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Theatre in England

In My End Is My Beginning

Today I saw *Blood Brothers* and *Noises Off*, both of which challenge the audience's expectations of theatrical conventions in different ways. In *Blood Brothers*, the narrator's presence throughout the play alerts the audience to what will happen, and he even seems to interact directly with the character Mrs. Lyons. While the other characters seem unaware of the narrator's presence, Mrs. Lyons often turns to face him while

The narrator's presence throughout the play surprised me because he formed part of the set itself by continually leaning against walls and out of windows during scenes. He didn't seem to be sympathetic to the mothers because their choice caused the terrible end he already knew.





ending triumphantly, a display of societal harmony and hierarchy at its most positive. Completing the musical with a similar tableau also provides a sense of closure and reminds us that the "circle of life" will continue through Simba.

From the stalls, I could appreciate the makeup and the techniques used for the puppeteering. Despite

With regard to plot, the story depends on tropes that have existed throughout drama and in, life itself- sibling rivalry, desire for power, greed, death of a parent, running away, suppressed identity, love, the

*Royal Family* was amazing for the comic timing and for the way that the actors portrayed cantankerous stars so successfully. The play seemed to me like a melodramatic statement about the artificiality that acting can have and the possibility of characters constantly upstaging each other. A play requires an ensemble of actors who can cooperate to produce the most effective dramatic moments, not a group of prima donnas who only want the limelight themselves. The Cavendish family desperately wants to continue their acting tradition but they also use their abilities to manipulate each other constantly. Fanny, as the head of the family, exaggerates fainting spells and temper tantrums to try to convince Gwen to pursue the stage and Julie not to get married. Fanny and the other characters make constant references to stage terminology, speaking about good entrances and exits, scenes, speeches, cues. Tony, especially, is consciously melodramatic, striking poses and drawing attention to himself. His disgust when the baby upstages him shows his own selfishness and childish behavior.

I think that *Royal Family* presents the contrast between actors and "real people." The characters reinforce stereotypes about actors even while being incensed by them. Their house reinforces the notion that "All the world is a stage"; these people can't contain themselves from playing a part. The most genuine scene is the closing death scene. Fanny Cavendish, after a life of being center stage and utmost in people's minds, dies alone with her back to us, the audience. Her silent, quick death out of the sight of her family evokes a feeling that even the best actors must relinquish their parts. When her family gathers around in their final tableau, the deliberate lack of noise shows that depth of their emotion and lack of pretension. The two instances of shattering glass in the play-Tony's throwing down the vase and Fanny's dropping cocktail glass in her last moments-contrast melodramatic fits with real life drama.

One of the ironies of watching this production is knowing that acting aristocracy are playing acting aristocracy. When Judi Dench entered the first time, the audience burst into applause at the mere sight of her. As an actor with a huge resume and prodigious number of awards, Judi Dench plays an aging actress who wants to go back on the road but ,can't. I found myself wondering whether the actors ~n this play encountered the same types of problems that their characters do, with people mob+g their houses, balancing schedules with people who have "normal" jobs, wanting to continue a part past its time of popularity.

In relation to *Noises Off*, I think that this play represented many of the same issues from a reverse perspective. Whereas *Noises Off* dealt with a play in production and the actors' lives bleeding through into the play, *Royal Family* shows the actors changing their ordinary lives into dramatic roles. The characters embody the stereotypical temperamental actors who launch into histrionics at the first sign of opposition, but they also show the loyalty and close knit nature of their family. When Gil Marshall talk disparagingly about dishonest managers and the artificiality of actors' lives, he describes stereotypes that apply to these characters but insults them because they see themselves as more than their roles on stage. The most direct parallel between *Noises Off* and *Royal Family* occurred, for me, when one character describes understudies as an "offstage noise," making me think of the chaos backstage in *Noises Off* and the difficulty of making a living in the theatre. In both plays, characters' personalities seem to



to resume her acting career because she has the means to leave her baby with a nanny. Julie's love interest, Gil, wants to take her away from stage life to his estate in South America, a possibility that she alternately embraces and rejects. Her final action, requesting to see Oscar's newest script, indicates that the stage life may well win over stability and domesticity. Part of the issue for these women is, I think, the lack of other career options available to them. They must either accept idle society life or pursue their careers on the stage, since that is a venue to which

rasa idea by showing the layers of performance and the accretion of meaning as actors continue to play a part and their personal lives change.

