

Saturday, December 31

A New Way to Please You (The Old Law)

William Middleton

The adaptation of William Middleton's *The Old Law* opens with a bang—literally. Sitting in the audience and chatting with those around me, I was unaware that the play was about to begin. Suddenly, there was a loud crash as a pile of papers was slammed onto the stage, representing the immediate effect of the new law enforced upon the people of the fictional community that Middleton creates. This law decrees that men lose their worth to society at the age of sixty-five, and women at the age of forty. Because they are no longer of use for society, people over these ages must be executed. During the realization of the law, the audience is introduced to Simonides, who is excited by the new prospects the law will give him, and Cleanthes, who is angered by this surprising and unnecessary law. These characters serve as the two opposing forces in the play, and represent the poles of maturity and immaturity. Cleanthes and Simonides could also be symbols of good and evil.

Newly without elders, Simonides and his equally greedy friends take over their households, upset society by firing their servants, and show their propensity towards materialism. The costuming of Simonides and his “posse” becomes important in illustrating their materialism—elaborate, over-the-top, and even queer, costuming emphasizes the excessiveness of this younger generation, especially in contrast to the conservatively-dressed older generation. Spending their fathers' money on clothing, drinking, and dancing, these young men are selfish and examples for acting in singular profit.

Lysander acts as a crossover character: he is almost 65 and therefore facing his death, but he wants to be part of the younger generation. Lysander marries the younger generation—Eugenia is as superficial and selfish as Simonides and his clan—and he even acts like the younger generation in attempt to avoid death. Nonetheless, his attempts to disguise himself are all superficial. Lysander changes into a printed yellow jumpsuit, dyes his hair, and dances to techno music, but none of this can change his age. This haphazard transformation emphasizes the superficiality of the younger generation.

A New Way to Please You comments on the generational gap between fathers and sons. It is interesting that we see no father-daughter or mother-daughter relationships, and only limited mother-son relationships (Simonides' mother plays a small role in showing the worth her husband still has to society). This could be a comment on the relative unimportance of women in 17th century life.

Ultimately, the law is a surveillance of society by the Duke and the elders of the community. It is a test of the maturity of the younger generation—a test that Simonides, Eugenia, and company fail. These characters fail to realize that communities can only function when its members recognize a common profit. When individuals seek singular profit, a community becomes chaotic and can not endure.

Twelfth Night
William Shakespeare

I have never seen a Shakespeare play on stage before, so what struck me most about this production were the liberties taken with respect to set and costuming. Certain aspects of the set design have been puzzling to me: the pair of eyes that were projected onto the set, and the deletion of the set in the last scene of the play.

The pair of eyes seems to be Olivia's eyes, and in the first scene in Orsino's home I thought the eyes could signify the presence of Olivia in the mind of Orsino. This theory was consistent at first, but after the third act I noticed that the eyes became ever-present, even in Olivia's house. The eyes could represent love, or the capacity to love. The eyes present in Orsino's house represent his capacity to love, and eventually the eyes become present in Olivia's house, showing her new found capacity for the love of Viola.

One interesting aspect of the set is that props are pulled offstage by ropes suspended from the ceiling. The props never disappear; they are always hanging above the action even when not in use. At points, I was nervous that the piano would crash onto the stage, crushing actors beneath it. The props, similar to the pair of eyes, are ever-present on the set. This could remind the audience of the action associated with the props, such as the piano and the music stands represent the melancholy melodies played at Orsino's command and composed by Feste. A boat which was used to show the accident that separated Viola and Sebastian also remained above the stage for a period of time, serving as a reminder of the accident and of the existence of a twin.

Music, which plays a significant role in the play, also becomes part of the set. In the first scene, the musicians are actually on stage as they play at the whim of Orsino. Additionally, Feste plays the piano in several scenes. The idea of on-stage musicians also surfaces in *History Boys*, *Thomas More*, and *Comedy of Errors*. Musicians in these cases help to drive the action because they are involved in the action on stage instead of removed from it.

I was also puzzled by the costuming in *Twelfth Night*—it seemed to be inconsistent. Sir Toby and Andrew were dressed in what looked to be lower class

clothing from the sixteenth century; it was simple and mismatched. This could represent the simple-mindedness of Andrew and the twosome's lower class behavior as they drank themselves silly. Orsino was dressed more modernly. He was unkempt in the first scene of Act I, probably to show his melancholy. In contrast, his servants were all dressed in suits. Olivia and Maria both wore black, conservative dresses until Olivia's marriage to Cesario. This represents Olivia's refusal to recognize love, and her detachment from society. The characters that stood out as far as costuming were the twins and Feste. The twins were dressed differently than any other character in the play; they looked "punk" as they did not adhere to any particular fashion. Viola's and Sebastian's costumes were bright and smart, a contrast to both Olivia, in all black, and Orsino, woefully messy. Feste also dressed in bright colors, at one point wearing a plaid suit.

An interesting connection between Feste and the twins is that all three characters were wearing face paint. In class, someone made a comment that the face paint signifies looking for love and a love lost. I disagree. If the face paint represents searching for love, then Orsino would also have it. I believe the face paint shows the characters misrepresentations of themselves, of the disguises they bear. Viola poses as Cesario, Sebastian poses as Cesario (albeit unknowingly), and the melancholy Feste poses as a happy soul, when he is in fact the unhappiest of the bunch. Feste becomes a tragic figure as he is still left alone and without prospect for love at the end of the play.

