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Theatre in England  
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## London Journal

*Saturday December 31, First Official Day of Class*

Today, our first official day of play

which none of the main characters, not even Cleanthes (the character most closely resembling a traditional “hero”), can be labeled good or bad. For example, Cleanthes’ virtuous devoted

costume so its removal seemed particularly noteworthy to me). Human behavior

subject of this play.

Evander’s edict, that all men over the age of eighty and all women over the age of sixty be put to death, introduces the inevitable and equally uncomfortable reality of death

to this pointed and frequently humorous exploration of human conduct. To be a mature adult and functional member of society, an individua

passing of judgment is problematized although the play definitely rejects the selfish profit embodied by Simonides and Gnotho in favor of the selfless behavior that benefits the community as a whole best embodied by Cleanthes' parents (and, by extension, through his own efforts to save his father) and Evander himself.

The production itself suffered from a lot of awkward blocking which, as we discussed in class, is probably the result of the fact that it was designed for the thrust stage of The Swan in Stratford. For example, there were a lot of moments in which an actor would have to turn around to deliver a line directly to the audience. Consequently, many of these moments—whether serious or funny—came across as forced or overly theatrical. That being said, I think this play functioned as a good introduction to many of the themes that went on to dominate our subsequent class discussions. I really appreciated the extent to which the production enjoyed the satirical elements within the text (the wild costumes and heightened sound effects are just two examples that come to mind). The actors seemed to really be having fun so I found it impossible not to do like

able to fulfill their obligations as servants while si

which the stage was lit brightly but the actors all moved around as if blinded by darkness, exemplified the extent to which Malvolio was disconnected from everyone else onstage. But this does not mean that he deserves to be abused in the way that he was. I do not think we are meant to entirely approve of the community's efforts to shame Malvolio who, although ridiculous in his vanity, poses no real threat to anyone.

While this production was also staged for the Swan Theater, it translated much better to the Novello's stage than *A New Way to Please You* did to the stage at Trafalgar Studios. The actors frequently entered or exited through the audience and the musicians moved from being highly visible onstage to being highly visible in the box seats of the audience. Props were lowered and removed from above, giving the distinct impression that things were indeed falling from the heavens. The traditional boundaries between the stage and the audience, and between onstage and off were intentionally being broken. The costumes also challenged our expectations for specificity of time or place since they were clearly modernized but also deliberately ambiguous. I must confess that I still cannot quite make sense of the face paint on Viola, Sebastian, and Feste. I liked the fact that the clown white links the three characters but do not understand

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depicted in thi

for the literature they are learning while also challenging them to use their imaginations to make the ideas they are learning their own. Irwin, on the other hand, is simply interested in teaching the boys how to manipulate facts so that they can do well on their placement exams. He is more interested in test results and school rankings than he is the development of the boys. Hector encourages the boys to remain true to themselves while Irwin wants them to become traditional success stories by gaining entrance to Cambridge or Oxford.

Interestingly enough, neither Hector nor Irwin is depicted as being particularly happy. Hector comes across as terrifically lonely. His marriage is passionless and he seems to have little else outside of the boys and literature. His overwhelming desire to connect with the boys as exemplified in the “Drummer Hodge” scene with Posner (where he talks about the ability of writing to reach out and touch the reader and literally reaches out to comfort the distraught Posner) and, more disturbingly, by his fondling of his favorite students is both understandable and pathetic. While we know little about Irwin’s personal life, he too appears lonely but for different reasons. Perhaps isolated is a better word—he knows he is a phony. He is a cripple before he is actually crippled which is, I think, why both the first scene of the play and the first scene after the intermission both depict Irwin in his wheelchair before we as an audience know what happened to him. Furthermore, the boys that most resemble each of these men also complicate our ability of

As far as I can tell, Alan Bennett agrees with Hector's teaching methods over Irwin's—although he does not completely dismiss the importance of getting into a good university or even doing well on placement tests. More than anyone else, I think Rudge comes across as the play's greatest success story. He learns as much as he can about everything without giving up what truly interests him—golf. He works the system enough to get into university but does not sell himself out in the process. The fact that he is not one of the most predominant speakers or even a steadfast presence on the stage throughout the play is one of the many strong points of Bennett's writing. What I'm not sure I understand completely is why he wrote homoeroticism into the characters of both Hector and Irwin. I do not think the incidents on Hector's motorcycle are about sex (how could they be, he's driving after all). Ultimately, it is my belief that they function as an effective metaphor for Hector's desperate desire to connect with his pupils—but then why make Irwin appear to be a closeted homosexual? It seems to me as though doing so “cheapens” the complex nature of Hector's confused behavior by making it fairly easy to focus on the issue of sexuality instead of the issues of connection and loneliness.