I enjoyed the dialogue and repartee of *Boston Marriage*. David Mamet has mastered the art of the unexpected endings, and his punch lines are fantastic. In the midst of very high diction, the times that the characters swear stand out as humorous but also significant turning points. From my past experience with Mamet in *American Buffalo*, I've seen that his use of language, and particularly vulgar lan

and lack of understanding. The high diction is also meant to be euphemistic, which is why we think it's so funny when Catherine, the maid, understands Claire's intent to seduce the young girl. The characters are a vehicle for the type of words that Mamet wants to use. He chooses upper class women from the turn of the century because they have the leisure time and intellect to be verbose and virtuosic in speech. Their conversations are rapid -fire exchanges of intellect that expose physical longings as well.

Catherine's character is a visual relief from the other two. Her plain maid's uniform corresponds to her plain spoken character and to the lack of frills and accessories she projects about herself. She knows her identity and hangs on to her family heritage, constantly trying to interject stories about her "Gran." Her perceptiveness comes out when she refers to Claire's hat by saying she wouldn't wear it to bed. She also enables the seance to take place by providing information from her Dad's stay in Bengal . While Anna and Claire have lavish appearances and imposing figures, Catherine's neutral colored clothing and the fact the

traditionally heterosexual, also impacts her because of the desire to be with her boyfriend and the abuse that she takes from her employer in order to stay.

These characters, although powerful in themselves, are also tools Mamet uses to convey his ideas. Mamet particularly draws on biblical allusions in an iconoclastic way in order to challenge cultural expectations for these women and question the efficacy of religion to provide peace or answers to their dilemmas. Mamet trivializes the religious by juxtaposing passages of scripture with references like the "sin of writing in purple ink. Claire's final promise that she will "never leave" Anna sounds like Christ's vow that he will "never leave us nor forsake us, even to the end of the age." I don't think that Mamet means this play to be a diatribe against Christianity, but I do believe he challenges the institution and mindset of religion as a way of concealment and a defense mechanism. Just as Anna wants to use a peephole to view Claire's seduction scene and participate vicariously, the literal wall of the house parallels the metaphysical wall of religion that shields characters from reality. Religious references in the play, though pervasive, don't show a system of belief but act as a literary vehicle for the characters' conversations. Anna's letter

showed a realistic sense of the gore in the play. The models of the cats and the blood dripping from the brain showed that the play's material world would be difficult to handle. The verisimilitude of the dismembered bodies also made me uncomfortable because I found it difficult to distance myself from the play and realize that the bodies were mannequins and not real people. Even the shooting of Padraic was shocking because of the amount of blood spattered. Despite the fact that the guns didn't make their explosive noise at that moment, the spray of blood was surprising and unexpected.

The most difficult aspect of the play for me is the humor. We as the audience rightly find many parts of this play funny, but the grotesque and the macabre are also present. The use of humor in the play is a way to deal with the horror of the situation. The contrast between the humor and the horror is what makes the play so powerful. The use of humor is a way to deal with the horror of the situation. The contrast between the humor and the horror is what makes the play so powerful.

in *Boston Marriage*. Still, I wonder if this play is meant to revoke or reinforce previously learned notions of Ireland. The characters seem bitter and unhappy, fighting for their cause but just as often with each other, losing in the end because of two cats. By the end of the play, only three

people and Wee Thomas remain alive- a telling end to the amount of violence portrayed here.

The characters' appearance and costuming reflect their personalities and behavior. Mairead's boyish haircut and clothing juxtaposed with the lipstick and dress portray an image of uncertain femininity and militant intentions. She obviously has sexual desires, as shown by her unabashed advances toward Padraic.

costuming of the rest of the play, but it did look like water streaming from the sea and could point to water as the source of life and death. Viola's transformation to Cesario worked physically because of the actress' natural haircut and square-shaped face. I don't think, however, that the repeated crying and attempts to cover it up help to develop her character; these episodes merely

and how much reparation needs to be made. I also like the Fool's role because of the clown shoes and suit, which give him a Charlie Chaplin hobo look that he accentuates through his mime-like mannerisms. His singing throughout the performance and skills on the guitar and banjo make me listen harder to hear the actual wisdom of what he says. The epilogue, in particular, has great orchestration that, on the practical side, allows Sir Andrew, Sir Toby and Maria to exit. The other musicians on stage and the orchestration are some of my favorite parts of this production because the combination of guitar and clarinet is beautiful and because the music shows how multidimensional and interdisciplinary Shakespeare's plays are.

