THEATRE IN ENGLAND 2012-13
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER
Mara Ahmed

The Master and Margarita
Barbican Theatre
12/28/12

Based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, this adaptation by Simon McBurney is as inventive and surprising as the book's storyline. Satan disguised as Professor Woland visits Stalinist Russia in the 1930s. He and his violent retinue use their black magic and death prophesies to dispose of people and take over their apartments; most villainy and betrayal in the play is in fact motivated by the acquisition of apartment space. Bulgakov is satirizing the restriction of private space in Stalin's Russia but buildings are also a metaphor for the structure of society as a whole. Rooms are demarcated by light beams, in the constantly changing set design, in order to emphasize relative boundaries and limits.

The second part of the play focuses on Margarita and her lover, a writer who has just finished a novel about the complex relationship between Pontius Pilate (the Roman procurator of Judaea) and Yeshua ha-Nostri (Jesus, a wandering philosopher). Margarita calls him the Master on account of his brilliant literary chef d'oeuvre. She is devoted to him. However, the Master's novel is ridiculed by the Soviet literati and after being denounced by a neighbor, he is taken into custody and ends up at a lunatic asylum. The parallels between his persecution and that of his principal character, Jesus, are brought into relief by constant shifts in time and place, between Moscow and Jerusalem. Margarita makes a bargain with Satan on the night of his Spring Ball, which she agrees to host, and succeeds in saving the Master. Towards the end of the play, cracks appear in a brick wall projected onto the backdrop. The apartment building finally crashes. Perhaps it's an illustration of Christ's vision: an egalitarian society without authority or tyrannical control, based on freedom and justice for all.

The Faust theme is unmistakable in Bulgakov's novel. However, the Master is less modeled on Faust and more on Bulgakov himself. It's the story of the consummate artist, whose yearning is intensely focused on his masterpiece. Many events in Bulgakov's own life are echoed in the life of the Master, especially the burning of his manuscripts. The Faust influence is most evident in the characterization of Woland, who is based on Mephistopheles.

Margarita is the embodiment of courage. Unlike Pontius Pilate who is moved by Jesus's message of goodness yet lacks the backbone to rescue him, Margarita will do anything for love, even ally herself with Satan. Both she and Jesus personify unconditional love and the fortitude to sacrifice everything for it. However, whereas Margarita is capable of heroic devotion as well as vindictive violence, Jesus exemplifies mercy and forgiveness.

The love story between the Master and Margarita parallels the struggle of art to save the artist's soul. The Master's manuscripts are burned at the time of his separation from Margarita. Once the book has been resurrected, through Margarita's bold

ingenuousness (and Woland's considerable help), the lovers reunite. Their destiny is finally secured by Jesus, who asks Woland to grant them eternal peace – perhaps peace for the Master to continue work on his book. This continued alliance between good and evil, seems to point to another kind of villainy (worse than Woland's depraved shenanigans), the villainy of the bureaucratic social order that destroys the artist's soul.

In the novel, Bulgakov's writing style changes with each geographical shift – the Moscow chapters are fast-paced, manic, almost farcical, whereas the Jerusalem chapters, from the Master's novel, are written in realistic prose. These variations can be felt in McBurney's staging. There is something terrifyingly lurid about the Moscow scenes, which include a fair share of slapstick and biting political satire. The Jerusalem scenes, which imagine the relatively short span of time between Jesus' meeting with Pontius Pilate and his crucifixion, are more deliberate and profoundly philosophical.

The play is an exploration of polarities: good/evil, beautiful/grotesque, love/hate, truth/fiction, innocence/guilt, courage/cowardice, forgiveness/revenge, nakedness/concealment, sanity and madness. What genius to highlight these extremes, theatrically, with audio-visual values such as light/dark, silence/noise and magic/reality (this last one with the creative use of videography and special effects).

These binary opposites are brought together literally in the conflation of the Master and Woland (who are both played by the same actor) and even more eloquently in the transformation of Satan into Jesus Christ towards the end of the play when Pontius Pilate is relieved of 2,000 years of insomnia and mental torture. Although these casting decisions seem to have been arbitrary, they embody an important message: everything contains its own antithesis.

The jarring juxtaposition of polar opposites, both in terms of themes and special effects, needed some quiet space to resolve into something cogent. That space came for me at the end of the play when the Master and Margarita are consigned to eternity in limbo. Neither heaven nor hell, this is finally a grey area where disjointed opposites can come together and blend into something less volatile. I wish there had been more such "pauses" throughout the play, where frenetic shifts could have coalesced into meaning and made our experience less exhausting. In other words, less polyphony and more counterpoint could have made this production a bit more balanced, if not melodious.

The idea of the particular being part of the whole is beautifully captured by seamless geographic transitions. At the beginning of the play, the stage is empty except for a row of chairs and a hospital bed. Everything is grey, severe, minimal. As the first scene begins to unfold, Google maps are used to orient us. These are projected behind the stage and all of a sudden we zoom into a park, in Moscow. It's a bit dizzying. The lack of anything ostensibly Russian or Middle Eastern, as we travel back and forth between different locations, also helps establish this universality. It is

interesting that the only two people with accents, in the entire production, are Woland (Satan) and Jesus Christ. Woland has a clipped, over-the-top German accent, while Jesus speaks with the rounded, warm modulation of Romance languages.

