They refuse to talk about what happened to their son, or what has happened to their daughter because of that tragedy and instead create a yawning void between them where they throw all that they cannot say to each other. These missing conversations will, eventually, will actually occur in the second act in the volcanic dialogue that ensues between the couple. Absence of communication, according to this play, cannot endure indefinitely, but that does not mean that the resolution will be a happy one. Max is ultimately left with no one but his friend Eddie at the end — his wife having decided to find their daughter who wants nothing to do with her parents (Max in particular).

Eddie is an interesting character in the context of absence because he is *never* away from Max or Harriet's lives. He remembers vividly everything that has happened to them (including their son's death) and eventually describes it in detail, forcing the unspoken into the light. He is a quiet, steady man and is a friend rarely recognized for his loyalty (particularly by Harriet). Nevertheless he is there even at the end of the play, when he and Max revisit the site of the tragedy.

The play is as much about mistaken absence as absence itself as a result, and its tragic elements lie in the characters forcing the memories of individuals into the darkness when those individuals are not dead (like Harriet and Max's daughter). The children *are* there in some form (whether ghostly or in mere remembrance), friends *are* present, and relationships are still at least superficially surviving. The protagonists, however, are so desirous for the absence of all of these things — even their own absence from the world, that they forget, or neglect, the things, people, or recollections of people that are still vividly present in front of them. The memory of the daughter and the Tree of Life rug force Harriet to realize that collecting things will never replace the loss of her son. Max realizes that he cannot truly escape the memory of his son's death by continually distracting himself with work and other forms of entertainment. The play ends on a hopeful note as Max confronts the death of his son directly, and Harriet departs to find the daughter she never fully got to know because of her grief over her son. Perhaps, the play indicates that it is never too late to differentiate between what is actually lost and what you only imagine has vanished.

January 2nd: *Alice in Wonderland* and *Caroline or Change*

5. *Alice in Wonderland*

I went to Covent Garden today and was fortunately able to purchase a grand circle ticket to the *Alice in Wonderland* ballet. The production was set entirely to the music of Tchaikovsky, and I was impressed again and again by how well-suited each piece was for the scene. Tchaikovsky, as the creators of the ballet point out, was a contemporary of Carroll's, and they felt the "story and the score had to be conceived in the context of a classical ballet that could fit comfortably alongside Tchaikovsky's other full-length ballets: *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*" (Program). They culled fifteen pieces out of the twenty-four found in Tchaikovsky's *Album for the Young* — a collection of pieces meant for children. Thus the creators of this ballet succeeded in creating a ballet with the same emphasis and audience of Carroll's fiction, while in the process effectively creating Tchaikovsky's fourth ballet, as one critic suggested.

The sets were spectacular, with various types of lighting and innovative props used to create the desired effects (from reams of cloth held by dancers and shaken to simulate the sea of Alice's tears to the dynamic use of color and lighting effects in the corridor of doors sequence). The transformations from one lavish scene to the next were practically seamless, a feat that maintained the dream-like quality of the narrative and of the ballet. The dancers each strove for a different "style" in their respective pieces: the dancers playing the Cheshire Cat and the Caterpillar, for instance, emulated the movements of their respective animals to great effect. The Queen of Hearts was by far one of the strongest dancers of the troupe, nearly besting the young dancer who played Alice in

some places.

The costumes, according to the costume director, were designed to show off the dancer's movements while also being faithful to Sir John Tenniel's original drawings. There were, as a result, many pleasantly familiar faces and figures on the stage throughout the entire production, and I have to say I was amazed by what the dancers could do despite the seemingly burdensome (though gorgeous) costumes. The Mad Hatter, for instance, pulled off a magnificent dance with an elaborate costume, either a prosthetic nose and chin or an entire mask, an enormous hat and props in both hands. The female dancers portraying the Queen's deck of cards had square, rather ridged looking, tutus and from above you could tell that they were decorated to look like actual playing cards.

The entire production managed to capture the tangential and fantastic nature of dreamscapes as it moved from one vivid scene to another, conjuring up stranger sights and activities at every turn. This was very much a ballet for adults as well as children, and the audience was definitely expected to know the story in advance! I have to confess I was at a bit lost in a few places until I picked up the program at the interval, it having been years since I read the story. While there were no virtuosic performances, the dancing was decidedly solid throughout and the entire production was outstanding.

6. Caroline or Change

This has become one of my favorite musicals, and I tend to be incredibly picky about musicals given the frequent hackneyed lyrics that seem to creep into even the best of them. While *Spice Drum Beat* did not give me much hope for the fate of lyrics in musical theatre, *Caroline or Change* certainly did. The musical dialogue and monologue throughout written in a style that did not require constant rhyme-schemes — a structural freedom that allowed for richer language. The music was also dynamic and alternately emphasized elements of Gospel, Soul, and Blues, Folk (both Southern and Jewish) throughout along with the more customary style of the musical genre. The depth and sonic richness in so many of the songs were augmented by the fabulous voices of, in particular, Caroline and her basement “helpers.”

Added to the lyrical and instrumental freshness throughout is the poignant, emotionally-charged narrative, one that could have easily gone the way of melodrama had it not been handled with such meticulous care, and the primary characters not been given the necessary multi-dimensionality. We talked in class about Caroline being a study in oppression and isolation, and I do think that that reading holds throughout the play. She is oppressed by the society in which she lives and like many African-Americans in her day, Caroline is not in any position to find a better way for herself lest she risk the meager support she is able to provide her four children. Her story is not a famous, sensational, controversial one, nor, on the surface, a brave one — and yet she demonstrates courage in her feelings of hopelessness and anger, a reaction meant to be read as equally potent and meaningful in the context of American’s cultural history as, for instance, that of the civil rights protestors. Caroline is decidedly self-aware and believes throughout the entire play that the future holds nothing for her anymore. The

future does, perhaps, hold something for her children, and her fierceness and hatred is in many ways fueled by her desire to see her children surpass her and have a better life.

In perhaps the most powerful moment of the play — the song entitled “Lot’s Wife” — Caroline screams for God to “tear out [her] heart, strangle [her] soul” so that she will stop hoping and be able to survive her life as a maid. It is in this song that the dual meaning of “change” in the title is referenced when she says “pocket change changed me.” It subverts the anthem style found so frequently in those dynamic moments in musicals in its cries of despair and ultimate resignation. There is a kind of peace at the end of the virtuosic number, but only in his realization that she has nothing to hope for beyond what she has and that her freedom will come from accepting that.

Her children, however, *do* have something to hope for beyond her life, and some of the most uplifting moments of the musical (the ending in particular) features them. We hear of her four children before we meet them and only learn later in the play that the eldest, Larry, is in Vietnam. The second child — her only daughter, Emmie — shows considerable optimism and hope for the future of things (particularly the civil rights pursuit of the African-Americans), and has both the courage and the tenacity that her mother seems to lack. Caroline comments on this aspect of her daughter rather poignantly in the song “Gonna Pass Me a Law” when she refers to her heathen daughter and, though seeming to chide her, says she will pass a law so that her “heathen daughter don’t never to get hurt ... nor learn how to mind me, nor learn how to mind nobody ‘cept her self” — a testament to both Caroline’s inability to change herself or her life, but her fierce hope that her children will not have to endure the same hardships. The daughter has the only productive debate with a white individual in the entire play — with Rose’s father from

New York City. She tenaciously debates with him over civil rights and is harshly rebuked by her mother for her behavior. Caroline, it would seem, is angered by her daughter's debate with the old man because of her inability to stand up to an adult herself. Her daughter, however, is more than capable of doing so and, as we find out towards the end of the play, more than capable of daring and dangerous acts of protest (she was the one responsible for the destruction of the confederate soldier statue).

The musical closely examines how an individual reacts to a lack of agency or control over one's life and how one tends to look to a younger generation with hope instead. More specifically, it poignantly — and without melodrama — reflects upon those in the African-American communities of the 1960's who did not engage the civil rights movement in any active way. They were not brave in the visible and external sense that is often remembered. Rather, Caroline comes to represent those in this time who had children in need of care and financial support and who were trapped in jobs or economic brackets they could not escape. The possibility that Caroline's children might be saved from all that she had endured was worth more than her own ability to change her life, worth even more than her own dignity. As the musical suggests, she (and those whom she represents) is, for that very sacrifice, one of the bravest of individuals.

January 3rd: *Coram Boy*, National Theatre Tour, and *The Waves*

7. *Coram Boy*

This play was billed as the #1 Family Production of the Year, by a certain reviewer whose name eludes me. I have to say that I had no idea as to why the play would be billed in such a way after the first act. Few scenes in plays that I have seen throughout my life have disturbed me as much as the infanticide scene in the first act of this play. Replete with horrific squeals coming out of the actress who plays the mother of the soon-to-be murdered child, the tortured and mentally disabled Meshak is commanded by his father to bury the baby alive; the knowledge that this *actually* happened to children, much less that anyone could actually do that to a child made the scene almost too much to take for me – and I usually have a strong disposition towards such things. Dr. Peck observed that the play could easily be viewed as a kind of Märchen, a moral fairy tale cautioning children about the perils and potential tragedies associated with premature sexual behavior, a reading that was greatly helpful in seeing passed the shocking elements of the play itself.