*Alice* was a great visual production for me. Like *The Lion King*, it was colorful and lively. The spectacle of the brightly colored scenery and elaborate costumes made it visually attractive, but the plot itself lacked the depth of Carroll's book. I think that the stage machinery, and particularly the moving props and backdrops, worked smoothly to create a variety of captivating scenes. Dressing Alice in white made her an innocent little girl in a world of brilliant color. In fact, all of the characters in the "real" world wore white, and the initial boating scene

seemed airy and light but washed out in comparison to the vividness of the looking glass sequences. I appreciated the way in which Alice could climb through the looking glass and then the stage reversed perspectives to reveal what occurred in the other world. In terms of stage machinery and appearance, I liked the alternation between red, white, and green as ways to

express life or danger and the device of changing perspective to achieve the differences in size when Alice supposedly grows and shrinks.

The costumes reminded me at times of Dr. Seuss illustrations because they were fanciful and creative in their use of bright colors. The visual effects made the lack of cohesion between episodes bearable, but I don't know if children watching the show could grasp the



connection between these events. The dancing, although well-executed, required no special skill and didn't impress me in comparison to later musicals we saw like *Kiss Me Kate*. Musically, the songs reminded me of children's choir music that I've sung in the past. The leaps in interval and unexpected harmonies reveal innovative composition, but the songs weren't catchy in the showy musical sense. I was impressed with the



correctly. Her verbose speech at this entrance shows her excitement and nervousness that he has come.

Basanio also improves his chances by presenting the appearance of wealth, which he finances by means of

though Jessica resents her father's behavior. When she rejects her father's way of life to marry Lorenzo, she doesn't realize the extent to which her Judaism contributes to her identity and will be difficult to relinquish.

Shylock may gain sympathy because of the blatant prejudice against him, but his refusal to show mercy and willingness to kill Antonio also make him contemptible to the audience. His knife-sharpening and deliberate display of the scales to weigh the flesh, his obvious thirst for Antonio's blood, and the stabbing



prejudice, as we see in this play, seems to rise directly from hell. I think this play convicts Shylock and Porsche equally for their blindness, even though Porsche and Antonio seem to have the happy ending. Not all evil is as obvious as Shylock's scheme to trap Antonio, but sometimes the subtle vice is the hardest snare to break. *Merchant of Venice* continues to be challenging and intriguing because of the way Shakespeare makes our sympathies swing because of the characters' own conflicting natures; its genius is in denying us easy conclusions.

*Aladdin* was much more interactive and fun to attend than *Alice* because the genre of pantomime is so geared toward audience interaction. I liked having music playing as we entered the theatre and during the interval because it set the tone and maintained it through the play. The curtain, made of a quilt-like menageri of fabrics, caught my eye and corresponded to the colorful, overstated acting. One of the reasons pantomime works so well is its repetitive nature. The audience learns to take cues and respond in a certain way to those stimuli. Examples of this kind of classical conditioning include the eerie music and change of lighting when anyone mentions the temple of solitude. The audience learns to sing that tune and be ready for the glassy-eyed expressions of the actors at that point. The audience also learns to respond to questions that characters ask, and there the actors reinforce that response by improvising from it. Of all the characters, Abanazar responded the most humorously to the audience's responses, telling us to save our booing for the second act and trying to trick us into cheering for him. He and Wishy Washy both manipulate the audience to achieve sympathy or revulsion.

The cross-gender casting, which is characteristic of pantomime, seemed both ridiculous and funny.

and tight. Although she was small enough and looked pubescent enough to play the part, she still didn't convince me as a boy. Maybe she wasn't supposed to be convincing, since the genre itself is so exaggerated and contrived.

The singing was decent but not overly impressive; *Alice* had a much higher voice quality and level of musical difficulty. Compared to the complex harmony and rhythm in *Alice*, the songs in *Aladdin* seemed even more like the stereotypical pop songs they imitated with no vocal range or skill in harmony required. As a musical production, I valued *Alice* much more highly. For its participatory element and puns on pop culture, however, *Aladdin* contained more levels of meaning that the adults of the audience immediately grasped. Some of the jokes were obviously not children's humor, like characters making reference to 80s pop songs and white rappers that young children wouldn't recognize. On the level of plot, I was a bit surprised at the sexual threat I perceived when Abanazar pursued the Princess, but I'm equally sure the young audience would never grasp the possible implications of his pursuit.

