Critiques from the West End

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Journal of Observations and Analyses
Theatre in England 2007
28 December 2007 — 13 January 2008
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War Horse

Perhaps the motif of puppetry extends beyond the realm of war. Albert's father becomes a puppet of his own materiality, his subconscious belief in self-failure, his competitive nature, his alcoholism, and a social preoccupation with money. Albert's mother becomes a puppet of her own pregnancy, her forced domestic life, and her marginalization in society (as well as the play) as a woman in a world where men make war. Herr Mueller is conscripted as an officer despite his desire to be home with his family and his disbelief in the purpose of the war. Indeed, the British officers themselves discuss their forced participation in a war that they did not instigate. In a tone full of both duty and regret, the men exhibit ambivalence toward war, recognizing the necessity of defending their families and country from an aggressor while expressing an aversion of conscience to violent conflict. One might view the dialogue as a type of *apologia* by which the men justify their actions to themselves. We are all puppets with little control over the forces of our lives, it would seem. *War Horse* largely deals with the loss of control over one's life and destiny in a violent, modern, mechanistic, and materialistic world.

Yet, despite the suggested loss of control over one's destiny, Stafford reminds us that choice and action remain within the realm of individual decision. The song of the lyrical storyteller reminds the audience, via narrative bookends, "We are only remembered for the things we have done." Contributing to the epic genre of the play, his words introduce the classical notion that action defines character. Albert joins the army to lovingly seek his horse, maturing into a compassionate adult in the meantime. Herr Mueller chooses to reject his duty, to him the senseless killing of an arbitrary enemy, and reposition himself as an orderly who caringly seeks to preserve life rather than destroy it. To his comrades he becomes a coward, hiding from death, but Herr Mueller substitutes his own code of principles for that forced on him by the violent military hierarchy and Kaiser. Viewing the play through the context of domestic

to be commendable and progressive. They appropriately treat one of the greatest epic tragedies of history with a lens that has not been clouded by traditional pro-British, pro-imperial, pro-war, and pro-conquest propaganda. In place of a one-sided narrative, glorifying the defeat of a demonized enemy, they present a tale told from two similar, yet supposedly opposed, perspectives, those of Albert and Herr Mueller. The audience encounters a German humanized by his shared compassion for Joey. Not only does Stafford destroy the traditional simplification of war (good versus evil), but he stages battle scenes that are meant to rattle the audience (I found the slow-motion strobe effect, which accompanied the deaths and bombings, to be unnerving). Likewise, Stafford does not shy away from the murder of Ned, Albert's cousin, at the hands of the Germans, but blocks it center-stage and directs the boy to writhe on the ground, gasping for last breaths. In a society that traditionally indoctrinates young men to admire and pursue glory and honor through military exploits, the realistic exposition of war conducted by Stafford is unconventional, effective, and admirable—it should especially resonate with us in light of current conflicts.

God In Ruins
Soho Theatre
Saturday, December 29, 2007

Using a contemporary reworking of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol as his framework, Anthony Nielson provocatively employs dark comedy in this play to address relevant issues of modern masculinity as well as a host of other taboo subjects, including homosexuality, pornography, alcoholism, terrorism, and religion. The play took on so many current issues in such innovative ways—the staging of cyber-sex, narcotic-induced hallucinations, and a virtual reality world—that I hardly know where to begin. This was my first experience with the audacious genre of "In-yer-face" theatre (an experience that I hope to repeat

elements, Second Life offers individuals the chance to create a new identity and redefine relationships. Second Life represents the future possibilities of Bryan's current situation. Thus, the future becomes the true second life, the true alternate reality, in which we are able to re-mold our identities, to recreate our realities. This is a second life in which everyone may become an "avatar," the "embodiment of a god." Yet, Nielson insists that such a god is not external, but resides within all men, waiting to be recognized and revealed. A man may be a "god in ruins" (an appropriately bleak title and not-so-subtle allusion to Emerson's Nature), but he has the potential to bridge the gap between himself and his idealized form, whatever that may be.

Nielson suggests the attainment of that form as an alternate definition of masculinity. The gift from Bryan's "thoughtful friend," a picture of the "vitruvian man," the idealized man, becomes the "reminder of what we may all aspire to." *God in Ruins* is the story of Bryan's transformation and redemption through the recognition of his true self. The active recreation of reality puts him on the path to self-actualization by which he can connect with others, achieving intimacy with those about whom he cares. Aside from the implication that Bryan's father was heaven-sent (a clever re-imagining of Marley's ghost), Nielson presents the audience with a Christmas story from which our traditional conception of God and Christ are absent. In fact, he goes so far as to have one of his characters utter the words "Santa is dead," in a satirical echo—more appropriate to the age of materialism—of Nietzsche's "God is Dead."

I greatly admired Nielson's ability to mix so successfully the tragic and comic in this play, giving each scene multiple layers of meaning without being utterly morbid. His semi-farcical opening establishes this technique when Scrooge's jovial and comic behavior is replaced by feelings of rejection. However, Nielson achieves the effective and climactic use of this tragic comedy during Bryan's cocaine hallucination. This scene, which included an imagined sing-along with men ridiculously dressed as reindeer, Santa, and other holiday characters, was at first hilarious. The mood only increased when the "Angel Gabriel" popped off the head of the Christ doll, replacing Marx's traditional opiate with pills. "What's next?!?" I wondered excitedly. Yet, the absurdity and conviviality of this sensory-overload soon gave way to deeper meaning. "And if there's no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," indeed. The tragedy resides in the fact that there is no place for Bryan—for the men he represents—to go. He is alone, trapped in an empty and seemingly worthless life. "So let it snow...?" Perhaps this is a veiled reference to Bryan's contemplation of suicide. Whatever one's interpretation, it refers to some form of a death, be it real or temporary, and the sing-along becomes heartrendingly sad.

Nielson introduces a final layer of reality, one that includes his audience, when the fourth wall dissolves, the actors break character, and the "soldier from Tehran" enters the theatre. "The play's the thing! Am I right? Am I right?" states the soldier, hinting at the meaning of his entrance (In which to catch the conscience of the audience?). Nielson seems to say, "Pay attention, this isn't just a play!" This entrance was an iny, tch /MCID 1 nce os7 Tw-ij0.0001r right He

their actual complexities. We know that we should admire Nicholas' fervor and desire to do good, righting the wrongs he finds in his path. Likewise, we should "boo" Squeers for his inherent evil. Much more intriguing than either of these extremes is the morally ambiguous character of Ralph Nickleby. Though callous in his decision-making, we might view him merely as an unfortunate construct of Victorian social mores. He is a prosperous, dutiful, and seemingly respectable gentleman trapped by his own rationality.