Both Feste and Maria serve as designers of plot; they help to drive the action in the play. Both distort and disguise meanings in what they say, and by doing so also add a comic element to the play. Similar to *The Hypochondriac*, it is the over-involved servants who drive plot.

Monday January 2

The History Boys

Alan Bennett

The set of *The History Boys* was fascinating. In our tour of the National Theater, we learned that the stage of the Lyttleton is very tall and deep; nonetheless, the set of *The History Boys* managed to enclose the deep space into a classroom-sized area. Florescent lights hung from the ceiling, creating an artificial ceiling for the set that was about a third of the height of the actual stage. A v-shaped wall created the interior space for a classroom and teachers' lounge. Both sides of this wall were used to create different types of interior space. Having two sides of the set parallels the two opposing methods of education discussed in the play. The details of the set itself evoke realism, as little detail is left for an audience to imagine.

One interesting part of the set is a large projection screen that shows hallway and outdoor scenes set to music in between scenes. Serving as a segue from one scene to another, the projected images give the impression of continuous action. The screen also gives the audience a kind of omniscient view of the characters since the audience is given an insight into what happens outside of the classroom. The images on the screen are set to music, but even though there is no dialogue, the size of the screen gives the audience the capacity to observe facial expressions of the actors, which can be incredibly telling.

The use of a screen also introduces the idea of television and its impact on society. In the play, Irwin ultimately becomes the lowest of all lows—a journalist. Irwin teaches the boys sensationalism: to learn the facts and question them by making sensational arguments. He claims that people are bored with the accepted facts, and would rather hear something interesting than something true. This sensationalism is best

exemplified in the beginning of the second act when the audience is given a flash-forward to Irwin's television show. In discussing Henry VIII and his dissolving of the monasteries, Irwin focuses on the excrement of the monks rather than any other academic exploration. In this one can see the negative impact of television and the media on academics; the push towards the sensational and the rejection of anything academic.

As I stated above, music in *The History Boys* takes place on stage. A piano is placed at the corner of the stage, allowing the instrument to become part of the classroom. In Hector's classes, the piano becomes another medium through which learning takes place. Hector uses music and poetry to teach his students the importance of self in education. One must understand oneself before he can learn anything else. In the final scene, Hector urges his students to "pass it on." He says, "Not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere." Hector wants the boys to pass on their knowledge of themselves, and the knowledge they have been given about the importance of education.

Tuesday January 3

Aladdin

Holiday Pantomime

Aladdin was a surprising event for me, I have never been to anything like it so I was not expecting the circus-like atmosphere that I know knows goes along with pantomimes. As I walked in to the theater, I knew this would be an interesting afternoon because the box office was selling all kinds of whirligigs that sparkled with all kinds of colors and flashed lights enough to give even the strongest of people severe migraines. Aladdin really did remind me of a circus, certainly not a theater production, there was so much distraction in the audience that the events on stage seemed unimportant.

The show is definitely for children—simple plot structure with hero and heroine who fall in love only to be pestered by an evil villain. I was really taken aback by the amount of racial slurs and sexual innuendos that I would have deemed inappropriate for a children's production, but that may just be my puritanical Americanism speaking.

It was also interesting that the storyline stopped frequently for unrelated games and songs—probably to keep the attention of the small ones.

A certain amount of audience participation is part of a pantomime, and this production was no exception. One character in the play, Wishee Washee, specifically served the purpose of getting the audience to participate. In his first appearance on stage in the show, Wishee Washee taught the audience what to yell to him every time he came on stage. Both Wishee and the cross-dressing mother of Aladdin served as the main comical figures of the play; they were almost like clowns. It seemed as if these two characters were the main hosts of the show, and the Aladdin story was just a side note.

Another method of encouraging audience participation was speaking directly to the audience. Much of the dialogue involved the audience so as to incorporate the audience into the production, making the play a shared experience. I also noticed that there were a few local jokes, possibly because this production took place outside of London, where I am assuming there are much fewer tourists and therefore more locals attending the play.

Holiday pantomimes seem to be a great way to expose children to theater in a way that is entertaining to them. Taking place only during the holiday season, it is probably something that many children look forward to. However, this type of production is clearly specifically for children, and I know from all of the odd looks our group of

students received that most people do not attend such productions without a small child at hand.

Journey to London
John Vanbrugh and James Saunders

A theater in the round production, *Journey to London* was an interesting experience from the front row. The only theater in the round I had experienced previously was in a much larger venue, so this theater surprised me in that I felt like I was involved in all of the action on stage. At one point, two characters sat by the edge of the stage by me so that I was almost in the middle of their conversation. At first I was very aware of myself in relation to the actors on stage, but throughout the play I became more comfortable being so close to the action.

The play centers around an inn run by Mrs. Motherly, who is in fact the only motherly figure in the play (except with regard to Martilla). Lady Arabella does not have children, and Lady Headpiece is too involved with herself to be concerned about mothering Betty and Humphry. Mrs. Motherly and her inn seem to be a kind of halfway house for the topsy-turvy characters. This is especially apparent at the end of the play when Lord Loverule, Lady Headpiece, and Sir Francis Headpiece each stand in a corner of the stage and recount the Mrs. Motherly why they have come to the inn.