To that end, this is perhaps an excellent play for young people to see. It depicts numerous unfortunate outcomes of unwanted pregnancy – the shaming (potential or actual) of the mother, the fear of that shaming that drives women to get rid of the child, infanticide, general emotional anguish and the deterioration of familial structures, the impending precarious lives of the orphans, etc. It could then serve as a warning against careless sex. However, I worry that, in hysterically cautioning against non-normative sexual behaviors it only helps to reinforce the stereotypes about sexuality that allow such tragedies to take place. In other words, the women would not be so desperate to give up their babies if it weren't so terrible a thing to have them.

Like the Märchen, the moralistic nature of the story requires melodramatic and unbelievable resolutions, and in many places these endings seem too neat. For instance, the entire sequence of false deaths at the end, much less the manner in which the young boy Aaron is recognized and reconciled with his parents is far from believable. Yet despite these instances, the play maintains the power to captivate and move. This is no doubt due to the breathtaking sets, the exquisite singing and the strong acting (particularly on the part of Al Weaver, Justine Miller, and Ruth Gemmell).

The many folktale and romance motifs in the play also add to its narrative power as these genres blend unbelievable elements with a recognizable world as a means of commenting upon particular (frequently social) concerns. In a strange way I thought of Chretien de Troye's *Cleges* when reflecting on the play's structure, since the first half deals with the story of Aaron's parents and he, like Cleges, does not emerge as a predominate figure until half-way through the work; Cleges is also, like Aaron, an orphan. That romance, unrealistic though it might be, taps into issues of proper entitlement and the perils of love at profoundly fundamental levels and, in many ways, so too does *Coram Boy* in its depiction of Alex and his quest for his own identity and role in life despite his father and familial obligations and, of course, in exploring the perils of sexual love in Alex's tryst with Melissa, a union that produces their love-child Aaron whose birth catalyzes several ensuing traumatic events. I am not trying to forge concrete links between *Cleges* and this play, but rather am positing that certain elements found in romance are evident in *Coram Boy* as well, ones that lend it considerable emotive power.

Coram Boy also relies on *setting* for effectiveness. The sets, like Orfeo's travels through the forest and the Otherworld, are grand in scale and meant to evoke child-like

awe in the viewer; we are meant to feel like a child does while watching the play, overwhelmed by the largeness of the world around us. According to our guide on the National Theatre tour, the set was crafted with intentionally oversized components (like the beams) to make the audience feel child-like again due to the sheer proportion of the set in front of them.

In many aspects a successful Märchen and romance, *Coram Boy* imaginatively illustrates a darker period in British history and captures several different facets and attitudes towards various societal issues with effectiveness.

National Theatre Tour:

The tour was very informative. Our tour-guide was lovely and happy to answer any or all questions. We were allowed to meander on the set for *Thérèse Racquin*, got to go into the paint room where we saw the soon to be opened Becket play's set being constructed, and figured out what fake (but deceptively real-looking) food feels like. Out of the vignettes she told us throughout the tour, I was most captivated by the one about Olivier who apparently had designed a particular niche overlooking the main lobby where one could look over all of the levels of the National theatre complex. He apparently loved to stand there before a play began to see "the theatre of life" as all the latecomers ran all over the complex trying to get to their productions on time.

8. *The Waves*:

By far one of the most peculiar productions I have ever experienced; it was more a

dramatic narration of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* than a play. In addition to taking turns reading the adapted script, a small group of actors created (through various ingenious methods) all of the sound-effects appropriate to the scene and also created miniature film sequences which were captured on film and projected onto the screen behind their worktables.

Some of these vignettes were rather extraordinary. Particularly striking were the sequences where a character looked out of a window or around a hedge. As part of the audience, you could see the actors constructing the image at the table with a bit of vine, or a glass pane and drizzled water, etc., but the entire scene on screen looked exactly as though they were outside in a garden or inside looking through a rained-on window. The production commented, as a result, on the inability to know what one is truly seeing.

Innovative as the play was, it did have its limitations. The fact that several actors would play the same character and would all subsequently speak in subdued and nearly identical voices made it difficult for anyone unfamiliar with the book (such as myself) to keep the characters straight in one's mind. Additionally, the fact that you needed about three pairs of eyes to properly appreciate the scene construction and the screen as well as to pay attention to Woolf's gorgeous, yet convoluted prose, could get more than distracting at times. I have to confess that I had a difficult time following the connections between the characters given the way in which Woolf writes.

In defense of the actors and their efforts, sharing seven different characters, aspiring to the same style of accent for the sake of consistency, creating sounds and vignettes, and all the while maintaining audience attention is no easy task. The entire production was, in many ways, an elaborately choreographed dance – each actor had to move and react

with a keen sense of fluidity and consistency in order to navigate and successfully use the nearly treacherous set. The limitations in this production really have little to do with the actors themselves – I was duly impressed by their performance given the amount of work involved to make this play succeed.

Yet despite their worthy efforts, the ultimate preoccupation with appearance and with set creation further precluded (in a similar way as did the vignettes in *Spice Drum Beat*) any actual emotional connection with the characters being presented. In a way it reminded me of Derrida's notion of deferrals, and yet the potency still founded in a several-times-removed representation of an object is nowhere to be found in the deferrals presented here in *Waves*. A distinct sense of detachment results from the created scenes and the split focus required to appreciate them. The narrative itself also aids in this sense of detachment, and, from what I understand (having not yet read the book), Woolf meant for the "novel" to create that effect. The play captures the fractured narrative style of the book and the emphasis on illusion and appearances. It also captures the idea that vignettes are all that remain in our memories and the memories of others about things in our past and vignette is neither pure or a complete story of the events that take place within that memory, and yet vignettes are all we have of our past (Program). The play also raises the issue (likely one that was in Woolf's novel as well of what is real or imagined) that the most real thing that the audience sees is what is on screen since that is what corresponds to the narrative, and yet it is all constructed illusion.

January 4th: *Much Ado About Nothing*

My mother arrived today and, since we only had the one play to attend, we journeyed over to the Tate Britain once she got settled. The Tate is one of my favorite museums in London – I have had a fondness for the PreRaphaelites since I was a freshman in high school and they have yet to lose their ability to delight me. I saw a few that I had not remembered being there – such as the Rossetti’s *Annunciation* — and got to spend plenty of time scrutinizing Waterhouse’s *Lady of Shallot*. I am glad they finally moved her back to eye level!

9. *Much Ado About Nothing*:

This is a comedy fixated on appearances, an observation supported by its continual focus upon hearsay and sight. This matter of appearance is initially emphasized in the development of Beatrice and Benedict’s relationships. They both type themselves as consummate bachelors initially (1.1.220 and 1.1.125); however, even their very names belie their potential for mutual affection, as Benedict comes from the Latin word meaning “the blessed one” and Beatrice comes from the Latin word meaning “the one who blesses.” One needs the other in order to properly exist and, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that these two bachelors need each other in a similar manner. The awkwardness of their public statements of their love largely comes out of their fear that they will be viewed as hypocrites for their previous public statements against love. This is a “fear” noted in both their earlier monologues where they confess that they love the other. Thus, beginning to end, these characters consistently defy the conventions and expectations of public appearance (whether by being in or out of love).

The story of Hero and Claudio (meant to be the main plot of the play, but typically lessened in importance by the dynamism of Beatrice and Benedict) is also about appearances, but a more problematic and moralistic one. The title of the play refers to Hero’s plight to regain her honor while punning on female sexuality and the cultural fixation on womanly purity (“nothing” is a Shakespearean pun for genitals). There are

several references throughout the play to the ephemeral nature of female purity — a fixation heightened by the inability to rely on external appearance to determine the woman's virtue.

The fear of cuckoldry so frequently referenced in this play (most frequently by referring to horns) reflects this fixation on feminine purity. While couched in humorous terms in certain instances, Claudio's quickness to believe Don John and his story as well as his violent and public shaming of Hero has long problematized the play. The entire succession of events begs the question as to how good men, trusted by the women surrounding them, could slander a completely innocent woman so convincingly that even her father would believe their words over hers. The answer lies both in the stubborn willingness to believe in that which you see instantly (despite intrinsic or prior knowledge to the contrary) and in the fear that men have over their ability or inability to control a woman's sexuality. Hero's fainting and quickly believed death is not, then, so much a melodramatic or tragicomic moment as it is a reflection of the strength of their shaming of her; rather, it indicates the power that men in this play have over women and the resulting ease with which they can ruin them.