Edgar's play has the clear intent of shining a spotlight on the ills of society, much like Dickens' intent in the mid-1800s. The playwrig

of impotence (exemplified by Shelley and George), renders the man worthless. Mamet clearly comments on the way in which the competitive world of business diminishes the individual. The relentless pursuit of the "leads" by the men suggests a type of enslavement to rules and industry. Shelley seems to be on the brink of a nervous breakdown and increasingly willing to do whatever it takes—lie, cheat, steal—in order to come out on top and affirm his relevance and primacy.

This ability to sell, however, relies entirely on luck—a major motif of the play. "One minute you are up, the next you'll be down, so enjoy your momentary success," it seems to say. Success is a fluke, not a skill. Even Roma recognizes this fact, admitting in one of his long, rambling, semi-coherent monologues that his lead in the competition has all to do with his good fortune. We might attribute his urgency at procuring the next set of leads to the expectation that his luck has peaked and will soon run out.

The play also deals with the myth of the "American Dream." The names of the properties, as well as the images displayed during the scene changes, have a mystical, tranquil, and unreal quality to them (emphasized by their purposeful distortion through pixelation). Purchasing one of these properties represents the attainment of an ideal, of defining one's place in the world (perhaps Gary's Glenn and Ross' Glenn would be more appropriate names). The harsh reality of the competition demonstrates that this dream remains distant and unattainable. Yet, it is the sale of this myth that all of the men rely on for their livelihood. The ideal is always just out of reach and the next sale will always need to be made.

The Seagull
New London Theatre
Tuesday, January 1, 2008

For my first experience with Chekhov, I cannot say that I was particularly moved, except to despondency. The characters inhabiting Sorin’s estate seem overly neurotic, but somehow the most real of any we have encountered yet. They are catty, frustrated, jealous, angry, and lustful. But, they do not commit outrageous or grandiose acts; they do nothing except lament their own existences. The small and insular artistic setting remains a place of ennui where the characters do nothing but attempt to reinvent past glory, or contemplate suicide. Only Nina tries to create a new world for herself, but her attempts are pitilessly undermined.

Perhaps some of the characters in this play suffer e ofuoagcts of an existential crisis (assuming that they are capable of such an experience). However, rather e an developing a sense of liberated angst, they become overwhelmed with a sense of purposelessness. Again, only Nina has any dreams and aspirations, which remain unfulfilled when s ofreturns from her tour around the country with a “sub-par” acting troupe. After e ofinitial three acts, during ns1,tiotatennse tries to commit suicide between the acts of the play-within-a-play. The death of a seagull seems meaningless, as though nothing has been lost. Through the boredom, despair, and emptiness that defines these actors' existences, Chekhov troubling transfers the same logic onto human life. With an escapist rationale in mind, Konstantin again attempts to put himself out of his misery; this time he reaches success. I don't know what Chekhov hoped to accomplish with this play, except to try and convince his audience of the worthlessness of their own lives. I can see why this type of tune would not appeal to Noel Coward's vivacity. Garry Essendine needs to introduce Sorin's guests to the notion of *present laughter*.

wall, creating a loud, harsh, hollow noise. The echo symbolized Henry’s hollow rule, an empty throne, and a kingdom devoid of leadership.

Boyd did a wonderful job creating the three distinct atmospheres in which the bulk of the play’s action occurs: Henry’s castle, the tavern, Wales. The realm of Henry IV was militaristic (emphasized by the lords’ black uniforms), dark, and illuminated by harsh florescent lights (though I did not care for the partial obstruction of view caused by these hanging from the ceiling). The beating of war drums during the scenes involving Henry also created a growing tension and suspense. Characterized by leisure, comfort, and jollity, the tavern contrasted entirely with the intense political world of impending civil war. It was the realm of camaraderie, “wenching,” and sack—the realm of Falstaff. The lush crimson curtains of the tavern matched the color of Falstaff’s garments, cleverly linking John to his own territory. It was also characterized by fun and sprightly background music. Using mystical blue lights, Boyd created a place of exotic and loving domesticity in Wales. Glendower’s castle, in which he functioned as a type of patriarch, was a domestic space in which husbands and wives acted loving toward one another. I found the scene between Hotspur and his wife, in which she pleads with him to stay with her and not go to war, particularly touching. The blocking in this scene (reclined figures embracing their spouses) as well as the lighting created a mystical (Celtic?) and tranquil space, removed from the world of war. With the voice of a siren, Mortimer’s wife beckons her husband to lie in her lap. Although conceived as beautiful in an aesthetic of “otherness,” her shaved head and lengthy song fit incongruously into an otherwise coherent production.

This was also a play about Hal’s developm tongued, but apparently lazy and indecisive, he neglects his filial duty to help restore order to the kingdom. He would rather have fun. Averse to military life and killing, Boyd chooses to dress Hal in all white (a stark contrast to the black uniform of his aggressive and violent foil, Hotspur) and make him perhaps slightly effeminate. However, despite his father's criticism (I was not expecting the scene between Henry and Hal to become so violent), Hal does in fact reveal his own aptitude for government, a calculated political shrewdness. He explains that he is biding his time, enjoying himself, until the day when he will emerge. This will make his transformation all the more remarkable and his reputation that much

scene, where Hal dupes John—(the Groucho disguise was also a nice touch; the descent from ropes was an impressive example of spectacle). Moreover, Boyd's inclusion of the audience as Falstaff's ragamuffin army was hilarious, as was the instance where John seems to rise from the dead—"Emboweled?"—, stab Hotspur again, and concoct an unbelievable story to explain his life. Boyd appropriately extracted humor from every instance in which the potential was provided. Nevertheless, the humor of neither Shakespeare, nor Boyd is ever idle. The scene in which Hal robs the robbers—Falstaff, et al.—parallels the frustrations of Henry IV's kingship. Perhaps Bolingbroke and Falstaff are two sides of the same coin.