By the end of the play, all of the female characters have had some sort of relations with Colonel Courtly, the sickeningly appealing and morally inappropriate womanizer. Mrs. Motherly has a business relationship with Courtly, as she has profited in the sexual relations between he and Martilla. His relations with Martilla have left the young girl hurt, yet empowered by the final scenes of the play. Courtly implies a past relationship

with the fun-seeking Lady Arabella, and he desires to entertain the interests of Lady Headpiece. All of these relationships are inappropriate, but most of all is Courtly's relationship with Betty. Though she seems to allow his advances, Betty claims that Courtly rapes her. Betty and Motherly are the only characters that are empowered directly by their relationships with Courtly. Motherly uses Courtly to make money at the expense of her niece, and Betty uses Courtly to free herself from the restrictions of her gender.

Saunders and Vanbrugh dissect the idea of marriage in this play. There are no faithful marriages; all of the relationships are characterized by deceit. Even Martilla's match with Sir Charles is deceitful: the match was made during a masquerade party when neither Martilla nor Sir Charles was sure of the identity of the other.

A few reviews that I have read mention that it is near impossible to tell where Vanbrugh stops and Saunders begins. Aside from the obvious pause in the middle of a scene, I believe that the writing shifts directly to include 20th century ideas. Betty becomes more interested in ideas about gender, and sexual promiscuity becomes even more apparent. Betty's sexual trap for Courtly is also more 20th century than restoration, especially after she acquiesces to enter the garden room again with Courtly. It is true that the idea of gender plays a large role in both restoration and 20th century plays, but Saunders' end of the play represents purely a 20th century resolution.

Wednesday January 4
Epitaph for George Dillon
John Osborne and Anthony Creighton

Since I am a student of media studies, I am interested in the role of television and radio in *Epitaph for George Dillon*. In between certain scenes and as the play commences, the audience hears the sounds of the rapid changing of channels. Both the television and the radio play a large role in the lives of the Elliots, a completely grotesque and detached family. Television and radio serve to distance each family member from one another—the audience never sees the Elliot family having even one meal all together. Although Mrs. Elliot tries to unite her family, ultimately the television captivates them, individualizing the family.

This seems to be a comment on the societal detachment caused by television, and is a relevant topic today as well as in the post-war time period that *Epitaph* depicts. I have heard many studies on the individualizing effect of television on society. With television, personal interaction as a form of entertainment becomes obsolete. Television also breeds mediocrity; no thinking is required when one watches the television set. It is purely for entertainment in the Elliot household, and the hours spend in the back room of the house only serve to distance the family from society and from each other. The Elliots' obsession with television reinforces the disgust that George feels for this “typical” family.

As television allows people to accept mediocrity, the theater also becomes more about entertainment and less about thinking. Plays must keep up with the popularity of television, because theater becomes unnecessary and unpopular as families are able to watch plays from their couch, and for free. In this play, George Dillon is forced to settle

for mediocrity at the expense of his art. George and Ruth are the only characters in the play that are able to see the ignorance and inferiority of the trite middle class life which the Elliots live. It is also important to note that Ruth does not share the same last name with the rest of the family; she is listed as Ruth Gray, although we know that she is Mrs. Elliot's sister. With this in mind, both she and George are automatically outsiders in the Elliot household.

By the end of the play, George accepts mediocrity and therefore ceases to be an artist. George is engaged to be married to Josie, though it is obvious he does not love her (in his epitaph, George states that he has loved no one successfully). By selling out to Barney and "popularizing" his play, George rejects art. This makes the presence of the typewriter that much more inappropriate and grotesque. George has conformed to the clichés of the Elliot family and of the new middle class; he stops living and must now merely exist with the rest of this mediocre family in a mediocre world. This is the point of his epitaph—George is no longer living, no longer an artist, and no longer an original.

Thomas More
Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, and William Shakespeare

As I sat in the Novello Theater watching *Thomas More*, I was surprised at how little specific information about the life of Thomas More the play provides. This fact was not as surprising when I learned that the play had never been finished, and that it was censored by the British government more than several times. Moreover, the play is accredited to several different playwrights; a collaboration of varied styles of language.

In order to appease censors, the playwrights represent More as an almost comic figure; he is charismatic and witty throughout the play, even when he is imprisoned in the Tower of London. More accepted his fate as a prisoner, and was prepared to die for his cause (which my classmates and I later discovered was to block Henry VIII from becoming head of the church in England).

Thursday January 5

Coram Boy

Helen Edmundson

As Handel actually held together the Coram Foundling Hospital through his monetary donations, his music serves in holding together this play. Handel's Messiah is the heart of this complex production, tying together themes of family and education with a multi-faceted plot. The play juxtaposes the privileged and the lower classes, and the Messiah is the perfect musical reflection of this juxtaposition. One of the first concerts of Handel's Messiah in London was given by the Coram Boys' Choir as a fundraiser for the Foundling Hospital. This relationship combines the high art of oratory compositions with the most destitute group of people in London at the time: orphans. One never associates destitution with musical compositions such as the Messiah, but the relationship the Coram Foundation shares with the composer allows for a brilliant foundation for *Coram Boy*.

