Meridel Phillips
ENG 252
Theatre in London

, The New London Theatre – December 30, 2011

The scope of this production was incredible in that not only were its technical aspects amazingly done and beautiful even in their mechanical nature (namely, the horses), but the artistic choices and acting also represented the story's emotional content incredibly well. The detail of each horse puppet would have been useless without the same depth of detail by the puppeteers, and this was seen in their physical attunement to the puppets and to each other, from the motion in the horses' necks that made them appear to be charging while standing still, down to even their slight movements that made the horses "breathe." The use of such larger-than-life puppets made the staging in this production even more important. During what would have been somewhat linear scenes (such as horses charging or Joey attempting to plough), the use of the rotating stage made the production fluid and showed the audience many physical perspectives, just as the play showed the perspectives of other nationalities during WWI. The choice to use human actors as inanimate objects (such as men holding bars to appear as fences or stable walls), while animals were humanized, really emphasized that the show was focused on the horses rather than the humans – that the war was simply a context, a human complexity, in which Joey's story took place. And through our very human eyes, looking at his story and the various human perspectives it led us through, the audience was shown all the atrocities of war and left to draw its own conclusions about humanity, or perhaps humanity's animalistic side. Various scenes in which war was glorified (such as the major general's speech to his ranks) contrasted with scenes in which we saw its horrors

The fact that the play's language was just as important in this production as the visual drawings again shows the production's scope. There were several plays of tongue, the most noticeable being the English term "joey gun" in reference to the cannon that Joey and Topthorn were carrying for the German soldiers. The German officer's relationship to the two horses was founded on the fact that he spoke English to them, which also made him a much more sympathetic character to the audience; we could understand him in more ways than one. In the end, his English became his tool through which he spoke to other soldiers behind his commander's back, and for which he was nearly killed by his commander. In some ways, this lack of translation for the conversations between humans was counterbalanced by not only the "conversations" with the horses, but also the narrator and accordion player, who translated the story into a

, The Young Vic Theatre – December 30, 2011

Nothing about this production was as I expected it to be and, for one of the most well-known plays by Shakespeare, this spoke to the immense impact of directorial choices combined with actor talent. The very first impression I got, and one that was emphasized throughout the play, was the idea of the audience being integrated into the mental institution in which the characters appeared to be trapped. There were moments when it seemed Hamlet was directly addressing us, most notably in his end monologue just b

visual side of the play was all imaginary, in the sense that we were in Hamlet’s head. The

emphasize that this is all Hamlet’s perception. The bond between Horatio and Hamlet is more than clear in the script, and in this interpretation seems to indicate a slight attraction between the two, thus Haml

, Trafalgar Studios – December 31, 2011

The subtleties of this production really amazed me. For a show with a small cast in a very small space and a rather simple storyline, the play was surprisingly engaging and the actors did an excellent job illustrating the memories that fueled each character's actions. The focus seemed to be not only on each character's memories, but also on their imperfections, something well reflected in the appearance of the production. The allusions to the story of *A Christmas Carol* were apparent not only in the title but in the dark, frugal atmosphere of John's home, and yet the play was not too heavy-handed in its comparison to the original story. In its transfer to a modern, realistic plot, the "Scrooge" character (John) is frugal not in his financial generosity, but in his emotions, and is haunted by his past choices as opposed to physical ghosts. The other "ghosts" in this production, pieces of the puzzle that were apparent to the audience and yet never seen, were the romantic relationships that each character mentioned. John talks about his family life and then about his time with Carol; Mary tells the story of her brother Paul's girlfriend and her determination to stay with him; and Mark becomes less and less interested in his girlfriend, Kim. The difference between men and women in their perceptions of love over time shows the theme of imperfection as well. This is most clear after Mark attempts to leave Kim, and he and John discuss women and their grand illusions about true, "perfect" love that lasts forever. The final image of the production, John's abode with Christmas decorations scattered across the floor and only two, the advent calendar and the star hanging from the wall and ceiling, is another illustration of imperfection as well.

Although all of the characters are written in a sympathetic manner, they tell stories with subjects ranging from the compassion of certain other people, such as Mark’s

family, but in the end his guilt is not what drives him to go see his wife. His simple act of replacing the advent calendar before he leaves to see her suggests that he might now find a new way to comfort himself, namely through his relationships rather than through alcohol. In the past, relationships have only caused him pain, which is why he has seen only brutality in the world and values the opportunity given to him by Mark's uncle so much. But as he starts to see some of himself in Mark, and the two become friends as well as co-

, Harold Pinter Theatre – December 31, 2011

Despite the mixed receptions of this production, I was astounded at the amazingly accurate portrayal of conflicting emotions, not as much by the actress playing Paulina Salas but rather by the actor playing her husband Gerardo Escobar. The actors, particularly Tom Goodman-Hill, did a fantastic job managing a script that not only tries too hard to shock its audience through language and overly drawn-out suspense (Paulina and Gerardo spend a long time alluding to the horrors of her past), but also writes stark contrasts into its characters. Gerardo is a human rights lawyer but treats Paulina like a stereotypical housewife. She herself is written to appear as if her sudden raging insanity is the result of fifteen years of repression and fake smiles. And Roberto, or Dr. Miranda,

go), and Gerardo's wonderfully written response, "An overdose of the truth can kill a person."