Henry IV, Part II
The Courtyard Theatre
Wednesday, January 2, 2008

Part II was a very different play from *Part I*. It seemed to focus most heavily on comedy, with a majority of the scenes occurring in the country, far from the anxiety and fleeting health of Henry IV (and the ongoing civil war, for that matter!). I'm not sure that I entirely understand this play (perhaps *Part II* provides the intellectual complement to the straightforward action of *Part I*?), or what it tries to accomplish (to characterize the included historical actors more fully?) other than providing comic entertainment and filling a narrative gap between *Part I* and *Henry V*. I thought the entire production was very well conceived and excellently directed, but found the play itself virtually lacking in substance. Thank goodness for the brilliant comic blocking of inane buffoonery in Act II and the marathon tavern scene of Act I.

Shakespeare establishes the dissimilarity of the two plays immediately by having Rumour, an allegorical personification and narrator, contextualize the action. We learn that misperceptions of reality, based on false report and gossip, will provide the impetus for the progression of the plot. In a commentary on the misrepresentative character of rumor, the audience is informed that, rather than spreading news of Hal's victory, Rumour reports just the opposite. Appearing to have been inspired by the grim reaper, the director chose to interpret Rumour as a spectral figure cloaked in black. His appearance contrasted greatly with the primarily jovial scenes that followed. Perhaps we are to recognize Rumour's morbid subliminal omni-presence throughout the play (as indicated by the scenes in which characters acquire information and Rumour appears in the background). Or, should we understand that Rumour precedes and thereby drives action? I was particularly fond of the decision to have Rumour enter pulling a casket. It did not appear to contain Hal, so I interpreted this moment as foreshadowing the death of Henry IV, of which the characters learn prematurely through Rumour.

This production was particularly noteworthy for its skilled comic blocking, although I was not pleased to learn that Hal had fallen back into his slothful ways with Falstaff and his posse of drunkards. The director created a wonderful atmosphere of leisure in the tavern scene, where wenching and drinking provided distracting celebration for Hal and his friends after the victory over Hotspur. At this point I began to wonder if Hal really did have the capacity and desire to fulfill his destiny, as he claimed and began to demonstrate in *Part I*. The interaction between Falstaff, Hal, Bardolph, Pistol, Peto (et al.) and Mistress Quickly and the other maids, created a vulgar feeling of pseudo-domesticity. This seemed like a world entirely removed from the war. The musicians were an effective addition to this scene, contributing to the sense of festive lightheartedness. While the interactions between Falstaff and Hal were very witty (as usual), this scene did not contribute anything new to the progression of the plot or the development of the characters. We only begin to doubt Prince Henry's potential.

In contrast to the cheerfulness of the tavern, we find Henry IV's physical and psychological condition rapidly worsening. I was particularly fond of the way in which the director showed Henry IV being haunted by images of Richard II. The wheelchair was a bit anachronistic, but adequately signaled the severity of his condition.

The brilliantly choreographed interaction between the fool and his ladder perfectly characterized the atmosphere of the farcical conscription that followed. This was simply well-done physical comedy that I found very entertaining. The director also took full advantage of the laughs to be gotten from the dialogue and names of Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, and Bullcalf. These characters were created very cleverly, but again I cannot come up with an adequate explanation for the inclusion of this scene other than pure amusement. I suppose we learn more about the mysterious character of Falstaff from Shallow and Silence. We also learn of his presumptuous intentions and expectations (Lord Chief Justice?!) should Harry become king. Falstaff, corrupt as ever, looks to take full advantage of his new friend's status by expressing his intent to deal out justice unjustly.

I found the staging of the scene in which Henry IV lies on his deathbed to be quite brilliant. Like Hal, I was deceived when Henry lost consciousness momentarily. The actor playing Hal was very convincing as him to power. His son displays virtue in coming to his father’s deathbed, and likewise in the was pure energy and enjoyment. Yet, the play transforms the genre of farce from mere inane slapstick and improbable situations (though there is plenty of this as well) into a comic reminder of the over-scheduled and fast-paced lives that we all lead. From our own chaotic world, we are ironically transplanted into the increasingly fren grating Western accent and speaks in a high-pitched squeal (she's from Texas). An utter materialist, Gloria speaks condescendingly to Bertha, and demands the most outrageous combinations of food. Gabriella, who only eats pasta, has an exaggerated Italian accent and volatile suspicions of Bernard's infidelity. Gretchen seems to border on insanity, commanding Robert and Bernard in angry, German-accented, bullhorn shouts (although the actress who played Gretchen could have used a bit more practice with her accent).

Bernard is a confident, glib, and wealthy womanizer, who thinks of his perfectly organized bachelor's life with three beautiful girlfriends as a male dream world. He is urban, professional, and stylish, a Don Juan wannabe and caricature of male egotism. Bernard's placation of his girlfriends, and the contrast between their extreme femininity and his masculinity, provide the play's initial comedy. However, a new stereotypical element arrives with the entrance of Robert, Bernard's old school

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laughing at aspects of the characters we find in ourselves. Yet, in the resolution, each of the characters has also evolved and matured in some way. Bernard becomes more secure with commitment, Robert discovers confidence and an enjoyment of frivolity, and the women find reciprocity for their devotion. The central couples attain romantic fulfillment while Bertha maintains her comfortable place as resident sage and critic. Nevertheless, the central message of the play appears in the final pillow-fight scene, reminiscent of schooldays past, between Bernard immaturity and unrestrained “rural” expressiveness. Likewise, Pinchwife was the perfect image of a distrustful and overly jealous husband.

attempts at conversation that he didn't even notice Harcourt stealing Alithea out from under his nose. However, in a reaction atypical to the production, Alithea remains modest, despite Sparkish's suspicions of her compromising (though innocent) situation with Horner.

Much Ado About Nothing
Olivier Theatre, National Theatre Complex
Friday, January 4, 2008

Nicholas Hytner's opulent production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was hilariously funny, while still managing to be emotionally charged with tragic potential. It was also a pleasure and a privilege to study this production with Professor Russ McDonald.