The stage of the Olivier Theater in the National Theater complex is important to the production of *Coram Boy*. The large and multi-functional stage allows more than one scene to occur at a time, and give the appropriate depth needed in certain scenes, such as the beginning scenes inside the cathedral and the under water scene. Both would be hard

to convey on a smaller stage. Another characteristic unique to the Olivier is the giant turnstile in the middle of the stage. The turnstile can create different levels, such as making a step up into a home or a room. It can also create indoor and outdoor space, something which was done incredibly well in *Coram Boy*. Dirt on either side of the turnstile combines with the raising of the turnstile about a foot off of the ground to create the idea of walls without the necessity of any sort of set.

To create the illusion of a passage of time or to facilitate in the changing of scenes, the turnstile is spun around. This was done in the scene in which Aaron's voice changed; on one side of the turnstile he is a boy, and on the other he is well into adolescence. Though this is a large jump to make, it was artistically effective. The same turnstile is even more elaborately used in *Once in a Lifetime*; moreover, a turnstile is also used for Billy's bedroom and the kitchen in *Billy Elliot*.

The most elaborate scene in the play was the under water scene in which Meshak drowns. Plays often struggle with under water scenes, using cables and varied lighting to create the effect of water. In *Coram Boy*, a plastic sheet creates the effect of water as lights dances off of its moving surface. Meshak and Aaron, who are suspended by cables, push against the plastic sheet in order to create the effect of swimming through water. This is an incredibly creative and effective way to represent a scene under water.

Coram Boy relies on its innovative set design and incredible score. Without these two components, the play would not seem as sensational to a critical audience.

Pillars of the Community
Henrik Ibsen

Both Ibsen plays we saw begin with characters on stage before the actual play commences. This play before the play functions as a way for the actors to get into character, but it also serves to involve the audience in the play. The audience can observe at their leisure the goings-on of the set up of the stage and the activities around it—almost as if the audience were involved in the production itself. It also makes the play seem more “real” as characters are not only part of the play, but their lives begin before the play begins. The similarity in the pre-openings of the plays between *Pillars of the Community* and *The Wild Duck* causes me to wonder whether Ibsen includes this as a specific stage direction or it is just coincidence that the directors chose to open the play before the dialogue actually begins.

Pillars of the Community exposes the deceit of community leaders. The only people who can see the flaws of this society are those who are outside of it: Lona, Johan, and Dina. Lona and Johan return to the community that they left fifteen years previous, finding nothing has changed. Lona attempts to ameliorate the flaws of the community through Karsten as she acts as a conscience figure. The first thing she does when she re-enters the community is open a window, shedding light and fresh air on an otherwise stale town. Johan knows the flaws of this society; he knows that the leader of the community, Karsten, known for his high moral character, is anything but moral.

Though Lona and Johan are physically not part of this community anymore, Dina is an outsider within the community. Dina is the illegitimate child whose mother died when she was young. The rumors of Dina’s birth circulate even presently as it becomes

the subject of gossip during the first few scenes of the play—Dina can not escape them. These three outsiders serve as catalysts to Karsten’s ultimate breakdown at the end of the play.

The character of Karsten is despicable. As an audience, we are able to see both sides of the community leader, whereas the community only sees the false moral character he creates. After realizing that his leadership is based on lies, Karsten seems to change in an instant, speaking to the community and telling them the truth. The audience knows he is not yet reborn; he has not admitted to almost murdering his brother-in-law along with a whole boat full of people. Though his rebirth gives hope to the restoration of truth and morality, his failure to admit his intentions gives evidence that Karsten’s transformation may not last.

Friday January 6

Paul

Howard Brenton

In our tour of the National Theater, we saw the Cottesloe Theater as it was set for the play *Two Thousand Years*. It looked like a smaller version of plays we had seen before, with rows of seats set stadium style in front of a rectangular stage. When we re-entered the theater for *Paul*, it was completely different. The stage was positioned diagonally across the theater, surrounded on three sides by the audience. At some places, the audience members were inches from the set. It was incredible to me how different the theater looked!

Paul obviously takes place in the first century of the common era, but the set shows buildings as ruins, maybe to show the passage of time between these events and

the present. Also, the costuming is modern; soldiers carry machine guns, and Jesus wears Birkenstocks. Rather than re-creating the play to modern times, it is possible that the director chose to depict the characters as they would look today amongst the ruins from yesterday.

Since *Paul* deals with highly religious material, people have different reactions to it based on their religious beliefs. *Paul* questions some of the stories that serve as a basis for the Christian religion. Though it questions these stories, the play constantly reinforces the idea of faith. Even when Paul is faced with evidence that severely questions his faith in Jesus Christ, he refuses to believe that it is true, that his religion is based on lies. In this light, even though *Paul* questions faith, it also reaffirms it.

When I first began thinking about *Paul*, one of the themes I came up with was “the search for truth.” After thinking more about the play, I realized that this was not true; Paul is not searching for truth, he has already found it. Paul believes he has found the truth, and his faith carries him throughout the play. He rocks back and forth at the beginning of the play saying “Christ has risen.” Paul has accepted Christ and his doctrine as truth, defends it, and uses it for hope—even when Peter tries to persuade him otherwise. Paul is so faithful that he even forces Jesus to question if he is the messiah.