This production in particular made excellent use of set and props to contribute to the atmosphere of suspense and uncertainty already established by the script. The glass doors or windows made for a useful method for the director to show the less socially acceptable actions, or those "meant to be hidden," such as Paulina's more violent treatment of Dr. Miranda (knocking him out, tying him up, and physically tormenting him when he tries to escape during her conversation with Gerardo outside) as well as actually hiding what is really meant to be hidden – the truth of whether or not Paulina actually kills Dr. Miranda. The very first scene sets up a feeling of apprehension and fear that permeates the play, as Paulina, appearing to be the average housewife, sneaks around in the dark and then pulls a gun out of a drawer, preparing to shoot an intruder. The tension eases when it turns out to be her husband, but the audience knows the gun is there and has also already seen how high-strung this woman is. From that moment on, every new twist in the plot is unpredictable, something perfectly exemplified in the arrival of the midnight visitor, whose presence is originally hidden even after Gerardo welcomes him. For a moment, the audience is unsure of whether this person is really a friend or not, something that seems appeased as soon as he enters the house, but which is never really answered in the play. The use of the tape recorder and the transitions it facilitated, both with Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and with Paulina's recorded story turning into Dr. Miranda's confession, made the show more seamless in appearance, a nice contrast to some of its frozen-in-time images. One such image is the beginning, when Paulina stands contemplatively outside the house, probably – we will soon learn – thinking about how

the past fifteen years of her life have been a lie. Another is the almost comic moment as Paulina stands outside the bathroom door, gun in hand, arm straight out at her side, holding Dr. Miranda at gunpoint even as he goes to the bathroom. Such static snapshots remind us of the tension of the entire situation and the seriousness of her intention, but provide a tiny bit of comic relief to help us get through the emotional issues of oppression behind the play.

The ending seemed too heavy on the suggestiveness of Paulina seeing Dr. Miranda's face, whether real or imagined, upon hearing Schubert's masterpiece. In a play where everyone wants the truth, yet everyone is lying about what they have done, what they will do, or what they want out of the situation, Paulina's seeming satisfaction made the whole uncertainty of the ending less effective for me. In the end, it wasn't about whether or not Paulina actually, *physically* killed Dr. Miranda, but whether or not she really got her revenge (completely regardless of his life or death), and it seemed all too obvious to me that she did.

, Lyttelton Theatre – January 1, 2012

The light and dark imagery of this play was wonderfully illustrated in both the set's illumination and its transformation to grandeur and back again. The underlying reality of the space was the same, but its appearance shifted into having the illusion of being a rich house, before being stripped bare so we could see what it actually was: a run-

the key statement, “It’s nearly time we had a little less respect for the dead, and a little more regard for the living,” a contrast that comes back to haunt her when she hears about Johnny’s death, and a contrast that is also reflected in their turn to music from the gramophone, representing wealth and recognition, rather than real, family life with live singing and music.

The play’s realism (and its representation in this particular production through set, lights, and sound) provided a good foundation upon which to build the idea of ghosts mentioned several times in the play, most notably in the discussion between the family and Mr. Bentham about Eastern religions. This realism highlighted the massive intellectual gap between Bentham’s “high” statements and Captain Jack’s attempts to contribute to the conversation. In reality, Jack’s “grandiose” questions about the stars and the moon to Joxer were an attempt to put him in the same position of power that Bentham held over him. Of course, Johnny’s vision of his dead comrade occurs offstage, so we assume it was not real, but Bentham’s position about the science behind such apparitions provides a point of interest in which we realize we don’t actually know if he has seen a ghost or not. This is yet another manifestation of the uncertainty that the play will end with, which is held in stark contrast against the constant nature of the set beneath its apparent changes.

country these days"), but the seriousness of the confrontation between young and old is more than realized in the brutal attack on Byron and the destruction of his home. The realism of all the technical aspects of the play (spraying real water or eggshells on the audience, real dirt, moveable trees, live chickens, background noises and realistic lighting) only added further power to a show that would steal the audience's hearts even without them – not only because we are culturally primed to love this youthful Peter Pan or rebel Robin Hood character, but because the theatre is the same sort of escape for us that Byron is for the young adults of Wiltshire. And the tech of this production, like the drugs that Byron offers, takes everything to a whole new level.

The character of the "Rooster" and his impact comes from his all-pervasiveness in the community – everyone knows him, whether they love or hate him, and his fearlessness makes him seem immortal. He shows us that New England is not really new at all, just the same as Old England, but with all its faults and repressions uncovered. This is more than apparent in the stories Byron tells about villagers (the supposedly "innocent" girl who has slept with every guy in town, or the fact that all the parents used to be visitors at Byron's c

, Cottesloe Theatre – January 3, 2012

The interactive nature of actors and animations in this production made it not only a technical masterpiece, but also fed the imaginative quality of the script with its picture-

followers) are a perfect example of the way the production simplified and animated such

witch-like black dress for Zelda's mother who runs the shop on Red Herring Street). The ultimate moral of the story takes the audience back out of the comedic world of animations which we originally entered to hear the story, and tells us that we can't always get what we want, whether that be an idealistic ending to a production, or a childish belief that we can escape our fate or the social norms that bind us in society.

