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Journal Entries  
ENG 252: Theatre in London  
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30 December 2005

*Lysistrata*

Written by Aristophanes, trans. Ranjit Bolt (1993)

Dir. Sarah Eisdale

This production of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* had me in stitches, but was also extremely provocative in subtle ways. While unabashed about the comedy inherent in a play about a sex strike, this production also drew attention to the dire situation that Athens and Sparta have created for themselves at the opening curtain, paralleling the dire situation that the US and the UK have helped create in Iraq.

Not knowing exactly where to begin, I would like to consider the set. A dark and damp car park, with fluorescent bulbs illuminating the oil stains on the concrete stage. I found this a fascinating choice for this extremely current translation and production of Aristophanes original comedy for two reasons. First, a car park is a transitional space, where vehicles and their cargo have a moment's pause before striking out again. The decisions made by the fantastic female leads against this background are likewise means to an end – once their goal of ending the war is achieved, they move onward. The principals pile into the central car that was also their mode of 'entrance' onto the stage itself, back to their beds. Although this entry comes at the beginning of my journal, I'm writing it last, so please excuse my anticipatory reference to one of the final plays in this series: the peace fought for and won by these women is perhaps as transitory, as imperfect as one of Hannah's 'broken gates' in Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana*. The sacrifice the women make is not without temptation and trial, the subjection and subjugation of one desire to another. More importantly, the movement out of this space at the play's conclusion, back into the 'real world' of city halls and diplomatic conferences suggests a return to the issues that provoked a conflict between Athens and Sparta in the first place, the issues that may well again strike a spark. And yet this peace, however brief it may prove to be, is not minimized by its transience. One element that I neglected in my consideration of *Night of the Iguana* (one very much in line, I think, with the theme of 'broken gates') is the humble fact that Shannon frees the captured iguana, saving its life. While the play closes on Hannah in her new solitude, with Shannon still without salvation at the beach, we may find consolation in the liberation of that animal by an act of human kindness. Another may again be captured to take its place, but that does not negate *this* salvation.

A final consideration of the car park as transitional space: this production of *Lysistrata*, one of the first anti-war plays (if not the first) was dedicated as an act of protest to the war that continues even now in Iraq. Such an announcement highlights the stage itself as a transitional space. After the final ode is sung, we all – actresses, actors, production staff, audience – we all go back out into a world where soldiers in combat are

wearing our flags upon their sleeves. In my mind, *because* of its very brevity and superficiality, the theatre has a dignity. War, in contrast, runs too long, and cuts too deep.

The other element of the staging in a car park that is suggestive is that (judging from the absence of windows and the huge concrete pillars), we are *underground*. This has, of course, a comically suggestive element: with men in charge, the eloquence of the spin that comes out of the city hall above can never obscure the basic truth that the *real* thinking is being done down below. Also, thinking just now about these concrete pillars, this is where the weight of the entire structure above is resting, where the forces above are put in contact with the foundation and dispersed through the foundation. As Lysistrata's plan proves masterfully, if you throw this 'most base' level into imbalance, the architecture above quickly crumbles. The contact with the earth, a foundation pressed down upon the bedrock reminds us also that civilization is built not only on the wars declared above, but by the organic contact made below.

31 December 2005

*A New Way to Please You or The Old Law*

Written by Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, and Philip Masinger

Directed by Sean Holmes

Trafalgar Studios

*A New Way to Please You* raises interesting issues surrounding the tension between individual and societal loci of value and desire. The title itself begs the question – who is to be 'pleased,' and by what? Is the idea of State, manifest in a leader like Prince Evander or in a tribunal of citizens to be satisfied? Or is this a way in which the state provides for the pleasure (or the fulfilment of desire) of its citizens? Ideally, both might be achieved - the fulfilment of both individual and social/political desires - but which should be given priority in situations less than ideal, which is to say *every* situation?

The opening scene with the lawgivers in dialogue with Simonides and later Cleanthes presents one notion of value in human life. From the position of *this* state (a most utilitarian and perhaps legalistic approach), male citizens exist only to serve in the military or to provide 'counsel' – to pass on a lifetime of experience and wisdom to a younger generation. Female citizens are reduced to their reproductive capacities – fertile fields for the generation of new citizens. Beyond a certain age, it obviously becomes difficult for citizens to perform these functions. They then become a burden to the body politic – dead weight.

Cleanthes throughout embodies the paradigmatic conflict – in his passionate love of his father, he exemplifies those social bonds based not on utility, but on the irrational affection of sons for fathers, brother for brother, man for wife (though Cleanthes perhaps falls short in this final category). As he declares to Simonides, he would rather not live one moment without his father. This position, from the perspective of Simonidean self-interest, is ridiculous. Each moment his father lives could be seen as a forfeit of his inheritance. But Cleanthes does not desire purely personal gain – he is not 'pleased' by it if such pleasure comes at the pain of his father's life. Although interestingly enough, his father, like Simonides's father Creon, does not fear death and considers it moreover his

duty to comply with the law of his *fatherland*. These characters embody an extension of Cleanthes's irrational love, only with the state itself as its object.

Creon's apparent pursuit of this irrational love, to the point of accepting death, complicates his character, especially placed in contrast with the passionate exhortations of his wife on behalf of his continued valued to the state. The issue itself is problematized by our ignorance of whether or not the tribunal of elders (including Creon) is 'in' on Prince Evander's test of his citizens. Does he 'accept' the state's decision purely because he knows it carries no consequence? To first consider the idea that he does *not* know that this is purely a test, that he believes this new law will cost him his life, I was a little disturbed to see such an otherwise exemplary citizen immediately bend under the pressure of injustice. Is he not convinced of his own wife's arguments? Is he not of greater value to the state alive than dead? Is he not a more valuable example to his own misguided son in the flesh than in Simonides's fragile memory, enchained to present fashion? Furthermore, his interactions with his wife surrounding his death are reminiscent of Cleanthes's treatment of his own wife. Both these women are passionate for justice and passionately in love with their husbands, perhaps even better (more balanced?) examples of the conflict between individual love and social responsibility. Yet, Cleanthes's behaviour aside, Creon's essential response to his wife's ardent pleas for his life seems to be, 'you'll die soon enough anyway, it'll only be two years until we're together again. Is it really worth getting worked up about?' In our current political climate in which 'family values' are made the foundation of any state, the Creon who so casually dismisses the genuine and faithful love of his wife and shows so little emotion in return seems casts doubt on his own fitness as a leader. But more simply, Creon's behaviour begs the question: what is the value of a life given to the state when that gift seems such a little sacrifice? Creon seems a passive victim of the new law, not an active participant in it.

If, on the other hand, Creon and the other elders *do in fact know* this is only Evander's test, the question then becomes, what of leaders who feel compelled to test their citizens? Is Creon specifically engaged in testing the fidelity of his wife and son?

The play presents a synthesis or alignment of individual and collective 'desires' as a solution to the tension between the two. Man's individual desires should include the welfare of the state (epitomized by Creon and Leonides, willing to die), and the state should guard the most fundamental social bonds which form its own very foundations, rather than sunder them. That sounds just great, just swell. But there are problems with the play's presentation of this solution. The crowning example of this fusion between individual and social desires is not in fact a perfect synthesis: like the rest of the characters in this play (and indeed, the rest of *us*), this leader's desires are always in a state of fluctuating, dynamic tension.

In his final exhortation of the counsel (populated by the criminals themselves), Cleanthes recalls Aeneas, the founder of Rome and progenitor of Roman law. But in doing so, he opens the bag on layers and layers of political and personal complexities in the Aeneid. Most poignantly, I think it raises the issue of 'just rulership,' denying that the irrational (arguably most human) element of our loves and desires might ever be truly excised from a rational and abstracted desire for justice. If I remember the details correctly, Aeneas sees the belt (garter?) of his fallen comrade as worn by his slayer Turnus, and instead of showing a majestic mercy to him, helpless on the field, Aeneas

brutally slays him. His irrational desire for vengeance (and for the fulfilment of personal desire on the whole), having been successfully repressed throughout the arduous journey to found Rome and rebuild civil society for his fellow refugees, have finally returned in a cold execution. Aeneas in this moment *fails* the test. I wonder if Vergil was feeling any resonances with the political situation of *his* day – was he disappointed that Augustus was as much a slave to violent desire as his epic anti-hero?

Holding in mind that Aeneas was in fact at times in a state of imbalance - that his repression of individual desire was not always successful, a consideration of Aeneas as a 'family man' can be instructive and supportive of the play's solution to the issue. This play is deeply involved in the notion of 'virility' – is it purely man's prowess on the battlefield that makes him a man? Or how much he can drink, or how he dances? The play pokes fun at these measures, and in the background remains the brilliant and at times imperfect service-leadership of that great 'vir.' Aeneas in fact loses his wife and father on the journey to Latium, yet I think it merits mentioning that at no time does his destiny demand of him their sacrifice at his own hand. He is willing, despite the pain that he experiences and makes visible (unlike Creon's passive acceptance of his death sentence), to actively pursue the course laid out for him and his people. The tension between these loves is not simply swept aside. In my mind, Cleanthes, with his own imperfections and imbalances in his love for family/love for state, most clearly embodies this tension necessary for just rulership. For him, justice is not something to be passively accepted from on high, but rather something in which every citizen must actively participate.

31 December 2005

*Twelfth Night*

Written by William Shakespeare

Directed by Michael Boyd

Design by Tom Piper

Music by Siamed Jones and John Woolf

Novello Theatre

I loved this play and this production. I especially enjoyed the music, which added both charm and pathos to the entire production – but especially to the character Feste, who was vividly three-dimensional, perhaps even more so than any other character.

I thought the production did a fantastic job of dramatizing the issues of transparency in tension with a need to 'untie, unravel.' Of late I've been extremely keen on the idea of narrative as tapestry – woven from threads of tradition into new arrangements – but more appropriately here, as a necessarily tangled web of representations. 'Necessarily' in that it is impossible to separate different elements from every other without losing coherence.

The sounds of the sea that played in the theatre as the audience was being seated gave way to music at the opening of the first scene. This congruence suggested to me the intimate connection between Viola's despair at having lost her brother and the trauma of her own shipwreck with the lovesickness of Orsino and his confusion even in his own court. When the scene shifted away from Orsino and the music stands and piano remained in view in the flies (a new technical term I just learned), I think they served as a reminder of the intimate intertwining of the diverse narrative strands, perhaps especially

appropriate considering this weaving metaphor could certainly be applied to the intertwining of musical phrases and voices.

The issue of transparency (or conversely, of conscious obscuring) was also physically dramatized in this production by the stage's back wall – sometimes a black curtain, sometimes a striking pair of eyes painted on a wooden wall. If memory serves, the curtain was in place when the action was at Orsino's court, and lifted while at Olivia's: like Olivia herself, a veil of her unwillingness prevents Orsino from a direct vision of his love's object.