The play is full of mirror images – what you see depends entirely on your vantage point. This idea is highlighted by the use of camerawork and film projection. After Margarita makes a pact with the devil, she is asked to undress, rub a magic cream all over her body and jump out of a window. She leaps and lands on her back, on the floor. She begins to flail her arms, as if she's flying. She is being filmed live from the top of the stage. That film projection is splashed onto the back wall and superimposed on a background of moving buildings. We can see her simultaneously from two different angles. It's unreal. At one point, a man's head is removed. Only his head is lit, the rest of his body is in the dark. His head is also being filmed and projected into a glass box, as if it were a museum exhibit. But the wittiest mirror image of all is the digital projection of an audience which we are left to stare at and gauge. Is it us? Is it some other pre-recorded audience? The distinction between subject and object is blurred once again in a most personal and powerful way.

The play's conclusion is incredibly poetic and breathtaking. The souls of the two lovers rise up to a starry galaxy. The couple is lying on the floor, moving their bodies in unison. The rest of the cast lies sideways on the floor with chairs. They move the chairs around in an orchestrated tableau. Again, this scene is filmed from the top of the stage and projected on the back wall. It looks like the couple is riding a gigantic, celestial horse made of matchsticks. Slowly they disappear into infinity.

The devil himself is a magician, underscoring the subjectivity of reality, its illusory nature. I wrote this in a review of "The Illusion," a play by Tony Kushner, and it applies equally to McBurney's theatrical interpretation: "This illusion within an illusion, the artifice of theater mirrored by the deception of magic tricks, and the osmotic interplay between reality and madness, all add an evanescent, contradictory, elusive quality to the plot." How perfect for a book like The Master and Margarita. It's similar to what Julie Taymor did with Titus Andronicus: she added a sumptuous layer of audio-visual artistry on top of a literary masterstroke.

The Master and Margarita: The Reach Exceeds the Grasp by Joan Delaney: http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/emen018_delaney.pdf

Cast

David Annen, Thomas Arnold, Josie Daxter, Johannes Flaschberger, Tamzin Griffin, Amanda Hadingue, Richard Katz, Sinéad Matthews, Tim McMullan, Clive Mendus, Yasuyo Mochizuki, Ajay Naidu, Henry Pettigrew, Paul Rhys, Cesar Sarachu and Angus Wright

Creative

By Mikhail Bulgakov
Directed by Simon McBurney
Produced by Complicité
Set Es Devlin
Costume Christina Cunningham
Lighting Paul Anderson
Sound Gareth Fry
Video Finn Ross
3D Animation Luke Halls
Puppetry Blind Summit Theatre
Assistant Directors Sasha Milavic Davies, James Yeatman
Text by Simon McBurney, Edward Kemp and the company

…

The Magistrate
Olivier Theatre
12/29/12

This engaging Victorian farce was written by Arthur Wing Pinero in 1885. The magistrate in question is Aeneas Posket, a well-respected, honest man who recently married a widow. What he doesn't know is that his young wife Agatha, under pressure to be of "proposable" age, has lopped five years from her true age. She has

been forced to do the same with her son's real age, turning a lusty 19 year old who loves to smoke, drink port, gamble and frolic with young women, into a bizarrely precocious child of 14.

Agatha's white lies are about to be exposed by Colonel Lukyn, an old family friend who knew her when she was married to her first husband. In order to save the day Agatha, along with her sister Charlotte, visits the Colonel at his hotel. That same night Agatha's restless son convinces his straightlaced stepfather, Mr Posket, to accompany him on a night on the town. Coincidentally, they all end up at the same shady hotel where a police raid creates endless confusion – not only do they have to hide from the police but also from one another. After a series of humiliations, Posket is successful in escaping the police. He appears at his job the next day, battered and bruised, and in the impossible position of having to preside over his wife and her sister's arraignment. The Colonel, who has also been arrested, tries to dissuade him from prosecuting the ladies but Posket's principles trump his personal relationships, until he's saved by a legal loophole.

Posket, played by John Lithgow who endows the role with much warmth and earnestness, represents the best of traditional British society. He's upright and responsible, proper and diligent in the dispensation of his duties, but also polite and amiable – he's a true pillar of society. Most of his household staff is composed of petty criminals and social rejects he has saved, by providing them employment and another shot at a decent life. Over the course of the play, Posket's own fallibility and ensuing guilt transform his understanding of justice and respectability. He struggles

with the rigidity of his principles vs his natural kind-heartedness and eventually, compassion wins.

Agatha is played by Nancy Carroll. She is charming and strong-minded at the same time. Her fib is contextualized throughout the play. She understands the social constraints she has to work with as a woman and tries to make the most of it: “Men want us for our biology, not our history.” The end of the 19th century was a time of change in England. Not only had the Industrial Revolution altered the urban landscape and labor markets forever, but democratic ideas were beginning to congeal and science was challenging religious beliefs. The role of women was shifting, under the influence of these modern ideals.