, Almeida Theatre – January 3, 2012

The script of this play was exceptional in its ability to provide characters on either side of an argument with qualities that the audience could relate to, but at the same time shows the ridiculous absurdity of both sides in a comedic way. This was beautifully done in this particular production, which built the set within and around a storage container, rotating the open or closed box at various angles to show different places in the same way that we saw both sides of the story. Steph's side was emphasized in the bedroom, despite her exaggerated outrage; Greg's side, namely his justification for his actions, was revealed at his workplace. The way in which the scenes transitioned into each other complemented this as well; the audience was treated to a complete black-out and music by Queen (often happy, inspirational songs such as "Don't Stop Me Now") that was abruptly cut off as the lights bumped up on a rather uninspiring, less glamorous, exasperating tableau of everyday life. The staging of the scenes themselves was done

and sexist, and yet he wasn’t completely evil enough to make him unreal2(s) -0m (e) 0.2 n’t 4 Tm / (e) 0.2

to take responsibility for their actions – the complete opposite of a character like Angelo. Interestingly, he provides a slight annoyance to the Duke and affects Vincentio's schemes in a way that no one else is able to. He seems to have many tricks of his own, but unlike Vincentio, his plans are always for his own gain. Because of this, he gets justice just as everyone else does, in the form of responsibility. Paul Chahidi did a wonderful job

every character; from the commoners, Froth and Pompey, who twist the law to their own purposes rather than just disobey it, to Angelo, who submits to and even demands the just punishment he should receive after his crime has been revealed. And yet the Duke is the most deceptive character of all, in his disguises and magic tricks and manipulation of people such as the Provost to make sure a head other than Claudio's is sent to Angelo. In some ways this deception (and the joy he takes in it) humanizes Vincentio, just as Angelo's feelings for Isabella humanize him. Both characters have monologues in which they directly address the audience, and in both cases these were well executed in this production. While Angelo's monologue, like his character, was meticulous, thoughtful and somewhat restrained as he attempted to control himself, Vincentio's was playful, experimental and took the audience's reactions into account. The other, and most obvious case, of actor interaction with the audience was Pompey's interlude with accusations against various audience members, which actor Joseph Kloska did an incredible job with. As for the ending, I was interested to find out that it was left open to interpretation; since Isabella does not respond, in the script, to Vincentio's offer of marriage, the ending could include either her acceptance or rejection of him (although her acceptance is the conventional interpretation). In this production, her acceptance initially surprised me and seemed out of place. But in light of the comparison between Isabella and Angelo as new law (mercy) versus old law (revenge), it made sense that while Angelo received his merciful punishment of marriage, so too did Isabella, in a comedic version of "mercy," receive her release from the convent.

, Swan Theatre – January 4, 2012

The circumstances in England since the translation of the King James Bible have changed in so many ways, and yet this play was still careful to deal with various issues in a politically correct manner. The hierarchy of the church, although confusing to follow, was delicately but realistically dealt with, both in the script itself and in the production. Although there was a clear tension between different factions of the church, the more striking difference was between those higher-class clergy members and the lower-class maid to Lancelot Andrewes, Mary. Her role seemed to be minor at first, but in many ways she was actually the point of the whole play; that is, the entire conflict centered on the ability of the commoners to have an accessible and understandable Bible available to them. Since this accessibility in many ways signified their individual spiritual freedom under government rule, the actual wording of the Bible was of great importance, due to the massive gap in education between commoners and aristocrats. Mary's importance became clear only at the end, when she threatened to burn her hand if Andrewes actually sent the letter with the corrections he had indicated to her. Not only was her role in the plot significant at that point as the one in control of the letter, but she also served to continue the motif of the burning hand, first mentioned by her in passing and then performed by Tyndale in his prison cell. The polar opposite of Mary was, of course, the crown, as seen when the Prince of Wales entered and tried to have the translation proceed "democratically," with different clergy members translating different phrases. This class hierarchy mirrored that of the church, and Andrewes' role as the one attempting to compromise between William Tyndale's translation and the new version represented the religious equivalent of the Prince. It was a nice detail that Andrewes' maid was of a

lower class, but that he valued her opinion and her ability to think things through; in a way, it foreshadowed the declining power of the royalty and the increasing power of the people to come in the future.

The title of the play originally comes from the book of Jeremiah ("I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts"), but is used several times in terms of the phrase "love and mercy written on the heart." The language of the play was of the utmost importance, being a play about language itself, and some of the debates between various translations are worth mentioning. Several times the debate between the words "church" and "congregation" was mentioned, a clever indication of different factions in the church. The contrast between obedience to God versus obedience to the law was clear in the discussion about the potential government objection to the phrase "dark rulers of the earth," whereas the church's close-minded opinions were expressed in a comedic

expected a linear timeline and was having a difficult enough time figuring out different characters' roles in the Church, it seemed like this wasn't enough to indicate that the second scene was set in time before the first. That said, once the timeline became understandable, the play became much more beautiful in its fluidity. The transitions, particularly the one involving a church ritual, were incredibly done with a live choir singing in Latin. The lighting, as well, played to the picturesque view of spiritual spaces, whether it was in the candle in Tyndale's prison, the stained glass windows, or the sacred light on the alter where Andrewes prayed. It all spoke to Andrewes' transitions in life, which the audience best sees in his repeated phrase in prayer about what a sinner he is. In particular, the merging of time periods was very effective after the timeline became clear, such as the transition from the scene in which an elderly Andrewes talks to the long-dead Tyndale to that in which a young Andrewes visits a prisoner. By this point the audience has understood that the two characters are the same, and the simple act of Tyndale placing his version of the Bible in the prisoner's hands as he prays to God gives the role of Tyndale's translation a whole new level of importance. Tyndale's action, and the moment just before intermission when a young Andrewes passes the chalice off to an older Andrewes, emphasized the importance of the past, but also the ways in which our actions shape the future.