But the issue at hand seems to be the *necessity* of that veil for the play to function at all. When I first noticed the raising of the back curtain to reveal the eyes, I thought about the veil and some of its resonances with other works – Dante's Beatrice, especially. Also, since then I have been reminded of the discourse on *weaving* as women's work in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* – how female expertise in carding, spinning, and weaving wool would make women more fit than men for rule in matters of state. At the setting of *Lysistrata*, men have made such a tangled mess of things that only violence (the destruction of the tapestry, the cutting of threads?) can sort things out in their minds. And that is the goal and end of the characters woven by Aristophanes.

Shakespeare's purpose, at least at the outset, is in contrast to entangle, to *make a mess*. He devises a delightfully dishevelled mix of representations and misrepresentations, which must interact confusedly with one another for 4 acts. Confusedly because the truth is veiled by intention or accident.

So, what was interesting to me in conclusion of this literalized veiling/unveiling with the back curtain was this: when everyone gets together and the height of confusion (and threat of violence towards Antonio) begins to unravel into coherence, so too does the painted back wall *itself* slowly recede into the flies (!), revealing unused set pieces and other technical elements of the theatre. In this vein, at the first face to face meeting of Orsino and Olivia, the eyes that haunt the back wall, themselves only a painted representation, are no longer necessary. And so with the revelation of all the other 'true' identities: once unravelled, untangled, the narrative itself comes undone and there is nothing left to speak about. Complication and deception are the stuff of the play itself.

Feste, of course, plays an important role in this complication, declaring himself to Viola 'a corruptor of words. This production added complexity to even that, and to its credit. In the bare text itself and in the opening scenes of the play, I was attracted to Feste as one who remained *outside* the deceptive web of misrepresentation in that he was personally uninvolved and disinterested in any specific outcome for one character or another (least of all himself, apparently), and rather *added* to and played within the complications of the linguistic sphere. I was attracted to his 'in the world, but not of the world' approach. But this production would disrupt his Pauline hermitage. In making Maria the object of his unrequited love, I think this production makes an interesting commentary on the nearly coercive inclusivity of narrative webs – in all their misrepresentations and misunderstandings. He cannot stay out of it, he is drawn into this world. Feste's plays on language are transformed from abstract exercise and theatrical technique into vividly personal and pathetic self-representation – a cover as deceptive and human as any presented by Viola or Sir Andrew.

2 January 2006

*The History Boys*

Written by Alan Bennett

Directed by Nicholas Hytner

Lyttelton Theatre

I was deeply moved by *The History Boys*. I've been trying to parse out just why I found it so affecting – I identified strongly with Posner and I was not at all pleased by the resolution or lack thereof that Bennett gave to him in the 'flash forward' of the roll call. Although I did think it prescient. As the boy most keen on Hector's approach to education, the one who is affected most on the emotional level by the idea of 'breaking bread with the dead' or the 'reaching out of hands,' it's appropriate that Posner make himself a victim to the same loneliness, the same removal to which Hector subjects himself.

The disparate approaches to teaching as embodied by the 3 central teachers – Hector, Irwin, and Lintott – are fascinating commentaries on their characters. Indeed, their approaches are inseparable from their character identities, and I think Bennett crafts the plot of the play masterfully around these divergent visions of pedagogy and history.

All 3 teachers are interested in encouraging the boys to develop an understanding of their relationship to history, which might be defined as a sort of cultural/social memory. The question is – how does my own individual memory fit in? Hector, whose approach I find the most compelling (in the abstract), imagines an understanding of history and art to be the foundation for 'breaking bread with the dead' – an idealized communion with great minds of the past. His class takes on in some moments an almost ritual element, most notably in his insistence on memorization and recitation of great works. In his one on one with Posner, one can see Hector's mastery in encouraging his boys to internalize and make their own that mass of (broken) images and words that have come before – that when the moment is right, the collective memory of history and the canon of man's reaction to it in works of art might be made real and powerful in the boys' hearts and minds. This is communion – 'do this in memory of me.' Lintott would suggest that it is Hector who would want to be remembered in this way, and I don't deny it. But it may be part of something larger.

Hector's approach, the limitations of which we will investigate shortly, could be seen as a sort of 'common profit' approach - what is real for Hector and the boys under his spell is the *corporate* nature of experience – art is the medium by which we might stretch out hands across time and space to connect with others – not for gain but for consolation. Irwin, in sharp contrast, emphasizes a relationship to history and art that is highly utilitarian and for the pursuit of one's own singular profit. Entirely eschewing the personal pathos of Hector, Irwin introduces a vicious practicality to the boys – and a practicality that disrupts and perverts the canon. Dakin at one point refers to his approach a 'subjunctive history' – a play in what *might* be or have been – a new way of looking at events that emphasizes the malleability of interpretation and of memory. In this sense, Irwin represents a sort of 'corruptor of words' when it comes to history, and one could view the progress of the boys down Irwin's track as the 'corruption' of the purity encouraged by Hector. Now, I don't think there's such a thing as purity, and I think Irwin's approach proves a necessary step in the process of broadening one's

understanding of history. The canon, so dear to Hector that it almost becomes his very voice, is a collection of *human* products – there is nothing especially sacred about them. They may be inverted and subverted according to our present needs and desires. I think this sort of irreverence is the beginning of creativity – who would dare to reinvent, rework, if every source was hallowed? But Irwin’s encouragement of creativity is cheap and ultimately proves non-discursive, as evidenced in his television program – he turns his eyes from the humble majesty of the cloister church to its latrine. What a base vision of production! After all, Irwin’s concern is very production oriented – to *produce* Oxbridge entrants. I’m just playing around here, but it’s funny to think of the latin – *facio, facere, feci, factus* – to do or make.

Mrs. Lintott is a fascinating lynchpin in this dichotomy. Her concreteness, both in her ‘A,B,C’ teaching approach and in her awareness of the human factor and cost in history allows her to transcend the disagreement between Hector and Irwin, as they both insist on viewing history only in the abstract. No doubt her singularity as a female character contributes: perhaps her most cutting comment on the nature of history is ‘History is women following behind with the bucket.’ Her vision of history involves an understanding of human suffering, an empathy with those left on the battlefields – those whose stories will not be written. Her frustrations at having to teach 1500 years of male ineptitude is perhaps an unintended comment on Hector and Irwin. As dominant figures, both in gender and station in the school, they lose sight of how their own behaviour really effects those subjected to their dominance – the boys, blinded by their battles with the other’s pedagogy and with their own insecurities. I believe it is Mrs. Lintott who says, ‘they remember everything,’ speaking of the boys. It’s interesting to think about Hector and Irwin in terms of their understanding of the *example* they set for the boys. Neither is able to really put their intellectual technique into real human practice, or if they do, it’s a very limited approach to life. As Dakin points out, Irwin’s daring and subversive intellectual life has no bearing on his personal life. And while Hector spends his days reaching out hands to dead poets, he is unable to form meaningful and fulfilling relationships with those around him in the present. Lintott sees the self-construction of these two men for what it is – she recognizes their humanity throughout, as the boys do only at the end, and as they themselves perhaps do only imperfectly.

The ‘unravelling’ of the play climaxing in the motorcycle accident is an intriguing commentary on these masculine visions of history. I think, to an extent, for both Hector and Irwin history is something *set apart*, which is to say separate from themselves. For Hector it is the majesty of the canon which he holds within him – but does not include him. For Irwin it is a damp sandbox – a realm of play he will not enjoy. For both, it is something that can be understood, fathomed. The discussion of the Holocaust seems to be an exercise in this. Hector holds it so close that he cannot speak of it, like a boxer grappling with his adversary, while Irwin stands in his corner of the ring and strokes his chin, pondering without sweat or tears. Interestingly enough, it is the boys who answer the bell and attempt to come into the centre of the ring. They reject Irwin’s look for ‘perspective’ and Hector’s perhaps cowardly dismissal of the painful tragedy as ‘infandus.’ They look for *context*. They really want to understand: that may be the opened gate to participation in this history – for what else might Oxford or Cambridge prepare a man for, other than a life of luxury and privilege?

It may be Hector and Irwin's unwillingness (from their polarities) to see themselves and their lives as *part* of history that is their tragic demise. Hector speaks of reaching out hands to those writing throughout history, of 'breaking bread with the dead.' The motorcycle accident for him is perhaps a reaching out of hands *from* that aspect of history he is unwilling to face: sometimes history is just a series of random events as Lintott says, or Rudge's more poignant 'one fucking thing after another.' This side of history reaches out and unceremoniously turns the handlebars. For Irwin, it seems his eagerness to sunder traditional understandings of cause and effect, of coherent connections – this is also revisited upon him. His contrapasso is to have his own body disconnected from itself, reattached to a foreign element – the wheelchair.

As a student myself and one who is interested in teaching, I feel a need to identify some fusion, some synthesis of these approaches to a subject matter. As a citizen I feel an obligation to a thoughtful, personal understanding of history that spurs me to *action* – for these events do not unfold in the abstract. Dickens may write touchingly of Pip, but my aesthetic pleasure and emotional arousal is not complete without a look to AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa suffering this day, 4 January.

I wish I had more teachers like Hector at school, I wish I memorized great works. Yet I think it is necessary to move beyond awe at these works, as Irwin would have us do. But such a movement is dangerous without that first, fundamental experience of awe. Certainly no one watching Irwin's television program would be inspired by that shit-show – but how might the shit-show enlighten St. Francis's Hymn to Brother Sun? His instruction to his disciples to put their coins in piles of horse dung – with their teeth? How powerfully these joined approaches might enliven the spirit of Francis – a greater understanding of his commitment to the poor, and perhaps a desire to share it.

3 January 2006

*Aladdin Holiday Pantomime*

The Richmond Theatre

How I loved the panto! It was a wonderful change of pace and perspective to be a part of an interactive show, and the presence of all the children lent a freshness that only they can bring. I enjoyed being in the balcony especially because it allowed me to see the pit orchestra. I think live music adds something ineffable to a production, even if the songs themselves can be a little tired.

Being at the Richmond and also at the Orange Tree in the same day was an interesting look at the role of theatre in a community. Simon Callow's quip about 'sending complaints to the Wimbledon Theatre' and Wishee Washee's incitement of the crowd in saying that the audience at the Wimbledon had sung louder was a great bit of local rivalry, and I think it added to the participatory nature of the performance. The theatre – the structure itself, even – was something that the audience could *belong* to, have a relationship with. I think the same could be said of the Orange Tree, especially considering its humble, plebeian origins in the back room of a pub. As Sam Walters spoke of, the Orange Tree is at once a London theatre and a Richmond theatre. It has attracted audiences from across the pond, but I am sure there are also Richmond natives



who come to see every production. I think this sense of ownership and participation are just wonderful, and both added to my enjoyment of both performances.

Aladdin embodied an interesting tension between what I would call 'flash' and a theatrical transparency. I always enjoy moments when a play, song, text, or what have you recognizes itself as such and admits that to fact to the audience. Growing up in a TV culture, there seems to be a push towards drawing a viewer into another world, all-inclusive and whole. I guess it's part and parcel with the feel of a local theatre, but I love it when a play throws off the burden of creating a world and rather assumes gracefully the awkward burden of inserting itself into *this* world.