Saturday January 7
Edward Scissorhands
Matthew Bourne

I have to admit—I was nervous to see *Edward Scissorhands* as a ballet with no dialogue. A movie is usually based on dialogue, and most times dialogue is the only way the plot can move forward. Nonetheless, the Saddler’s Wells production of *Edward*

Scissorhands was phenomenal. Though the dancing is not incredibly technically complicated, the dancers showcase their talent in their characterization. They are able to portray so much through only movement and costuming. Visual stimulation and continuous acting allow the plot to not only move forward, but to engross the audience.

The set design in *Edward Scissorhands* made the production. The set creates a sense of a Tim Burton-esque world—a grotesque reality. It mostly consists of a neighborhood in which the cookie-cutter houses seem sickeningly perfect. Everything seems distorted, showing the flaws of a perfect community. Each family, all consisting of a father, mother, son, and daughter, has their own role within the community. Even the imperfect families fit into the mold that the community requires.

Issues of normalcy pepper this production. What is normal? Are the grotesquely perfect families to be considered normal, or is the physically flawed Edward the normal one amongst outsiders? It seems as if the town and its people are superficially normal, only normal in looks, but Edward is normal in humanity. Edward certainly is not considered normal by the townspeople. Choreography consisting of pairings of couples constantly reinforce that Edward is an outsider. When he is brought into the choreography, he ends up hurting someone or messing things up in some way. This motif is continued throughout the production, even when Edward becomes accepted by the community.

The Hypochondriac
Moliere

In Moliere's *The Hypochondriac*, the servant-maid Toinette is the director of all of the action. As in *Twelfth Night*'s Maria, Toinette seems to meddle in the lives of her

charges. She is the only person who questions Argon (except for his brother), adding to the comedy of the situation of an incredible hypochondriac. Instead of comforting Argon in his fragile state, Toinette argues with him. Toinette actually becomes a true director at several moments during the play. In order to gain Angelique's love interest permission to see Angelique, Toinette tells Argon that he is Angelique's substitute music teacher. She then observes as the pair puts on an exquisite show of musical talent to mask the real reason for the visit from Angelique's love interest.

Toinette also facilitates the play between Argon and his greedy wife, attempting to find the wife's reaction when she finds Argon dead. Toinette knows that her reaction will not be one of sorrow, and it is for this purpose that Toinette instructs her actor Argon to begin his play.

One aspect of *The Hypochondriac* that I found interesting was the subtle comments it made on education. Like *The History Boys*, this play shows the "dangers" of learning simply for the regurgitation of information rather than for enrichment. Tom Diaforia, Angelique's potential fiancé, epitomizes this hazard in education. Incredibly comedic, Tom mechanically gives overly-complementary speeches which end up offending his audience. His father admits that Tom is not bright, but his lack of intelligence makes it easier for him to learn, as he does not question. Of what worth is an education that is never questioned?

In this reproduction of the play, the director chose not to end the play as it had been written, but to conclude it with its actual conclusion before the death of Moliere. This gives the effect that Moliere was in fact writing for himself, possibly writing his own epitaph.

Sunday January 8
As You Desire Me
Luigi Pirandello

As You Desire Me is intentionally ambiguous. The play ends without a resolution as to who Ignotia really is—Pirandello forces the audience to make their own decision. The play is filled with ambiguity and unanswered questions, mirroring the ambiguous nature of the construction of self. How is self constructed? Is it constructed by the person herself, or by the people around the person? In *As You Desire Me*, Ignotia is constructed by whoever she is around. The play's title suggests this: Ignotia becomes whoever the people around her want her to be. Around Salter, she is a show-girl, a sexy lead, and a star. She is Elma, fluid like water, able to conform to whatever container she is given.

Around Bruno, Ignotia is the cultured Chia. She is a wife, she is pure, and she is wealthy. At her villa, there is a large portrait of "Chia"—this serves as another example of the phrase "as you desire me" since the portrait represents other people's representation of someone else. Bruno seems like he is willing to accept a "Chia" that is not real, at least not real anymore. This brings into question his real motives: does he want a wife, or a villa? This is a question of love or money. Does he want the real Chia, or someone who happens to resemble her?

When Salta brings the supposed real Chia to the villa, the family believes even more that Ignotia is Chia. They refuse to believe that their Chia could be so disturbed. They are willing to accept the fake over the reality, becoming a family of surfaces. These surfaces mask the real self, making it impossible for Ignotia to find her own self.

Ultimately, Ignotia can not risk being only superficially Chia, even if she is the real thing. Even though she does not remember her past, with Salter she has a real life, superficial because it is based on sex appeal, but real because it is hers.

Monday January 9

Tintin

Rufus Norris and David Grieg

With its bright colors and use of framing, *Tintin* is a comic strip brought to life. The opening scene of the play shows several brightly dressed characters walking across the stage in between a rectangular opening that was used throughout the play. Even if you did not know that *Tintin* is based on a comic strip, this framing technique would have given that fact away. The characters as well as the plot in *Tintin* were underdeveloped—possibly two-dimensional, adding to the comic strip effect of the play.

This was another matinee filled with school children, but this time the children were all around ten, just the right age to enjoy the show. The play assumed knowledge of the cartoon strip, something my classmates and I did not have, but the children did; they recognized characters from the comic strip. I am wondering if this cartoon from the beginning of the 20th century still surfaces in children's homes today.