, Donmar Warehouse – January 5, 2012

I was surprised by the simplicity of this production's unchanging set, but after seeing the entire production and its religious overtones, the church-like appearance of the stage and its connection to Richard's "divine" position as ruler, I realize it would have been somewhat less effective to attempt to portray settings realistically. What the production lacked in visual cues, it more than made up for in lighting, sound and costumes. Because the set was so unadorned, the changes in lighting and sound were much more noticeable, and the background noises of horses, seagulls, or birds in a garden really allowed us in the audience to use our imaginations. For a script as rich in imagery as this one, the choice to focus on certain technical aspects over realism in the environment wa

also has a certain sensitivity that makes him a compassionate and sympathetic ruler, even in his imperfections. The emphasis placed on his development by accenting the King's religious position through his appearances at the beginning and end of the first act, and the church-like music, all alongside a spectacular performance by Redmayne, gave the

are working together. Garcin's final line is "Let's get on with it," a very different suggestion from the silence and separation he has demanded throughout the play. This is also after the three of them have had a momentary fit of laughter about being stuck together "forever and ever," which leaves the audience very much wondering what these characters know that we don't. As viewers, we moved through a journey beginning with total uncertainty about the setting of the play, then moved to having some idea about its characters and their location, and finally to again being unsure of what was going to happen and becoming outsiders once again. There is also the question of whether we are a part of "them," meaning the people who are thought to have put these three together. Garcin mentions near the end of the play that there are "many more" eyes watching him, and in this production he actually looked out into the audience, making us even more aware of our part in the proceedings. This "other," which perhaps the Valet is part of, is maybe the most uncertain part of the show: who and what are "they"? How do they place people together in hell? Where are they in the context of this very enclosed room which we have become a part of? By bringing us into the plot, we are almost necessarily integrated into this "they," and in a sense it provides yet another mirror image. That is, our complete and total uncertainty about "their" nature is just a reflection of our lack of knowledge about ourselves. Our only real encounter with "them" is through the Valet, and the total absurdity of Garcin's interaction with him provides yet another indication of how little we know. Garcin's questions about having a toothbrush, turning out the light and other meaningless details all show not only his character's insecurity but also our own self-deception and focus on things that, in the end, don't really matter. The only character who wants to be honest about their situation is Inez, and she is also notably the

only one who refuses to interact with the Valet at all. The other insinuated interaction with “them,” however, is during the moment when the door opens. Garcin, as the one looking for a way to escape, is the one who opens it, but also the one who closes off that opportunity. In his explanation for doing so, he indirectly justifies the dynamic between the three of them that makes them not only each other’s best torturers, but also each other’s best hope for redemption, and thus justifies “their” decision to put them together. The triangle between them, reflective of the various love triangles in all of their lives, made the relationships between any two of them somehow exclusive of the other, but also made each of them necessary for the absolution of the others. Along with the mirror theme, this might be representative of the idea of facing our fears and demons in order to really understand ourselves. With each of these details, this production did a fantastic job providing a framework inside which the play brought us on a journey of self-examination and discovery.

Pantomime, Richmond Theatre – January 6, 2012

This production was clearly most interested in the "spectacle" aspect of theater. The reliance on exuberant dance numbers and gaudy outfits made it much more a form of entertainment than regular theater, but considering the expected age range of the audience, this made a lot of sense. The hugely exaggerated set pieces and costumes of the evil step-sisters also played into this childish need to be kept engaged by surprise. Considering how short the attention spans were of most children in the audience, however, I thought this production did an incredible job of keeping them interested in the storyline. The character of the Fairy Godmother served as a narrator to keep the plot very simple and coherent even to very young ages, as shown by her short introduction and various rhymed "storyline" updates throughout the show. Buttons, meanwhile, acted as the "insider" for the audience, allowing us to participate in the action and also often to be able to predict what would happen because of the nature of his tricks. He also simplified the idea of dramatic irony down to a children's-book level; that is, he was able to keep children engaged in the story by letting them be the only ones who knew the answers to questions like where the spider was or where the key was hidden. Buttons' various games, as well, were clearly meant as a distraction from the story purely to keep youngsters entertained.