The children in the audience, and all of us as well, loved responding to the characters. Their conscious references to themselves, such as the repeated introductions in the middle of the play and their improvisation off the audience responses, distinguished this theatre experience from the "adult" plays that we saw. The humor was overtly slapstick, such as the chase scene through the marketplace, the "Twanky special," and the fight scene in which Aladdin becomes the accidental target. Aladdin's dream sequence in the cave also uses the stage well by having the actor spiral in and out of the dream so that the audience knows what is real and imaginary. Having the Genie be a long haired Scot draws on stereotypes that all Brits recognize concerning the barbaric, uncivilized behavior of their northern neighbors. The woman playing the camel also did an admiral job of mimicking, in a cartoonish way, a camel's mannerisms, even while

serving as a talking sidekick to Abanazar. Compared to *Alice*, this production engaged the audience more and created a more pervasive atmosphere of mystery and adventure.

*Hamlet* used the Barbican stage much more effectively than *Twelfth Night*. The spotlights scanning the audience in the beginning immediately made us more active participants in the production, rather than being removed from the action on stage. The ghost's emergence onto the stage ramp also brought the slay closer to a theatre in the round experience and allowed



signals that they approve of anything that maintains their status, regardless of the personal results for those involved.

Ophelia seems like an innocent child, manipulated and confused by her brother, father, and Hamlet. Her pastel-colored clothing corresponds to the blue and purple lighting to make her seem much younger than the corporate courtiers. Her part, to try to catch Hamlet in his madness, becomes the scene of her own undoing. Hamlet's erratic behavior, like putting his hand up her skirt and simultaneously denying his affection, confirm to Claudius and Polonius that Hamlet is unstable, but it also dooms Ophelia to a mental and emotional breakdown. Ophelia's insanity scene, wandering the stage in a light-colored shirt, possibly nude underneath, showed the extent to which she had been wronged. I think her white shirt confirms her innocence and the fact that she had been put in peril by those who were supposed to care for her most. Ophelia lacks the strength and wisdom to manage her own welfare, and her father's mishandling of it contributes to her death.

I loved the way that "The Murder of Gonzago" used the camera and screen to record Gertrude and Claudius' reactions, thereby adding another dimension to the spectator element since the audience and Hamlet watch Gertrude and Claudius watching the players. The pantomime part of the embedded play, with music and choreographed movement, made that scene more exciting and tense in its scheme to catch Claudius. The harsh black and white projection and close up shots of the faces revealed every wrinkle and defect; Gertrude and Claudius couldn't mask their feelings or reactions from our scrutiny. This type of direct lighting occurs at several points in the play, giving a sudden illumination of the whole stage and changing the shades of gray



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*Twelfth Night* because both used guitars and other instruments that would have been available in the setting of the play. The mellow-sounding court music in *Twelfth Night* may differ from the 50s sound of the skiffle band, but both showed the importance of music in expressing characters and cultural transition. The clever way that the music in *Meat and Two Veg*

satisfaction that Elyot and Amanda get from their fights. As a kind of foreplay, their fighting seems to strengthen the bond between them even as it threatens to tear them apart. As passionate people whose words often come out spontaneously and in the height of emotion, the content of what they're saying is often caustic and destructive, even though their underlying feeling is one of care or concern. Their mutual jealousy about the other's relationships during their time apart shows that they value each other over their other lovers and probably use other people as temporary replacements for the person they really miss. Even their new marriages serve as a way to mask loneliness rather than consummate a new-found love. Each of them is able to respond to his or her new spouse in an appropriate and even affectionate way, but their real personalities

notwithstanding the amount of friction between them. Their dancing sequence visually represents the amount of parallel action they have throughout the play. They respond similarly to their initial predicament and when Victor and Sybil arrive. Their common tendency to exaggerate and to try smooth awkward situations with witty remarks shows the way their minds function alike. Victor and Sybil simply wouldn't be satisfying for them after a short period of time; sheer boredom would drive the couples apart.