This day showed us a myriad of ways in which this insertion is possible. First there is the issue of space itself. *Aladdin* was full of moments in which the 4<sup>th</sup> wall was breached – audience members up on stage, cast members in the audience, squirt guns! Theatre in the round is another take on these issues – why walls at all? In both cases the performance was much more intimate than a standard production.

Both performances used anachronism creatively and to comic effect. *Aladdin* was full of pop-culture references, obviously the point of which was to establish a total absence of separation between stage and outside world, making the production more accessible to the largely youthful audience. The remoteness of China or Egypt was brought closer with 'prawn balls' and countless references to nearby places. That's an interesting question in itself, I think – how does a play establish a frame of reference? In 'Journey to London,' a certain knowledge is assumed of the audience. In Aladdin, the correlation of new ideas and familiar ones had to be made by the play in real time – a sort of simultaneous translation for the children. I guess that is the goal of every production – use a provided text and make it current. Clearly James Saunders thought there was something current about *Journey to London*. To touch briefly on that element of anachronism in this second play, I'm thinking of the very first entrance of the actors, when the cell phone ring went off! In addition to its practical application, I think this little comic action was an interesting comment on both the intimacy of the performance in the round and also the higher stakes of the contract between the actors and the audience in that setting. There was a sense of *cooperation* moreso here than in the proscenium theatre, as the divisions here are largely absent. So, in that space where the stage 'invades' the audience, so too can the audience and the modern world it represents and carries along with it interfere and interrupt the world of the stage.

The creativity and humor of that imperative to turn off cell phones holds deeper questions for me, perhaps a little naïve because of my relative inexperience with the theatre. But just when does the performance begin? The entire company, on stage, peering into the crowd for the imagined culprit: was this not a performance? And did not the uncle then remain on stage to begin the script of 'Journey?' Was this moment not a dramatization of the contract between actors and audience? Was this less of a clue to the type of performance about to be than the singling out of 'Sally' of Aladdin for not participating in Wishee Washee's call and response?

*Epitaph for George Dillon* 4 January 2006

written by John Osborne and Anthony Creighton.

dir. Peter Gill

## Comedy Theatre

This play featured the most elaborate and restrictive set of any we've seen thus far. It was an emblem of the drama of the play itself - the crowding in of 'stuff' details the suffocation of capitalist kitsch. The limitation on movement according only to prescribed paths between furniture commented on the restricted mobility of the Eliots which would come to trap the injured protagonist George Dillon. As the drama unfolds, George is increasingly bound by the set - there is that glorious moment after he gets a job in which he flies unexpectedly through the side window, wine in hand. He moves freely about in that scene, handing out glasses, speaking excitedly in allusion after allusion, all of which are humorously lost on every Eliot.

One of those allusions that jumped out to me was George's self-naming as Jupiter to Josie's Semele. At that moment I wondered if George would indeed get Josie pregnant and it indeed proved prescient, but I think the significance is larger and that the classical allusion comes together well with the evangelical Christian discourse of Mr. Colon-Stewart, Mrs. Eliot's companion to 'the meeting.'

Mr. Colon-Stewart's discussion of 'lamps' held within it a thinly veiled criticism of those who 'put their light under a bushel basket.' I think George reacts emotionally at the appropriateness of this. But what would be the cost of unveiling his 'true glory?' If George were really to let his lamp of artistic talent and caustic criticism shine, he would no doubt burn up his foolish consort, and probably the rest of the family also. Looking ahead, beyond the play's conclusion, one wonders if that child will be indeed a Dionysus - one who calls his initiates to an escape from the humdrum and invites them to a mystical bacchanale. Because 'Escapades on Ice' clearly isn't making the grade for anyone.

What made this play difficult for me was not that George and everyone else has resigned themselves to the dim shadows of the cave, that no one will 'light a lamp.' What frustrated and frustrates me now was that neither George nor Ruth allowed themselves to get angry with themselves and act on that anger, to exorcise themselves. George contemptuously declares at one moment 'I'm in love - shift me, I'm burning.' If they would not get out of this hell, I wish that they would at least allow themselves an honest despair over it! I can handle despair, but I have trouble with the deeper malaise that comes when despair is distrusted and condemned, not honestly lived. In that there is at least some hope of catharsis.

Another reason I had some trouble with this play was that the boring lives of the Eliots as portrayed on stage was, well, boring. The only moments of real action in the play are those in which George is putting on some kind of show, or conversing with Ruth, which is difficult because of this despair issue. When George is acting, it's obvious that it is in fact just a show. But this leads into something I've been thinking about for a few days now and which has come out most prominently in *Journey to London* and now *Epitaph*. What if the 'play' we make of life is in fact *more real* than that which we would 'genuine' - is there such a thing? I guess this is based on a prejudice of mine which I'm gradually working through and away from - the idea that there's something corrupting about artifice.

*Epitaph* and *Journey* dramatize the difficulty of judging just who is *more* artificial, playing a more proscribed role. The question the production rather emphasizes is: which

is better - to play unconsciously the role that society would cast you in, or to reject it in favor of a more consciously chosen role? I myself often question the effectiveness or even the possibility of the latter option. Bettie's final thoughts on life as a play and the now-cliché sentiment that all life's a stage would suggest that one cannot exist in the social world without playing some kind of part, which no doubt exists in tension between social pressures and individual desires. But if we all must play a part, how best approach this for greatest fulfillment? Would we be like the Eliots, unquestioning, putzing along right in line with those boxed in next door? Or would we be like George, who sees the suffocating conformity for what it is, but does not have the courage to break out and in fact 'out fakes the fakes?' Or would we be like Martella and choose freely to take on the role assigned to us and infuse it with the fullness of our being, achieving an alignment between out and in?

*Thomas More* 4 January 2006

written by Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, and William Shakespeare  
dir. Robert Delamere  
Trafalgar Studios

Anthony Munday's *Thomas More* brings the political element into this discussion and reminds us of the power of religious role within it. Before continuing along these lines, however, a word on the production itself:

I had a hard time with this production. I didn't care for it very much. I admit I spent the first five minutes trying to identify all the actors from the production of *A New Way to Please You*. I enjoyed that aspect of our second visit to Trafalgar Studios, it added to the sense of community I spoke about in conjunction with the Richmond and Orange Tree theatres. Still, those minutes probably could have been better spent getting all the background information necessary for a good grasp of the first act. The play moved very quickly through this information and indeed all the action surrounding the anti-immigration riots of May Day 1517. It's a frustrating proposition all around to stage the history of a whole life with grace or narrative continuity and I think the play suffered from the necessary fragmentation, no doubt compounded by its collective authorship over a number of years. Well, at least, I suffered a bit.

I was disappointed the play did not deal more explicitly with More's *Utopia* and his thoughts in general on the way that government might go about solving the social ills that emerge in the play, and the inherent difficulties of that proposition. It's interesting to think that this 'Gunpowder' season at Trafalgar which has directly involved the most violence of the plays we've seen thus far are the two that involve a utopian ideal of government. I think More's *Utopia* works from a good understanding of the violence necessary in establishing 'peace,' and I was pleased to see the dynamic tension of his positions on state-citizen relations brought out in Nigel Cooke's performance.

More's own personal alternative to violence seemed to be comedy, and it's interesting to think how that theme is active both in More's own actions *in* the play and in the playwrights' use of comedy as a means to evade censorship, a sort of literary violence. There seemed to be wisdom in each. I'm reminded of a comment Steve made before *Twelfth Night*. He said, 'yeah, if you ever get lost in one of these plays just listen

to what the clown says, he's always on top of things.' That was certainly the case in *Twelfth Night*, and I think it held true in *Thomas More*, whatever the problems of the production - especially the 'play within a play,' *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*. Little Wit must follow Intention away from Vanity and Folly to Wisdom. Interesting that in the larger play More was eager to jump in and *play whatever part* needed to allow the show to go on for the entertainment of his guests. He was eager to engage wit in its quest for wisdom, clearly taking himself less than seriously in the process.

To take again the issue of *choosing* one's role or the alignment of these roles, it seems that Sir Thomas More was able to accomplish this in his political career by reimagining his role as magistrate as involving a 'corruption of words.' Indeed, in that first scene with the thief, More reads back the argument of the pickpocketed lawyer to him. It's interesting to think about how the law might *need* corruption from time to time to serve most justly the interests of all people, but cannot be corrupted by the powerful to serve their own limited aims and it is such corruption in the form of Henry VIII's articles that More will not abide. On a related note, More does not make much in way of speeches in the play, which I think appropriate: conscious of the corruption possible in the moment and in history, he protects himself by silence. Yet I also imagine from his earlier action that he has no fear of corruption, be it instructive or constructive. Considering, however, the imperfect commitment to instruction or construction by both the court and its historians, he seems wise to let his actions speak for themselves.

*Coram Boy* 5 January 2006  
written by Helen Edmundson  
Dir. Melly Still  
Olivier Theatre

Fantastic! I loved being in the Olivier to see this production - I thought they used the resources of that stage masterfully to weave the plot together but with a subtlety that did not detract from this aim. Naturally, I loved the music and I thought that the creative reinterpretation of some of the Messiah's most recognizable themes throughout the score added depth to the production.

The staging and ordering of scenes imaginatively kept characters and ideas on the periphery of the stage, out of the main action, but still present in the minds of the audience. This was done most often and to the greatest effect in the first act with Meshak, who would hover around the edge of the stage, come into the main area of action, then run off around the back to hide again in plain view. To me this suggested a perceptively broad consciousness on the part of the director: there were and are many on and beyond the fringes of comfort and those who are perpetually peering in the windows of the well-to-do and burning in their mistreatment. In the second act, Toby served this function well also, both dressed up as an Arabian prince and also in the rags of a slave. He seemed pointedly as a reminder of the limits of the Coram myth - not all children were equally blessed by their experience there. Finally, and in contrast, I enjoyed seeing Handel himself at work at the organ, keeping us conscious of the fact that music, that which bound so much of life at Coram together, was being created in the midst of all the drama at the school and the hideous world surrounding it.

In short, the breadth of the stage was used masterfully and with subtlety to embrace the thrills of melodrama while maintaining a consciousness of itself as such. In a sense, this consciousness both undermined and uplifted the conclusion. It was undermined in the sense that, having established all the imperfections and exclusivities of the Coram system, this ending seemed too good to be true. As despicable a figure as Mrs. Lynch was, she did level an effective and correct criticism of Mrs. Ashbrook when she declared that 5 orphanages might be funded for a year by just one ring on her finger. This scene in combination with the opening of the second act and the business with the white, red, or black balls suggested that so much more could have been done to help these children - perhaps even thousands were excluded from the idyllic environs of the Coram foundation. Toby serves also as a reminder that not all placements from the foundation were as successful or indeed fantastic as Aaron's, in which he discovers both his talent for music and his birth parents.