As the entire sequence with Hero — from her shaming, to her "death", to her final "marriage" and reconciliation with Claudio — indicates, appearances and even one's own sight can belie the reality underneath the surface of things, and characters — the men most of all — are quick to believe that which is immediately placed before them. They are, in effect, all poor readers. This partially explains the problematic idea of Claudio and the Prince believing the unknowingly deceitful Don John so easily where Hero's virtue is concerned. In their defense, they do "see" her committing an act of infidelity,

but why would they so quickly believe a man who has been known to sew discord in the past? The answer is rooted in the themes of cuckoldry and feminine sexuality throughout the play; a deceiver can be believed when it comes to a woman's infidelity because women are easily spoiled. Thus, Don John's news validates to Claudio and the Prince what at some level they fear of and expect from women. But why shame Hero so publicly? They could have taken care of matters privately with Leonato, well before the hour of the wedding itself, and yet they do not. They wait until the embarrassment and shame would be the most keenly felt and get so visibly caught up in the action of the scene that they can hardly hear anyone's protest and refuse to give them any credence when they do. They are incapable of reason, emphasized in this particular production by its staging of the shaming and of the Prince and Claudio's subsequent cockiness prior to hearing of Hero's death. They clearly transgress the boundaries of decency and, regardless of the woman's guilt or innocence, that kind of behavior is likely to be read as unacceptable.

This production also developed the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice very convincingly, playing up the hints of a background history between these two characters more so than other versions. These hints further suggest that the two are a natural match, perhaps in an attempt to circumvent the vexations contained within their "courtship" (i.e. the obvious machinations of their friends). In this RSC version of the play, Beatrice and Benedick's love has been there all the while, and only needed the gentle, if mischievous, prodding of their wiser friends to bring it back to the surface where it belongs. The performances of Beatrice and Benedick characters by the respective actors were by far the strongest in this production. Full of dynamism, vibrancy, and tremendous wit, these

two actors conveyed a believable and vital chemistry which greatly compensated for the weaker performances (i.e. Hero and Leonato in particular). Weakest of all was Dogberry, who is such a fabulously humorous character with all of his malapropisms and general absurdities that it was a shame to see him so flatly played here.

The setting of pre-revolutionary Cuba was a puzzling choice. I did not see any strong links being made throughout the play to the cultural location and had a hard time seeing any historical referents in the particular characters. One factor precluding any kind of direct connection is the comedic nature of the play whose themes do not allow for much interpretive historical commentary. The tragedies and histories have been more successfully reinterpreted in more modern circumstances (Branagh's *Hamlet* and McKellen's *Richard III*, for instance), largely due to the simpler forms of overlap – historical referents superimposed on older historically-based plays. Comedies, for all their potential complexities, seem to operate on different spheres, and this play did demonstrate some of the difficulties in trying to blend historical context with a Shakespearean comedy (namely that the specific references to the culture aside from dance and costuming will be easily lost on the audience).

January 5th: Museums, *Twelfth Night*

Today I went to the Holbien Exhibit as well as the British Museum with Mom. Particularly enjoyed the temporary exhibit on Polynesian sacred art at the BM – small though it was, they had an impressive selection of totemic art from Hawaii, New Zealand, Tahiti and other island civilizations. And seeing the Rosetta Stone and the Parthenon marbles is always a wonderful treat as well. Holbien's exhibit was quite impressive as well – his attention to detail is truly extraordinary and I was amazed at how many portraits I recognized. Was particularly fascinated by his prototypes for the More family portrait, as well as some of the unnamed portraits of nobility. Though essentially first drafts of the painting, he would even render such things as “catchlights” in a woman's eyes!

10. *Twelfth Night*:

I was excited to see this play as it was the first all-male production of Shakespeare that I have ever seen. I was mesmerized by their evocative, yet minimalist set design: the predominance of grey in the background and on the furniture, the sparse foliage or other props. The chorus was also intriguing, made up of ensemble members dressed in black and wearing white masks as they slunk around the stage to observe the action or played various musical instruments. They act as both audience members and displaced contributors to the scene, as if to emphasize at every turn the issue of false or misleading appearance in the narrative.

The sets were also comprised of several mirrors which, in addition to emphasizing the matter of appearance, also emphasize the fact that sight is the least stable of the sensations. Like this production, the RSC production of *Much Ado* used masks in much the same way — to emphasize that the truth is so often underneath that which we can actually see on the surface; and yet the use of mirrors in this production raises the issue of sight to a different level, pinpointing the idea of optical illusion in a way that is not present in *Much Ado*. This interpretative emphasis is likely due to the illusory physical appearance of Viola as Cesario— a female character pretending to be a male and played by a male. The mirrors, coupled with the masks and the hauntingly dissonant music serve to evoke a carnivalesque sense of illusion consistently throughout the performance. This consistent peripheral emphasis on guise reflects the tantalizing nature of Viola's hidden identity, for the audience is constantly reminded of her true identity and the inability of anyone around her to see her for who she truly is.

The one character who consistently subverts this sense of illusion throughout the play is Feste the clown, who both begins and ends the play in a whimsical and haunting song, supported by the white-masked ensemble. As a result, *he* never wears a mask for the entire course of this production. Critics have frequently remarked that for this reason he seems the wisest individual in the play, and perhaps that is why it is he who speaks last in the play. He is similar to Puck's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Puck acts as a trickster figure who subverts the action of the play while at the same time driving it forward to its "natural" end (with the two pairs of lovers being properly matched with each other). Puck, like Feste, speaks at the end of the play, and, while neither are the technical political leaders in their respective works, they are certainly the directors of the plays actions in a way that the other characters are not. These "fools" are, as a result, bracketed outside of the context of the play and almost become commentators on the actions which they observe and interact with. For this reason perhaps, Feste is clearly linked in this production with the marked and peripheral chorus/observers in the ensemble.

Feste's song at the beginning (though not called for in the actual play), and at the end, is disquieting in its implications. Just as he tends to act as an elucidator throughout the play (as, for instance, when he toyingly chides Olivia for mourning her brother for being in heaven), he lifts the veil of humor at play's end to the awareness of life's harshness – perhaps in a telling reminder that comedy is, as the saying goes, merely tragedy averted and that life is full of as many cruel moments as humorous ones.

January 6th: Stratford, *Winter's Tale*, *Merry Wives*, *The Musical*.

11. *Winter's Tale*

The romance motifs in this particular play are fascinating, and it was interesting to see how it was staged, given that I had only read the play and never seen it performed before. I found the staging bemusing, given that half of the audience had to throw themselves over the balcony to get a good view of the action. That made things a bit more distracting than I am sure was intended, but it was, all the same, quite entertaining to see the groundlings mingling with the actors and vacillating between simple observers to unwitting participants for the particular scenes.

The issues of class, transformation, redemption, and time, found so often in the romance and fairytale genre are all at work in this play, and were particularly emphasized in this production. Time, in particular, was dressed for the required occasions – costume being the biggest signifier of its progression (in this case from the glamorous fifties to the hippy culture of the sixties). These costumes also heighten the class-divides so prominently featured in the play: the royalty are introduced in the first scene at an elegant ball replete with big-band music while the peasant culture in which Perdita finds herself welcomed as an infant are first collectively encountered as countercultural flower children. Nobility, while initially noticed in both social classes, is based upon the (presumably) inherent noble blood of the individuals involved (Perdita and her lover for instance are both noble-born and either unknowingly or willingly displaced from their “proper” habitats).

The one individual least capable of noblesse is Perdita's father who, so riddled with irrational fears of cuckoldry (in a manner all too similar to Claudio in *Much Ado*)

destroys his family in his rage over his wife's alleged infidelity — by the end of the dramatic first act, his son and his wife have apparently died, and he casts his own daughter (whom he believes a love child) into the woods to be eaten by wild animals. The man sent to do the job cannot and merely leaves her to die after seeing a bear approach, enabling Perdita to be rescued by the peasant folk. This is, in many ways, a romance version of the same kind of fears of cuckoldry present in *Much Ado*, except with a greater emphasis on the tragic than in the lighter comedy. The play will, however, go on to assert that even someone like Leontes can be redeemed through time.

This is, after all, a romance very much in the fairy-tale mode – a mode that requires a degree of grave moroseness before a satisfactory conclusion may be reached. Unlike *Much Ado*, where the audience is made readily aware of Hero being alive, the audience must wait in this play until the very end when presented with the “statue” of the mother. Her resurrection and reconciliation with her family and daughter affects a technically happy ending and yet it is an uneasy one all the same. Similar to *Much Ado*, where the audience tends to wonder why Hero bothers to take Claudio back, so too do we wonder why the mother so willingly went back into the arms of the man who accused, abused and effectively killed her. In each case, the women do so as much out of obligation to the men in question but to other loved ones as well. Their return to the domestic scene is equally out of love/respect for their husband and for their children (or in Hero's case, her father). While the RSC's version of *Much Ado* hints at this resigned sense of obligation in Hero's reserved demeanor at her reunion with Claudio, there the same kind of depth is not present in this production of *Winter's Tale*, which makes the ending flatter than may have been intended. The performance was moving in its way, with the woman's awaking

and reunion with her daughter, as well as her final reclamation of her honor. There is, however, the disquieting fact that the *men* are always the ones who allow the women to reclaim their honor and live – the women in these plays, for all of the agency that they do have, do not have the power to instrument that much change over their own lives.