Despite its obvious pandering to a very young audience, however, the tale of Cinderella and the Prince is a nice case illustrating the idea of mistaken identity. While the Prince purposefully conceals his identity in the hope of finding true love, and then reveals himself to find Cinderella, Cinderella is forced to disguise herself in order to lose her true self and find the mistaken Prince, or "

, Orange Tree Theatre – January 6, 2012

The subject matter of this play was very revealing in its use of extremism to show a fundamental problem that is just as relevant to today's society as it was when it was written. The serious theme inside the script was well-hidden behind its comic banter, which was subtly immersed in this production's historical appearance. In several different cases, the seemingly superficial appearance of a character or an issue gave way to a much more complex person or situation, which was seen primarily in Mr. Hylton's philosophy of charity, but also in the issue of the maid Anson's pregnancy and eventually in Hugh Verreker's choice to cancel his marriage to Margery. While these complexities were there, in the end, the appealing nature of the production was its lightness while managing to portray such issues. First, Hylton's form of charity, at first justified by the Denisons, became in the end almost devalued because of its over

between the two of the

, Victoria Palace Theatre – January 7, 2012

For a very politically centered story, this production made a wonderful comment about the place of art in society and how class difference shouldn't necessarily dictate a person's exposure to different parts of culture. My favorite part of the show was one that captured not only the conflict between the working and middle classes, but also the difference between the "cultured" and "uncultured" groups: the choreography of the song "Solidarity." At the same time that we were treated to Billy's introduction to ballet class, we also saw the clash between the miners and police officers in an elaborately choreographed dance. The integration of ballet moves into the workers' march, and the exchange of police hats for miner's helmets, both emphasized one of the points the play tried (and succeeded) to get across to the audience: the common humanity between

The political message behind the miner's union, while written into the script, was particularly powerful in this production. Small details, like the opening of the show with its historical footage from the strike, set up the concept of community strength as the real theme behind the show, more than simply a boy's dream to dance. Tiny costume details, as well (such as Tony's Che Guevara shirt) were a nice touch and added to the feeling of revolution (which was particularly applicable for his character). The universal humanity behind even the enemies of the community, as well, was apparent in more than just the choreography and design. While Billy's family and the miner's union condemned the "scabs" or strike-breakers, the show also portrays one of them donating all his money to Billy's cause, purely, it would seem, out of compassion. Also, as the audience sees what Billy's family goes through in order to get him to his audition, we are tempted to sympathize with his father even as he goes to become a strike-breaker himself, suggesting that the two sides are not as black-and-white as characters like Tony would have everyone else believe.

The spectacle of this production was by far its most appealing aspect for modern audiences, in particular the flexibility of the set and its ability to morph and indicate the

the audience was overwhelmed with energy and had too many places to look at once. And, of course, the “Swan Lake” dance between Billy and the older dancer, with Billy’s flying trick, was amazing from both a technical and theatrical point of view.

Finally, the different vantage points during Billy’s audition were, to me, one of the more appealing parts of the show because it really captured the different perspectives of various characters on this kind of culture (that is, our perspective after following Billy’s story, his father’s acceptance without really understanding why, and the perspectives of other students at the audition). While we never actually saw Billy’s audition, we were treated to both his opinion of it and the judges’ eventual opinion, just as we saw the theater he auditioned in from both the wings and the house. Despite its deep political message, the emotional aspect of Billy’s self-expression through dancing (especially, of course, the “Electricity” sequence) was definitely the appeal for most audience members, but I think the ability to not only balance but also integrate those two aspects was the best part of this production.

, Gate Theatre – January 7, 2012

Undoubtedly the most remarkable part of this production was actor Hilton McRae's portrayal of the protagonist, Posdnyshev. Since it becomes clear later on that he is a murderer, he should be dislikeable even from the beginning of the play, as he devalues women and objectifies his own wife. And yet McRae made the character oddly riveting, so that, far from condemning him, we almost sympathized with his near-insanity and wondered at the lengths to which jealousy can drive people. The nature of this play as a monologue brought up some interesting questions that this production left unanswered. Who is Posdnyshev speaking to? Why would he confess this story to them (or us)? Why does he ask them repeatedly to forgive him, clearly an important point since it constitutes both the opening and closing lines of the play? And then there is our uncertainty of his sanity, which calls the validity of the entire plot into question. His only indications of insanity are in the script rather than in his character, and the subtlety of McRae's portrayal here was even more impressive. For example, his initial comment about hearing music all the time, even in silence, seems strange to us, but is ignored at first because he seems to be coherent in telling his story. However, as we see more and more of his nature, the possessive quality of both his love for his wife and his appreciation of her music becomes clear, and the stability of his mental state becomes questionable. Along the same lines, we never really find out the truth of his wife's infidelity, but this actually seems appropriate, as we never really find out the truth of the entire story either. The magic of presenting a plot from a single perspective is that what appears to be the "truth" can be as complete or incomplete, or even false, as the storyteller wishes. This was nicely illustrated in both the set itself and the use of two

other, silent actors as Trukhachevski and Posdnyshev's wife, staged behind the screen to represent Posdnyshev's memories. The stage was set up to represent a single train compartment, but in a way that made the audience very much "looking in" on something private. The seats and walls of the compartment were damaged or even broken, suggesting similar qualities in Posdnyshev's recollection of events. Meanwhile, the memories depicted by his wife and Trukhachevski, while often for the simple use of illustrating a certain point or providing music to underscore his memory, were sometimes fragmented and contradictory. In Posdnyshev's recollection of the day he came home early to find them practicing together, we were treated to two very different and rapidly juxtaposed truths: first, in their embrace, his enraged perception of their desire; and second, in their upward glance from the piano, what was probably meant to be the actuality of his memory, unclouded by jealousy. Although this sort of staging threatened to suggest there was some truth behind his suspicions, I think that by placing the two moments right next to one another, the audience was allowed to wonder for themselves what the truth was. Other small details, like McRae's presence on stage before the audience had settled, and the pre-show technical aspects that made it very clear he was in a moving train, showed us the very transitory nature of the show. That is, it begins *in medias res*, so to speak, even though the play itself has little or no action, and ends without telling us the purpose of Posdnyshev's journey or how his story concludes. For