In regard to the morality of the play, I think the validity of Elyot and Amanda's relationship depends on the hierarchy of personal, social, and religious contracts. Having taken the step to legally marry their new spouses in the sight of God and other people, Elyot and Amanda have no legal right to pursue each other. Their obvious love for one another, however, and the probability that they would have been miserable with their new spouses,,and quite possibly made the spouses equally miserable, speaks to the "rightness" of discontinuing their present marriages before they get and r.3( d( s)12)-1(e)-113( )-11.3In anec3, 0.4( g11.3In run, V6.2(a)-7.3(

singing shows the way in which they can support and complement each other, while also being in a competitive relationship. They seem to attract and repel simultaneously, but both emotions stem from an underlying need and affection. Love and hate, in their relationship, are really extremes of the same emotion.

I also liked the perspective and color of the set. The way that both sets opened out at the front shows the explosive and trumpeting nature of their exchanges. I think the set also points to the limited nature of our own viewpoint, the way in which we see from one perspective and find it difficult to change our opinions. The predominant white of the hotel set made me think of the sterility of the new marriages, or conversely, the clean start and lack of hurtful history in them. The parallel sides of the hotel also represent the parallel relationships that Elyot and Amanda have begun with people they don't really love. The parallel sequence of events between the two couples after Elyot and Amanda meet also builds toward a conflict between them later. We know from the conflict scenes at the beginning that Elyot and Amanda argue at a much higher intellectual level and feed off each other in their arguing. Although their equality causes their conflicts to escalate, it also draws them closer together.

*Art, Boston Marriage, and*

discussions of deconstruction because it's post-structuralist, not like the new critical \*arc who sees binary oppositions as fixed and immovable. The white painting, for Serge, may be a subversion of classic painting values, a system-as Yvan calls it-that works against the system. Marc can't recognize the motivation behind the Antrios because it doesn't correspond to the aesthetics of the "well-wrought urn" mentality. He wants a painting with frame and picture in detail and unity, with content he can easily analyze and about which he reach conclusions.

Yvan, on the other hand, sees paintings for their affective value, whether they can move him, not whether they show talent. His daub, painted by his father, evokes memories and emotional response rather than issues of organic unity and paradox. Yvan doesn't want to see his painting on a philosophical plane; he wants to view it as an avenue to his own past and family.

*Boston Marriage*



disregard for the sailors in the play in the unsafe sailing conditions serves as an example of mistreating workers, similar to factory laborers and even slaves. As the head of the shipping business points out, every occupation has hazards, but mostly because the adequate precautions weren't taken to prevent the tragedies. I felt like the tragedy presented in this play extends even to events like the Holocaust, in which the world's action came too late to prevent the deaths of millions of people.

The singing, live instruments, and dancing brought me into the village and m .2841 TDc284 TDc284 Tes hwrt f(g)7.7e

authentically part of the community and less like the artificiality of a musical with a pit orchestra.

In the face of such overwhelming sadness, the choice of the Good Hope for the boat and title seems ironic and almost cruel. Without prior knowledge of the play, the audience may expect a positive outcome rather than the tragic one that occurs. It strikes me, however, that these characters must cling to a hope that makes everyday life possible and sustains them through difficult times. As Anne Tyler writes, we must "keep on keeping on." In her novels, the strings of love and need and worry that bind people together and the web of relationships that bind people together are both intensely painful and essential in giving everyday

grief of those around her, as they quickly recognize. What seems like fantastic stories to her are people who have lived and died, leaving gaping holes in the lives of their family members. Jo's hysteria in this scene is so genuine, and her nudity so well portrayed as a symbol of her duress and vulnerability, that I felt the gall rising in my own throat and the racing of my pulse as I thought about what angst she endures. Like the storm scene in *King Lear* in which Lear rages on the heath, this storm represents the physical destruction of their loved ones and the emotional, psychological turmoil that they continually face in coping with so much grief. -

After the news of the ship's sinking, Kitty's reaction showed the incapacitating shock of losing family members. I couldn't distance myself from the stage because the situation and the grief cycle are so universal and inescapable. The anger and sadness onstage shows how we "speak what we feel/ not what we

showed the regional costumes of all th provinces and also has a picture of the monkey king over the top of

base of the pyramid and leads upward through emotional, intellectual, and spiritual to reach self-actualization.