12. *Merry Wives The Musical*

Merry Wives was apparently written at the request of Queen Elizabeth I, roughly in two weeks because she wanted to see Falstaff “in love”, and as a result it is one of the more superficial of Shakespeare’s work. The characters are flatter and less distinguishable at first than in other comedies of his, and there is little above the surface of the plot – it is, at its core, a light-hearted farce, a place for even more Falstaff jokes, though the play does celebrate the intelligence and ingenuity of women.

The set, costumes, and dance blended Elizabethan architecture and dress as well as a range of eras from the 20th century in the dress and props used throughout the play. While Falstaff dresses in stock Shakespearean attire, his cohorts look like 80’s era punks with various Renaissance-style accessories, and they all arrive on a vintage mid 20th-century vehicle. The Wives wear dresses that appear to be a mix of Elizabethan and 1950’s fashion, while Mistress Quickly wears, as does Falstaff, “traditional” Shakespearean garb. Added to this are certain dance numbers, particularly the one about the Wives which begins in a familiar sounding Tudor scheme but bursts forth soon after with a theme reminiscent of the musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein. These dichotomous pairings attempt to link this comic tone of the Renaissance play to the modern musical genre which, in its way, makes good sense.

Despite the original intention of the play (to show Falstaff in love and in a comedic setting), and despite the apparent and consistent light-heartedness of the narrative, there are a few important subversions in the play that are worth noting. The most significant one, of course, is that the women possess nearly all of the societal power. Mistresses Page and Ford in particular feign the expected helplessness and submissive behavior attributed to their gender in addition to playing into the myth that a woman's purity is easily jeopardized and "cheapened." They do this all in an attempt to teach Falstaff an important lesson about the female sex: that they require more mastery over themselves than he was willing to ascribe to them. He would have seduced one or both of the women to simply reinstate himself financially and indicates through this decision that he ascribes to the previously mentioned beliefs about women. Page and Ford prove to be more than matches for Falstaff and his subterfuge, and so, in this adaptation, does Mistress Quickly as well.

Judi Dench's performance of Mistress Quickly was highly energetic and enjoyable. The woman, great actress though she is, is not a singer, but she seemed wholly comfortable with that fact throughout the production, a confidence that only made her performance all the more delightful. She is allowed perhaps the one genuinely poignant moment in the play with her song "Honey-Suckle Villain." In this song she reflects upon Falstaff's philandering and alludes to that time (see in Henry IV, part I) when he seemed to be in love with her and wished to marry her (an allusion never made in the original *Merry Wives of Windsor* -- program). Here, she faces the possibility of joining him "upstairs" but decides she cannot because she knows he does not care for her – and sings triumphantly of giving her hopes of him up for good. Pistol enters at this point and we are

left with the suggestion that they are destined to be a couple instead – and that is, in fact exactly what happens as they have married by the time that *Henry V* commences. She overcomes her feelings for Falstaff and her feelings of rejection in this scene and takes an even more active role in Falstaff's "downfall" by playing the fairy queen in the forest fabliaux in which he is made the ultimate fool.

The matter of the horns put on Falstaff in this final, lavish sequence is of particular interest, given the degree of feminine power at work in this play. Horns are attributed, in Renaissance terminology, to the cuckold, and the entire town, under the auspices of the women who Falstaff tried to seduce, ultimately places the cuckold's horns on the would-be adulterer himself. In doing so, the town simply reaffirms its values in the face of a raucous outsider. As Anne Barton notes, Shakespearean comedy usually ends with a sense of societal change, but in this instance "all that has happened is that a pre-existing society whose values Falstaff tried and failed to subvert has triumphed, without losing its vitality of gaiety of heart" (Riverside Chaucer p. 322). While the entire town takes part in the plot to shame Falstaff, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page and Mistress Quickly are most responsible for its success and for the preservation of their town's values, a fact that the men do seem to note by the end of the play

Within the forest fabliaux is another final subversion: for while the women in a fabliaux are instrumental in putting the horns on their husband while feigning fidelity to him, here the women are faithful to their spouses but feign infidelity in order to put the cuckold's horns on the would-be adulterer, all in an attempt to preserve their community through humorous spectacle.

January 7th: Meandering around London with my mother, and *Swan Lake*

13. *Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake*

I had heard of Matthew Bourne's production prior to signing up for this course and was eager to see it performed live, given the acclaim which it has received. Bourne chose to use only male dancers for the swans, and his daring reinterpretation of the story grapples with, among others, the issues of homosexuality, breaks from societal convention or obligation, and a man's relationship to his mother. The story, as a result unfolded in rather thrilling and unexpected ways.

Bourne's decision to use an all male troupe of dancers for the swans was an intriguing one, delicate ballerinas in luminescent tutus are usually used instead. Bourne defends his choice in the following statement: "The idea of a male swan makes perfect sense to me ... the strength, the beauty, the enormous wingspan of these creatures suggests to the musculature of a male dancer more readily than a ballerina in her white tutu" (Program). While I would argue that a female dancer can easily exude the same degree of gravitas and power, I do understand the principle behind his statement, and it does inevitably allow for an examination of homoerotic motifs.

As the program aptly states, much of the psychological drama that belonged to Odette (the Swan Queen) in the original telling is here transferred to the tormented and isolated prince. It is he who seeks escape from his claustrophobic environment, much like Odette who is trapped in the enchantment of Swan Lake. The Prince also wishes to break from the obligations and expectations of his royal position, and Odette seeks the freedom of the human realm. By transferring the psychological emphasis to the Prince, Bourne's

retelling focuses on the restrictions and ensnarements of the human world. In the world of this ballet, the only escape or release from these restrictions is death.

The swans can apparently be read either as actual characters with whom the prince interacts *or* figments in his tormented mind. I will mainly focus on the reading of the Swans as actual creatures, since that was how I interpreted the ballet when viewing it. The other option is fascinating though, and I look forward to watching the recorded version with that in mind sometime soon. Regardless of how one reads the swans, the narrative powerfully examines the nature of attraction and the effects of disconnection on the tormented psyche. The prince only finds affection and solace in the embrace of the powerful and, as alluded to in the initial aggression of the first swan sequence, potentially dangerous swan. The Swan, whether it is an actual otherworldly lover or an aspect of the Prince which he finally accepts, is also the only one who can release him from his earthly torment. To emphasize the Swan's singular importance to the Prince, the ballet both opens and ends with the Prince interacting with him, and both the scenes evoke a kind of tenderness between the two (in the first act, the prince clutches a swan stuffed animal, and in the end the Swan and Prince are seen embracing above the bed).

Knowing implicitly that the Swan and he share a vital connection, the prince lusts after the Stranger at the ball because he sees an affinity between him and the Swan (though he does not realize that the connection is only superficial). He can endure neither the ridicule of his peers nor the taunting of the Stranger and decides, in a rage, to kill the Stranger as a result. Read in psychoanalytic terms, he is trying to kill away the part of himself to which he most needs to be reconciled: the boundless and completely unfettered aspect of his psyche. The Stranger rejects him, but not without tormenting him (part of

the reason for the attempted shooting), simply because that is what he wants to do at the time. An embodiment of nihilism, the Stranger is not bound by any kind of social structure. That, more than the physical appearance, is why the Prince sees the swan in him, and why he becomes so enraged when he is mocked and rejected after making advances.

The final moments of the ballet were incredibly moving and included some of the best dancing sequences of the entire production. Here, the Prince and the Swan meet for a final time and are both killed by the swan troupe, largely because the Swan rejects them in favor of his love for the Prince. Unable to accept that rejection, they tear the lovers apart and peck them to death. Once again, this could all be in the mind of the troubled Prince as he gets ready to kill himself, or it could be read as literal. Thus the opening sequence of the ballet (in which the Prince is awakened by the swan at the window) is fulfilled: the swans are capable of both good and evil and, unlike the original version of Swan Lake, are the unfettered ones. Perhaps though, the swan troupe simply does as the lovers wish and allow them to be together in eternity. Their spirits *are* seen embracing at the conclusion of the play, and I could not help but think of Philemon and Baucis from Ovid (despite the obvious differences in the way in which the couples die). It has even been observed by critics of this version that the lover and the Odette/The Swan seek a kind of love-in-death throughout the progression of the ballet (Program).

There was much talk after the play about the potentiality for a heteronormative reading of the production, one which requires the “homosexual” lovers to be killed off at play's end, and one that negatively portrays homosexuals because of their demise at the end. But while an imbedded commentary on homoeroticism undoubtedly exists, I saw

this ballet as rather heavy commentary on the perils of the heteronormative worldview. Given Bourne's emphasis of the male body and in male interactions on the stage, as well as his wonderful subversion and reinterpretation of this much-loved story, it seems quite clear that he fashioned the vaguely fascist kingdom of the Prince and Queen as a more absolutist version of our own: a world in which breaks from convention will lead not only to ostracism but to (depending on your reading) psychotic breaks and death. Bourne's narrative decisions are a commentary on *our* society's limitations when it comes to accepting people and relationships classed as "other" or "abnormal." The use of the traditional swan imagery emphasizes the uniqueness of their relationship.