of the storyline. Posdnyshev's associations between his wife and her music were very apparent, not only in his passionate moment during the performance of the Sonata, but also in his own account of his first sexual experience and the relationship he creates between such an act and listening to a symphony. This link suggests that the play was focused less on the truth or content of Posdnyshev's story and more on his masculinity. Such a musical (and romantic) undertone provided a context in which the content of the story could unfold, while the philosophical and surreal aspects of the production, highlighted by the tech, were left up to the audience to figure out.

, Olivier Theatre – January 8, 2012

The National Theatre's production of Mike Bartlett's play *13* might have been one of the most spectacular productions we watched, due mainly to the flexibility of the set and its reflection of the complexity, darkness, and changeable nature of the play itself. The revolving stage and moveable cube nicely accented the play's rapid movement from one storyline to the next, while providing a huge, symbolic edifice as a sort of continuity between them, just as the mutual nightmare united its characters. It was no coincidence that different "boxes" appeared as crucial props as well, from Dr. Crosley's "God" box to John's various "soapboxes" to his initial speech about the hen in a box not knowing or believing in what is outside. Lighting, as well, provided an important emphasis on the dream at the center of every storyline; by using spotlights to illuminate actors, the rest of the set (and the characters coming in and out for their very short scenes) was kept in near-darkness, relating back to the original repeated monologue about the dream itself. The structure of the script and staging was beautifully done, with set pieces such as the table transitioning smoothly from one scene to another, and characters passing through scenes from other storylines on the way to their own. The culmination of this was in the argument between Amir and Rachel, integrated into a similar argument between Ruth and Dennis. The connection between these two mirroring situations was an example of the sort of connections in every part of the play: subjects brought up in passing by one character (such as multiple universes existing side by side) became issues of emotional importance to another (such as John's suggestion of an alternate universe where Simon would still be alive). It speaks to Bartlett's attention to detail that the same happens with the opening "dream" monologue: the way the narrator talks about dreaming versus being

in others' dreams exactly reflects each character's being in the center of his or her storyline versus being a minor character in others' storylines. And every so often, we see the bigger picture with that repeated dream monologue and a rather terrifying recurring image of people in the cube, frozen in time and space and grisly green lighting, just as every so often, we become aware, in dreams, that we are dreaming.

My only criticism of the play would be that, in attempting to show so many different kinds of people from so many different backgrounds, it inevitably oversimplifies their situations and the issues it addresses. The script attempts to keep from stereotyping its characters, but to a certain extent it can't help it. Of course Amir, the protester, is unemployed (although they indicate that he used to be a university lecturer). Mark, although he fits the typical heartless lawyer mold, is also struggling with a mid

criticizing war and the free market. Up to a point, John serves as a Christ figure for both other characters and the audience, and regardless of the play's religious overtones, his ideas are put in a much better light than those of Dr. Crosley. It is not his strange omniscience or even his mass following that make him seem "better" than Crosley – these are merely ways of advancing the religious comparison. Rather, it is his demeanor, and the positive, inspirational tone of his message against Crosley's brutal honesty and negativity that make him appealing. Also, the fact that there is a clear parallel between Sarah's choice to kill Ruby and Ruth's choice to go to war, as advised by Crosley and against John's wishes, makes the act of war seem abominable, as no sane person would rationally understand Sarah's act or its justification. In all, the only really three-dimensional character was Rob, the soldier who followed John's speeches but who also went to war, who tells the final story of an act of violence meant to prevent future

, Duchess Theatre – January 9, 2012

The use of art, and theater in particular, to express social and political statements is not a new idea; but this production's portrayal of that use, and its embodiment of such statements itself, was neatly done in a way that somehow followed through on both its artistic and socio-political messages. The first noticeably unique aspect of the production was the screen on which the title of the play, the titles of various scenes, and the setting were written, which was also used to show the miners' paintings in detail. This, along with the efficiently (but very definitely) staged scene changes, added to the idea of time passing between scenes, which was crucial to understanding the story of the Ashington Group's growth. One of the best aspects of this production in my opinion was the audience's treatment to different kinds of art; that is, the way in which the miners' paintings were portrayed against the exhibition of the art of Ancient China or Ben Nicholson's carving. While the miners' prints and finished works were almost always physical props as well as projections, the museum and gallery paintings were only "seen" through the eyes of the characters, as projections on the screen. It represented in some ways the same kinds of socialist points brought up by the dentist, Harry, about the working class; that is, Marx's theory about "alienation of labor" applies to those who have made art their labor, but not to the pitmen painters, who, in the words of Ben Nicholson's character, "can't be bought." It was also slightly comparable to the pitmen's discussion on perspective while looking at the Chinese paintings. Ian Kelly did an excellent job portraying Robert's fake criticism of the paintings in order to provoke George into admiring them for having no real perspective – for looking at the subject from all angles. For the character who was so persistent at the beginning of the play about

figuring out what art “means,” his moment of clarity while looking at the Chinese paintings was not only comedic, but also ironic in that he directly opposed his instructor and at the same time followed his instructions, by finding the meaning in the relationship between subject and object.