Yet the consciousness of melodrama also enhances the conclusion in my mind with Alexander's comment to his son Aaron on Meshak: 'He was your father, too' and Melissa's parallel invitation to Toby that she might be his mother, if he'd have her. All this suggests to me an *uplifting* of what happens on the periphery as worthy of center stage and of huge importance to the characters existing there. The traditional stuff of melodrama - Lord Ashbury's rejection of Alexander in the family Bible, tensions over inheritance and paternity - these questions are matched in significance by the more pragmatic but equally intimate relationships that move beyond blood. We might have more than one father or mother, and our love for them and they for us might be just as full and pure.

I had a moment's hesitation when the entire cast broke into the Hallelujah Chorus. As with any time I hear it, I got the shivers. But it seemed too much, too shiny, too much rejoicing in itself. But ultimately I disagree with myself. I guess I think of it as that other element of the periphery being brought to center stage for a moment. Interesting in that Handel himself, down from the organ loft to the stage for his bow, would sing as a simple member of the chorus - the music has transcended and included even its creator. Also in that, as an encore, this performance recognized and reached out to the audience. I heard many around me hum and even sing along: I felt the urge to stand, but didn't have the courage.

*Pillars of the Community*      5 January 2006

Written by Henrik Ibsen

Dir. Marianne Elliott

Lyttelton Theatre

In the middle of his 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,' Max Weber leaves a brief footnote in his discussion of Martin Luther's understanding of *beruf* - usually translated into English as a 'calling.' The word was Luther's own German translation of an idea which for him bridges the Old and New Testaments, and its significance was essentially one of caste: one should work diligently within one's calling as prescribed by God in order to please him. John Calvin and his followers would invest this idea of *beruf* with incredible power in subsequent decades, imagining that success in

one's calling was the *only* way to prove one's destiny, one's ultimate salvation. So they worked their tails off, as we would say.

What was interesting to me about this humble footnote was Weber's brief analysis of the linguistic descendants of *beruf* in other tongues. Namely, it was translated into other Germanic languages (English and Dutch) and the Nordic Tongues (Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian) *with* the significance breathed into it by Luther and Calvin.

I think Ibsen's *Pillars* is a commentary on the difficulties of this idea of calling and the permutations within it as set in this small Norwegian seaport. One of the central tenets of the Protestant Ethic as Weber lays it out is that wealth generated by a business must never be spent on one's self, but rather always be reinvested into the community (primarily in its economy – Calvinists were never wild about the arts) the goal being the ever-perfecting realization of God's kingdom here on Earth. Very little about Ibsen's play is overtly religious – Karsten claims no divine command for his success, but I think the community that Ibsen develops and the characters within it are acting within a *very* Protestant framework.

In class we talked about how Ibsen, in many of his plays, explores the idea of someone loving two people. I think that idea could be extended here to the notion of serving two masters: Karsten is a compelling character because his care and concern for the community *is* genuine – but it exists in tension with his self-interest, and the two impulses are often conflated. Speaking economically, this self-interest is to a point productive – it drives efficiency and, as Knap relates to Karsten that the inspectors have barely looked at the Indian Girl because of his reputation, a Spartan *quality* to his work. The shipbuilding corporation being the lifeblood of the town, what is good for business is good for the community. But Ibsen dramatizes the potential costs of such careful alignment of self-interest in leadership and the social welfare.

First, Karsten doesn't care about the Americans. They can drown, and as a result of his shoddy work. After all, American ships sink all the time! I find this intensely ironic considering that, in my opinion, is emblematic of a *very American* perspective on the wider world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 'Oh, who cares about the body count of Iraqis! They'd be doing it themselves anyway. We might as well do it for them – more efficiently, and for their own good!' Clearly, this prejudice against aliens is pursued in the name of common profit – the Americans in *Pillars* disrupt the delicate social machinery of the town – they've got to go, even if that means to their deaths.

Ibsen also explores the interpretive transformation of the very personal threats to Karsten, becoming in his mind threats to the community. The damning letters that Johan has would bring down Karsten, and then they'd never get the railroad in, and then the town would slowly die – Johan is a threat to the town. Clearly. The pursuit of truth becomes a dangerous attack on the stability of society. The pathos of the final scene I think comes from Lona's inability to reveal to Karsten the price that he would have paid – yes for the community, but also and moreover from selfish desire. As the deafening train comes in, it acts perhaps as a symbol for the power of individual or societal memory sent down a certain track – no dissenting voice can be heard, and there are no other tracks to explore.

The train whistle also serves as an emblem of the price we allow our leaders to pay for the stability and growth of our societies. In this case, stability means a degree of servitude to Karsten's self-interest. This servitude is efficient. In closing, I thought the

opening scene was fascinating – the women knitting for the destitute, listening to the exhortations of the schoolteacher Rorlund. This arrangement suggested to me a sort of social machinery whirring away in the town, with the women playing an important role. Underneath the economic arrangements there was this (also perhaps very Protestant) rumor-mill, with cogs and gears turning smoothly, everyone playing their part. This meant that Dina had to play the disgraced child, to be the object of pity and contempt at all times. The question raised by her love for Johan is again: what price must be paid to exist in this circles and what price must be paid to get out? When she no longer wants to play along, she *must* leave. For I think Karsten does touch on an almost truth when he says ‘women are the pillars of the community’ (although Lona is right to rebuke him for playing too coy) – the social roles and bonds established and fortified around that table are the foundation of Karsten’s political and economic power in the town. He is absolutely right to fear for his reputation: were his secret about Dina’s mother revealed, his cog would no longer fit snugly in its niche, and the town machine would grind to a halt.

*Paul*                      6 January 2006  
Written by Howard Brenton  
Directed by Howard Davies  
Cottesloe Theatre

My first impression of the set constructed for this production of *Paul* at the Cottesloe Theatre was that it looked ‘post-apocalyptic.’ The ruins and rubble, the telephone and electric wires exposed and stretching across the vertical space of the stage – the barrenness. The dramatic swings from time to time and place to place from one scene to the next made the stage into many different settings, but I think the ‘post-apocalyptic’ remained appropriate throughout on two levels. First, only the second scene on the road to Damascus, the only scene that shows us *Saul*, portrays him as a military commander leading Temple guards abroad – outside Judea – to track down early Christians. The company of guards, in their fatigues and with their machine guns, suggested powerfully to me a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality: armed men with conflicting motivations moving violently beyond national borders in the service of orthodoxy. One could think equally of terrorist cells kidnapping prominent figures or of a nationally identified organization like the United States military attempting to preserve their style and idea of governance in foreign realms. Both of these could be seen as elements of an era beyond boundaries: the breakdown of traditional notions of political and religious relationships make it difficult to imagine the coming of a kingdom of God – if that kingdom is a political entity. Might we be living in an era beyond the Apocalypse? Odd to think of that today, after I was so moved by the service at Westminster.

Anyway, in the remaining twelve scenes the post-apocalyptic set is even more appropriate. With his special conviction, Paul seems utterly unconcerned with the realities of the world around him. In Corinth, surrounded by practical questions of diet and sexuality, Paul is frustrated: ‘Think of what’s to come!’ In his own mind, Paul is already living in the Kingdom of God. It’s interesting to think about how Paul, so forceful in his belief that he is able to convince even eyewitness to the contrary of his

vision of Christ, is able to perhaps even define the physical space in which the action is dramatized. Or, the bleakness of the physical space could well be an exterior representation of Paul's despair, the 'wrongness cut deep inside' him. Given that the play opens with Paul alone in prison, all other scenes might be viewed as projections and explorations in his own memory. In which case the set is the mental schema upon which and in which his memory unfolds.

I had other plans for this entry, but I want to explore this mnemonic thread for a moment. In that opening scene, Paul's first lines are that mantra that also closes the play: 'Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen.' He then breaks into a frantic plea for Christ to appear to him again in a vision, but then he forcefully rebukes himself for this desire. 'No – be content with the *memory*.' Clearly Paul is *not* content to live in the past, and his insistence on the Risen Christ would seem to be the foundation of his theology that, arguably, makes Christianity compelling to believers even to this day. 'Christ is Risen!' The Son of God is not bound by human death or human time and can be a *present* reality to those who trust in Him – both in the 'literal' sense as experienced by Paul himself, but also in the almost limitless expanse of metaphor. How compelling would Yeshua be in history if Peter's secret were revealed? The beautiful 'everydayness' of his teachings made him a wonderful teacher to those immediately present, but doubtless *Yeshua* would not have survived the fall of the Temple. Only a Romanized, Latinized *Jesus Christ* could do that.

Ironically, it is of course Emperor Nero who is most wise to the historical significance of Paul and Peter, specifically in their martyrdom. He also brings in the idea of *story*. Nero possesses an almost unbelievable consciousness of his place as villain in the unfolding Christian narrative, and also of the roles he would in a sense give to Peter and Paul as martyrs. The fascination of this play comes straight out of Paul himself, the unintentional but eager nexus of individual and cultural memory: his own fragile and blossoming understanding of his experience shapes his own self as powerfully as it shapes the early and current church through his ministry.

*Edward Scissorhands*

Choreography by Matthew Bourne

Sadlers Wells

I just adored almost everything about this production. I went and saw Garth Fagan's company perform at Nazareth at the beginning of December and I was captivated by the grace and athleticism of the dancers and by the capacity of the human body to tell a story. Matthew Bourne's production did less to highlight the abilities of his dancers, facing greater narrative constraints, and I think the latter half of the ballet had some trouble communicating just what was happening in the story. But having seen the film, having that narrative framework in place, I found the latter half also very moving – unexpectedly.



But first, a note on space and set. The set pieces in this production, as they did in the film, played on perspective to great effect. From one vantage point, the houses indeed looked pristine and idyllic, but from another appeared surreal and even grotesque. The houses were too small for the people inside! That was a powerful if simple indication of the constraints into which Edward stumbled. The use of that semi-transparent curtain at the front of the stage multiplied the emotive possibilities of for setting scene and mood – whether stormy, sunny, or fantastic, as in the scene with the cheerleaders dancing in Edward's imagination. I thought that curtain was also a fitting metaphor for the identities of all the characters – layered with appropriate and semi-transparent social roles.

The conformity of the town was highlighted in the frequent ensemble dance numbers, most notably at the pool party/bar-b-que and the winter ball. Edward's exclusion from these dances, all of which required a partner, highlighted both his outsider status within the overarching social structure and the frustration of his desire for the girl.

On the narrative level, it was interesting to see how Edward's partial exclusion from 'normal' society interacted with his role as artist. Edward's creations, both the hedge sculptures and the haircuts become objects of fashion and desire – they are commodified within the pre-existing social scheme of the town. But this method of keeping Edward's capacity for danger to the town, both in terms of his invasion and disturbance of the town's rigid compartmentalization of identity and also in the physical danger of his scissorhands, are also what draws the object of his desire to him. His creation of the ice sculpture adds emotion to his established outsider status – an complexity not found in his rival, her badass boyfriend.

Of course Edward's presence will not be tolerated by the town forever. His implicit threat of violence (which the town and specifically the boyfriend actualizes upon itself) demands a violent expulsion. In my opinion this aspect of the narration was rushed by this production. Edward's abrupt exit, leaving only a pair of scissors behind, took me by surprise. I felt a little cheated that Edward would not figure again onstage.