Musical interludes are spread throughout the production. Dandies in full Victorian regalia entertain us with song and dance, adding much subtext to the action in the play. When they sing about “the mystery of the age,” they’re not only referring to Agatha’s age but also the socio-economic and cultural metamorphosis of the Victorian era. It’s a witty and colorful way of providing social commentary.

Joshua McGuire plays Cis as a jaunty, unruly manchild with a cupid-like mop of curly blond hair. The combination of his body language, which is playful, perky and decidedly meant to be adorable, and his hormonal penchant for adult pleasures is hilarious and creepy at the same time. It’s a hard feat to pull off and McGuire is brilliant. His 5 ft frame adds credibility to the amusing arc of his oddly bipolar identity.

Katrina Lindsay’s set design is spectacular. It looks like a pop-up book that folds and unfolds, with actors hiding in its nook and crannies and materializing as if by magic to perform song and dance numbers. Acts are cleverly titled as if they were chapters in a storybook. Set changes reflect the mental and emotional travails of the characters, e.g. when Posket is shaken out of his upright, orderly world, the entire set seems to melt and doors hang askew on crooked frames. Victorian aesthetics demanded that the eye be the most authoritative judge of truth. This important connection between the verbal and visual was apparent in Victorian books which were carefully illustrated to highlight and intensify the meaning of the text. The play’s staging is completely in line with these artistic conventions.

Both The Magistrate and Sauce for the Goose are farces written in late 19th century Europe, the first play being set in Victorian England and the second one in France during the Belle Epoque. It's interesting to compare the social sensibilities that are apparent in both plays. The British seem to be more class-conscious and more rigid in their ideas of right and wrong, including what constitutes acceptable sexual behavior. They seem to revere power and authority and are loyal to the hierarchies they dictate. The French are less concerned with class and more libertine in their approach to social norms. Authority figures take a backseat to artists and intellectuals. It's not without reason that the British admired Cecil Rhodes, while the French feted Emile Zola.

John Lithgow, Nancy Carroll and Tim Sheader talk about The Magistrate:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ny22gIOwDxw

Cast

Mr. Bullamy: Nicholas Blane
Captain Horace Vale: Nicholas Burns
Agatha: Nancy Carroll
Singing Dandy: Tamsin Carroll

Wyke: Alexander Cobb
Charlotte: Christina Cole
Colonel Lukyn: Jonathan Coy
Singing Dandy: Richard Freeman
Achille Blond: Don Gallagh
Singing Dandy: Amy Griffiths
Constable Harris: Joshua Lacey
Posket: John Lithgow
Isidore: Christopher Logan
Singing Dandy: Nicholas Lumley
Cis Farringdon: Joshua McGuire

Sergeant Lugg: Sean McKenzie
Singing Dandy: Joshua Manning
Beatie Tomlinson: Sarah Ovens
Inspector Messiter: Peter Polycarpou
Popham: Beverly Rudd
Mr. Wormington: Roger Sloman
Singing Dandy: Jez Unwin

Creative

Director: Timothy Sheader
Designer: Katrina Lindsay
Lighting Designer: James Farncombe
Lyrics: Richard Stilgoe
Music: Richard Sisson
Movement Director: Liam Steel
Sound Designer: Paul Arditti
Vocal Arranger: David Shrubsole

…

A Chorus of Disapproval
Harold Pinter Theatre
12/29/12

This Alan Ayckbourn play about an amateur operatic company's production of The Beggar's Opera is set in rural England in the 1980s. It's a play within a play, with a life-imitating-art storyline.

The Beggar's Opera was written in 1728 by John Gay. It lampooned fancy Italian opera, a symbol of cultural elitism in London society, by combining traditional opera music with popular ballads, folk tunes and church hymns and by focusing on themes of poverty, injustice and corruption. Gay's proletarian approach was quite radical for that time and opened the door to more political satire. The opera's main

character is Macheath, a highwayman – an unconventional hero motivated by love and passion but who becomes an inadvertent victim of society's widespread corruption.

Rob Brydon, as the amateur opera society's director Dafydd, anchors this production of the play, at the Harold Pinter Theatre. He is clearly Welsh, melancholy, pushy, full of himself, funny, perennially cardiganed, and deeply committed to his craft, perhaps as a way to evade the real world. His marriage to Hannah seems passionless but competently functional (he describes her as his Swiss-army wife). Later in the play, he evades her extra-marital affair with his usual, obsessive immersion in theatre work.

Ashley Jensen, who could easily be a glamorous stunner, plays the role of Hannah. It is to her credit then that she manages to bring a homely stillness to this role, a heartbreaking, understated, down to earth vulnerability. In between loads of laundry and taking care of her young twins, she's also involved with her husband's amateur opera. Falling in love is a reawakening for her, although she's ill prepared for the consequences.