I can see why Zoe Wanamaker and Simon Russell Beale are considered to be two of the finest living stage actors. Both have a great talent for combining brilliant comedy with absolute dramatic sincerity to create believable characters that run the emotional gamut of tragicomedy. For example, the witty and critical exchanges between Benedick and Beatrice were performed with consummate condescension and a rapier tone. Yet, the sad and lonely few words uttered after each of these by Beatrice, in which she expressed her love for Benedick, were truly moving. Moreover, both Beale and Wanamaker gave exceptionally funny comedic performances involving the pool. I'm thinking specifically of Beale strutting around on stage in skin-tight wet clothes, making statements like "The world must be peopled," after learning of Beatrice's true feelings via eavesdropping. However, their range becomes apparent when one compares this scene to the moment in which Beatrice, outraged and furious at Claudio's accusation toward Hero, demands that Benedick defend her honor, which he does, displaying his truly honorable nature.

seemed always to be on stage somewhere, providing just the right note to intensify the feeling of the scene.

Like Iago, Don John seems to be a “motiveless malignancy,” intent on destroying the character and pleasure of others. What could be the possible reasoning behind his actions, his evil and unfounded denigration of Hero? The only explanation I can find is his exclusion from love. In another wise directorial move, Hytner chose to open his production at a banquet table, complete with a great feast. Is this the feast of love? It would seem so. At the arrival of Don Pedro’s men on the domestic scene (itself a source of comedy and delight since they seem to fit into it incongruously; perhaps this is a comment on the differences in gender-stereotyped personalities) we assume there is enough nourishment to go around. However, we soon learn that this is not the case. Benedick and Beatrice accept their invitations reluctantly, Hero and Claudio hastily, but the two princes do not receive any. Lacking esteem as a bastard and uninvited to love, Don John turns to distraction (he seemed to be frequently drunk during his monologues) and destruction. Don Pedro himself, though Hytner chooses to give him a certain ambiguity of character (we were to be suspicious of his motives in pursuing Hero for Claudio) ends the play standing alone off to the side. Yet Don Pedro seems to indulge in a larger love of group companionship, responsibly regarding his role as leader foremost.

I thought that setting Hero and Claudio’s marriage in a church worked well. It created another beautiful set, while also establishing an ominous atmosphere of moral judgment (though I didn’t care for the echo effect). The black and white floor tiles seemed to reflect the deluded dichotomy of Claudio’s thinking. Yet, it was most impressive to watch Beale abandon sacrosanct protocol to put an end to the accusations of dishonesty leveled at Hero. I was particularly moved by the indefensible and crushing position in which Hero found herself.

I soon realized that these carefully considered details simultaneously set the action in several particular moments of history. The costumes placed it at the conclusion of WWI and the music, bunker, and radio at the end of WWII. The cell phones were a stinging reminder of our current military engagements. With the mention of an “expeditionary force,” we also heard a specific allusion to 19th century British imperialism. At first, I did not consider these details appropriate, but soon realized that Mitchell was more intent on communicating a message than remaining traditional. She explains that the horrors of war are temporal ubiquities. *Women of Troy* becomes a play about all women in every violent conflict throughout a history epitomized by war. Thus, the era of the adaptation takes on a timeless quality. It is the Trojan War, yet it is all wars, including the present one.

As the title states, this is a play about the way in which war differs for women—a remarkable composition for Euripides, considering this issue remains infrequently addressed today. For men, war may mean death and a glorious elegy, but for women it means life as a living hell. It means rape, bondage, and servitude. It means you mseay dbeifcelregdy,e bnduthat.01r may md0.0

the innocent at the hands of men making war. *Women of Troy* shows how war transforms sex into an act of violence, the victims of which are helpless to defend themselves. The women have a choice between a life of sexual enslavement—to Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Odysseus, et al.—or death. The instances in which the women danced violently alone also convey this notion of powerlessness and being partnered by "unreal" partners.

However, this dance, as well as the constant application of make-up, did not, in my mind, undercut the image of women depicted by Mitchell—she was not putting them down. If anything, these instances seemed to convey an attempt to latch onto a semblance of the peaceful, orderly past, to memories of life and civilization before it was crushed by war, while also indicating strength to face whatever horrors the future might hold (putting on a face to "meet the faces that we meet," as T.S. Eliot puts it).

Hecuba appeared as a pillar of this unwavering strength (especially as she performed the burial ritual over the corpse of Astyanax), remaining outwardly collected at all times. I only wish that I could have understood more than a few of the lines that she spoke. I found the play to be very frustrating in this regard, and think it would have been possible to emphasize visual images, while keeping the essential dialogue in tact. In this way, Mitchell's production sacrificed the play to her agenda—but perhaps that's her intention. I was also a bit surprised at Hecuba's rebuke of Helen, who Mitchell designed to look more like a wild women than a harlot. I would have thought that Euripides would portray Helen as another victim of male-dominance and sexual aggression. But, he does not. Rather, she becomes an egoistical figure, intent on self-preservation (no matter what it involves), and unwilling to take responsibility for her participation in the cause of the war. But, is this instinct for self-preservation not a result of the militaristic male world in which she lives? The common emulation of aggression in Hecuba and

Helen suggests the struggle to find a mode of survival to endure the disasters that men have wrought upon their worlds.

The set had a harsh, stark, industrial feel. It was dimly lit and confining, inescapable to the women. At first I thought we were located in the hold of a large Greek warship, but it became clear that this was a subterranean bunker beneath the streets of a crumbling Troy. By setting the action underground and filling the space with large menacing flames, Mitchell succeeded in creating a hell on earth for the characters to inhabit while awaiting their horrifying fates. The feeling of imprisonment, of being trapped, was compounded by the emphasis placed on the locking and unlocking of doors through which only Talthybius (a surprisingly sympathizing figure, though certainly not atypical in his conscience-cleansing passing of the war crime buck to his subordinates) and his attendant could pass. The sirens, flashing red lights, and background explosions likewise contributed to the creation of this hellish atmosphere. Perhaps it was the women's psychological anguish, their fleeting sanity, that made them seem most like lost souls. In the face of war, Hecuba suggests, "Only the dead shed no tears; for they are beyond weeping."

The final explosion provided the tragedy with a nihilistic ending in which the world and lives of the Trojan women were utterly obliterated. While physically shaken by this effect, I can only say that this final exclamatory punctuation left the audience nowhere.