I know this play is going to Broadway and I think this issue, combined with the fact that the kind of public school education geared towards the college entrance exams has the direct equivalent in the United States, might make it hard for North American audience to fully appreciate. I know that I felt at times as though I were missing some of the

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*Tuesday*

audience, they laughed at themselves and each other. I

“nincompoop” seems out of place in a Restoration Comedy if you ask me! The gender dynamics set up by Vanbrugh were highly significant since women actors were, for the first time, allowed to perform onstage. The manner in which Saunders developed these dynamics, however, was predictable. The “morality” speeches about equality, servitude, and freedom were not especially engaging—they felt more like forgone conclusions of a modern era than a complex subject worthy of exploration.

As the two most predominate female voices calling for change, Arabella and Betty best exemplify some of the irreconcilable contradictions that confuse the message of the play. For example, Arabella’s assertion that she is unhappy in her marriage because she is emotionally neglected (her line of reasoning here reminded me a lot of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath) and her demand that she receive an allowance equal to the amount her husband spends on himself

Our first play today was *Epitaph for George Dillon*. Everything about this play is suffocating—from the set that confines the movement onstage essentially to pacing between one chair to another in a cramped living room, to the ideas of progress and success (like getting a telephone or simply earning lots of money) that ultimately win over individual expression at the end of the play. Each and every character is quite literally trapped in mediocrity. The only difference between them seems to be the extent to which they are aware of their own situations. In this regard, the play reminds me a lot of several classic American plays of the same era like *Death of a Salesman* and *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

As its title suggests, the play ultimately functions as a case study on the intellectual death of its main protagonist—after all, epitaphs are only written for the dead. Part of what makes George such an engaging character, despite his bitterness, is his ability to recognize what is going on around him. His brutal mockeries of everything from the Elliot family's taste in furniture to Josie's means of entertaining herself are brutal precisely because they are grounded in recognizable truths. George is great observer of others. His critical insights remind me, in many ways, of the insights of a privileged member of the audience—at least as far as the Elliot family is concerned. He is not quite as capable of acknowledging failure when his own efforts are involved. In Ruth he finds a kindred spirit of sorts. Like George, she is also unsatisfied with the life she is living. Unlike George, however, Ruth does not pretend to be happy—she does not lie. While George pretends to be and ultimately becomes a character in someone else's bad narrative, Ruth withdraws herself from that same narrative of mediocrity by moving out of the Elliot house. Thus, despite the fact that the play ends with the death of George

Dillon, there is some hope in the possibility that Ruth might be able to make something of her life.

The acting in this production was spectacular. Joseph Fiennes and Francesca Annis were particularly good. Their scene together right before intermission in which they get to know each other for the first time was a



report for Rosemary Kegl last year in which I compared the different versions of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy so I was aware of the

disagreement, and Alex's subsequent disappearance and disinheritance, almost results in a tragedy of Dicksonian proportions (think *Oliver Twist* meets *Bleak House*). Ultimately, it is the skillful incorporation of music into the text itself that prevents the characters of this melodrama from becoming soap opera-esque caricatures.

Music also held the thirty-five scenes of the first act and the thirty scenes of the second act together, preventing them from feeling too much like episodic moments without any linear progression or narrative purpose. The multitude of scenes in this play can, I think,



which babies were bur

well spent. It was really interesting to see what went into effectively utilizing the space within each of the three theaters—I got a lot more out of the set designs of the remaining plays we saw in these spaces as a result of this tour. For example, *Pillars* was performed in the same theatre as *History Boys*—the Lyttelton Theatre. But the set of *Pillars* felt a lot smaller, more confined. It consisted simply of one room with the traditional three walls (the audience is the fourth wall). The set of *History Boys*, however, seemed much more open and it certainly was much more versatile. Walls and furniture were constantly being shifted to depict different locations. The only permanent “barriers” were the hung lights that separated the action involving live actors from the action depicted in the film clips projected onto a movie monitor above the lights. More than simply being different and exemplifying the adaptability of the theatre itself, these set designs reflect the pieces they were designed to support. But I am getting ahead of myself...