One scene that works particularly well is the scene in which Tintin, Snowy, and the Professor climb an ice cliff. The three characters are suspended by cables and face into the audience as if the cliff were between the audience and the actors. This creates a neat effect as the audience is able to see the characters' reactions while imagining them climbing an ice cliff.

Another interesting facet of this Young Vic Production is the role of Snowy being played by a human. The human Snowy is not even in dog costuming—he is dressed in all white with bleached white hair. Nonetheless, the audience does not question whether Snowy is human or dog; his mannerisms and movements leave no doubt that the actor is supposed to be a dog. Making Snowy a human also allows for the comic strip nature of talking animals.

Tintin is definitely a children's production; flat characters and predictable plot structure leads the “big kids” to seek for interest in other parts of the play.

Gem of the Ocean
August Wilson

Freedom is the central issue in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*—liberation from the bondage of sin and from the bondage of race. Taking place in Pittsburgh around the turn of the 20th century, racial prejudices flourish and African Americans are still severely discriminated against. The play brings together two generations: one who can still remember slavery and being enslaved, and one who struggles with freedom. Solly and Citizen Barlow embody these two generations. Solly lived through slavery in Alabama and helped to deliver slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Citizen Barlow, whose name implies his post-slavery generation, struggles to find a place in the supposed free world.

In order to be free, Citizen needs to be free from his sin, and he needs to recognize the sacrifices his elders made so that he could live freely. The climax of the play occurs when Aunt Esther takes Citizen to the City of Bones, on her boat made of her

bill of sale, the Gem of the Ocean. It is interesting to note that the stage is bowed as the bottom of a boat would be, adding to the effect that Aunt Esther, Solly, Eli, Black Mary, and Citizen are all actually going to the City of Bones. This City of Bones represents their ancestors, the ones whose deaths have made their free lives possible. There is an important message in the necessity for Citizen to confess his crime: in order for him to move forward in freedom, he must be free from sin.

There are different kinds of freedom in *Gem of the Ocean*. The African Americans in Pittsburgh experience freedom in a legal sense, but although they are free on paper, they are not free from the bondage of prejudice. The audience gets the sense of distrust of this race, even from their own people, as seen in the heartless Caesar. Another kind of freedom is what Aunt Esther tries to instill in her protégés: spiritual freedom, or freedom of the self. If a person recognizes his ancestors and redeems his past sins, he can be free; however, freedom is not individual. Solly shows this idea of collective freedom when he ultimately risks his life to save others, even when he is already free.

Aunt Esther's spiritual freedom is above human law. No human law is necessary in the City of Bones, the only requirement is spiritual freedom. At the end of the play, Citizen Barlow sets out to carry on Solly's tradition of community, of freedom for a common profit. He is cleansed and purged of his sins, and ready to fight for the freedom of the black community rather than for himself.

Tuesday January 10
Mary Stuart
Frederick Schiller

A dark play about a dark time in England, *Mary Stuart* shows the other side of history. Schiller's meeting between Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I was fabricated, but the power struggle between the two women was not. Both female monarchs, risen to status by family connection—not through marriage to a king, Mary and Elizabeth represent the pressures of gender in politics. Mary, Elizabeth, and Mary's nurse Hanna are the only women in this play, surrounded by cabinets of men who advise them. The men in this play do not seem power hungry, but they do seem to want to wield their opinions onto the women in power. Lord Burleigh, an advisor to Elizabeth, pressures the Queen into sentencing Mary. It seems like although the women are in power, the men make their decisions.

Although both Mary and Elizabeth share the pressures of being a woman in power, each deals with this pressure in a different way. Elizabeth rules like a man, with little or no feeling, and a constant eye on politics. Alternatively, Mary allows her feminine emotions to guide her. This is especially apparent in her meeting with Elizabeth on the greens of Fotheringhay. During this meeting, Mary ceases to be composed and unleashes her inner lion into an outpour of emotions against Elizabeth and against Protestantism.

Religion also plays a large role in this production: Catholic versus Protestant. The Protestant Elizabeth and her followers are portrayed as suppressive and puritanical, whereas Catholicism appears to be the source of art and emotion. When Mortimer explains his time in France to Mary, he raves about the gilded Catholic cathedrals and the

outpour of emotion he feels when he observes the ornate paintings and sculptures dedicated to God. In the religious sense, the emotional Mary represents the ideals of Catholicism, and the struggle between the sister Queens becomes more about religion than anything else.

The costuming in *Mary Stuart* puzzles me. The women are dressed in modernized period clothing, whereas the males are dressed in modern dark suits. This could possibly be a reinforcement of gender, as well as a nod to the power of these women over their male advisors. At the end of the play, Mary is dressed in the only color that ever enters the stage: red. Red is the color of passion, representing Mary's struggle for life and for her religion. Red is also the color of blood, symbolizing her bloody death by the hand of Elizabeth. This spark of color could also represent the salvation Mary has received previous to her death, and her acceptance of her fate.

Salvation is at the heart of this play, just as religion is. Mary has made peace with herself and with her God, and is ready to accept her own death.

Wednesday January 11

Once in a Lifetime

George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart

The words "once in a lifetime" say it all: a gold rush to Hollywood, a yearning for fame, and a craving for success. *Once in a Lifetime* is a spectacle that shows the spectacle of Hollywood in the 1920's. Only two things matter to the characters in this play: fame and money. In order to get either of these two, one must please "the man"—the person who has the power to give anyone fame and money.