The Woman-Hater
Orange Tree Theatre
Saturday, January 5, 2008

I'm glad we were able to include a production in-the-round on our itinerary; I found this experience to be engaging, intimate, and unique. Seated so close to the action, it was impossible to not be entirely absorbed by the play, especially during Mr. Waverly's many asides, which seemed directed at specific audience members. This type of intimacy added an ineffable quality of participation and enjoyment to the production.

Initially, I did not recognize the important place of this work within the canon of British literature, nor its significant effect on the prominent writers of the early 19th century. I was struck with admiration for Fanny Burney's forward-thinking women's liberation message and her adroitness at constructing a comedy that would both appeal to the humor of contemporary audiences, while making them reconsider existing social relationships. It is certainly unfortunate that this play has just received its world premier, but that fact perhaps contributes to the message of gender inequality that the play addresses, reminding us of social arrangements that may not have completely changed since 1802.

In this comedy of errors, Burney constructs a delightful play of confused relationships with a progressive feminist agenda. The action followed a traditional marriage plot; however, instead of one or two couples getting together, Burney provides us with fulfilling reconciliations between 8 individuals in addition to Joyce's discovery of her true mother.

Like so much comedy, Burney successfully relied on the amusement derived from gender stereotypes. First, the men: Lord Roderick, Mr. Wilmott, Mr. Waverley, Jack, and Bob. Roderick, the apparent misogynist from which the play gains its title, was a stuffy, condescending, elderly man, whose surly demeanor results from his being jilted by Lady Smatter many years before. Taking Jack as his heir, Roderick seems to try to make Jack into a monk, forcing him to live in isolation and indoctrinating him with misogyny.

Wilmott typifies an austere puritanical ideology focused 6801DC w]TJ465 yirand not end up like her mother, who he

Tempest). Within this pool of femininity we also discover the real Sophia, who Mrs. Wilmot has raised on her own. Burney depicts Sophia as a reserved, thoughtful, and articulate young women—truly a "Sophia" in the classical sense. She was lovely, virtuous, and relatively quiet, but still managed to convey a sense of both daughterly duty and independence. Sophia embodied the ideals of strong-minded womanhood that Burney advocated.

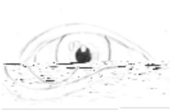
Education was a major theme of this play—or more precisely: Who is allowed to receive it? Who needs it? In what form? Roderick rejects education as a waste of time, revealing sustained ignorance not only of books, but of social protocol. Wilmott is a pedant, who forces his daughter to read things she doesn't understand, while misinterpreting the world himself. Mrs. Smatter teaches herself by memorizing quotes, but can never comprehend the message that they contain or remember their sources. Burney seems to suggest that education requires social interaction. We learn from each other and cannot grow and mature in isolation, subject only to our own constructed prejudices. Moreover, she advocates the fulfillment of romantic relationships, even when they seem implausible and confining. The unification of Roderick and Smatter, the Wilmotts, Bob and Joyce, and Sophia and Jack convey the message that love is for all people at all ages, irrespective of the past.

Despite its light-hearted mood, *The Woman-Hater* addresses a serious social issue of the period: oppression of woman, consignment of their roles in society, and restrictions on behavior. All of the female characters in this production were subjugated in some way, be it verbal (Smatter), familial (Mrs. Wilmott and Sophia), educational (Joyce), or social (Bob's sister). Burney's play about female oppression, though in line with comedy of the day, was too far ahead of its time to get produced. Though Roderick is the play's obvious misogynist, Burney identifies Georgian society as the true, palpable "woman-hater," defined by oppressive and restricting social norms. Dressing Joyce and Jack in contemporary clothes—a punk-rock tee-shirt and leather jacket respectively—tied Burney's message to the present, suggesting a current society that remains not entirely equitable between the genders.

Marianne Dreams
Almeida Theatre
Sunday, January 6, 2008

Through Moira Buffini's ingenious direction, this adaptation of *Marianne Dreams* managed to be both a captivating phantasmagorical story for young girls, a more general discussion of maturity, and an intellectual conversation on human psychology. Ashamedly, I admit that I was not expecting to enjoy this production—but I absolutely loved it!

Foremost among this director's brilliant artistic decisions was the way in which she used projection, lighting, and sound to manipulate the atmosphere of a virtually empty stage, constructing a double-reality in which Marianne lived while ill. The colorless, grey world of Marianne's dreams provided a blank space in which she could explore, create, and mature. The atmosphere created by simple surreal props—a distorted window frame, a pendulous clock—as well as the constantly changing sketches that served as a backdrop, evoked the atmosphere of an unstable dream-world (reflecting the instability of her illness). It was an alternate reality into which Marianne could escape from her convalescent anxiety and bedfast loneliness. I thought it a particularly nice touch that all of Marianne's movements in her dream-world were choreographed dance—I greatly enjoyed this aspect of the production; the fluidity of the young actress' movements were a pleasing contrast to her bedridden immobility. On a psychological level, it fulfilled a fantasy beyond confinement. Sometimes it seems, when faced with adversity, we need to create other worlds for ourselves, perhaps confidantes who can empathize with us.



The play was largely concerned with making notions of maturity and adversity available to a young audience—a message simultaneously transmitted to adult guardians. Rather than receiving a pony for her 10th birthday, Marianne becomes infected with a life-threatening illness. In the beginning of the play, Marianne is self-absorbed, immature, and bratty. She whines about her illness, complains to her mother, lacks confidence about her ability to understand math, and has a depressingly negative attitude, reacting pessimistically to her mother, doctor, and "governess." However, through her work with Ms. Chesterfield, a wonderfully receptive friend who manages to bridge the disconnect between adult and child perspective (a gap emphasized by the inability of Marianne's mother to understand her daughter's sketches), she learns empathy and selflessness. Marianne begins to think in terms of doing for others—she asks her mother to buy flowers for Ms. Chesterfield, wants to help her imagined friend Mark, and even gives the real Mark her pencil. Marianne learns how to interact respectfully with others and how to cope with her illness-induced fears and frustrations. By the end of the play, even though Mark is unfriendly and critical of her, Marianne is undeterred and insists on helping him. She has begun to grow up.

I particularly admired the scene in which Marianne and Mark realize that the horrible "eyes" are watching them. These cellular creatures seemed to be unconscious manifestations of the viruses that threaten both Marianne and Mark's lives. It was a clever way to discuss the phenomenology of the brain as it processes reality by transforming the unknown into something more comprehensible. Having these cells take on a monstrous quality seems like a perfectly logical dream for an ill child to have. On another level, the eyes, which possess a quality of otherness, may represent the adult world looking in on the world of the child, or, more simply, perhaps, the ever-present obstacle of the illness as it perpetually holds you in its sight.