Nigel Harman plays Guy, a recent widower who joins the opera society in the inconsequential role of Crook-Fingered Jack. He is timid, unassuming, naive and annoyingly passive. A series of accidents and his growing popularity with the company's cast, especially the ladies, ensure his upward climb to the ultimate role of Macheath. His increase in social (and thespian) currency is also driven by the rumor that he has insider information about a land deal. Although he never confirms this rumor, he goes with the flow as usual, and gets swept into a narrative, a reality, that he has no hand in writing.

The same indeterminate approach is mirrored in Guy's personal relationships. While he is still having an affair with Dafydd's wife, he gets involved with the flirtatious Fay, an unapologetic swinger. He's slow in catching her meaning though – he thinks she's discussing food rather than sex.

True to his indolent docility, he is incapable of breaking up with either woman. When Dafydd decides to share his marital woes with him (a backstage confession which is accidently broadcast to the entire company over the theater's sound system), Guy is finally overcome with guilt and ends his affair with Hannah. They break up during a rehearsal, in 18th century operatic arias. Although Guy shines in his flashy opera role, he ends up disappointing and being ostracized by his fellow thespians in real life.

I found Nigel Harman's performance uninspiring – so much so that it's impossible to imagine his social and sexual ascent. His submissive "nice guy" verges on indifference and all-pervading lifelessness. There is no character arc – no evolution, no transformation, no intrigue, no surprise. I find it hard to map this character onto the much more interesting Macheath. Carrying on with two women simultaneously does not seem to be a significant enough parallel. I have the same critique for A Chorus of Disapproval as a whole. It lacks the contradictions and energy of The Beggar's Opera, it has none of its radical social commentary, inventiveness or spunk.

Cast

Rob Brydon as Dafydd
Nigel Harman as Guy
Ashley Jensen as Hannah
Teresa Banham
Daisy Beaumont
Georgia Brown
Rob Compton
Matthew Cottle
Steven Edis

Creative

Written by Alan Ayckbourn
Directed by Trevor Nunn

…

Jack and the Beanstalk
Theatre Royal Stratford East
12/30/12

This was the first pantomime I had ever seen so I decided to familiarize myself with the genre, in order to have a point of reference. Pantomime (or panto) is a form of musical comedy descended from the commedia dell'arte tradition, in 16th century Italy. This family entertainment includes dance, music, slapstick comedy and cross-gender acting. Its storyline is based on a popular fairy tale and there is no fourth wall, which means immense audience participation, including frequent singalongs.

A quick google search revealed that there are, in fact, some well-established panto conventions and I decided to compare them to the Theatre Royal presentation.

In this production, the leading "boy" character is not played by a young woman; instead Jack is played by Jorell "MJ" Coiffic-Kamall, a sprightly young man who gives every sign of being a hip hop dancer.

The hero's mother, Mrs Trott, is played by a man in drag (Michael Bertenshaw), as tradition dictates. He has the most stage presence by far and some of the funniest lines – a lot of the double entendre and coarse humor typical of pantomime is supplied by this character.

The animal in the play, Marigold the cow, is not played by actors in costume. She ends up being a chunky puppet, with big bovine eyes, that each actor manipulates with ease.

Although there is traditional audience participation and singalongs, some of the music is quite contemporary – it is hip hop influenced and in places downright techno.

There is definite physical comedy, but no messy, circus-style slapstick, where food and water are thrown around.

Instead of usual references to nursery rhymes and other fairy tales, Jack is called Wacko Jacko by his mother – a term used by the media to describe Michael Jackson's eccentricities.

The ogre is a gargantuan puppet, a bespectacled chewbacca with stringy tattooed arms and forbiddingly long fingernails, while Mrs Ogre is replaced by a Jamaican housekeeper who is part of a lively Motown ensemble (including a tap-dancing hen and a harp diva). Some of these characters constitute the traditional panto Chorus.

Several changes were made to the original Jack and Beanstalk storyline, which is in keeping with panto conventions. There is the addition of Lucy, an amateur detective whose father has been posted to the local police station. Lucy is a normal, likeable girl, someone the kids can relate to easily, and she warms up the audience at the beginning of the play. Lucy's job is to investigate a series of robberies in Jack's neighborhood. Jack is turned into a more traditional hero – a victim of thievery rather than a thief himself. Instead Biz and Bos become the villains of the story, although their villainy is anything but clear-cut. They are forced to steal on behalf of the Ogre when they would much rather run a seaside B&B.

We hear a lot about Lucy's father but we never meet him during the course of the play. Jack's father figure is also missing. His only goal is to support his mother financially so they don't lose their home, a common concern during a time of recession, unemployment and home foreclosures, perhaps more so in the working class community where this theatre is located. East London is a gritty neighborhood where waves of immigrants have settled down for generations – Bangladeshis, Afro-Caribbeans, Turks, Kurds and Orthodox Jews. This diversity is reflected in the panto's cast, its music and some of the lyrics. The Motown ensemble, enslaved by the Ogre, sing about having a dream and wanting to be free. Maybe it's a reference to British ex-colonies from which East End residents might have migrated.