I was not sure what to expect from *Pillars of the Community* because I am not particularly fond of Ibsen’s writing. While I appreciate the significance of his writing for the time in which it was written, his morality frequently feels preachy to me. I ended up really liking this play, however, not only because everything about this production was outstanding, but also because the text itself functions as a pointed critique of the high moral standards that I have—justly or not

himself and his family up within their house. It is as if he is afraid of the community he claims he so desperately wants to serve. As it turns out, his fear is not without cause—his reputation is one built entirely on lies. This sense of artifice is similarly mirrored by the set itself. Right before intermission, precisely when Karsten's lies are beginning to unravel, the two flies that had previously prevented us from seeing into the wings of the stage are removed and we are suddenly able not only to see actors moving outside of the enclosed room of the set, but also to see the very edifice upon which the set is

simply dismiss him as a villain or a “lost cause”. After all, many of his fears about the community are founded on truths. As it is depicted in this play, society thrives upon gossip, on the destruction of “others” to feel better about itself. And it is not only unforgiving, it never forgets. Karsten is not the only one to recognize this. Dinah knows this truth all too well and flees to America because of it. Why, then, does Karsten stay to serve what he fears? Why is he so dedicated to communal progress as embodied by shipping and the railroads? He is, at least to a certain extent, sacrificing some of his own happiness to do so if we are to believe, as I think we are, that Lona is the woman he really loves. The extent to which conceptions of progress and happiness a



characters instead of just Alex, while the images of all of their faces begin flash blurrily across the screen as the title ends her film

The use of this screen both exemplifies and challenges the extent to which our notions of identity are based on visual recognition. This, I think, is why the destruction of Alice's brain as a result of her butterfly melanoma is so devastating to both her husband and her father. She continues to look like the young, beautiful women they knew, even after she can no longer recognize them or remember the details of the life she lived. What does this mean about her identity? It seems to me that this is where Alex's theory of consciousness from his 1990 film (s) 650 0 Tm ( ) Tj 50 0 4 ( ) Tj 50 0 0 50 787 05Tn

terminated—he has a sense of self. Similarly, Alice’s disease does not immediately remove or even disrupt her presence in other people’s narratives, it simply destroys her ability to reconstruct her own. Thus, memory clearly plays an important role in our

speaking lines were warped versions of famous movie quotes (“As God as my witness,  
I’ll never be subservient again”—“As God as my witness, I’ll i



different ideas and emotions being expressed. For example, t

the music, clearly adapted from the original movie score, contributed to the overall sense of wonder and enchantment suggested by the story as a whole. I know I for one left the theatre wanting to dance.

Our evening performance was another show I had some apprehensions about seeing since it has been my experience that good Molière is absolutely delightful while bad Molière is practically unbearable. However, my fears were quickly abated—this production of *The Hypochondriac* had me rolling in my seat within the first five minutes! Nothing was off limits as a subject of satire within this play, not even the author himself. Molière's sense of humor is wonderful in the extent to which it embodies everything from toilet jokes to incredibly insightful observations about human irrationality. Although this show is a farce, the characters are by no means one-dimensional. Even Beline, the character who is perhaps most easily dismissed as a stereotype—that of the conniving younger wife and step-mother—is a somewhat sympathetic character if you consider the fact, as Molière clearly does, that the law forces women to prostitute themselves in one way or another. Women cannot legally inherit money; they can only receive gifts. Thus, the scheme to leave all of Argan's money

(directed by Toinette of course) that the “actress” Beline’s true character is revealed. The same test also reveals Angelique’s devotion to her father.

*Sunday January 8*

After class this morning I opted to join the majority of our group in attending Eucharist at Westminster Abbey. I would highly recommend this experience to anyone and everyone, as it is not every day that you get the opportunity to hear a service in a space used to crown past and present monarchies! The acoustics were amazing and the service welcomes people of all backgrounds and religious beliefs—you are not obligated or pressured into doing anything you do not feel comfortable doing.

Our show for the day was *As You Desire Me*. Like *On Ego*, this play is a self-conscious exploration of the process through which identities are created and destroyed. Everyone in this play—not just L'Ignota—is looking for something to believe in, a confirmation of life after the devastation and loss of the First World War. For L'Ignota, this search is simply complicated by the fact that she has no memory of her life both during and before the war. It is, of course, this very complication that makes her such a convenient companion for the other characters who are engaged in their own quests of wish fulfillment, most notably Salter and Bruno. For Salter, L'Ignota is the mysterious sex symbol, Alma.