A production in the Olivier Theater of the National Theater, *Once in a Lifetime* makes use of the revolving floor to create spectacular scenery. During the scenes that take place in a Pullman car in Acts I and III, the revolving floor adds the effect of the movement of the train. As in *Coram Boy*, the revolving floor also serves to expedite the scene changing process and adds to the spectacle of the show. This is especially apparent when the Gold Room of the Hotel Stilton revolves out onto the stage—its glittery massiveness succeeds in portraying the air of exhibition in Hollywood.

Adding to the inclination towards showiness that Hart and Kaufman represent, the most successful character of the gold rush is the one that is most enamored by the glitziness of fame. George Davis reads *Variety* magazine (a celebrity gossip magazine) religiously. He is floored when Helen Hobart, a celebrity gossip columnist, visits his Pullman car, and he completely buys into the show of Hollywood at the Hotel Stilton. Despite George's lack of competence, he "makes it" in Hollywood, and every stupid blunder he makes increases his success. This is no doubt a comment on the process of fame in Hollywood: no skill is necessary, only luck.

Billy Elliot the Musical
Lee Hall

Billy Elliot the Musical is a brilliant social commentary—it depicts complex, adult issues as they effect and relate to children. Set during the mining strikes in the 1980s, *Billy Elliot* juxtaposes children with their parents who are fighting for more rights. In one of the most interesting scenes of the play, children danced between strikers and policemen, serving the purpose of keeping the peace. This juxtaposition shows that all lives are affected by social issues, and especially children's lives are affected by their

parents' decisions. Lives are interconnected, and community instability affects children, maybe even more than their parents.

Community solidarity plays a major role in the interests of the miners. Many of the plays we saw dealt with issues about common versus singular profit. In *Billy Elliot*, common profit is valued over everything else. This is especially embodied in Billy's older brother, an intense young worker who stands for the miners sticking together. This particular character seems to forget the interconnectedness of the community, and his challenging nature becomes a hazard to Billy and to the Elliot family. It is necessary to achieve a balance between solidarity and family—this is shown by the dinners given by the community to feed the families who are out of work because of the strike.

Gender also plays a large role in *Billy Elliot*. Obviously, Billy breaks down gender barriers as he realizes his passion for ballet. In a great scene, Billy's friend breaks down barriers even more as he sings a song to the effect of expressing oneself. The boys are dressed in skirts and heels, dancing around with dresses on hangers. This shows that gender is unrestricted: skirts are not just for girls, just as dancing is not only for girls. Billy's grandmother also helps to break down gender roles as she sings him a song about how she could get along just fine without the help of a man.

The community is the driving force in *Billy Elliot*—the only time Billy is outside of the community is on his audition, but even then he has the support of the community behind him. Unlike other musicals, Billy does not have to leave the community to discover himself; the answer lies within the solidarity of the community.

Thursday January 12
Comedy of Errors
William Shakespeare

Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is a comment on true human nature. Infidelity and deceit characterize many human encounters, and it is these flaws that are represented and exaggerated in this play. This Royal Shakespeare Company production nodded to the exaggerations of human nature present in *Comedy of Errors*; the costuming seemed to me like that of a grotesque circus. Characters are exaggerated, from the tall Antipholuses to the stout Dromios. This circus-like quality is emphasized by overly-elaborate costuming and hairstyles, reminding me of characters in the movie *Moulin Rouge*.

Playing into the motif of dreams and nightmares, the costuming represents a kind of alternative universe. In the case of constant mistaken identities, real life becomes a nightmare for the people of Ephesus. In the play, we see scattered references to witchcraft. One such example is in a scene when Antipholus of Ephesus wards of the courtesan by crossing his forefingers, like one would do to ward off Satan. Another example of witchcraft is the exorcism attempted on Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus. Both examples show the nightmare of mistaken identity and the attempt to cure it with witchcraft.

Because of the constant mistaken identities, identity plays a large role in *Comedy of Errors*. One way this is shown in the production is through costuming: articles of clothing are constantly taken off and put on again, as quickly as identities seem to change. At the end of the play, all of the characters shed their outer layer of clothing. This could be representing the epiphany of finally seeing double, or it could be the realization of new identity now that all of the errors have been righted. Antipholus of

Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse now have their own identities, and Antipholus of Syracuse has secured Luciana as a love interest.

The play ends with the reuniting of a family. Family is the strongest of identities; it gives a person a place and a history. With his family reunited, Egeon's quest has come to an end. He no longer has to wander, and the twins can now know their true identity.

The Night of the Iguana
Tennessee Williams

How do we free ourselves from a poisonous life? In *The Night of the Iguana*, Shannon can not break free from a cycle of breakdowns, nor can he find his peace. A fallen man of the cloth, Shannon can not escape the spooks from his past that still haunt him today. He is an alcoholic and a womanizer, and beyond that he has a different approach to religion than is accepted by the church. In Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the key steps in achieving sobriety is to surrender oneself to the power of a higher being. Shannon seems to do this, he is a religious man. Nonetheless, he keeps messing up over and over again. Maxine, a hotel manager, says he has a breakdown every 18 months. It is temptation that holds Shannon back from the redemption he needs to find peace.