But this production *did* do something unexpectedly wonderful in the conclusion here. When Edward came out for his bow, stiffleggedly in character and under a shower of snow, I was suddenly overcome with emotion. I think it was Edward's wonder and delight at the snow falling around him, which we understand to be his mythic creation. Edward's childlike appreciation of beauty had not been entirely sundered by his experience in the town. And the loneliness of his time on the mountain found some consolation in us, the audience. For all this final drama took place during our thunderous applause. Whereas Edward had been rejected from one community, here he found perhaps another acceptance.

*The Hypochondriac*

Written by Molière

Dir. Lindsey Posner

I enjoyed this play and found much of it hilarious, though some scenes bordered on the grotesque. Two major themes were of interest to me. First, the figure of Argan's brother (Thomas?) the brewer and his empiricism came into sharp and serious conflict with Argan's unabashed faith in his own illness. Secondly, as ever I am interested in roles and instances of plays within plays.

Thomas appears halfway through the play as a figure of rare genuine concern for his brother's well-being, balanced by a complete contempt for the illness which he accurately and unabashedly calls vanity. Amid all the uproarious comedy, however, is a very serious philosophical debate between a 'faith-based' worldview, which in matters of health would put a doctor on the level of priest or shaman, and an empirical worldview which uses the infant scientific method to discover naturalistic causes for bodily maladies. Coming from the latter perspective, Thomas casts aside Pergon and the host of other doctors as swindlers collecting indulgences from a believer who claims to desire heaven above all else, but creates for himself a hell. It's all in his mind, and for the doctors who are lucky enough to treat him, it's in his pocket. Using the analogy of his beer-brewing business, Thomas says that if the beer does not brew, he doesn't seek an otherworldly motive, but rather a rational explanation.

Molière's satire on Argan's misplaced faith is cutting, but he also pointedly notes that the same hesitancy to accept new ideas exists within the fledgling scientific community. He puts the arguments for tradition in the mouth of the suitor Bonnefoi, who presents Angelique with a copy of his 'Treatise against the Circulationists.' Molière's overreaching point is well-taken – so many of us are unwilling to change our minds about the ways of the world and our place in it as new information arises, and our stubbornness and ideological recalcitrance can yield hilarious results for those who would take us less seriously than we take ourselves.

What saves Argan is a new way of asserting his self-importance, a new vessel for his vanity. As ever, Toinette directs the play, casting Argan in the starring role. He will no longer assert himself as a man on the verge of death (and thus deserving of respect and attention), but rather as a man fully in control of the intricacies of his body. What strikes me about this ending, for better or worse, is the lack of interior transformation that comes with this new exterior. Argan remains fundamentally unchanged by the action, he simply finds a different vessel to transport his vanity. His lack of dynamism makes him difficult for me to identify with; he seems to be more of a stock character. Which may well be appropriate – Toinette seems to me a much better star.

With grace and ease, Toinette pokes, prods, and provokes her master in a manner that infuriates but also enlivens him. Taking full advantage of his reliance on her for the various grotesqueries that he feels his 'condition' warrants, Toinette is perfectly placed to manipulate him for his own well-being and the happiness of his daughter. Aware of every motive, Toinette herself is an emblem of the flexibility in role that ultimately 'cures' Argan. At times openly mocking her master, at times taking his side as a fragile

invalid against the demands of others, and even assuming a literal costume to play the part of the new doctor, Toinette herself initiates comedic vignettes that serve to bring the family itself into real alignment through their artifice. Finally, her most effective technique seems to be her willingness to initiate a 'play within a play,' only to step aside and offer the spotlight to another. Her willingness to serve, with caustic wit to boot, allows for the final ritual which initiates Argan into the more functional role of doctor, albeit just as hilariously inappropriate as that of invalid.

*Come tu mi Vuoi*

Written by Luigi Pirandello

Directed by Johnathan Kent.

Considered together with the Sung Eucharist at Westminster Abbey

I'm so glad I had the chance to participate in the Eucharist at Westminster and see this play in the same afternoon. I'm very interested intellectually and moved personally by the issues surrounding mysticism and the mystical union of medieval saints, and I had some interesting realizations at Westminster that colored my impressions of *As You Desire Me*.

In the first scene, Alma tells Salter that she feels like 'a body without a name – lost luggage waiting for someone to claim me.' This moment above all others in this exposition of the identity theme grabbed me. It seems to me that our identities are shaped powerfully and often beyond our control by our experiences *as held in memory*, and by the roles demanded of us by others. Deprived of this first pillar of self by an unknown trauma, Ignotia is left with only one leg to stand on – and that is not her own: she exists only as she is named by the men in her life. This leads to her self-perception and even naming as a 'whore.' But this is far from a pithy projection or identification, rather existing on a multitude of levels.

On the first and most immediate level, Ignotia is a whore because that's what the 'customers' she performs for want her to be. It's profitable: it's her business. Salter, too, despite his anger with the suitors who drunkenly follow her home and tear her dress, gains his pleasure in their relationship from her sexuality and its commodification. Ignotia herself calls him out on this, dryly recounting how it makes him feel powerful and potent to go to bed with a woman as in demand as she is. So: whore is a role that she plays in Berlin.

Her movement to Italy, however, begs the larger question which comes to dominate her mind and the remainder of the play: in changing her very identity to mirror the desires of the man she sleeps with, is she not whoring her very name, her very self on a more unconscious level than she had on stage in Berlin?

Prostitutes figure in with surprising frequency to Biblical narratives and exegeses. As this past production of *Paul* reminded us both comically and with pathos that Mary Magdalene was in that line of work before meeting Jesus. Dante gives special honor to Rahab, the prostitute who let Joshua and the other spies into Jericho, writing that she was the first woman to ascend to the sphere of Venus after the Harrowing of Hell. In both these instances the women are redeemed from their 'turpitude' to special places of honor. In the Middle Ages, exegetes developed the idea of a *casta meretrix*, a chaste whore, with which the Church itself was often aligned. Human folly and concupiscence would always corrupt, but through a surrender to the will and Person of God, redemption was always possible.

The ending of this Pirandello production was initially dissatisfying to me because Ignotia chose to go back to Berlin *with Salter*. I recognized the impossibility of remaining in Italy with Bruno – temptation to create herself in 'the image reflected in [his] eyes' would be too great to allow any sense of individual security in herself. She would never be able to be any Lucia other than one enshrined in the memories of others, regardless of whether or not the body she inhabited once belonged to that memory. But to go back with Salter? It seemed to me a double renunciation – of her role as Cia but also in her search for redemption. Why go back to the one who wants you as a whore? Why not strike out on your own?

I think my frustration was heightened by the recent memory of the Sung Eucharist at Westminster. For some time I've been struggling for a new way to understand the many facets of Christianity – its humble and human origins (as dramatized beautifully by *Paul*), the violence and repression carried out by Christian institutions in the name of God, the fracture of the Body of Christ in history, the wealth and beauty of text and art interwoven in these developments, and my own place in all of it. I had not been able or interested to take communion for about the last two years, although I had been to church many times. Indeed, I didn't intend to do so at the outset of this service. Much of my reticence has centered on the limitations of imagining God as a person, as embodying recognizable human qualities – created in our own image. The flexibility of that idea of God presented considerable difficulties for me – if everyone just makes God who they would have God be (personally and through history), how can we figure out just what we're dealing with? Who is God in the *purest* sense?

But recently I have been in the process of rejecting the idea and ideal of purity, and I think Sunday morning I got around to applying that rejection (in some limited form) to God also. Rather, I should say I am in the process of *embracing impurity* in representation, idea, and narrative – so why not embrace that in God, in the church, in my own faith and that of others? Paul would not approve, but though the bread is *broken*, is it not nourishing? In fact, I think the bread *must* be broken for us to eat of it and be restored, renewed. There is no resurrection without a death, and that may be a painful one. Bones may be broken (or not, to preserve the parallel with the Paschal Lamb).

So I decided to take communion – to take in the mess of tradition, the mass of broken images, the body of the king, the collective memory of a people joined in a barely common faith. But common enough.

I need to take up a devotional reading of the Bible. And a critical reading. I need to read the Bible, saint's lives, sacred texts. Having established that we may call that Highest Ignotium by whatever name we need to call him/her/it, I still desire to be named, to be called, to be claimed.

In reconsidering my initial dissatisfaction with Ignotia's return to Berlin with Salter, perhaps this represents not a step backwards but a step upwards – she returns to the city where she was once a whore, but with the solid understanding that she has rejected that life in an even more subtle manifestation in Italy. My mental image is Mary Magdalene returning to her hometown after having recognized the Risen Christ. For others, she had wandered away seeking redemption from some radical, and now had returns to resume her old ways, her old profession. For some, she will never escape that identity assigned to her by memory. But while her own memory remains, while she knows that as a part of her, she knows too that it is a former thing that has passed away. If I may again bring myself into this discussion: my decision to participate in communion could have been read by others (with relief, with disappointment, with disgust) as a return to the fold, a return to an unquestioned affirmation of the one true way. And that's fine – in fact, it could be a real resource in creating change, pursuing redemption from the inside. It was, in some small way, a return to participation in the communal life and tradition of the Church. This 'return to Berlin' is on my own terms, which recognize and affirm a greater degree of complexity to the situation, a place in which our memory may provide some nourishment even as we move away from it.

### *Tintin*

Written by Rufus Norris and David Grieg.

Dir. Rufus Norris

I loved the first half of this production, but the second half was a big disappointment. We discussed in class how the story followed a traditional romance format, beginning in civilization and moving steadily outward. I would have to see a return to origins (civilization, I mean), or at least a different final image than the lonely Yeti.

The comic book medium was transposed to the stage in an interesting fashion, with the coffin-shaped curtain acting as a stage divider – bisecting it into 2 2-dimensional planes. The raising of that curtain and the beginning of '3-D' work using the whole stage (beyond the opening dream sequence) was Snowy's reach for the bottle of whiskey

*through* the plane dividing. This then increased the pathos of the eerie approach and song of the devil-horned and the discovery of the plane and its 'cold' inhabitants later on.

I was just tickled that the cast generated the music themselves, whether vocally or with instruments. It added a whole element to the production, the same that enlivened *Coram Boy* and also 'Gem of the Ocean.' I guess I would call that element 'immediacy' – it's somehow enlivening *not* to have a pit orchestra, to have *all* the action being created on stage with no accompaniment.

I think some of the attraction came from the sense that *everything* is happening on stage. That sense, of course, is hugely inaccurate for this production and every other we have seen in this week and a half. But then I wonder what theatre would be without any of the elaborate accoutrements of set and staging. I wonder if I personally would find it compelling, of if my Hollywood upbringing has ruined me.