The idea of transformation, both of material into art and also the transformation of the self, was apparent throughout the play, and yet the set was very static in its use of a small space, a few chairs, some paintings, and the projector screen. The different settings were somehow all very easily p(ing6) 0.2g(a) 0.2 (i) 0.2 (n t) 0.2 (ha) 0.2 (t) 0.2 (t) 0.2 (he) 0.2 (pd(rut)0

, Old Vic Theatre – January 10, 2012

In this play, the idea of the beginning, middle and end of a story was clearer than in any other production we watched. While following the Aristotelian idea of “plot” very well, however, this show portrayed each of the three parts very separately, building on the last in order to make the audience feel more intimately part of the play-within-a-play. This was also done through the use of the entire theater space, such as when the director

The passive-aggressive use of terms of affection for one another even in very stressful situations was wonderfully acted and consistent throughout the show, and played into these stereotypes as well, since they were used only by Lloyd and the actors. Other minor details, such as the company's lack of money and use of stage managers as understudies, furthered the exaggeration just enough to make us fully aware of the nature of the show as a farce.

These stereotypes also made the characters predictable in some ways, which added even more to the show's comedy as it gave the audience a whole new kind of anticipation about what would happen next. For example, we got the impression right away that Brooke is no genius, and as we saw the "third act" from the audience's point of view, the anticipation of her complete inability to improvise made her delivery of those moments all the funnier. The characters' various predictable qualities also made the second act much more comprehensible. Even the foundations laid by the first act were enough to let us understand each character's motivations and intentions as the silent drama unfolded backstage. It is a credit to all of the actors that they were able to portray such a wonderfully complex and hilarious inner story with very little dialogue as their "real" production was being simultaneously acted on the other side of the set.

Of course, just as great farce has been compared to great tragedy, the irony of shows like *Noises Off* is that they must be a perfectly executed mess in order to succeed. This production not only contained some of the very ideas of tragedy in disguise, as we spoke about in class, but also did an excellent job keeping order in a very disorderly play.

, Adelphi Theatre – January 11, 2012

At the same time that this production was open about its nature as pure entertainment and stand-up comedy, it also played with more serious issues in a comedic manner and its appearance gave deeper meaning to its subject matter. The very structure of the production suggested that it centered on being entertaining, from the opening band to the small musical acts between scenes to the majorly exaggerated caricatures of each character. The rich and self-centered Stanley, the overly-dramatic actor Alan, and the somewhat brainless Pauline all served as stereotypical characters fitting their roles and furthered this goal of distracting the audience from the real world. Francis' interactions with the audience were also primarily for entertainment, and since his method of direct address constituted a large part of his character, it made sense that the point of this production would be amusement rather than critique.

However, there were certain qualities that showed there was more beneath the surface than just pure comedy. The set was based on very well-constructed, but deceptive, pieces that made the show appear to me more dimensional than it was. Even the "curtain" behind the band and small in-between acts were painted on a two-dimensional wall. This was clearly a conscious choice on the part of the design team, and it showed in a very physical way the two-dimensionality of most of the play's characters. But it might also have been a representation of the play's adaptation from Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*. Just as this adaptation reduced Goldoni's original script from its *commedia dell'arte* form into a nearly-modern farce set in Brighton, the three-dimensional setting was reduced to layers of two-dimensional backdrops. Furthermore, the perspective on these was often exaggerated, making them appear even more skewed

humor of repetitive “accidents.” These sequences found victimization easy, since the old, senile stereotype has already been victimized by society.

Most of these issues, however, were behind the real action of the show. The improvised, unpolished feel of much of the comedy would have felt very thrown-together but for the musical pieces that kept it consistent and contributed to its primary goal: that of entertainment.

, Cambridge Theatre – January 11, 2012

What really amazed me about this production was the amount and quality of

or elementary school. The Wormwoods, meanwhile, although nasty to Matilda, come off in the end as having simply misunderstood themselves and her. Her forgiveness of her father and his choice to let her go, although a happy ending, seemed different from the usual “triumphant-over-evil” ending that a childlike story would have. Matilda’s story, and this production’s depiction of it through her eyes, showed us that children are not necessarily the self-centered and innocently ignorant people we see them as, despite their reliance on imagination. In fact, it showed us that imagination can be as great an intellectual and moral advancement as anything else.