Additionally, I believe there to be a conversation based in Freudian psychology operating here. The "eyes" might represent the "I"s of the human superego. The creative world of the unconscious is a remarkable place of freedom and creativity where the rules of reality do not exist, where individuals can transcend themselves. Yet, it is also the realm of the unknown and the chaotic. The eyes may symbolize the constructing influence of the superego, of consciousness, over imagination and the creative process. It represents an invasion of the dream world by the human need to understand through organization. Perhaps there is also a message here about the individual's egocentricity disrupting relationships with others (e.g. Marianne's carelessness in letting the eyes see her leads to a turbulent relationship with Mark).

Dealer's Choice
Trafalgar Studio 1
Monday, January 7, 2008

In our third play about dysfunctional men, Patrick Marber constructs an insular world for five restaurant employees suffering from various forms of addiction. The men who participate in Stephen's weekly game of poker cannot stop gambling in spite of the ways in which it is ruining their lives—Sweeney even gambles away the $50 he sets aside for the day with his daughter. Gambling is the opiate on which they are dependent to escape their ordinary and static lives. In the poker room, Sweeney (T.S. Eliot's Sweeney character? Stephen identifies him as "all aggression") can shed his chef's uniform, something he's too scared to do in reality because of the insecurity it would mean. Likewise, Mugsy and Frankie become unique characters rather than waiters. For a few hours each Sunday night the men can feel like "real men" rather than cogs in an occupational machine. In the world of the poker room, social barriers are leveled and every man deceives himself into believing he possesses a certain independence and skill that will put him above the others. The uncertainty of poker not only gives them all a momentary thrill, but sustains each man’s hope of becoming the winner—possibly winning the pot that will free

Mugsy functioned as a hopelessly idealistic figure amidst the gloom of the poker world. His constant cheer and foolish disillusionment provided much needed comic relief to the tragic situation in which the other men find themselves

Perhaps the lesson to draw from Dealer's Choice is that in the gamble of life we are all mugs in a way—like Carl, Mr. Ash, et al. we all have some debt to pay. Even though luck may allow us to win (like Stephen), it may not matter.

Present Laughter
Lyttelton Theatre, National Theatre Complex
Tuesday, January 8, 2008

During Act 2 of this production, Garry Essendine proclaims "She feels like she's in the middle of a French farce;" I felt likewise. Trying to determine whether I enjoyed *Boeing, Boeing* or *Present Laughter* more would be a futile task—the consummate wit of this comedy had me in a constant state of elation. Both comedies employed many of the same types of jokes—improbable and confused situations, extreme characters, gender/class contrasts, and very witty dialogue— but I think it was the gravitas added by the layers of depth which Coward assigns Garry that set this production on a slightly higher pedestal.

Before Garry even enters, Coward builds up our expectations through the dialogue of the servants and knowledge of his affair. We expect an egocentric, vain, and charismatic character, which is exactly what we get. Though he is hopelessly narcissistic and self-interested, we can't help but like Garry and want to remain in his presence. He exudes a lightness of being, says very clever things constantly, and makes those who surround him feel like the center of attention—we know that Garry would never sacrifice this position, which belongs to him (as indicated by the elevated, disproportionately large, center door through which he enters). Coward also amusingly satirizes the character and genuineness of actors through Garry.

Although Garry provides a center of gravity around which all of the other characters revolve, he seems to have a certain grimness about him. Sadness lurks under his jovial façade. He seems unhappy and jaded, pursuing meaningless sexual relationships with his adoring fans.

Garry longs for something, but we don't know what it is and neither does he. Despite his fame, the Garry we see doesn't seem to be the real Garry, but rather one of his many roles; his identity seems fluid as he shifts in and out of characters, reciting lines from past performances. At this midpoint in his life, Garry floats along, powerless and disillusioned—an performance tour through Africa should hardly be desirable for a famous London stage actor. While lamenting the ways in which others impose on his life, Garry also constantly muses on the past and future, indicating the presence of both regret and foreboding. He is dissatisfied despite the decadent life he leads. Garry seems to love all of the women in the play without really loving any of them.

One notion presented by the play is being in love with an illusion. Garry embodies this idea by morphing into the desired ideal of each character who surrounds him. To the women, Garry is the perfect vision of romance, the perfect man. To Rowland Moore, he is a brilliant artist and inspiration. Garry becomes all of these people while pointing out that many of the extravagant characters we encounter are in fact deceiving themselves.

The idea of Garry's constant performance (as well as that of his seductress) and the deceits he and his wife create interested me greatly. Rowland Moore observes, "You're always acting. You act sane while I act mad." Coward seems to suggest that in a way we are all acting, all the time. Though Garry's performances may be more melodramatic and insincere, this is the way that humans interactions. Or, perhaps acting is merely a survival technique, one that is not necessarily manipulative or malicious but natural.

Essendine derives pleasure. Garry is dependent on those around him—he needs his wife to rescue him from the consequences of his own philandering, his secretary to keep his life ordered, etc… Gary's jaded attitude toward everything and the unexpected decisions that he makes to

Kwei-Armah addresses the question of group identity by holding the prism of Identity Politics Theory up to scrutiny. On the surface, Kwaku's firm symbolizes the entire community of black Britons who share an experience of marginalization in society. However, by revealing inner-fragmentation—the schism between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans—Kwei-Armah exposes the fallacious assumption of unity that has been superimposed on different ethnic groups. Nevertheless, he also rejects the antagonistic disconnect between these groups because of its counter-productivity. Identity politics fragments groups into smaller groups, establishing animosity and competitiveness where there should be cooperation. Kwaku's family—half African through his marriage to Lola and half Caribbean through his affair with Adrian's mother—becomes a metaphor for this discussion of identity politics. Kwei-Armah admirably populations. He recognizes and illuminates the differences between the experiences of these groups while proposing reconciliation.