Shannon has his breakdowns at the edge of the Mexican jungle. We learn from Maxine that her dead husband will decompose easily in the heat of the jungle, but it seems as if Shannon decomposes in the heat as well. In this remote area, Maxine, Hannah, and Shannon are all disintegrated from society. Outside of conventional civilization, they serve to aid one another's frightening truths, and are imprisoned by their internal struggles.

Maxine exacerbates Shannon's breakdowns; she is the cause of temptation. Even though he is a self-proclaimed alcoholic, Maxine tries to shove Rum Cocos down his throat. She throws sex in his face, and she promotes his womanizing capabilities by proposing that he can take care of the women when she tries to make her hotel more attractive to middle-aged men. In Maxine, Shannon can never find redemption. Hannah, on the other hand, offers Shannon redemption, which he refuses to take. The virginal Hannah plays the role of a nurse, maybe even a nun to which all wrongs can be absolved. In the beginning of the second act, Hannah is staged behind a sheer curtain in her hotel room. She seems to be reading, but it is certain that she is listening in on the conversation between Shannon and Charlotte.

In the second act, Hannah wants to release the iguana from imprisonment, and Shannon says that the iguana is at the end of its rope. Hannah, Shannon, and Maxine are all imprisoned by the hotel, and are all at the end of their ropes, so to speak. Maxine is the only productive one, with plans on marketing her hotel in order to get out of debt. Neither Hannah nor Shannon has any plans. There is very little hope for either to find the peace they are looking for. Shannon will never find peace, his spooks are imaginary, he can only cure himself, and to do this he must submit to his God.

Friday January 13

Wild Duck

Henrik Ibsen

Truth causes disaster, while lies keep a family together. Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* is not a social commentary as so many of his works are, but a commentary on family and private life. Every person has secrets, and sometimes these secrets are buried under the

foundations of a home. Especially in the very working class home of the Ekdal's, who's constant struggle in day-to-day life is to keep food on the table, complicated ideas such as the ideal can cause irreconcilable destruction. In his search for the ideal marriage, Greggers Werle succeeds in breaking down the foundations of the Ekdal home through exposing the secrets of Gina's past. Greggers believes that the marriage can be rebuilt on truthful foundations, and he imposes himself as a savior.

I have heard that Ben Daniels (Greggers) has won many awards for acting, including the Olivier Award. After the show, some of my classmates were commenting on his acting, that they thought it was stiff and unnatural. Not that I am any kind of expert in the art of acting, but I think that Ben Daniels was intentionally stiff and unnatural for the role of Greggers. Greggers is a creepy character, forcing himself into the lives of people who do not need to be "saved." This rigid acting gave Greggers an eerie aura, and made him seem even more sinister at the conclusion of the play.

Greggers succeeds in poisoning the atmosphere of the Ekdal home through unleashing truth. Truth is generally thought of as the highest of virtues, yet lies are valued above all in this play. Life-lies, as the doctor Relling says, can help in the building of a home. Love is the foundation of the Ekdal household. Hjalmar, though selfish and ignorant, finds his one true passion in Hedvig, his daughter. This foundation of love and devotion is more important than the truth, and when this foundation is broken, so is the family.

Though Greggers laid the foundation for Hjalmar's destruction, I can not dismiss Hjalmar as a culprit in his daughter's death. Hjalmar is certainly not a hero—his strength in this situation is non-existent, and he ultimately alienates Hedvig. Hedvig, kept in a

stunted state of maturity, can not survive without the adoration of her father. As the wild duck, she realizes that without her father's love, she is all alone.

Saturday January 14
You Never Can Tell
George Bernard Shaw

Like *The Hypochondriac*, Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* is motivated by a servant. In this play, it is a waiter at a hotel that serves as the director of the action. "William" is so named by the Clandon family. They name him for William Shakespeare, which is significant because William acts as a playwright, driving the play. William involves himself in significant issues of the Clandon family, even when Mr. Crampton says that he should not be so involved. The waiter delivers the news to Crampton that he is in fact the father of the three Clandon children, and he testifies during the mock-trial regarding the marriage between Mr. Valentine and Gloria. William also serves as the moral force in the play, repeating "you never can tell" at key moments.

Two other interestingly named characters are Mr. Valentine and Dolly. A manipulative womanizer, Mr. Valentine represents a man ready to love. This is ironic, since tenderness is not one of the qualities one usually associates with a dentist. "Valentine" can mean love, but by today's standards, Valentine's Day can be a cheap, commercialized holiday, only serving the purpose for card and chocolate companies to make a buck. Mr. Valentine openly admits to being interested in Gloria for her money, and his cheap lines he feeds her could be words from a Hallmark card. But then again, we aren't certain as to Mr. Valentine's sincerity, he could really be in love with Gloria.

Dolly is a silly girl, unrefined and not to be taken seriously. She is suitably named because a dolly is a plaything, used for entertainment purposes only. The irony comes in the fact that Dolly uses others for her own entertainment, such as her inappropriate flirtations with Finch.

The prospect of the ideal partnership involves the characters of *You Never Can Tell*. Mrs. Clandon, a modern woman “life advice” writer is bound to her rule and ideals, and tries to pass them on to her children. Gloria is under such a trance from her mother that she is not able to decide on her own will to remain independent, especially after meeting Mr. Valentine. All of the Clandons profess they know something of human nature (especially Phil), but none can apply this knowledge to real life. In the end, they discover that there is no ideal, and that William is right, you never can tell.