In short, even though some of the traditional, over-the-top panto elements were softened or modernized in this spin-off, it managed to live up to the genre. The addition of Dizzy, Jack's imaginary friend in the shape of a giant, psychedelic bunny was extremely inventive (might have been a reference to "Donnie Darko" who was also haunted by visions of a man in a bunny suit). At the conclusion of the play, Dizzie is replaced by Lucy. Jack has finally grown up and substituted his imaginary friend for a real, flesh and blood girlfriend.

Jack and the Beanstalk, Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London by Paul Taylor:
http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/jack-and-the-beanstalk-theatre-royal-stratford-east-london-8434038.html

Jack & The Beanstalk, Time Out London:
http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/jack-the-beanstalk-1

Cast

Dizzy: Vlach Ashton
Mrs Trott: Michael Bertenshaw
Jack: Jorell 'MJ' Coiffic-Kamall
Mrs Porridge: Susan Lawson Reynolds
Mr Fleece: Windson Liong
Harpo: Marcia Vanessa Richards (Allyson Ava-Brown)
Lucy: Gemma Salter
Boz: Jack Shalloo
Biz: Oliver Taheri
Henrietta: Shelley Williams
Additional supporting roles: Gabriel Akuwudike & Suhaiyla Hippolyte

Creative

Book and lyrics by Paul Sirett
Music and lyrics by Wayne Nunes & Perry Melius
Director: Dawn Reid
Designers: Jenny Tiramani & Harriet Barsby
Lighting Designer: Declan Randall
Musical Director: Ian MacGregor
Sound Designer: Theo Holloway
Choreographer: Jeanefer Jean-Charles
Fight Director: Bret Yount
Assistant Director: Ben Bennett
Dramaturg: Tanika Gupta

…

Privates on Parade
Noel Coward Theatre
12/31/12

Privates on Parade is a semi-autobiographical, musical comedy written by British playwright Peter Nichols. It is based on his military experience of serving in the British Army in Singapore in 1948. He was part of the Combined Forces Entertainment. Nichols has often described his time in the army as his university:

It was in Singapore in 1947 that my real education began. For the first time I read Lawrence, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Melville, Graham Greene and Bernard Shaw's political works, becoming a lifelong Leftie.

The play is based on real people, a coterie of misfits who learn to bond with one another and create an alternate world. The Malaysian Emergency at the end of WWII forms the story's backdrop. Here is some historical context.

In 1819 the British East India Company signed a treaty with Johor's ruler Sultan Hussein Shah to develop the southern part of Singapore as a British trading post. By 1824, the entire island was a British colony. The Japanese defeated the British in 1942 and occupied Singapore until their surrender in 1945. The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army was formed during the Japanese occupation. It was predominantly communist. After 1945, they had about 300 members in Singapore who were committed to ending imperial hegemony. They tried to destabilize British rule by bolstering civil unrest, especially through trade unions. They were supported by the Singaporean poor on account of their promise of labor reforms. They were also supported by the local middle class which felt politically suffocated under British rule. In 1947 the communists were successful in organizing 300 strikes involving more than 70,000 workers. However, by 1948 they had lost faith in legal means of ousting the British and they adopted a strategy of insurrection in Malaya and Singapore. This came to be known as the Malaysian Emergency.

The play is structured like a variety show with song and dance numbers, mixed together with tragicomic elements and good old colonial adventure. In many ways it's a tribute to 1940s' cinema.

It's a coming of age story and follows the induction of the virginal Private Steven Flowers into the gay and colorful world of the Song and Dance Unit South East Asia (SADUSEA) which is in the process of producing a concert party.

It is also a military farce. The flamboyant Acting Captain Terri Dennis who is the star of the show and plays a formidable drag queen (Simon Russell Beale) reminded me of Jack's mother, in the panto "Jack and the beanstalk." Like Mrs Trott, Dennis is a larger than life character – an oversized man in drag who delivers the funniest lines, replete with sexual innuendo, and holds the play together by being its emotional and physical axis. Although he does a mean impersonation of Marlene Dietrich, Carmen Miranda and Vera Lynn, he ends up being the real "man" of the play, in the classical sense of providing protection and rising up to the challenge to do his duty. To me it was also a negation of the hyper-masculinist concept of war and empire through the intervention of homosexuality.

However, the play is much more than backstage campness. It's also about politics, perhaps more so since it's a revival. It was produced originally by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the late 1970s. The production we saw was revised and rewritten in December 2001, when it was staged at the Donmar, under the direction Michael Grandage.

Racism, homophobia and sexism are on full display. I understand that the idea is to expose prejudice but it's uncomfortable, in fact impossible for many of us in the 21st century, to laugh at uncivil discourse even if it's presented as political farce.

The word half-caste was painful to hear with such careless frequency. Caste is a word that comes with a lot of baggage, especially in the Indian Subcontinent. It is associated with untouchability and notions of purity and pollution, with vile dehumanization and continued exploitation. It is inextricably linked to colonialism and ideas of white supremacy. The word "half-caste" was used by British ethnographers for census purposes, to classify people along ethnic and religious lines. Many blame this concretization of Indian identity in new and unnatural ways for laying the groundwork for the Partition of India in 1947. Later, the word half-caste seeped into mainstream culture. It implied a questionable, unclean gene pool and moral degradation, characteristics unfairly associated with Sylvia Morgan in the play.