The set of this production gave it a modern and sophisticated feel. Kwaku's office, his think tank, is a place of idea generation. As such, it functioned as a stylish debate forum—appropriate since the entire play was, in a sense, a debate on current issues—in which the characters could argue their various strategies on how best to promote issue awareness. I also thought that the inclusion of a separate office space for Kwaku worked well. It conveyed a sense of isolation, of being physically, mentally, and ideologically cut off from the group. In a way, Kwaku's office represented the space of his mind—a space inhabited by the ghost of his father, Soby (a type of conscience of inheritance). It was in this space that Kwaku delivered his the inner-thoughts through soliloquy and in which he accepted the demands of his father to never forget.

Despite Kwaku's life-long commitment to advancing the agenda of Britain's black population, he was presented as a very human and flawed character. He has become merely a remnant of his former incendiary self. Kwaku's womanizing—with Issimama, Lola, and Adrian's mother—and uncontrollable alcoholism transform him into a morally ambiguous character. Perhaps, Kwei-Armah is trying to show the damaging effects of "post-traumatic slave syndrome" and the way a lifetime of virtual ineffectiveness has destroyed this man. With a staff of Oxbridge educated men and women, the idea of this syndrome seems to become their continued marginalization and disadvantage despite having achieved the apex of western academics.

The prominence of education in this production provided another angle from which to assess fragmentation. It creates a sense of legitimate "family"—perhaps lineage—from which

and so we are forced to impose our own prejudices and morality on the situation subjectively. The actor who played Flynn gave an outstanding performance in this regard; he had me constantly questioning whether he was a perverted sociopath, or merely an unconventional church figure who liked three lumps of sugar in his tea.

A skeptic through and through, Sister Aloysius was the embodiment of doubt and discontentment—"Satisfaction is a vice. Do you think Socrates was ever satisfied?" She attempts to impose her own dispassionate principles of education and distrust of the students on Sister James, an enthusiastic though naive teacher. We don't like Aloysius for that reason, or for her cold demeanor and condescension. She seems to be an intolerable voice of unwavering Catholic discipline. Moreover, we can't be sure whether Aloysius' own prejudice against Father Flynn's untraditional ways predisposes her suspicion. Maybe she is just resentful that he undermines and threatens her authority within the parish. Is she calculating? It's tough to say. The interpretation offered by the director and actress establishes Aloysius as a sincere, righteous, and kindhearted figure, if only a little old-fashioned. She views herself as a defender of the helpless—a characteristic emphasized by the scene in which she covers the plant to protect it from the winter. She must protect the "isolated" and "sheepish" from the "wolf." Moreover, I found it incredibly admirable that she was willing to sacrifice her own position to protect Donald from Flynn. Standing up to the Church hierarchy, against which she would have no recourse if disciplined, was a very brave and atypical act. Yet, we are never sure if she actually cares about Donald or if she merely uses him as a tool of destruction.

The play also sent a larger message to the audience about the troubling nature of moral dilemmas in general (I particularly liked the way in which the play included the audience by having Flynn preach to us at the beginning of each act). As Flynn asks in his opening line, “What do you do when you’re not sure?” This seems to be the question anytime the individual, like Sister James, finds himself sandwiched between the innate moral compass and the blurry details of reality. Is it better to act on suspicions and potentially ruin a life, or to let circumstances continue? Shanley seems decisive on this point, while pointing out that morality is hardly a black and white dichotomy in reality and that the individual must be prepared to accept the consequences of an action before carrying it through.

largely racist 45 years after the action of the play is set; it is not unreasonable to assume that there are still Mrs. Muellers forced into similarly difficult positions.

The History Boys
Wyndhams Theatre
January 10, 2008

In this comedy about the development of intellect, sexuality, and character, nine young men preparing for both their Oxbridge examinations and the rest of their lives begin the transition into adulthood, establishing unique ways to understand history in the process. Alan Bennett displayed a remarkable talent for weaving together laugh-out-loud comedy, touching sentimentality, and unexpected tragedy in this play, which combines and legitimizes the genres of popular culture and cerebral theater, while transcending them both.

First and foremost, this play concerns itself with various forms of education. The transmission and absorption of historical facts in preparation for examinations becomes the most obvious example of this theme, but it is only the starting point, the establishing motif for a complicated discussion. This education, the type that looks good on paper, is sufficient for the "square" business-oriented brain of the headmaster, but it lacks the depth that the boys require to make sense of their individual experiences.

From Hector, the boys receive a random sampling of anything and everything. He is an English teacher with whom, in a delightful scene, they practice the French conditional (an appropriate tense for this forward-looking and indefinite time in their lives; there also seems to be a discussion of mores, of "shoulds/and should nots" operating here with regard to Hector), for whom they perform cinematic skits and show-tunes, and against whom they argue the legitimacy of an education in popular culture. Hector values learning for its own sake, for the inherent pleasure that one can derive from knowledge. His methodology of randomness is unquantifiable, but this is the difference between education and knowledge. Knowledge is ineffable. You can’t put your finger on it, but it prepares you for when you will need it. Hector explains this phenomenon best during his response to Timms’ obstinate questioning and in the beautiful passage when he describes the way in which a hand can reach out from the pages of a book and grab you. Yet, Hector embodies an educational philosophy (a notion of intellectual transmission that seems to hearken back to Socrates) that rapidly becomes obsolete during the action of the play. His fall from the motorbike not only provides the boys with a tragic experience from which they learn about life’s unpredictability, but symbolizes the unfortunate death of an age of education that valued learning for personal enlightenment.

need Irwin’s “edge” and knack for ironic interpretation, but it is the randomness of Hector’s instruction that gives an unpredictable flare, allowing them to stand apart form the crowd. We must not, however, forget Tottie, whose untraditional feminist approach to the subject—“History is women following behind with the bucket”—is equally important to th

King Lear
New London Theatre
Thursday, January 10, 2008

Trevor Nunn's production of *Lear* was simply magnificent; Wow! Obviously, the first thing that struck me about this performance was the visually opulent set, which can only be described as palatial. With the sweeping arced balcony (that extended offstage), ceiling high columns, crystal chandelier, and lush red curtains (foreshadowing the blood to be spilled), Nunn creates a mammoth space truly fit for a great king. The decadence of the initial set provided a wonderful contrast with the dilapidated structure in front of which the production concluded. Nunn made a brilliant directorial decision by visually representing the decline of the kingdom and the degeneration of Lear's mental condition. Moreover, I'm glad that he allowed the audience to experience the violent destruction of the set, rather than have it occur during scene changes. The effect of watching the hunting party tear down the curtains and the storm break open the roof and windows created an intense spectacle on stage and tension in the audience.