I enjoyed seeing parallels between Buddhism and Christianity in this story. The creation ex nihilo and the concept of Buddha holding the universe like a grain of sand corresponds to the Christian concept of a sovereign, omnipotent God who created all and rules all. I also conceive of my life as a journey in which everyday struggles are the heart of the substance rather than the inconsequential means to an end. The

the throne. Pandulf knows how to appeal to the Dauphin's pride and sense of masculinity in pursuing the English crown. By urging the claim of his newly made marriage ties and the havoc created by the struggle between John and Arthur, Pandulf pushes the Dauphin toward war and hopes that England will reconcile with Rome to avoid the conflict. Pandulf's equal willingness to reinstate England at the expense of France's suit reveals the plan that Pandulf harbored from the beginning. During

Spooner's lines about experiencing the same situations before-the locked room, the call from a distance, the door ajar. Like the situation in *Ros and Guil*, Spooner's fuzzy, incomplete memory leaves us with the disconcerting sense that we are emerging from a dream. Hirsts's dream of drowning, in fact, reminds me both of the physical disappearance in *The Good Hope*, and the metaphysical disappearance of men in *Art*. Wallace Stevens writes of "the nothing" that makes up the world, a white snowman in a white world, birds flying in sinking undulations toward the sunset. His somewhat pessimistic view of the world seems to align with the existentialist notion that we appear and disappear. Like the series of moments in *No Man's Land*, life occurs as a sequence of events that is erased almost as soon as it is completed. This past semester, I spent a long time thinking about Wallace Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar," and it strikes me that this poem applies as aptly to drama as it does to the practice of poetry. The guitarist tries to represent "things as they are" on the blue guitar, but he knows that he can't complete the task. Like a "metaphysician in the dark," he twangs on the guitar trying to make sense of the world around him and reconcile the reality of what he sees with his imagination. Pinter's plays, and especially the instance of turning out the lights, show his characters trying to understand their lives and their own creative impulses.

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*No Man's Land* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* seem connected by the thread of alienation and illusion. In *No Man's Land*, the sense of loss and disorientation, of being alone in an icy place, corresponds to the discomfort and removal Maggie feels as the character who knows the truth and can't make others understand it. In *No Man's Land*, the lack of memory, the disjointed communication between characters, and the voyeuristic tendency of Spooner become personified in the family interactions between Brick and Maggie, between Brick and Big Daddy, and between Big Daddy and Big Mama. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* contextualizes the difficulty of





mendacity that leads all the way back to himself. People have so many layers of protection that must be peeled back in order to share the raw vulnerability at the core. Brick's lack of sexual intimacy with Maggie is as much a reflection of her adultery as it is with his self-disgust. It's obvious that she loves him desperately, and perhaps her jealousy of his friendship with Skipper prompted the affair in the first place. Sexual intimacy, of course, is the physical representation of the emotional intimacy that it should accompany. Brick and Maggie have neither as the play opens; they are sleeping in separate beds and don't share any authentic communication. The most encouraging aspect of the play is the willingness to endorse Maggie's pregnancy and concede that it could become a reality. Brick's confession to his father and his vulnerability to admit he needs rehab attest to progress in breaking down the barriers that separate these people.

If *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* questions the definition and characteristics of masculinity, then I think *Top Girls* asks what constitutes femininity. The opening act of *Top Girls*, in which women of the past share their experiences, illustrate how each of them defines womanhood and the behavior that must accompany being a woman. For Griselda, femininity means accepting her husband's choice and obeying his will regardless of its consequences. Only by agreeing to give up her children and her husband does she gain the entire trust of her husband and her children. Her husband, her "lord," makes all the decisions about her life and fate. We remember Griselda for her patience and her willingness to obey; for her, the duties of being an obedient wife supercede everything else. For the geisha, her greatest sense of femininity comes from fulfilling her years of training by serving the emperor. Like Griselda, her children are taken from her, but she never has them returned. Her life depends on whether she stays in the emperor's favor, and when she falls out of it she becomes a Buddhist nun. Pope Joan denies the cultural notions of femininity and takes on masculine form to attain schooling and status within the church. Her