January 8th: *The Enchanted Pig* and *The Seafarer*

I went to the National Gallery with my mother today and revisited several of my favorite paintings: Van Eyck's "Arnolfini Portrait" with its painstakingly sumptuous detail, Da Vinci's "Cartoon," Bronzino's "An Allegory with Venus and Cupid" and Carravaggio's "Supper at Emmaeus" among others. The first time I stepped foot in this museum was after my Junior year at William and Mary, having taken four different art history courses and I felt, walking through the galleries for the first time, like it was Christmas. It is always a delight coming back to this museum for that reason, and I manage, each time I come, to find another painting that I had never justly appreciated before: in this case it was Vermeer's two paintings of women at the Virginals, with his unique capturing of light and facial expression. There was also an exhibit on Impressionist art, and I was amazed by the collection of works housed at the Gallery – some truly signature pieces (i.e. one of Seurat's *Pont du Hoc*, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, an entire room of Monet's, etc.). That exhibit in particular meant a lot to my mother, given her great love of late 19th century French art.

14. *The Enchanted Pig*

Our first play for the day was at the Young Vic, a theatre known for its experimental productions and youth productions. The numerous children were quite fun to watch

given their frequent delight and amazement at this spectacle of a play. They were positively adorable, and worlds better behaved than the miscreants sitting in front of us during *Much Ado!*

We talked briefly in class about their daring decision to perform an opera for children and I have to say I was equally impressed by that difficult-to-achieve accomplishment and by the children's acceptance and enjoyment of it. The singing was decidedly strong and well-developed throughout, with each singer adopting or emphasizing a different vocal tone for the sake of character discernment. Added to this were the expressive and captivating sets — complete with deftly managed wire-work, fabulous costumes, and innovative scene changes.

The plot itself was a variant on one of my favorite fairytales: “East O the Sun, and West O the Moon.” Closely related to the Cupid and Psyche myth, the tale traces a woman's unfolding love for her beast-husband (who turns into a beautiful man each night), her subsequent loss of her husband as a result of her attempt to rid him of the curse that causes the nightly metamorphosis, her journey around the world to find him, and her daring and successful rescue of her love right before he is to marry the Troll princess (here a spoiled fashionista). While a much more sanitized fairytale compared to the original Märchen of the Grimm Brothers or the fairytales of Perrault, the first few songs introduce the audience to an entire “culture of fairytale” (Dr. Peck). In the first song, for instance, three women with bee-hive hairdos emerge from backstage doing needlework, invoking the topos of the three fates (the weavers of destiny) while also establishing a sense of gender roles (men are later given lines such as “that war was fun” while women are cast as marriageable and pretty). In addition, the father's admonitory

song sung to his daughters before his departure evokes an entire range of fairytales, from Cinderella to the Frog Prince, from Rumpelstiltskin to Sleeping Beauty.

Certain motifs found frequently in fairytale were also put to use and emphasized in this initial scene. For instance, mothers are frequently dead or absent and sisters often come in threes, both of which are details found in this opera. The sisters in this play are far from malevolent, though they are clearly much sillier and simpler than the heroine Flora. They also lack the deep empathy and emotion of their younger sister, aspects of her character that will take her farther than her siblings could have ever gone — a message, perhaps, to strive for that kind of depth. The allusions to sexual awakening, also common in fairytale are also referenced here to great effect, with the beastly figure of the husband indicating as much about Flora's initial concerns about sexual love as it does about the nature of Pig/Husband. Flora is at first disconcerted and disgusted by the dirt and grime of her new life but then comes to realize, particularly when she sees her husband in his true form, that her life is far from miserable. She even comes to prefer it to her previous existence, so much so that she is willing to go through years of trials and ordeals to get it back.

It is ultimately that same emotional and empathetic depth that gives her access to the cosmic powers of the world. She visits Mr. and Mrs. North Wind and learns an endearing lesson about long-lasting companionate marriage. She then visits the Moon who encourages her on her way and provides her with inspiring luminescent light to guide her, and perhaps his solitude also acts as a further inspiration in her quest to find her husband. From the Moon, Flora journeys to the Sun where she encounters the Sun and his lover the Sky; from them she receives further guidance and a glimpse into ardent attraction and passion found in companionate love. Finally, she journeys to the Milky

Way. In every phase of this journey, she wears the three pairs of iron shoes down into nothingness, gains valuable clues as to her husband's whereabouts, and also gains considerable wisdom about love and marriage. She also receives several jewels that will serve as useful lures for the "troll" princess who wants to marry Flora's husband.

The success of Flora's quest depends on her steadfastness and her attention to the details of certain circumstances. These are two qualities which she did not demonstrate at the outset of their marriage, mainly in the events surrounding her haste to get rid of her husband's spell: she did not follow his instructions to the letter (she makes amends by wearing the iron shoes exactly as she was told), and did not consider the dangers of taking a stranger's advice, lacking an attention to detail that cost her her husband (she makes amends through carefully following the guidance of the cosmic forces and discerning how to free her husband). Once these are demonstrated she is able to save her husband and return to the realm of companionate marriage.

15. *The Seafarer*

*He knows not
who lives most easily on land, how I
Have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea
Wretched and anxious, in the paths of exile,
Lacking dear friends, hung round by icicles
While hail flew past in showers ...
- From the Seafarer (Program)*

This passage, found in the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, is the first text one encounters upon reading the program for this play. Upon viewing the production, it most immediately links to Lockhart's claustrophobic description of hell when talking to Sharkey in Act II – it being a cold place where all are locked off from contact with any

other person, and from where there is no escape. More generally it refers to the isolated state of all of the members of this unusual “comitatus.” While they are friends, their companionship cannot be celebrated without copious amounts of alcohol, and they are far from being beneficial influences upon each other. They seem, rather, to encourage one another’s vices. Sharkey is the exception to the group and tends to spend much of Act I playing mother hen to the rest of them; he has quit drinking, and has devoted all of his spare time into caring, albeit loudly and reluctantly for his blind brother Richard. What becomes clear, as the play progresses, is Sharkey’s feeble attempts to make amends for his past transgressions and attempt to reclaim his soul from the Devil.

Integral to the plot of this play are the allusions to the world outside of the house. References to angry wives, neglected children, deep-seated and dangerous alcoholism, the winos, as well as the acts of violence perpetrated by Sharkey and Ivan are kept to a minimum, and yet they are impossible to forget. They remind the characters within the play, but even more so the audience, of how much lies under the surface of these men’s lives. While we might laugh throughout the play at the genuinely comical moments, these brief but frequent allusions alert us to the limitations of our point of view — of how much we are *not* seeing. Many of these allusions to Sharkey’s life outside cast him as an incompetent man who has no direction and can never do anything right for himself. These small statements collectively suggest his need for redemption of some kind and, once Lockhart makes himself known, they allude to the damned state of his soul.

While these earthly vignettes signify to the audience the dissolute living of the men in this play, music is one of the keys to uncovering Sharkey’s path to redemption. At the very beginning the fierce static from the radio blares on the stage and Sharkey rushes

down the stairs to fix it. Later in the play, Lockhart will explain that he cannot hear music and that it simply sounds as unpleasant noise to him. The fact that the music is only made of static in this beginning of the play indicates Sharkey's graceless status. As he moves closer and closer to the final moments of the play, he is able to hear music again — particularly Mozart's Miserere ("have mercy on us") over the radio. Not too long after this moment do Richard and Ivan save Sharkey by winning the last poker round, to which Lockhart replies "Someone up there likes you, Sharkey." At the end, Sharkey himself puts in an album and the song "Sweet Little Mystery" plays. As he reads a letter from a potential lover, light shines into the room for the first time, an indication of both his redemption and the hope that he will finally start to improve his life and his outlook upon it. Music, in this play, ultimately acts as a pulse beat for the current or ensuing action or thought.

I was deeply impressed by this production and the strong acting on the part of all five of the cast members. I typically enjoy Faustian tales, and this one was no exception. The actors all connected strongly, obviously working individually to create vital and believable characters, ones who would relate to each other in varying ways. Their performance was truly exceptional, aided, no doubt, by the superb play script of Connor McPherson, and I need to read more of his plays now having seen this one.