In terms of costuming, the ornate military uniforms and ball gowns in which the men and women were respectively dressed seemed to set the action in the early 19th century. Although the imperial feel of the set reminded me of czarist Russia, we are perhaps dealing with the madness of King George III. In any case, Nunn ach picks up on this point, observing, “To be such men as may besort your age, which knows themselves and you.” He implies that a man of Lear’s years should know himself, though he does not. Even Lear himself exclaims, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” Lear does not understand what it means to be king. This absence of knowledge leads him to desire the fragmentation of his kingdom initially (his *hamartia*), while retaining his title and privileges. His lack of understanding guides him to a rejection of Cordelia, the daughter who loves him most genuinely. Consequently, Lear must first lose everything—his kingdom, his family, his sanity—and become utterly poor to realize that man is poor, or rather mortal.

Lear only comes to know himself through suffering and recognition of his own mortality. The time spent with the Fool and Poor Tom, “the philosopher,” in the wilderness could be read as a pilgrimage of introspection through the tempest of Lear’s mind. It is during his time spent with them that he becomes cognizant of himself.

I believe that the idea of “nothingness” becomes a major motif of the play as well. The first instance in which we learn of its importance comes when Lear responds to Cordelia, “Nothing will come of nothing.” Though this is perhaps only a witty retort, I read Lear’s statement ironically. Without self-knowledge, Lear himself is nothing; thus, the loss of his kingdom, lordship, and position as father, his nothingness—or in the wise Fool’s own words, “I am a fool, though art nothing”—results from hi

typical of Shakespeare) is a fi

calculated duplicity—there is something beneath the surface, but those around him would never know it. When Iago is acted, I believe, the audience should in part be deceived by him. What I mean is that when Iago puts on the mask of loya

Iago tramps—was an innovative and symbolic touch that reminds the audience of his perpetual reduction of love to bestialities. Having the actors track water over the stage, creating footprints and puddles, also produced an effective, distinctly Mediterranean atmosphere. At the same time, the warm feeling and golden colors of the Cyprus set created a rich-feeling and idyllic locale, beautifully accented by Persian rugs and lush curtains. The exotic music composed for the production significantly contributed to the beauty of this other world, perhaps best represented by Martina Laird's alluring and sympathetically genuine Bianca.

The performances had me so emotionally involved with the characters by the final scene that I feel as though I experienced a true catharsis for the first time. The intensity began when, in a touching and chilling scene, Desdemona seems to sing her own death ballad, prophesying her future murder. The muffled, feeble, yet strikingly beautiful song emphasized her vulnerability (symbolized by her disrobing) and understanding of fate. I do not think her singing was directed this way because of a vocal deficiency, but to set an unnerving tone for the bedroom scene, while piquing sympathy for Desdemona—it was not until this scene that I truly felt for her.

Desdemona's death was a theatrical triumph in acting. I took issue, however, with the director's decision to block this scene off-center and out of my view. While I appreciate my physical involvement in the production to some degree, the murder should have at least occurred center-stage if it was not going to take place on the marital bed. DeThe piredtosIath

The Tempest
Arts Theatre
Saturday, January 12, 2008

This greatly reduced production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* had a simple message: forgiveness is best. Director Jatinder Verma gave the play a fresh social relevance by re-contextualizing the plot to deal with Islamic religious extremism. In Prospero, Verma saw a parallel to intelligent leaders of current fanatic movements, determined to seek revenge against their enemies. In his playbook notes, he even suggests that Prospero calls to mind a major supporter of Osama bin Laden. At first I perceived this reading as ludicrous, but then intriguingly innovative. Verma tries to convey a peaceful message to both Eastern and Western audiences, inspiring a reconsideration of social divisions—divisions that are very local and real in a city and nation with both a growing middle-eastern population and hateful nativist movement. I greatly admire Verma's commitment to breaking down cultural barriers through art, as well as the message of non-violence that he was trying to convey.

Although I deeply appreciated Verma's socio-political commentary and the lovely middle-eastern music, I did not otherwise care very much for this production. The cuts and selected dialogue seemed entirely arbitrary, giving the action a disconnected feel and making the play virtually incomprehensible. A skeleton of the plot remained, but could not have been understood much by an audience member who had not studied the play intimately.

Although the magical and pastoral atmosphere of the play was entirely absent, the vertical sheets of plywood did manage to express the condition of the characters' imprisonment on the island. They created a cave-like world in which Prospero could brood and contemplate his power over the others. The use of these panels as projection screens was clever, although the dimly lit stage made it difficult to see the displayed images.

The ropes that dangled from the ceiling functioned as a central visual metaphor of the play. I can only assume that they were supposed to get increasingly tangled, representing the way in which the characters lives intertwined. The integral motif of magic, virtually absent, also seemed contained in the ropes, which Ariel uses to induce sleep on Alonso. Additionally, they represent the romantic relationship into which Ferdinand and Miranda knot themselves. Despite the fact that the play is a romance, Verma might have cut this element altogether since the sole emphasis placed on Prospero's contemplated vengeance against Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian made it seem superfluous. The flirtation scene in which the lovers each awkwardly hung from the ropes seemed utterly ridiculous and out of place. Moreover, the chess game between Ferdinand and Miranda, the inherent romantic/sexual metaphor, was missing except for projected images of chess pieces that were displayed at the wrong moment. I suppose that the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda was kept in tact only to emphasize the peaceful union of two formerly antagonistic groups, becoming the ultimate symbol of forgiveness and peace.

Verma troublingly underemphasizes the relationships between Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel. I found Caliban's characterization very problematic in that he was not at all monstrous or in any way different from the other characters. We aren't given any explanation of the relationship between Prospero's cruel treatment of Caliban, or even a hint of what it entails. By accepting Caliban as "his," Prospero further contributes to the theme of forgiveness, but we don't understand why Prospero should forgive him, because he doesn't seem to have done anything except appear on stage and mumble a few times. Verma also does nothing with the character of Ariel—she certainly issn't sprightly or particularly magical. Moreover, the scene in which Prospero releases Ariel, one of the most important moments in the play (it confirms and