I have noticed that my attention is more likely to wander in productions *without* 'special effects,' most especially music, but also including rapid scene shifts and the use of technology. This series of plays has shown me just how trained I have been by television and the American film industry, which is not to say that I haven't enjoyed play that don't cater to this inclination – Paul, for example, blew my mind, and I found *Journey to London* very enjoyable. My issue with *Tintin* is that it began in a more spectacular vein, and then failed to keep pace with the expectations it created in the first act. Oh well.

### *Gem of the Ocean*

Written by August Wilson

Dir. Paulette Randall

It was odd to see an American play here in Britain, something so in touch with the trials and tensions of the African-American experience. Tension. I would definitely say this play was *tense*, but there was resolution. Which is not to say that the tension was necessarily released, but at least recognized and appreciated.

Citizen Barlowe appears with a profound but un verbalized need to 'get his soul washed.' He is at once aware of 'the hole inside' him, and yet unwilling to confront, to admit its cause. Aunt Ester, as his confessor, draws from his own mouth the weight upon him, the bucket of nails he carries around with him everywhere in his satchel, and more profoundly, the guilt he carries for Garret Brown's death for integrity.

I was struck by the plurality and intensity of ritual elements in the journey to the City of Bones, which is the means by which Aunt Ester cleanses Citizen, or rather the means she provides for him to cleanse himself. The singing, the masks: everything involved suggests a patterned series of actions that have purified many before Barlowe.

In a sense it is those who have come before Barlowe that are most important – for him to recognize and for us to understand the significance of the City of Bones. As Black Mary said pointedly to Citizen during his botched attempt to 'seduce' her – if it's just him, 'that's not enough.' Citizen obviously recognizes his own need to get help, thus his supplication of Aunt Ester – but the ritual journey to the City of Bones shows him a larger community, struggling alongside him through a common history. It also allows him to frame his own personal struggle in this larger context of community.

The journey begins with the boat, which is later revealed to be fashioned from Aunt Ester's bill of sale as a slave. Citizen's journey begins with the pain of his confessor, of the priestess in this rite. In the ritual's condensation of time, Citizen moves from an almost infantile identification with the pain of his 'mother's' passage (Aunt Ester), to losing the boat and being personally and directly subjected to the very real mental and even physical torment of a slave ship: he is whipped and branded by Solly and Eli, wearing masks of white men. I found the participation of these 'others' in the rite extremely interesting. These two and Black Mary also play the part of the other slaves in the hold, and at other times, rejoicing members of the congregation hailing Citizen's progress. From Aunt Ester's initial announcement of the journey, they trade knowing glances and smiles. This strengthened my impression that Citizen Barlowe is far from the first to have been initiated in this way – indeed, each of them has been before, been the focus of the journey and seen it for themselves. Nor, do we imagine will Barlowe be the last.

In class we discussed the possible allusion of the City of Bones to the New Jerusalem. I don't think this allusion stands up in the final analysis. First, rather obviously, the city is made of bones and second, Citizen does not remain there. It is not a place of rest, of peace. Rather, I think it is a mythic externalization of the violence perpetrated against African peoples brought into bondage by the slave trade. But if it were only that, it would be just a graveyard, a pile of remains. This is a city, which suggests that it also includes in its metaphor the experience of African Americans in bondage and after emancipation, trying desperately to *build* a life for themselves from the mass of painful remnants of an unspeakable past. Citizen, too young to have experienced slavery firsthand, nonetheless struggles within its legacy and its various reincarnations in turn of the century Pittsburgh. And just as he must see that his own sin, his own stain is part of a larger complex of injustice inextricably bound to this legacy, so too must he realize that this history is a source of comfort and consolation: *it's not just him*. This is the extension of Hector's vision of *History Boys* that I would like to have seen. Citizen here 'breaks bread with the dead,' finds solace and atones for his sin, but he does not remain there in the City of Bones. For literally, there is only stagnancy and death there. The connection to a spiritual and ritual reality cannot be divorced from the work that needs to be done: Eli and Citizen have their own wall to build, of stone.

Citizen emerges with a new, ritual identity that is at once a fulfilment of the name he carried before. He has been relieved of the nails as his solitary burden, but now takes on the often difficult yoke of participation: the real history of this African American community unfolds around him and he must act within it, shape it. Solly's death is one

facet of that unfolding. As Black Mary is being subtly trained groomed throughout to take Aunt Ester's place, Citizen returns from the City of Bones to a role that needs a player. For now this history, this story includes him, needs him. The play ends with another brief and humble ceremony. Citizen takes Solly's jacket and he takes the staff: the staff that is itself inscribed with history being liberated from itself, a mark for every man brought out of bondage. Having just been freed himself, Citizen takes on Solly's charge – to go back, and back again, for the others.

*Mary Stuart*

10.1.06

Written by Frederick Schiller

Dir. Phyllida Lloyd

I was amazed by how well this production contrasted the worldviews of these very different sisters, and I'm fascinated by the religious upbringings might have inspired or sharpened such divergence. Faced with Elizabeth's reticence, Mary looks like a nymph rejoicing in her body, in nature, and in the beautiful scene with the rain at the opening of the second act, their interaction. From Mary's behaviour in general and her religious fervor in particular, it's very easy to see how Puritan iconoclasts would have found her an easy target: her rosary and cross, which she grips compulsively, her revealing clothing (although of the time), and her speech, which flows with her emotions always close to the surface, threatening escape. Her insistence on receiving Catholic sacraments before her execution would have seemed like fanciful superstition to her Puritan enemies, and her clothing immodest, even brash. On the whole, she is too much *of the world*.

Elizabeth, in her public appearance, is everything Mary is not – the perfect Puritan. Her high collars and rigid comportment, while no less regal than Mary in her glory in the prison yard, do present a hard exterior that Catholic supporters of Mary would no doubt have seen a cold and artificial mask. No one can control their emotions so successfully as that! Indeed it is interesting to examine Elizabeth's puritan repression in public and her private passion for Leicester. It would appear that the end of the play leaves her resolved never to trust anyone again, dramatized beautifully by the gradual departure of every male advisor. The cunning and devious manner in which she allows her revenge to be carried out (by the decidedly UNCunning Davison) and his subsequent punishment as her messenger make it difficult for others to entrust themselves to *her*.

The last scene has Elizabeth bring out another aspect of her Puritanism – her insistence on *perfection*. She passionately states 'I must be *perfect*, to shroud the circumstances of my birth.' Her awareness that there is something *wrong* with her, that she may not be the most direct and rightful heir to this throne must be blotted out by an uncompromising commitment to an infallible exterior. Again, Mary proves an interesting contrast. While her pride often makes it difficult for her to admit her faults, she does not fear her shortcomings on the spiritual plane – she can be absolved by submission to the universal and true church. Elizabeth's insistence on individual responsibility are very



Protestant, and her drive to achieve private and public perfection *on her own* reflect that background.

Two quick extensions of this: Mary is clearly more comfortable in community – she allows herself to rely on her two loyal servants, to share herself with them, to let them feel loved by her (and let them love her as well as serve her). She allows herself to be weak before them: she leans heavily on her nurse, and gives a full confession to her former servant-turned-priest, interpreting his insistence on the question of a plot in Elizabeth's life not as insolence, but as genuine concern for her soul. Her composed and even triumphant march to martyrdom in a stunning red dress is in fact a procession: her two servants loyally flank her stride, matching her assured steps. Elizabeth, as ever in contrast, ultimately allows only impersonal servitude – personal connection is too risky, too tempting. Also, my earlier comment on iconoclasts suggests an interesting irony. Mary's comfort with images actually accompanies a greater transparency of personality. She sends a picture of herself to Leicester, probably as a sort of manipulation (and her painting in France is certainly motivation for Mortimer), but she is more or less direct with those around her. The austere Elizabeth's *lack* of exterior representations (into which she might channel some energy) forces her to pour all that energy into manipulating her own person as a representation. That's a lot of pressure.

Elizabeth's insistence on agency over community highlights another persistent issue in this production – the relative conformity of the two sisters to dominant ideas of gender. Mary is quite often a stereotypical 'feminine' character: she allows herself both to desire and to be an object of desire. Paulet questions whether, as Milton says of Eve, she is 'too desirous' – calling her a 'second Helen.' Her plurality of male admirers allows her to use her sexuality as a means of motivation or control, acting powerfully in the minds of both Mortimer and Leicester. And she does allow herself both positive and negative passion – and to express that passion. On the one hand, she kisses Mortimer (whose own awakening to passion on his journey through the art of Rome causes him to convert), but on the other hand, she admits to a plot to kill her husband. The discussion of this choice with her nurse Hannah reveals that she undertook this murder because her husband was too controlling after she had given him the kingship by marriage. While she will submit to passion for men (the reason she married in the first place), she will not be any man's servant or inferior.

Elizabeth has a similarly complicated relationship with gender. Her public person is at once 'the virgin queen,' an image of undisturbed innocence, and the 'female king' – a symbol of punishing strength. Her personal affections for Leicester betray her ability and pleasure to feel passion, but also elucidate her resistance to this passion for fear of compromising her ability to act in her own self-interest – to keep all her power for herself. She does not make herself desirable to men, though she surrounds herself with them as counsellors. She interacts with them in a much more masculine fashion than Mary, competitively and violently. Yet often deviously, which like her dress, shrouds her true intentions in layers of artifice. Davison falls victim to this killer combination of power and deception, and again the departure of every advisor (indeed every character save Elizabeth) in the final scene dramatizes the effectiveness with which Elizabeth's

style of rule both insulates and isolates her. Mary walks unburdened to her death with friends and allies at her back, while the curtain falls on Elizabeth, attempting severity and poise as she looks for danger from the wings.

*Once in a Lifetime*

11.1.2006

Written by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart

Dir. Edward Hall

This play and especially this production in the Olivier was itself an embodiment of the inequality of flash and substance that Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman directly and indirectly criticize in Hollywood. I was disappointed by the thinness of the plot and the lack of depth in character. At the same time, I was impressed by the size and scope of the set and the use of the Olivier's revolving drum to usher in huge set pieces in their entirety. The huge cast allowed for a lot of action to be happening on stage at one time, although no one ever seemed to do anything worthy of attention.

What I'm trying to get at is this: the play itself seemed to me to rely heavily on cheap jokes and special effects to entertain in the place of a real, substantial plot, which is exactly the style of film that Glogauer Studios makes. The play has all flash and no substance – it has 'gone Hollywood.' As we discussed in class, it is an interesting idea – the translation of th1930's cinema to the stage. One sees immediately the incredible excitement of new technology, of success in the new medium of 'talkies,' and yet the disuse of real talent, of *productive* output, most notably in the character of the playwright Lawrence Veil, who enters a sanatorium because of 'underwork.' The fact that this Veil character was played in the original cast by George S. Kaufman himself lends depth to this idea of transparency, although in a much more positive sense than the thin plot.

This production had perhaps some of the most flashy costuming since *A New Way to Please You* and it's intriguing to consider how that exterior belies an interior obsession with fashion in each play. In *Once in a Lifetime*, often the only thing that's coordinated in a given scene is the wardrobe of all the principal actors. Chaos and gross inefficiency reign, yet everyone is wearing pink pinstripes. The Veil character is again the odd man out, failing to conform to such pettiness and thus of course he is excluded. But the better example of ironic fashion is George himself. His utter unconsciousness when it comes to all practical matters does not ostracize him from the movie business, but rather makes him the vanguard of new trends. Glogauer's comic blow-ups at George finally fade to a blind trust of this blind man, who manages to stumble again and again upon success.