Local Singaporeans are shown as faceless, voiceless servants. The condescending pidgin lingo used by the British (especially Sergeant-Major Reg Drummond) to communicate with them illustrates Rudyard Kipling characterization of the

colonized as “half devil, half child.” It’s interesting to contrast the easy-to-hate, monstrous Drummond with the pietistic Major Flack. Drummond is a cesspool of human vice and gets his comeuppance when he is murdered by the servants he treats with such contempt. Major Flack embodies many of the same reprehensible ideas as Drummond (he is equally racist, sexist and homophobic) but he speaks the language of patriotism and Christian evangelism. He personifies la mission civilisatrice. Although Flack is less obviously repugnant (he seems like a harmless, anachronistic ad for the British empire), he is in fact far more dangerous. He represents the dull machinery that supports racist massacres, the steady bureaucracy behind powerful systems of injustice.

The play questions the usual justifications for empire. Why were the British in Singapore? For some higher calling or to exploit the rubber industry? What about the human cost of war – its effects on young British men being fed to the war machine and on the lives of the colonized? The last scene of the play was most vocal in articulating these contradictions. As the flotsam and jetsam of British occupation finally leave Singapore, their inscrutable servants show up in snazzy business suits and reveal Singapore’s magnificent night skyline. So much for “what will happen when we leave?”

At Your Service: The Birth of Privates on Parade – As Simon Russell Beale drags up in the West End, the playwright Peter Nichols recalls serving in the military concert party: http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/your-service-birth-privates-parade

Cast

Simon Russell Beale as Captain Denis
Chris Chan
Sophiya Haque
Harry Hepple
Christopher Leveaux
Mark Lewis Jones
Darren Machin
John Marquez
Davina Perera
Adam Price
Brodie Ross
Sam Swainsbury
Joseph Timms
Sadao Ueda
Angus Wright

Creative

Director Michael Grandage

Set and Costume Designer Christopher Oram
Lighting Designer Paule Constable
Choreographer Ben Wright
Sound design by Nick Lidster and Terry Jardine
Musical Director, Jae Alexander

…

One Man, Two Guvnors
Haymarket Theatre
1/1/13

One Man, Two Guvnors is an Anglicised adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's classic Italian farce, One Man, Two Masters. Cleverly set in 1960s Brighton, where gang activity and hooliganism are in full force, the play introduces us to a litany of odd characters and sleazy lowlifes, all motivated by money, sex, and food.

After being fired from his skiffle band, Francis Henshall finds employment with Roscoe Crabbe, a small time gangster who's in Brighton to collect money from his fiancee's father. We find out later that Roscoe is in fact dead and is being impersonated by his twin sister Rachel.

In his insatiable quest for more food, Francis accepts a second job, this time with Stanley Stubbers, a vain dimwit who's hiding from the police. He is Rachel's boyfriend and is hoping to get together with her. He is also the murderer of her brother Roscoe.

Francis's goal in life is to keep his two bosses apart. However, his desire for food (and later for love) and his tendency to get easily confused make this plan difficult to execute.

One of the most hilarious scenes in the play is when Francis serves two dinners simultaneously, to both his bosses, with the help of the hotel manager and a superannuated waiter with shaking hands and an adjustable-speed pacemaker. The old waiter looks so enfeebled that it's uncomfortable to laugh at him at first. However, the slapstick gets so intense, as Francis shuttles back and forth between two doors and the waiter goes up and down the stairs spilling soup and ruining a series of fancy entrées (Francis never loses an opportunity to take a bite or two), that it's hard not to respond to the comedy. When the waiter falls backward down the stairs, it's a moment of absolute shock and panic. However, he reappears soon enough and that's when we appreciate the perfect timing of the choreography. He also runs amok and begins to spin out of control when his pacemaker gets too revved up. Who knew that the frail, unsteady waiter would turn out to be the most adept at physical comedy on account of his incredible athletic prowess?

The fourth wall is broken on a regular basis, as in most farces. Francis's confessional monologues directed at the audience, his demand for a sandwich, theatergoers asked to help with a trunk and finally an actress planted in the audience who becomes the guileless victim of a farcical sketch, all add to a sense of reality meets fantasy. This imbues the play with the energy of improv while containing it within a meticulously choreographed and well-rehearsed structure.

Francis's love-interest is a curvaceous bookeeper who makes some hilarious digs at Margaret Thatcher and her non-existent feminist credentials. Roscoe's supposed fiancee (a quintessential dumb blonde) and her eventual suitor (a grandiloquent young actor) are two other characters who stand out.

Set changes are accompanies by musical interludes provided by The Craze, an actual skiffle band.

Skiffle is a type of popular music with jazz, blues, folk, and roots influences, usually using homemade or improvised instruments. Originating as a term in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, it became popular again in the UK in the 1950s, where it was mainly associated with musician Lonnie Donegan and played a major part in beginning the careers of later eminent jazz, pop, blues, folk and rock musicians.[1]

It's charming.