Bruno's conception of L'Ignota is quite diffe

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Perhaps, then, there is no authority on identity. Pe

appreciated how, in homage to its cartoon origins, every scene employed some sort of framing device reminiscent of a cartoon cell. The bright colors, costumes (especially the red socks against the white stockings), and the repetition of catch phrases (“blistering barnacles”) also contributed to this sense of a cartoon reality. Having an actor play the dog was a nice touch; I thought he was the most interesting character in the whole production. I must confess that I was confused in

freedom or your sense of self. This does not, however, mean that the community cannot help or support you in your struggles. Citizen Barlow arrives at Aunt Ester's house precisely because he is in need of help; he has inadvertently contributed to the death of an innocent man and wants to have his soul cleansed of his guilt. Although Ester is able and willing to help Barlow, her methods of helping him consist of helping him help himself (this theme is reminiscent of *The Hypochondriac*). For example, she sends him 1



Ester, Solly's power emerges from his desire to use his own experiences to help others. He worked for the Underground Railroad after escaping slavery, he burned down the mill in an attempt to abolish the newest form of black exploitation, and he returns from safety to break those being held for their alleged roles in burning down the mill out of jail. Having found his personal freedom in every sense of the word, a fact best exemplified in his re-naming of himself, Solly literally dies trying to help others. Unlike Caesar's, Solly's conception of not only freedom, but also community, holds hope for the future. Thankfully, Barlow's "education" enables him to recognize this potential and, quite literally, carry it forward into the future (nicely represented by the claiming of Solly's hat and walking stick).

I thought the staging of this production was really quite remarkable and benefited greatly from being in such an intimate space. I really like how the stage bowed like the deck of a ship, although I did not fully understand the implications of this decision until after the scene in which Barlow actually goes to the City of Bones. The fact that Black Mary was actually cooking—I could smell the food!—and that the men actually ate, really strengthened the sense of comfort or sanctuary offered within the walls of Ester's house. Overall, you could really tell that every aspect of this production was carefully considered and constructed to support Wilson's text and boy was it ever effective!

*Tuesday January 10*

I spent day today exploring the Wallace Collection, something I had never done in





royal garb as the play progresses. She too functions as a martyr of sorts, albeit a less romantic or even likable one.

*Wednesday January 11*

The weather was absolutely beautiful today so I decided to take an extended walk along the river. I started down by the Tower, crossed the Tower Bridge, stopped by Southwark Cathedral to see Gower's tomb, wandered through the Clink and past the Globe, before arriving at the National Theatre.

Today was our day of musicals. The first of the two, *Once in a Lifetime*, bored me for many of the same reasons I found *Tintin* so hard to appreciate—the lack of an interesting story. It very much felt like a translation of an early Bugsy Burkley film—elaborate sets, fl



My favorite numbers from this show were those that simultaneously depicted the minors and the miners in action—the choreography alone was impressive, one

community to include all of us audience members and our shared experience of wishing the best for Billy.

*Thursday January 12*

I divided my morning today between Westminster—one of my favorite places in London—and the Cabinet War rooms, a place I had never been before as they were being renovated the last couple of times I was here. Both were fabulous experiences of communion with the past.

Our first play for today was *Comedy of Errors*. This is actually one of the few Shakespeare plays I had never seen staged before and it was really great to see it for the first time after having seen the same company's production of *Twelfth Night*. This whole show reminded me of some sort of warped fairy tale or romance narrative in which everything that could possibly go wrong does. The vibrantly colored but frequently asymmetrical costumes, the highly stylized hair, the tango-esque music (vs998w50.13004 ssn03450e0 5)

In the extent to which this show problematizes how much of our conception of identity is dependent upon the assumptions or projections of others, it reminded me of *As You Desire Me*. Adriana, Luciana, and Angelo all mistake Antipholus of Syracuse for the Antipholus they know—Antipholus of Ephesus—and expect him to behave a certain way based upon their assumption of who he is. Similarly, each Antipholus assumes the Dromio he interacts with at different times throughout the play is not only the same man, but also the man he knows and each Dromio makes the same assumptions about Antipholus. Since both sets of twins are not only identical, but also share the same exact name, the situation is complicated even further. We are encouraged to laugh at all of the



involved in each ma

Hannah and Maxine are both remarkably like



there is no sense of growth, progress, or reconstruction of any kind after the Ekdal family is torn apart. Gregors' idealism comes across as very selfish. He wants to get back at his father and to convince other people of the validity of his own ideas, no matter what the cause. His own perceived victimization makes him determined to right the world and he transforms Hjalmar into heroic ideal that has no basis in reality. Doctor Relig tries to explain the impossibility of Gregors' idealii



a big part of the appeal of their relationship is its novelty, which quickly begins to become problematic—especially for Neal, who left not only a wife, but also a child.

Neal is, in my opinion, the most interesting character

possibly be happy with someone else before they are happy with themselves. Who will end up with whom remains deliberately ambiguous.

I was really impressed by the quality o

Henry.



show you that there is something for everyone in the way that this class is designed and that is no small feat so I would like to end by thanking you, Dr. Peck, for this amazing opportunity. I really appreciate all the time and effort that both you and Ruth put into making sure that we all had n