George's relationships with the critics is interesting. The opening scene has him reading *Variety*, with stacks and stacks of back issues stacked neatly around the apartment. When Jerry announces their departure, George first begins to pack these archives before anything else. Ironically, George never seems to go to the movies or to

plays, but rather only to ballgames. His only connection to the theatre is through those newsprinted pages. When first confronted by a Hollywood presence, Helen Hobart, he simply parrots something he has read about the stage and it's 'laurels.' So his is aware of the critical audience, and he responds to it in some way. Yet he obviously has no critical eye himself, literally mistaking the file cabinet for the wastebasket.

Perhaps more interesting to consider is how critics react to George – they mistake his ineptitude for brilliance. More accurately, they interpret his snap decisions and oddly motivated choices (to free the pigeons because they looked hungry or bored or whatnot) as part of a tradition, as an addition to and commentary on a cinematic canon. And this is too a comment on fashion. The critics land the movie George makes for both its distinctiveness from the current trend of 'backstage pictures' and for its revival of an older form, the 'rescue and marriage.' Although George reads *Variety* religiously, incompetent as his is, he seems to have internalized none of it and makes decisions without any consideration of their consequences. Yet this unawareness (perhaps interpreted by the critics as courage) and horrific product are validated by a critical audience completely contrary to the intentions (or lack there of) of the creator. This chasm between artistic intention and audience interpretation is a beautiful and liberating thing, but perhaps Hart and Kaufman are satirizing the moment in which that can go just a little too far.

*Billy Elliot*

11.1.2006

Book and lyrics by Lee Hall

Directed by Stephen Daldry

Music by Sir Elton John

What to say – so much to tackle, yet I would be remiss if I didn't start with the idea of celebration. This production was an exploration and evocation of the ecstasy and exhilaration of expression (this sentence brought to you by the letter E). It is about so much more and so much less, but the pure joy that Billy finds in movement cannot be overstated, and the production did a magnificent job of communicating that right to every audience member.

Billy's intimate personal connection and the connection of his dancing to the community of miners on strike was beautifully choreographed. As Billy and Mrs. Wilkinson appear in different outfits to illustrate the passage of time and Billy's progression, the dance class is intertwined with the miners clashing with the police: masterful. More accurately, the clash does not happen until the second act, when Billy's

anger at being unable to audition is expressed against the police barricade. Before that, however, the police and the strikers were involved in an ensemble dance number, intermingling and playing off each other in the choreography.

While an obvious theme of the production is Billy's internalization of the community conflict and his expression of that tension through dance, a more subtle and yet more present theme in this musical medium is the exterior conflict as itself a dance. Union negotiators, police, scabs, and strikers – even the government: these forces push and pull against each other on the social and political stages. The image and idea of the stage was made most powerfully real (for me) in its literal and metaphorical contexts in that later scene when Billy dances against the police barricades. At one moment he actually rips up a piece of the stage proper and throws it against the storm shields. I was moved – Billy's dancing is in part a one-man riot, in which tensions and aggressions overflow and threaten to destroy anything and everything, with the most desirable target being the very surroundings, the very environs which both comfort and constrain Billy and his family.

By the same token but in a very different context, the finale of the musical brings the entire cast out on stage, beyond the conclusion of the plot to simply celebrate together in a unifying dance. As it often is for Billy, after the enormous tension, disappointment, and sacrifice wrapped up in the plot, this final number is a tremendous release. The miners do graceful pirouettes – *in tutus!* In the same way that Billy's Swan Lake duet with the future idea of himself allows him to leave the confines of the stage, so too does the thrill of this ensemble finale allow the entire cast to transcend County Durham for a few moments.

Yet I think it would be selling both of these transcendent moments short to divorce them from their imminent surroundings. Billy's duet in fact climaxes with his whirling and defiant approach to his father, still struggling with the idea of having a ballet dancer as a son. His otherworldly passion has a worldly application and foundation. More accurately, Billy's passion for dance comes from within him, but also very much from a participation in the tension of the town. The scene soon following in London with Billy's father conversing with the other father and Billy's fight with the other boy suggest just this idea. Billy's aggressiveness and energy comes from his background. As he sings, dancing makes him feel like *electricity*, an energy which acts well in this metaphorical context: the energy has its own distinctive properties, but acts powerfully in interaction with the elements around it – a dangerous and beautiful arc of light.

### *Comedy of Errors*

Written by William Shakespeare

Dir. By Nancy Meckler

I enjoyed very much this opportunity to return to the Novello Theatre and see a second play by the company that produced *Twelfth Night* so fantastically. The acting was again superb and the stylistic similarities with the previous production were fascinating.

Both productions emphasized that these plays involve much more than witty banter and hilarious misunderstanding. Egeon's opening speech evoked real pathos both in the Ephesian prince and in the audience. Following Thomas More's example, this politician is eager to 'corrupt' the letter of the law to preserve its spirit, allowing Egeon time to gain the sum to purchase his liberty.

Egeon's subsequent submission to Fortune in an attempt to gain this money for his freedom and his apparent failure in this quest contrast with the nearly-unbelievable *good* fortune that ends the play – the whole family is reunited. Yet the drama and fun lies all in between, of course.

Two images from this production stand out in my mind. First, I was intrigued by the use of the white sheet dropped down to the stage floor to serve as the door of Antipholus's house. While a simple wooden door in that position would have allowed the audience the same pleasure of seeing the two pairs of twins so close to one another yet mutually unrecognized, the pliability of the sheet was used to increase the comic effect and to incorporate some interesting thematic elements as well. It would have been much more difficult to use some of the physical comedy bits with a solid door – Dromeo of Syracuse as a battering ram, or the gastrointestinal duel between him and his twin. What made these bits possible and most funny in my mind was the very flexibility of that fabric barrier – one could see the impressions made by bodies on the other side, dim outlines of figures. And that in itself is interesting – the idea that the separation between those seeking each other can be so feeble, yet so impenetrable. It ties in well with the idea of veiling that I considered in *Twelfth Night*. It seems to me a comment again on the flimsiness of representations and misrepresentations, while in no way minimizing the fundamental importance of these 'barriers' – that is, if we want to have any fun. That which should be most easily recognizable to us (our own flesh and blood, our mirror image even outfitted with a similar costume in this production), is shrouded and obscured, but ultimately towards a more joyful revelation.

This is very much the thrust of the second image that leapt out at me: the final scene with the whole cast on stage. They moved in slow procession downstage, gradually removing their outermost layer of clothing and laying it down on the ground. Like the 'unveiling' in *Twelfth Night*, those simple fabrics that have proved indeed deceptive are no longer barriers - a layer of representation has been removed, although needless to say, many more remain. The very fact that layers still remain, coupled with the playful exit of the principals granted a much more comedic conclusion to this production than that of *Twelfth Night*. Feste's final solo in that production was an expression of his bitter solitude, the lament of a mass of irreverently corrupted representations against a barren stage revealed as stage – this song and its staging proclaiming that 'the play is done.' And yet Feste remained, alone, uncomforted. *Comedy of Errors*, ending with romantic reunion and then, more importantly, the company's exit *in pairs* seemed to suggest that more fun was to be had backstage.

*Night of the Iguana* Tennessee Williams 12.1.2006 Lyric Theatre

I'm writing these final 3 entries on route to the Taiz é Community, southeast of Paris, about 5 km away from the medieval village of Cluny and its important monastery. I don't know much about the history of this community, other than it was founded by returning soldiers from WWII who wanted to love intentionally together and try to reconcile the divisions that conflict carved deep into Europe. Since that time it has grown quickly, drawing brothers and visitors from all over the world. During the summer, there are sometimes over 7,000 people there for a week at a time, although I'm told there will only be about 50 there during this week in January. A fun fact to break up the reading!

I found Hannah to be an incredibly compelling character, although almost too good to be true. She seemed the manifestation of understatement: she was utterly unconcerned with her own self-construction. Well, she certainly communicated her need to Maxine, and made a compelling argument for being allowed to stay with her grandfather. She told a good story when it was necessary. But in every moment she maintained her integrity – she owned the story, it never took control of her. As the most positive character, she is surrounded by others at the hotel who are more powerfully claimed and identified by their unconscious narratives. Williams provides an interesting variety: the Fahrenkopts are consumed by their aggressive national identity, triumphant at the news of London burning – the most large scale example of the violence and unkindness that disgusts Hannah. Maxine *becomes* completely that version of herself that is most advantageous in that moment: the grieving widow, the seductress, the slavedriver. A plurality of identities is certainly no sin, but rather the unconscious manipulation for which Maxine uses them. Finally, Shannon apparently lives in a destructive cycle in which he 'cracks up' every 18 months, crucifies himself for the sins of the interim, and then wallows in his own victimization. He is haunted by 'the spook' – some perverse externalization of his repressed unconscious. Hannah gives him a cutting Freudian analysis during their interaction, establishing his relationships with young girls as a way to get back at his mother, and his striking them as a way to get back at a punitive God. In contrast, Hannah herself seems remarkably at peace with herself.

What made Hannah an even *more* positive character in my mind was her recognition that even the most well-adjusted people can't expect to their relationships to be eternal. Her pragmatic approach, her belief in 'broken gates between people' is a little disconcerting given our extensive schooling in the ideal and its 'claim' over us. But while Shannon initially rejects Hannah's experiences of 'love,' the depth of her perceptive capacities shows just how shallow *his* experiences of 'love' have been. She recognizes the imperfections and impurities of human beings (and thus obviously in the interactions between them) and actually *affirms* their transience and apparent flaws. Even the surface crudeness of her second 'love' experience does not obscure for her the communicated need for human communication, however imperfectly that connection is made.

Human interaction and bond are highly precarious enterprises. The question I'm left with is: if Hannah isn't disturbed or disgusted by imperfection, why doesn't she accept Shannon's offer to become traveling companions? If she accepted the lingerie salesman's offer, wouldn't Shannon's qualify as worthy? Perhaps this is a commentary on

Hannah's own imperfections. After she suggests that Shannon put aside his 'senile delinquent' vision of God, of thunderstorms and power, and rather lead his congregation 'beside still waters,' he indeed acts as a comfort for her grandfather. He is witty, and shows himself more than capable of kindness toward others. Yet I think, to an extent, her genuine pragmatism in finding relationships that *work* also allows her to protect herself with the transience of these relationships. She knew the lingerie salesman was going to be a one-night affair. Shannon could be a much longer and potentially more binding arrangement. Or perhaps she fears that a relationship with Shannon will end in the violence she so detests and which has capped many of his previous trysts. Or, also possible, she is afraid that Shannon's passion for the underbelly of the lands to which he travels will corrupt her fragile *weltanschauung*. Finally, perhaps she cannot consider Shannon as a viable option while her grandfather still lives and so needs her help.