[1] Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skiffle

Cast

Sam Alexander
Martin Barrass
Mensah Bediako
David Benson
Owen Brazendale
Gillian Budd
Ian Burfield
Rhona Croker
Amy Cudden
Derek Elroy
Rufus Hound
Max Hutchinson
Harry Kershaw
Tom Lorcan
Aimee Parkes
Kelly Price
Hugh Sachs
Claire Sundin

The Craze

Benjamin Brooker
Richard Coughlan
Tom Green
Bryan Smith
Josh Sneesby

Creative

Director: Nicholas Hytner
Physical Comedy Director: Cal McCrystal
Designer: Mark Thompson
Lighting Designer: Mark Henderson
Music and Songs: Grant Olding
Sound Designer: Paul Arditti
Associate Director / Choreographer: Adam Penford
Fight Director: Kate Waters
Associate Director: Lisa Blair

…

Hansel and Gretel

Cottesloe (National Theatre)
1/2/13

Katie Mitchell's Hansel and Gretel is a whimsical interpretation of the fairy tale, a lovely alternative to straightforward panto. The play's most delightfully poetic scene happens right at the beginning, when we meet the Grimm brothers as a vaudeville double act. They're in the middle of the Schwarzwald (possibly the same Black Forest where Hansel and Gretel encountered the witch), trying to capture tiny hummingbird-like stories zipping across the sky, with butterfly nets. What a brilliant metaphor for the Grimm brothers' lifelong work. They began collecting stories in the early 1800s, in Hesse, where they lived. They were fascinated by the oral transmission of stories from one generation to another and found that many times they contained the same bits of ancient myth and religious folklore. After "netting" stories for many years, they published them in two separate volumes in 1812, 1814, and later in 1857.

In the play, the brothers bottle their stories and then release them into a confabulator. To confabulate means to "fill in gaps in one's memory with fabrications that one believes to be facts." Again, this is an inventive way to give tangible form to the process of revising and editing that the real-life Grimm brothers must have gone through. In Katie Mitchell's imagination, the confabulator is a complex contraption that swallows flighty restless stories, processes them with steam-engine fussiness accompanied by gulping and gurgling sounds, and then delivers them in the form of finished books. The brothers know not to sit on the edge of the confabulator, yet they do, and down the rabbit hole they fall, so that they are now inside their own story. Perhaps it's a sign of things to come – of witches being shoved into their own ovens.

The play relies heavily on personification to give lively form to inanimate objects and animals. The witch's oven is a Russian count called Rotislav. His head and legs pop out of the oven and he's happy to do a Cossack dance whenever given an opportunity. The witch's sidekick is a bat named Stuart. We later find out that he too was put under a spell. In reality, he is an Eastern European ballet dancer.

Paul Clark provides the music to this playful production. Seated at a keyboard, he uses quirky add-ons to produce interesting sound effects. Lucy Kirkwood's script is sharp. Not only is it hilarious but it also rhymes and enhances the play's musicality. Vicki Mortimer's set design is as simple as a storybook, with actors erecting walls and creating forests by moving cutout pine trees around the stage. Three sets of wings enable the cast to charge across the stage, this way and that. It's reminiscent of silent comedies where actors chase one another, back and forth, across the entire width of the frame. It also reminded me of the chases in "One Man, Two Guvnors."

Although Hansel and Gretel is a children's story, like most fairy tales, it deals with many dark themes. Poverty and hunger are central to the storyline. It is the motivation behind the stepmother's abandonment of her children. Food and feasting

also drive the actions of the witch. Many believe that the story of Hansel and Gretel originated during the Great Famine (1315-1321) when crop failures led to massive deprivation, death and disease in Europe. Under these wretched conditions, cannibalism and infanticide were not unknown. The house made of sweets and Hansel's willful fattening have a different resonance for us, people living in the West in the 21st century. Large-scale production of genetically modified nutrient-free notional food, addiction to highly processed junk food, childhood obesity, tooth decay and heart disease are representative of obscene over-consumption in the West. How appropriate then that the witch's stolen jewels turn into an organic fruit and vegetable garden. Health is literally better than wealth.

Mitchell and Kirkwood are keen to highlight feminist elements in the story. Gretel's coming of age is sketched in detail – from terrified little girl to confident young woman who manages to keep her wits about and trick the witch. The stepmother is also redeemed rather than killed, though with the addition of a fox's tail. I was interested to learn, during the course of some basic research, that the story of Hansel and Gretel as we know it was repeatedly revised by the Grimm brothers. It started with evil natural parents but ended up with a reluctant father figure and a cruel stepmother. It started with a small old woman but ended up with a wicked witch who uses her candy-laden house to tempt and trap children. In short, the gradual witching of female characters, based on their duplicity and cruelty, was, to some extent, a contribution of the brothers.

Memory plays an important part in this fairy tale. It's not just the use of white pebbles and bread crumbs to refresh one's memory and find one's way back home, it's also about keeping the past alive in order to confront a dismal present and continue to hope for a happy ending.