16. *Thérèse Racquin*

This play concerns the psychological effects of murder, namely the effects upon a pair of amorous individuals who commit the act collaboratively: in this case, Thérèse and Laurent who are in the midst of a passionate love affair. Thérèse is an interesting study

into a depressed mentality. Much like Beane in *Love Story*, Thérèse does not interact or communicate in a manner that is acceptable or understandable to the people around her — in part because she does not find anything in her immediate environment satisfactory or pleasurable. She has been forced into this environment since her father nonchalantly dropped her at her aunt's door as an infant and was effectively forced into marrying her insufferable, sickly cousin (Camille) for whom she feels little more than pity (an emotional response that soon turns to resentment and then hatred once she enters into a passionate and illicit relationship with her husband's friend Laurent). She and Beane are also similar in that they are characters filled with a wealth of passion that most people do not see because it lies so far beneath the surface of their everyday appearance, or (more in Beane's case) is never expressed in a way that is understandable to others. Her husband and aunt read her silence and stillness in the first several moments of the play as evidence of her simplicity, when in fact it more clearly reflects the underlying complexities of the thoughts which she so scrupulously keeps to herself.

The one person to whom she can express her passion is her lover Laurent, and their lust leads directly to the murder of her husband. Murdering him, to them, is the only way to enable their permanent and public union. And yet, once they have achieved all that they desire — once they are even married with her Aunt's blessing — do the lovers begin to mentally unravel. They can no longer touch each other due to the unspeakable guilt and paranoia over the act that they committed together. Divorced from the passion they felt for one another, they realize that their deed was wholly unjustifiable, and they enter into a spiral of despair that cannot be remedied. They start to see and feel their victim everywhere, a claustrophobic presence that leaches out all enjoyment and pleasure that

they had hoped to experience through murdering him: Thérèse has violent dreams and seems to hear him in the apartment, and Laurent can paint only Camille's face after the murder. Added to which, the aunt knows that they killed her son due to a violent conversation between the newlyweds which she overhears on their wedding night (she has a paralyzing stroke due to the shock), so they truly have no peace wherever they turn because the knowledge of their act is all around them.

The lover's relationship is based on little more than lust, supported by their irrational decision to murder her husband in the first place. They gave no thought in all of their plans as to the possible consequences it might wreak upon their relationship. They ultimately lose everything that they had hoped they would acquire through murdering her husband and, in effect, he ends up murdering them by the end of the play with the mere memory of his presence. The anguish of his mother, the fact that she knows what they did, the kindness of friends who know nothing of the real events behind his death, and the fact that they actually killed an innocent person become too much for them to endure. Most important to them, however, is their loss of each other through murdering of Camille — a loss that, once grouped with all of the aforementioned factors, leads them to commit joint suicide, an ultimately cowardly decision.

The lovers make one cowardly and irrational decision after another in this play, culminating in their deaths. They could have announced their love for each other, and Thérèse could have requested a divorce; social conventions would have been thwarted, probably to their detriment, but they would have made their love public and would no longer have to hide it.. They could have even run away. Both options would have gotten them what they wanted, and yet they do not give any of these options an actual chance.

Instead, Thérèse lacks the courage to do anything aside from what her aunt wants her to do and refuses to make those options available to her. She is, in effect, willingly infantilized. Choosing either of these options would also have meant public derision and scorn, and neither Thérèse nor Laurent are strong enough to withstand that burden. Even at the end, they lack the courage to publicly face what they have done and decide to commit suicide to avoid having to account for their crime. Thérèse cannot even make that final decision by herself and has to see some kind of instruction in her Aunt's paralyzed face. These are, in the end, the most pathetic of characters whose crime and unaccountability make it difficult to forge any kind of sympathy for them.

That kind of detachment allows the audience to observe the psycho-drama with a bit more objectivity. By being unable to fully empathize with the characters, the predominate theme of murder and its effects on the co-murderers becomes the primary focus of the viewer. Zola himself intended the story to be a study of the psychological effects of murder on the perpetrators, and the second half in particular becomes, as we discussed in class, an anatomy of collaborative murder done for love. The scientific study effectively answers a question posed by Michaud to Grivet the detective: Do many murders go unpunished? The answer, according to this play, is that no murder goes unpunished, whether the perpetrators of the crime are found by the authorities or not.

17. *Amy's View*

Having heard such good things about Felicity Kendall, I was looking forward to seeing this version of *Amy's View*. I actually saw the play performed in Rochester over the summer and was interested to see how it would be interpreted here in London. This play

is at once a family play, a reflection on reconciliation, as well as a commentary on the fate of the theatre. The strongest moments in this play involve Esme and Dominic's conflicting attitudes about the theatre: Esme passionately defends its importance while Dominic rails against its irrelevance in modern culture. They are both doing this as a way of staking their claim on Amy, whom they both love and whom they both feel a need to possess apart from the other. This entire conflict emblemizes the struggle between film and theatre. Both seek a sympathetic, loyal and attentive audience (i.e. Amy) but the two are rarely interested in learning from the other. According to the play, the theater, like Esme, isolates itself too much from contemporary culture, while the film industry, like Dominic, focuses too much on the whimsical desires of popular culture and, as a result, lacks substance. In the end, Amy leaves both of them because of their inability, perhaps, to understand her, and she eventually dies. Esme returns to the theatre and Dominic actually branches into directing, which is what he always wanted to do. Both find a kind of fulfillment in their work and yet, without Amy (who has since died), their work does not fulfill them in the same way. Interestingly, they are both galvanizing their industries by putting on exciting and popular productions/films. This observation, however, is problematized by the fact that Esme's play is incredibly avant-garde and Dominic's film cashes into the popularity of violence. They have, in effect, simply polarized even more than previously and it seems unlikely that they have found solutions to their unhappiness or to the problems over which they argued years ago. There is a palpable emptiness and solitude in both of them now, a sober realization perhaps that they have forever lost Amy — their greatest audience member and constructive critic.

In terms of this specific production, I was not particularly impressed with Felicity

Kendall's performance. She had moments of strong acting, but tended to act out towards the audience too much, an irony considering her character Esme is known for her inward style of acting. She also overacted several of the more emotional moments of the play (such as her final conversation with Amy). In a play that was (despite the lapses in time) meant to be naturalistic, I found her performance a little stylized and overwrought. The actor playing Dominic, however, did a convincing job of conveying the character's transformation across the four acts of the play.

January 10th: Bash and Billy Elliot The Musical

18. *Bash: Latterday Plays*

It had been years since I had seen one acts performed, and I had been looking forward to these plays with some anticipation. I found them simultaneously mesmerizing and utterly repulsive, a sensation very much akin to watching a natural disaster on live TV—that same, simultaneous horror and inability to walk away or turn the screen off. Each one act was based on a particular Greek tragedy, with the themes from each placed in a modern context. The first, called “Orem” was based on the story of Iphigenia, who was, according to legend, sacrificed for the safe transport of her father's (Agamemnon's) army. Here, an infant daughter is “sacrificed” to save her father's job: he lets her suffocate under the covers because (being in the midst of a job crisis) he knows that a personal tragedy will keep the company from firing him. In the second play an effusive couple discuss (to different individuals) a night in Boston where, after a dance, the young man participates in a brutal beating and murder of an older gay man. In the third play (“Medea Redux”) a young woman recounts her affair with her teacher, the child that

ensues, and her ultimate killing of that child as a way of getting back at her lover.

The acting, for the most part, was strong, and the way in which the stories develop was particularly effective, so effective that I was barely able to keep myself in the theatre. I was so shell-shocked by the content of the first act. I have never come so close to walking out of a play in my entire life, and the only reason I did not was because I would not have been leaving due to anything that the actors or playwright had done wrong. If anything, my reaction to the play would suggest that La Bute and the actors did a considerable amount right in the respective writing and performance of the plays.

Nevertheless, these plays reminded me of Dominic's questions to Esme (in *Amy's View*) about the theatre's value and purpose to modern culture. Why perform something like *Bash*, a play that is so relentlessly disturbing and whose only initial purpose seems to be to toy with the audience's emotions? Part of the answer was found recalling my favorite performances when I acted in high school and college. Of all of the roles I played, I enjoyed the dramatization of the Tell-Tale-Heart (where I memorized the entire short story), and the brooding play Howard Brenton play *Bloody-Poetry* the most. These plays, the darkest ones I performed, were a delight because, as an actor, I could embody characters so contrary to myself. In a Jungian sense, I could tap into those darker parts of the human psyche that we tend to avoid and leave unexpressed. So, from an actor's standpoint, I can readily understand why these roles would hold such appeal. And yet, from an audience member's perspective, I still grapple with the question of what the utility of performing this kind of play would be?

Part of the answer may come from the idea of instrumentality. These characters can easily be universalized in some way — based on the already apparent indications that the

same emotional currents that ran through the Greek tragedies run through us today, and that we too are capable of such acts, though they might be dressed in less mythic terms. In choosing the Mormons as a cultural location, la Bute focuses on a religious organization which is highly attuned to the idea of a social and spiritual community. In locating these atrocities in such a religiously devout and tightly knit society, la Bute implies that these acts can occur anywhere, and that no one is fully immune to the emergence of these emotional currents. Denying their existence (i.e. effectively walking out on the play) seems to be the worst thing an individual could do to him or herself. Just as Zola, through *Thérèse Racquin* argues that no murder goes unpunished, these series of one-act plays reflect on the idea that no murder can go *unspoken*. All humans, as the play purports, have a desire and a need to communicate and make connections with others and, in this case, to relay the darkest parts of their being to another person so that they do not have to bear the truth alone. Working through this entry has been beneficial in parsing out my reaction to the plays. I have never felt so emotionally pulverized walking out of a play in my life and having this journal entry to write has helped me to begin sorting out my reactions to it.