The play's conclusion essentially nullifies these questions. From a pragmatic point of view, Hannah's intentions are not of consequence. Only the 'fruits' of her decision to deny Shannon are important, and here we see the difficult side of her philosophy. While anyone at anytime could be a partner and provider of the communion we all crave, there comes a moment when the circumstances change and the old arrangement no longer works, no longer bears fruit. And one is left alone. I admire Hannah's ability to remain so much her own woman in the face of various situations. But the play's conclusion leaves her unfortunately just that - her own woman and belonging to no one else. Shannon is down on the beach after threatening his swim to China, and the small miracle of her grandfather's poem is followed immediately by the small tragedy of his death.

The poem itself heightens the pathos of the final scene. Nonno, composing orally, is finally able to construct a complete poem from his failing, fractured memory. Memory – is there any more 'broken gate?' The result of his miraculous dictation is the viciously appropriate image of the orange tree, carefully transcribed by his granddaughter. In many ways it is a direct address to her character: containing both a frightening fall from the security of the branch (perhaps the *family* tree represented by Nonno himself) and then the more disconcerting process of spreading out, merging with the soul, drawing nutrients from it - the tenuous process of growth. The poem's end appropriately calls for courage for the poet, a moving invocation of his impending death, when he too will be below the earth. But I think it is also an indirect imperative for Hannah, to put aside her peregrinations and to experiment with a root structure. To plant herself in someone else, to be the ground in which another is rooted.

*Wild Duck*

Henrik Ibsen

13.1.2006

Donmar Warehouse

The first scene of *Wild Duck* paints Gregors as a positive if impetuous figure. We are unaware of his past as an evangelist for 'the claim of the ideal,' and his father Werle certainly seems worthy of filial scorn with the information we have from

Gregors. Hjalmar, clearly out of place at the feast, seems to *need* help from his old friend. The drama unfolds as these initial impressions are tragically turned on their ear.

All three of these plays reminded me in some way of my experience with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and our discussions of that text in Professor Longenbach's Modern Literature class. Most specifically, Gregors reminded me of a more palatable but equally dangerous incarnation of the Irish nationalist in the bar (I believe in the Nausicaa episode? – the Fahrenkopts also, certainly) who derides Leopold Bloom's Jewish heritage and fiercely advocates for racial purity as the foundation of Irish national identity. Gregors's 'claim of the ideal' is a more docile call for purity that implies yet the same violence. That is the only word that seems appropriate to what Gregors brings down upon the entire Ekdal family.

More specifically, Gregors demands a violent rehashing of past sins and imperfections, imagining that the loving and happy Ekdal household needs a firmer foundation than what Gregors sees as manipulative deceit on the part of his father Werle. With a self-righteousness and blind earnestness that would make your skin crawl, Gregors sets out to dismantle what Relling calls the 'life-lie' that binds Hjalmar personally and the Ekdal family collectively together. In addition to the purity/impurity tension, Gregors forces the faceless abstract into the visceral and personal world of the Ekdal house. 'The claim of the ideal' is never fully defined, and one just about wants to scream when Gregors encourages Hedwig to 'sacrifice' her duck to prove her love to her father. Gregors seems genuinely unaware of the real traumatic tragedy he brings about in his friend's home. Even after Hedwig shoots herself, he sees this only as a stimulus that will encourage Hjalmar to become 'the man he always could be.' As Relling points out finally, in the wake of all the destruction, Hjalmar is not the hero-waiting-to-be-realized that Gregors idealizes: he does not respond in the intended way to Gregors's '13<sup>th</sup> man' complex. I think Gregors expresses the peak of his selfishness in those final moments of the play. After admitting to Relling his true intentions and realizing that Hjalmar simply *will not be* saved according to his scheme, Gregors's grief is not for the Ekdal family he has destroyed, but for himself, deprived of the ideal role that he would assume.

A few words about Gina and Mrs. Seely, as we discussed in class, the most positive figures in the play. These women and their pasts stand at the center of the drama.

### **pause – going through the Chunnel – COOL!**

In Gregors's eyes, all must be revealed, which is not to say that in contrast, the women are manipulative deceivers. Mrs. Serby has indeed told Werle everything about her, which is an ironic moment for Gregors: the father he despises is in that moment 'more ideal' than his hero-friend Hjalmar. And I certainly don't think Gina is consciously or unconsciously trying to deceive her husband. This may be one of those situations in which a sin of omission is simultaneously an act of compassion. Knowing Hjalmar's 'fiery disposition,' I think she wisely chooses not to disrupt his world with unnecessary frankness. Their relationship and their family is an excellent example of a 'broken gate.'



as Hannah would call it. It is far from perfect, but love and compassion flows through; a community has been built up around its arch.

What Gregors claims to want is to tear down any misunderstanding and rebuild this community on 'solid ground.' I think there is an intimate connection between this 'ideal' foundation and the recurring theme of 'the bottom of the deep blue sea,' which Gregors and Hedwig talk about often. Gregors clearly finds the phrase striking; when Ekdal or Hedwig first utter it (I can't remember which), he repeats it over again, asking why one didn't say simply 'the bottom of the sea.' I think it was Hedwig. Anyway, the context of that is that a wild duck dives to the bottom of the deep blue sea when it has been shot – to die. Gregors's charge to Hjalmar is that he has set up this life as a seaweed tether to the bottom, waiting for death – I find this tragically ironic. It struck me in Gregors's final recitation of this line – an epitaph for Hedwig – that the solid ground that Gregors seeks can only be found at the bottom of the deep blue sea, and that indeed is a place of death. The only true certainty, the only truly solid ground is death. All of life is an awkward floating, a lashing together of leaky lifeboats.

*You Never Can Tell*    George B. Shaw        14.1.2006        Garrick Theatre

George Bernard Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* beautifully takes on this idea of purity, recasting it slightly as our desire for originality or our preference for an unadulterated 'first time.' The young and beautiful Gloria Clandon is appalled that Valentine would court her with words he had used (and even successfully, one might imagine) on other women. We, the audience, are given a moment's pause when Valentine spells out so directly and unabashedly his method for wooing rational 'equal-rights' women. But Shaw completely busts the apparent dichotomy by revealing through Dolly and Phil, the play's delightful sprites, that Gloria too is no stranger to repetition. The point seems to be that in neither case is a formulaic or patterned response any indication of the degree of real emotion, real intention. The outside does not prove the inside, and some falsehoods are at times necessary, endearing, and perhaps even more 'truthful' than 'objective' fact.

What I really find myself wanting to return to in this discussion of *You Never Can Tell* is the idea of roles and the ease and consciousness with which one plays them. The play provides a comic variety. Mrs. Clandon, so vehement in her denial of 'traditional femininity' that she moves her children to France to raise them away from 'traditional masculinity,' immediately thereupon sets out to establish *new* traditions and norms for the '20<sup>th</sup> century.' Her husband, Mr. Crampton, is so obsessed with the 'correct' relationship between father and children that he cannot enjoy the precocious pair that stand before him. In contrast to the singularity of roles and the firmness with which they are pursued, Valentine and William stand out. But first, a note on the children. Dolly and Phil seem both extremely aware of social norms, yet unimpressed with the prospect of following them. They are not reactionary: rather, they exist outside the system of roles and relationships and delight to play within it.

Gloria and Valentine exist as a pair in this discussion. Valentine shows his awareness of social bonds when he asks the Clandon twins who their father is and then politely denies their invitation to lunch because of the social consequences. He is unapologetic that he must play a certain part if he is to make any headway in the world at all. Moreover, he is equally unapologetic to play the enlightened, rational male to turn Gloria's women's rights defense on its ear. Gloria's confusion, however, is one born of love, not of stagnancy in her mother's ideals. She has remarkable distance from them, as she displays in her discussions with her father. But the moment in which she truly shows her understanding of the importance of roles is when she asks William, who is uncomfortable having been made a witness to the dispute between Clandon and Crampton (and thus an unaccustomed equal to the rest of the group) to *serve* her a cup of tea. This is a moment of quiet compassion. She allows William to play the role he is most comfortable in.

This seems to be the lesson of the play, a lesson that perhaps Gregors would be well advised to study. We all plays parts, we all have roles, and often many in conflict with one another. We construct ourselves through these roles, and perhaps more importantly, these roles construct *us*: we cannot exist in some 'pure' state separate from who we are claimed to be by others. I really find it quite a beautiful ending to this magnificent series of plays to have the servant as the star. Unlike Gregors, who *forces* others into the 'claim of the ideal' (which is little more than a role he has imagined), William's greatest joy and service is to facilitate others in the roles that *they would play*, gently guiding them in the direction that they want to go, towards what comes next in that story. It is not always a tidy enterprise, not always carried out with William's grace, but I think this is the service to which we are all called. To allow and to encourage others to be better versions of themselves.

*Professor Peck - thanks for being just that kind of agent, on this trip and otherwise, for all of us. These journal entries are a pale reflection of what I got out of these two weeks. Chances are I won't have any idea about the true scope of this experience for a while, but thanks for what I've got here, and thanks in advance for what I'll have then.*

As for the Masquerade Ball that provides the literal and figurative background for the final act, I must here make a final confession, the subject matter of which has cropped up in several of these entries: here I spell it out. When I decided to come on this program, I was looking forward to exploring theatre as an art form, because I'd had very little previous experience with it. But I confess that I didn't expect very much of substance. I've read many plays, and that always seemed to me an odd format for a work: why not use prose or verse? The theatre seemed to me indeed a masquerade: a place where superficiality provided a cheap escape from the 'real work' to be done.

What this particular series of plays has revealed is that, as I've mentioned with some surprise before, that realm of 'real work' can be considered as just such a stage, with roles and scripts just as constraining. Or, as in this emblematic final scene of *You Never Can Tell*, just as liberating. The glorious moment when Mr. Crampton submits to

folly, to pleasure, to silliness and dons the mask: can one really say that the subsequent peace-making with his ex-wife is somehow tarnished by the costume that he wears? Is William's character, so connected to his role as servant, a limitation? After these two weeks, I believe it rather to be – yes, a structure, a framework – but within which we can act with genuine compassion and connect to other people, other characters. At the very least, if we must wear a mask to dance, is that compromise of 'purity' not a better outcome than if bare faces bring us to blows?

The Masquerade Ball to which all characters exit (or rather, into which they hurl themselves) is the necessary reminder that we *need* roles, masks, elements of artifice for survival and connection. In the same way, while I once imagined the theatre to be only a superficial fleeing from the 'purity' of the 'real world' (this course has shown me the virtue of quotation marks, but perhaps they have become cumbersome), I now affirm it as a realm in which we – actors and audience – are free to assume roles and fiddle with them until they become our own. Thinking back to the political backdrop of *Lysistrata*, the first play in this series, perhaps this flexibility of parts would be a welcome presence on the international 'stage.' Perhaps the best diplomacy is done after the bargaining table has been left behind, when every penguin or a princess shuffles around a polished floor, attempting grace that proves elusive.