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masculine form allows her to become a renowned scholar and leader, and she might never have been discovered except for her baby. Despite her masculine exterior, she retains her female sexuality and uses her chamberlains to fulfill it. Lady Isabella pushes cultural boundaries through her extensive travelling, but her speeches focus on retaining virtue even in her varied circumstances. Her sense of propriety prevents her from staying with Jim Nugent, and her lines convey a strong sense of duty toward the Church and toward her status as a lady. Dull Gret takes on the warrior's role, denying notions about female strength to lead a band of women against Satan. Her dirty appearance and silence distinguish her from her dinner companions, but her feats of battle do garner respect. Marlene also negotiates a difficult world and forges new paths for women. As a highly motivated career woman, her first duty is really to herself-or at least, she has arranged her life that way. She has given up Angie and had two abortions to prevent hurting her career, and she refuses to marry a man who expects her to be domestic. Her notions of the feminine have to do with beauty and power, attaining status and proving herself capable in a man's world. Her office resembles a literal "no man's land" because it's so female-dominated and charged with the goals of advancing women. The double casting of characters shows how problems in defining the woman's role have carried through from time past to time present. Wynn, or patient Griselda, claims independence by having an affair with a married man, but she agrees to hide in the car so that no one else will know. The other office worker has different men on different nights but her number of conquests doesn't bring her any closer to stability. Is stability a virtue for these top girls? The job candidates also depict women who have problems advancing in their workplaces: Pope Jean comes out as a woman who acts masculine to prove her competency; the secretary wants a management position but plans to get married; the black woman lies about her qualifications to get a job she isn't prepared to do. Joyce displays an

entirely different notion of femininity devoid of glamour and high on self-sufficiency. She sees no need for a man in her life and likes the idea of getting along alone.

Marlene's secrets, Angie and her two abortions, attest to the problems that sexuality poses for women trying to be top girls. Even though Marlene and her co-workers try to accentuate their physical attributes, they want to keep their sexuality as free from consequences as possible. They have many affairs that aren't serious, but won't commit to any one person.

This play makes me feel torn between the values of having a family and a committed marriage and the desire to pursue my career as far as I can. I don't want to become a permanently unattached woman because of my career aspirations, but I don't want to give up my goals to have children. I've watched people succeed and fail at maintaining a balance between the tough, goal-driven top girl attitude and the need for stable, nurturing relationships. I think femininity has to include a mix of strength and gentleness, assertiveness and submissiveness,

concern for family and career goals.

The strained communication between Joyce and Marlene also brings to mind, the relationship between Brick and Big Daddy. When Marlene goes to visit Joyce, we learn that they have barely spoken in years and don't even know the major events of each other's lives, like Joyce's husband leaving. The major difference between their conversation and Brick's is the speed with which they begin to talk honestly about themselves and their lives. Their level of vulnerability takes Brick and his father much longer to reach and is harder to maintain. When Marlene cries, she recognizes it as a good sign and a therapeutic event; Brick's tears seem more of an embarrassment to him and a momentary admission of weakness. Brick and Marlene deal with pain differently-Brick by drinking and Marlene by working harder, but both of them are struggling to reconcile the lives they have with the lives they want.



and satirizes that genre by placing these artists inside of a situation in which their art seems pointless. They perform for audiences who don't understand a Word of their performance, and they fight with mysterious enemies. They are completely unengaged with the native culture and live outside of the social norm because of their homosexuality. Living as fringe on the edge of the British Empire, they embody the militaristic "no man's land" because of their obscure mission and sexual identities. While *No Man's Land* had an obvious surrealism, *Privates on Parade* seemed so ridiculous at times that it could also be surreal. The cross-dressing, the enigmatic Asian men, the oblivillivliafie0

shot off also appears nude earlier in the play, which can be seen as virility that never has a chance to mature and produce offspring. The man with the prickly heat who runs into the rain nude later faces his fiancée choosing mother man, so his nudity seems a symbol of his cuckoldry. Terry, who never appears fully nude, as a flamboyant and obvious sexuality, but ironically only he retains a genuine sense of loyalty to Sylvia. While Steven apparently returns to his original girlfriend and the other two return defeated, only Terry, who has no interest in women, proves the depth of his friendship by marrying Sylvia.

In *Rita Sue and Bob Too*, the sexuality points to the degeneration of families within this dying town. Bob's willingness to seduce two teenage girls and to have sex with each of them in front of the other girl, and - what's even more astonishing to me - their lack of stigma and inhibition about it shows, perhaps, what the thirty years since the time of *Privates on Parade* has done to British culture. The sex scenes in this play are deliberately grotesque, as unattractive and degrading as possible, played in a comical way because they're so horrifying. Like *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, this play presents awful situations in a humorous way so that the audience can handle the content. I'm glad that *Rita Sue* shared billing with *A State Affair* because it drew the attention away from sexuality and dysfunctional homes to the arena of wider social problems. While *Rita Sue* was a depressing story without much chance for redemption, at least in *A State Affair* we can see the attempt at rehabilitation and some faint possibility of improvement. *A State Affair* was more openly didactic and perhaps had less craft as a play than other plays we saw, but it was an eye-opening social commentary. My upbringing, in a county with a high level of poverty, illiteracy, and domestic violence has made me aware of these problems before. Seeing these issues enacted so vividly reminds me of the huge social inequities present in both Britain and the United States and the difficulty of making any permanent changes for the better.