, Olivier Theatre – January 12, 2012

This show continued the trend of modernized Shakespeare plays providing both a fresh interpretation and a visually engaging production. The combined elements of set, lighting and sound were most effective in this piece, as far as telling the story, although they often overshadowed the comedy the work is focused on. To begin with, the terrifying almost-assassination scene at the very beginning of the show and the complex story that it contained in Egeon's monologue provided an introduction that was very different from the rest of the play. In a certain technical way it prepared us for something extremely different from what we got, but in terms of its interpretation it provided a smooth foundation from which we could base our understanding of the rest of the plot. The "fishermen from Corinth," for example, were shown as modern rescue helicopters, while the Duke's treatment of Egeon (with the typical black-bag hood and abandoned-warehouse space) was very much a modern covert-operation twist on the original scene. The exchange of the Dromio twins between their biological mother and Egeon, in which the actors used long, wound cloths to indicate the children, was an interesting directorial

beginning, which made it easy to follow along, the complications of following the two sets of twins became almost too difficult. Luckily, the production made heavy use of its modernization to make us understand the plot, from Antipholus's bed scene with his twin's wife to some of the unspoken exchanges between the Dromio twins as Antipholus of Ephesus is locked out of his house. In some cases the script made this modernization tricky, as in Antipholus of Syracuse's asides to the audience, but this was done by freezing the rest of the action for a moment, which was only effective because it was done so rarely. In many ways, the script relies more on its puns and the comedic misunderstanding of its characters than the real facts of the plot, and in the delivery of such puns and heartfelt comedy this production excelled completely. The urban greyness of the set, the scene changes integrated into the street band playing modern pop songs, and even Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse's snapping fingers to ward off the evil spirits that he feels are controlling their lives, all brought the play much closer to home than just its modernized literal interpretation.

, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs at the Royal Court – January 13, 2012

The one thing I took away from watching this production was its amazing handle on the art of deception. Not only were the actors spectacular in their portrayal of two parents engaged in two very different kinds of deception in order to do what they thought was best for their child, but the production itself was a sort of act of deceit. It portrayed itself very simply and easily as a realistic storyline when, in actuality, there were aspects of it that suggested otherwise. Everything in the set and the relationships between characters suggested a modern, working-class family, from the small details of Julie's painting project in the living room to the rather significant symbolic act of Douglas fixing Thomas's shoes (since Thomas walks around in his father's shoes later in the play). Every character, even Thomas, expressed a certain futility about life that is also based on a very realistic, depressing view of the world. Julie explained it in her justification for how she had been raising Thomas in his father's absence; Douglas expressed the idea in his explanation for why he quit his job; and Thomas said nearly the same thing in his question of why life is worth living at all if we are all going to die in the end anyways. Nothing about the interactions between the characters suggested anything other than realism, and yet the single choice to manipulate the ceiling during crucial decision points in the storyline seemed significant enough to me to call the interpretation of the entire plot into question. The slowness of the ceiling's downward movement might have had a debatable effect on the audience (who may not have noticed it at all), but its specific placement in the story made it hugely significant for those who did see it. The two moments in which the ceiling lowered were during Julie's moment of weakness in which she almost agreed to go back with Douglas to his group, and during the final scene where

he returned to her asking for help: two times in which we acutely felt the suffocating impossibility of her position, and so the idea of the walls “closing in on her,” so to speak, was most effective. It also linked the two scenes together in a way that might be suggestive of what happened next; while in the first case, Julie ends the scene by pulling a knife on her husband before the lights go dim, in the second case we never find out whether or not she will take him back or even what the reasons are for his return. The ceiling trick, for me, provided a foundation upon which to build an alternative interpretation of the story, as it effectively shattered the previous, detailed realism of the production. It was only after observing this trick that the audience could realize how little of the realistic appearance was actually based on known facts, in that there was no background given about Douglas’ disappearance. This opened up a whole new range of ways to interpret the title of the play itself. In either interpretation, the “haunted child” could represent any of the characters. Realistically, Julie is haunted by what her husband has become, as seen in the production’s tagline: “We thought you were dead. In many ways, this is worse.” Douglas is haunted by his delusions about reincarnation and the mutual exclusivity of science and religion (a nice mirror of his relationship with Julie), and Thomas is haunted by a phantom figure that turns out to be his father. After looking at the play through a less literal lens, however, there are even more possibilities of haunted children. Douglas’ discussion of his own father’s reincarnation in Thomas suggests a different kind of haunting of the child, while the lack of background details, and the uncertainty about whether or not Julie actually uses the knife, could even suggest that Douglas is not alive at all and so both mother and child are haunted by his ghost. This was highlighted for me in the two instances in which Thomas asked the forbidden

questions that the entire audience had been asking itself: first, while Douglas was still missing, if he was dead, and then later, after seeing her with the knife, if she had killed him. Her responses, and the action of the story, would suggest that he was still alive both times. But the fact that these questions were still posed was significant in itself. Considering the different ways of looking at this production, I don't think we can assume she was telling the truth either time, regardless of Douglas' appearance in the show afterwards. This would certainly underline the same art of deception mentioned before, in that she has succeeded in covering the truth from Thomas just as the production has hidden it from us.

The talent of Sophie Okonedo and Ben Daniels in their roles as Julie and Douglas was most apparent in the silent scene in which Julie dances, attempting to get Douglas to

, Novello Theatre – January 14, 2012

This production was not only an excellent one to close with, as it was both funny and uplifting, but it also related back to a number of other shows that we've seen. The exaggeration of the set was effective in portraying the essence of a certain place through just a few backdrops, very much as in *One Man, Two Guvnors*. Also similar to that production, the two-dimensional set pieces were slanted in a way to make them.2 (ba) g r