19. *Billy Elliot*

This play could not have come at a better point in the program. After a run of powerful, if occasionally maudlin and frequently draining, tragedies, it was wonderfully refreshing to see a play with a *life-affirming* theme to it. What made the experience even better was the fact that the play steered well clear of unnecessary melodrama. In almost every instance in the first act when I braced myself for a stock emotional ballad, we were

given *dialogue* or a brief comment before the next scene began. The musical was not without any sentimentality, but whenever the narrative moved in that direction (as with the letter from Billy's mother) it does so effortlessly to open up Billy's world that so gently drives him through hostile social, political and personal circumstances. It was refreshing to watch a musical where the way in which the story unfolded was freshly unpredictable. The lyrics were nowhere near as elaborate or as sophisticated as those in *Caroline, or Change*, but that stems in part from Elton John's musical style as well as Stephen Daldry and Lee Hall's desire to return to a music hall tradition with this production (Dr. Peck, in class). Thus, while the lyrics might be a bit more straightforward, they were still carefully written and the dialogue was visceral and believable as well (in no small part because Lee Hall, who wrote the Oscar-nominated screenplay for the movie also wrote the script and lyrics for this musical).

Cinderella motifs abound in this musical, from the mother appearing as a ghostly advisor (whether through a letter or in person), to the emphasis on Billy's ability to project a future for himself (just as Cinderella takes proactive measures, throughout the eponymous fairytale, to secure a life independent of her step-mother), to the possibility of rising in social rank through the perfect shoe (in this case a ballet slipper), to the motif of transformation -- of both Billy into a confident dancer and the father who gradually comes to support his son.

The directors and writers used dance in innovative ways throughout this musical. It is a personal statement of one's individuality, a psychological state (as Billy articulates in the song "Electricity" and as it is embodied in the *Swan Lake* dream sequence), a social statement (as in Michael's fabulous song encouraging Billy to express himself), and

finally an expression for the political tensions exhibited in the play. One of the most powerful dances in the entire musical blends all four of these usages together. Referred to as the “Angry Dance” it begins with Billy angrily tossing around his bedroom and throwing himself and his furniture against the walls (a reaction to his father’s and brother’s refusal to understand his dancing). As he moves downstairs the personal expression of anger is still there, but it starts to transform into something larger. The dance begins to express the psychological state of anger as each tensed gesture in the dance evokes the same kind of frustrated entrapment which the young boy feels at that time. The dance then shifts to even larger territory and emblemizes the town’s social and political tensions. The final part of the dance, when Billy encounters the riot police, simultaneously represents the protest itself, the heated emotions of both Billy and the entire town, and Billy’s fight against the familial barriers that are obstructing his dream.

This was a powerful production with some of the most impressive dancing I have seen so far in this trip; the acting was also quite solid, with some of the better dialogue I have encountered in a musical in quite a while (no doubt because of Lee Hall’s work on the script). The young boy who played Billy was spectacular and charismatic, and I was also impressed with the adult ballet dancer who accompanied him in the Swan Lake segment. In some ways I found their dance more impressive than the pas de deux in Bourne’s Swan Lake. I should probably mention that I have yet to see the film, but I cannot wait to see it when I have the chance. I am very glad that we saw this play when we did. It was a much needed moment of levity after the succession of fascinating, but rather heavy dramas that preceded it.

January 11th: *History Boys* and *There Came a Gypsy Riding*

20. *History Boys*:

I took particular interest in the intersections of humorous and dark content in this play. It dealt with issues seen in other plays thus far, such as illicit sexual relationships, inappropriate sexual contact between student and teacher, and homosexuality. But unlike *Bash* which rarely, if ever, broke the tension or its relentlessly bleak mood, *History Boys* incorporates a blend of genuinely humorous moments (such as the French Class scene where the boys act out a scene in a brothel) with instances of the pathetic and disturbing (such as the teacher's frequent groping of his students while on his motorcycle). The play does not moralize or comment upon British culture in the heavy-handed way that *Bash* comments upon the superficiality of American cultural community, but offers certain critiques of the education system in England, or simply the process of education itself (where youth are subject to manipulation long before they have found their own voice). The play as a result examines the acceptable and inevitable influence that a charismatic teacher will wield over his students and how the line between beneficial influence and wounding influence can be dangerously thin. Of the three teachers presented in the play, the woman represents the formidable, somewhat formulated and fact-based history instructor whom the boys admire immensely for the background information with which she provided them. The older instructor they all seem to love dearly, and he grossly transgresses his boundaries by fondling them while on his motorcycle. His teaching methods clash rather vehemently with the young teacher brought in to help the boys pass their A-levels, and he is successfully seduced by a

student (clearly reacting to the groping received by the older instructor).

The delicacy and the humor attached to the older instructor's habit of groping students was a bit baffling, and might (to its credit) have seemed less so had I not seen "Medea Redux" just twenty-four hours prior. What troubled me though was the difficulty in figuring out what to make of that almost flippant attitude towards the sexual infractions in this play. While I applaud the director's attempt to approach the issue of sexual power-relationships, I initially had a difficult time quite making sense of the constant joking about the man's transgressions or the occasionally nonchalant manner in which the boys address the matter — almost as if it is being dismissed as a tremendous problem.

Upon closer examination, the intersection of humor and serious content communicates much of the same concerns about sexual misconduct that *Bash* did, and in a way this play is just as naturalistic in its representation of relationships and the effects of sexual abuse on each of the individuals involved in the play. The writer does not deflect the graveness of sexual abuse but, in a tactic similar to that found in *The Seafarer*, uses humor as a means of alerting the audience to a particular issue underneath the surface of the dialogue. For instance, there are several moments for laughter when the boys talk to or about their older teacher, including their conversations (amongst themselves) about him groping them. The humor does not masque how serious the issue of his abuse of power is, but it conveys the boys' lack of complete comprehension and the teacher's incredible influence over them.

I was impressed with the performance, from the innovative set design, to the impeccably strong acting, to the brave decision on the writer's part to round out each central character so that none of them can be thoroughly vilified or praised for their

actions.

21. *There Came a Gypsy Riding*

This play examines the effects of suicide on a tightly-knit family and its psychological effects on the various members of that unit. Most emphasized is the effect on the mother Margaret, played with a wonderful multi-dimensionality by Imelda Staunton. She keeps herself well contained in the first act and exerts several visible attempts to control her emotions and keep them underneath the surface. The fact that her attempts are so visible foreshadows her impending emotional collapse in the second act as the memory of her son viscerally "washes ashore". He is once again brought to the surface by Bridget who, instead of finding his actual body this time, brings a letter which he had on his person the day he killed himself. She hid the letter and now presents it on the eve of his 21st birthday because she feels the family is "ready." Margaret had mentioned her wish that there had been a letter earlier in the play, and the arrival of this letter brings with it the hope that perhaps something will be resolved and this chapter of their lives closed. When the letter provides no clue as to her son's reasoning behind his suicide, Margaret spirals into a near psychotic episode, where all of her hardships experienced throughout her life pile on top of her and her guilt over misunderstanding her son almost sends her into the waves after him.

She quotes Keats and makes Death her son's bride in an attempt to make sense of her loss. When her children disobey her and refuse to go out into the water (or farther along the beach, I cannot quite recall), she screams that she should beat them, but what actually boils at the surface is the shame and anger over the beatings inflicted upon her as a child.

Though she appears delusional in this sequence, Margaret is actually the most lucid and open one in the family. Her entire subconscious cracks open in this moment and she finally talks about the loss of her son and her other grief without inhibition. When she collects herself, she cannot remember what she said — evidence, perhaps, of the purging effect that this moment had for her.

The other members of her family react very differently to the loss of their son or brother. They are, for the most part, much quieter than Margaret in expressing (or expelling) their grief. All of their responses indicate the ultimate desire to bury the grieving pieces of themselves so that they can continue to live, and each of them has journeyed back to the boy's place of death to try and expunge those parts of themselves. Margaret, by play's end, shows promise of having made peace with her son and his death. The same seems to hold true for the other three members of the family as they make their own peace with the boy's death as well, in part because of the power of Margaret's release towards the end of Act II.

I found this play more moving in retrospect than in the moment, and I feel very strongly that this was primarily due to my state of mind going into the play than anything else. I was prepared for the dark content of this play since I knew in advance that it centered on a young man's suicide, and, I learned a valuable lesson in theatre going from this production — that if you go to a play unwilling to be moved, or “braced for impact” you simply will not be touched by the experience because you are not giving anything to it. That does not mean that a playwright and the performers should not be held to standards. I did find this play less effective in its capacity to move than *The Seafarer* due mainly to matters of narrative pacing (there were substantial slow moments in this

production). However, restraining my reaction going into the play had a noticeable effect on my initial perception of it, and, in retrospect, I found that this play has a much greater capacity to move me than I had initially attributed to it.