Interestingly, *Privates on Parade* and *A State Affair* had very different depictions of Christianity. In *Privates*, Christianity was part of the imperialist mindset, an institution trying to convert "heathens" and impose Christianity as an agent of Western culture. The degrading attitude toward the two Asian men, seen in the different names they're called, the constant commands given then, and the fake Chinese accent used to speak to them, places them in the inferior cultural position. The Major's attitudes, while well-intentioned, deny the integrity of any culture but his own and display an assimilation mentality of trying to create a uniform world. In *A State Affair*, the woman who runs the halfway house espouses Christian principles but also meets a social need in her own culture. The portrayal of her character doesn't seem propagandistic or derisive but simply declarative. Since this play draws on accounts given by real people, I'm inclined to see this woman as a good example of the "keep on keeping on" mentality. To me, Christianity doesn't appear as a cultural institution or a weapon in this play, but as the genuine belief of one person trying to make a difference in her community. *Faith Healer* also engaged faith on the level of miraculous powers in a fallible person and the use of those powers both to heal people and to make money. By hearing the story from three distinct viewpoints, we piece together a nomadic existence that had some moments of profound joy and many of disillusionment. We see that Francis and Grace had different perspectives about the miracles despite the fact that they loved each other. Grace's background in law and her family's wealth antagonize Frank because he can't explain with logic or rhetoric where his powers come from or even where their next meal will materialize. Grace's devotion to Frank makes her willing to forget even his most painful mistakes, like being absent at the birth of his child, if we can believe Teddy's version of the story. Frank believes that her lawyer's mindset and rationality scoffs at his power, and so the two often quarrel and hurl insults at each other.





to manipulate people into becoming part of a movement, but it does leave room at the end for Grace move toward a genuine faith of her own. *Faith Healer* also focuses on the immediate family of the healer Frank and his relationship with his wife and child. In Frank's monologue, we learn of supposed affairs and acts of disrespect that he has committed, about the difficulty of travelling from place to place with barely the means to survive. Both Frank and the preacher in *Saving Grace* have a power that other people want to experience, but neither of them knows how to balance that power with his personal life and family relationships. The ending of *Faith Healer* is a combination of the tragic and the comic because of Grace's suicide and Frank's account of his own violent but strangely peaceful end. We also

The issue of language that *My Fair Lady* presents reminds me, in some ways, of Spooner's line in *No Man's Land* that the English language is all we have left. In *My Fair Lady*, language serves as a class divider that helps to keep people in their "appropriate" social position. As Higgins learns, correct pronunciation must accompany correct grammar and etiquette in order for Eliza to gain entrance to high society. Once she has made the transition, however, she can no longer return to her former life; if the lower class has a glass ceiling, then the upper class, to some extent, has a glass floor. Eliza's newly acquired language skill helps to illustrate how hard it is to move between classes; in fact, when her father becomes wealthy, he suddenly has to conform to the "respectable" rules of middle class morality, which he abhors. In *No Man's Land*, I think that language serves as a vital means of expression that allows people to communicate their fears and the uncertainty of the world around them. Spooner and Hirst spin tales about their school days, not

them to become supportive wives with normal schedules. For both women, the stage life seems to have a stronger draw than their outside relationships, since Kate returns at the end and Julie asks to see Oscar's latest script. The implication in both is that the adrenaline and excitement of stage life, not to mention Kate's relationship with her co-star, overrule the urge to settle down and become traditional wives. All three of these plays *Noises Off*, *Kiss Me Kate*, and *Royal Family*-compare performance onstage with "scenes" offstage. In all three, I think we get a sense of way people perform constantly to manipulate situations to our liking. Having seen twenty-five plays in two weeks, I realize, more than ever, that plays always reflect dilemmas and aspects of human nature that we can apply to ourselves somehow. Although we may not have faced the scenarios we see or find a character with our exact personality, still I think we love theatre because it mirrors us. This elementary observation may not be the most profound, but I think it brings me back to the place I started-as a theatre lover who appreciates each play we saw and looks forward to many more!