January 12th

22. Don Juan in Soho

In the opening scene of the play, DJ (played with incredible panache by Rhys Ifans) instructs the audience *not* to be moved by him, and the glittering, nymphomaniac of an anti-hero does his best throughout the play's progression to ensure that those around him (audience included) will not have a chance to feel much at all for him. I was surprised to find out that the same writer behind this work was responsible for *Closer* as the discussion of sex and all its (potentially insidious) complexities were teased out with much more sophistication and originality than in this play. Nevertheless, the play was styled after Moliere and the writer does seem to be attempting something different in this production. Whereas *Closer* is more a study of various characters and their interactions, this play is a satirical romp through 21st century London, with DJ acting as the embodiment of all the vices of modern culture. He is flashy, lazy, smooth-talking, nihilistic, hedonistic, and, ultimately, insatiable. His desires can never be met and, once he has acquired a new woman he is instantly dissatisfied with her once he has been intimate with her for very long. The chase excites DJ far more than the acquisition does — a sentiment that applies directly to his sexual appetites but can also be a reflection on modern consumerism as well (at least in terms of the insatiability of his desire). His lackey even comments on DJ's declaring "jihad against the human spirit," a statement that points as much to the vices of modern consumer-driven culture as it does to DJ

himself.

He is obviously *not* meant to be an empathetic character and almost goes to extremes to ensure that people cannot empathize with him. Whether getting oral sex performed on him while attempting to seduce a woman whose husband he may have inadvertently killed, deliberately destroying his innocent wife without even a glimmer of remorse (the only feeling he has for her is lust when she becomes remotely unattainable), or blatantly lying to his father, DJ affirms his hedonistic attitudes and is in love with his completely repulsive lifestyle and the ironic fact that it makes him, at least to himself, “magnificently fuckable.” This statement, taken with another in which he calls himself “uber-human” (i.e. man in his primal or animalistic state), also suggests that the inability to empathize with him perhaps reflects more on the aspects of ourselves, or of culture, that we are not willing to acknowledge.

Despite the inability to empathize with him, he nevertheless commands a certain respect in the last minutes of his life. His wife’s brothers tell him that if he apologizes and repents that they will spare him his life and he refuses. When they ask him why, he states (to paraphrase) that he would rather die as himself than live as something that he is not. Thus, while DJ was incapable of virtually any kind of faithfulness in life, he at least, is faithful to the person who truly mattered to him: himself.

January 13th: Last day of class, Spamalot and Antony and Cleopatra

23. *Spamalot*:

This production was as enjoyable as I had hoped it would be. Full of references to the film as well as to other moments in Monty Python lore, it was a delightful parody of the

musical genre and refused to take itself even remotely seriously, to the great delight of the entire audience.

The re-imagined story of Python's Arthur and his knights on the quest for the Grail successfully parodied musical tropes throughout the entire production (whereas the film itself tends to subvert the film genre). The cleverest by far was the song delivered by the Lady of the Lake and Galahad entitled "This Is the Song That Goes Like This," a wonderful satirizing of the standard musical ballad, complete with an inordinate amount of key shifts. Another example of their parodying of musical theatre can be found in the second act when Arthur and Robin realize that "you won't succeed in showbiz if you don't have any Jews." They proceed to launch this rather risky number with tremendous enthusiasm (and glittering Star of David jewelry), and I probably would not have been as uncomfortable as I was had I not been in Britain and been aware (thanks, incidentally, to a fascinating Kalamazoo talk) on the country's gradual sanitization of the history surrounding Medieval Britain's treatment of the Jew. It made Arthur's complaints and queries as to where all the Jews had gone a bit more resonant — the uncomfortable laughs from the audience in response to his comments were particularly intriguing.

In terms of the acting, I was the most impressed with the woman who played the Lady of the Lake. She had a spectacular voice and exuded enthusiasm every moment she was on the stage. The other actors were pleasing as well, though none of them could come close to replacing the original Python's. To compensate, several creative liberties (some already mentioned) were taken when adapting the film, and these became the strongest moments in the musical— queering Lancelot was a particularly nice touch. While hearing the more well-known lines from the film performed on stage was

entertaining, the actors, on occasion, seemed too aware of how well known some of the lines were and simply tossed them out to the audience (the swallow and coconut dialogue in particular succumbed to this); there were a many moments, however, when they did manage to make these famous lines their own, particularly in the scene where they discover Galahad. In summation, the play — in its lightness, enthusiasm, and colorful sets — was well worth seeing and an excellent way to close the official part of the course.

24. *Antony and Cleopatra*:

I had seen Patrick Stewart in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* when I was previously in London, but had never seen him in a live performance of Shakespeare. I was, in short, mesmerized not only by his performance but by Harriet Walter's as well. Both actors embodied their characters completely, and unlike Felicity Kendall's performance in *Amy's View*, they did not act *out* towards the audience in the least. Their performances were quite internal, even in their solitary moments on the stage.

I was quite impressed by the chemistry between Stewart and Walter. Playing these two historical figures must certainly present a challenge, particularly given the substantial amount of mystique that surrounds them — Cleopatra in particular. One of the program writers stated that Shakespeare “synthesizes” the split historical memory of Cleopatra (as an exotic seductress and able ruler), the result of which is an “entrancingly unpredictable Queen.” Walter manages to work within this synthesized construction and, through it, presents a very *human* Cleopatra, for all of her magisterial and religious pageantry. The unpredictability of Shakespeare's Cleopatra that results from this synthesis of historical perceptions keeps her in the realm of the empathetic. Despite her flaws (her fixation on

and desire for power, her occasional moments of irrationality, her constant theatricality), Walter's Cleopatra retains her dignity by means of her suicide. Killing herself prevents her reduction to a mere whore by Octavius, who would have paraded her around the streets of Rome as a "puppet."

Antony, played by Patrick Stewart, is in some ways a more problematic figure. Ever torn by his desire to maintain his reputation as a decorated Roman general while fulfilling his desire for Cleopatra and the luxury of the East, he spends most of the play vacillating between the two worlds in a fruitless (though subconscious) quest to find a way to have both. That proves impossible and, when he has been deserted by everyone, including his lover, he decides to kill himself to restore his honor. The language surrounding his death makes it clear that *he* believes he will restore his status as an honorable Roman by doing so, but the audience is left to question how reinstated his heroic status really is. This production emphasized the different motives behind the deaths of the two principle characters to quite a degree. The way Stewart played the death of Antony, and the way in which the other characters reacted to him made his death far more pathetic in nature when compared to Cleopatra's (that she dies after him is also telling). This rendition also left the matter of his honor unresolved and, if anything, leans towards the perspective that he does *not* succeed in reinstating himself as a hero. Contrasted with the regal, unavoidable suicide of Cleopatra, his death seems all the more feeble by comparison, particularly since he does not succeed in killing himself quickly.

The sets, as minimalist as possible, were spectacularly draped in bold colors to designate the various locations of the play. The staging of the play was also impressively done; Cleopatra's death was, in particular, marvelously rendered.

After the play, a small group of us gathered around the stage door to see if we would be able to meet Patrick Stewart. Harriet Walter came out first and chatted with us briefly and, after a little while, Mr. Stewart came out to greet us and sign programs. Both of them were very gracious, and it took a few days for it to actually sink in that I had met and shook hands with Patrick Stewart. I could not have imagined a more perfect way to end this amazing trip.

Conclusion:

I doubt I will ever again have the chance to see this many plays in a single London season, and it was an incredible immersion experience! The course has raised some interesting questions about the purpose of theatre, from the basic question as to why it holds such appeal, to why that appeal seems to be lessening, and also what the utility of the theatre is. Having completed the course, I sense that the theatre's appeal and its utility are rooted in the desire of the audience to be transported — whether to another location, culture, emotional state or perspective on the world. Billy Crudup, in a recent interview for his Broadway production of *The Pillowman*, said that he felt people come to a play to be manipulated. I disagree strongly with the word choice as it implies or suggests a lack of active thought on the part of the audience member. If I learned anything on this trip it is how very *active* you have to be as a viewer in order to experience the transportation that a play can provide (though not all completely succeed in doing so). That very requirement is probably behind dwindling appeal of the theatre. We live in a society where our more common form of entertainment has become TV (where commercials interrupt the program every few minutes), or Film (where scenes

change with occasionally distracting rapidity). A play requires much more from the viewer in terms of sustained attention, a factor that may be reflected in the smaller number of attendees and the consequentially shorter runs of certain plays. In the end, I sense that as long as the theatre continues to be a place of innovation and experimentation, there will always be a place and an audience for it, though it will always be in competition with the more accessible TV and Film industries.