Cast

Gretel: Ruby Bentall
The Witch: Kate Duchêne
Hansel: Dylan Kennedy
Father: Justin Salinger
Mother: Amit Shah

Creative

Director: Katie Mitchell
Designer: Vicki Mortimer
Lighting Designer: Jon Clark
Movement Director: Joseph Alford
Music: Paul Clark
Sound Designer: Gareth Fry
Puppet Designer: Toby Olié

…

Dance of Death
Trafalgar Studio 2
1/2/13

Ibsen was sane, progressive and formal. Strindberg was neurotic, reactionary and fragmented. [...] I see the two men as violent, necessary opposites, who between them laid the foundations of modern drama. From Ibsen we learned about the interaction of private and public, the beauty of structure and the idea of the dramatist as spokesperson: "What he lives through," Ibsen once said, "all of his countrymen live through together with him." From Strindberg we learned about sexual madness, fluidity of form and the power of dreams. Far more than Chekhov, whose symphonic realism is impossible not to admire but fatal to emulate, the two playwrights have shaped our drama…[1]

Ibsen was a realist, while Strindberg was a naturalist. In the preface to "Miss Julie," Strindberg set forth "the criteria for a naturalist play: the drama should be unvarnished and close to reality; there should be no fabricated plot, no division into acts, no painted scenery; and the characters should be multidimensional."[2]

Dance of Death is Strindberg's darkest depiction of marriage. It's a prelude to Edward Albee's "Whose afraid of Virginia Woolf" which explores similar themes of

marital toxicity articulated through savage verbal attacks and mind games that draw others into an infernal conjugal dance. In Ian Shuttleworth's words: "This three-handed 1900 portrait of a rancorous marriage is probably Strindberg's bitterest play (if it is not, I do not want to see the alternative candidate). Edgar is a bull, bellowing and charging at his targets; Alice is a serpent, insinuating her way around others to create stratagems. As they prepare grimly to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary, Alice's cousin Kurt arrives on the military garrison island to be sucked into their vortex."

Titas Halder's production is based on Conor McPherson's new version of the play, which is lighter and lacks some of the cruelty and terror that permeate the original text. Edgar (a military failure) is less of an evil tormentor and more of a grouch and buffoon, while Alice (a bitter ex-actress) is strengthened for an all-out battle of equals. Kurt seems to be a neutral bystander at first but we gradually discover his history with the couple. His severance of ties with them, for many years, seems to have had a calming effect on his life and temper. He has found some comfort in religion. However, once he's seduced into Edgar and Alice's world, all his defenses begin to crumble, his id takes over and he's consumed by imprudent impulses, including his sexual desire for Alice, which she is more than happy to stoke. To the couple, he is just a plaything – a weakling they can manipulate and forge into a weapon. They have a disturbing conversation, earlier in the play, about whether they want to invite a man or woman guest to dinner. They weigh the consequences of adding a catalyst to their matrimonial experiments. Our initial reaction is pity for these two people, trapped in a poisonous relationship. They know each other's vulnerabilities – which buttons to press to elicit a certain response and cause maximum harm. However, their conscious participation in this twisted waltz adds more complexity to the standard lore of "bad marriage." They relish the damaging games they play. Their co-dependence is founded on the excruciating ups and downs they suffer together and on the pain and pleasure they derive from them.

Edgar dies in the original play but in this interpretation, although his health is fading, he survives till the end. The couple rallies once again after their latest exhausting series of hellish confrontations involving Kurt. They know that they must return to the same tiresome pattern of abuse. Yet they are reconciled to that reality. They would be lost without it.

This was an intense play to experience in the confined space of Trafalgar Studio 2. The isolated military garrison island setting, a prison for this trapped couple, was in tune with the cramped space of the theatre. One felt part of the worn-out squalid set, privy to something incredibly ugly and private. Initially, we access this secluded, explosive, domestic bell jar through Kurt. But he soon loses his ability to negotiate that space and so do we.

---

[1] The troll in the drawing room by Michael Billington:
http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/feb/15/theatre.artsfeatures

[2] August Strindberg: "I'm a devilish fellow who can do many tricks":
http://sweden.se/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/August-Strindberg-high-resolution2.pdf

The Dance of Death, Trafalgar Studio 2, London by Ian Shuttleworth:
http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/84ce493e-4907-11e2-9225-00144feab49a.html#axzz2kAb1e7Q7

Cast

Kevin R McNally (Edgar)
Daniel Lapaine (Kurt)
Indira Varma (Alice)

Creative

August Strindberg (Author)
Donmar Warehouse (Producer)
Titas Halder (Director)
Conor McPherson (Translation)
Conor McPherson (Adaptation)
Richard Kent (Design)
Richard Howell (Lighting)
Alex Baranowski (Sound)
Alex Baranowski (Music)

…

The Merry Wives of Windsor
Royal Shakespeare Company
1/3/13

Here's an excellent introduction to "The Merry Wives of Windsor" by Caldwell Titcomb in the Harvard Crimson:

Many critics have been quick to look down their pedantic noses at Shakespeare's Merry Wives. They decry its lack of psychologic or philosophic depth; they bemoan its coarse language; they complain that almost none of it is in verse. Indeed the play is prose, but not prosaic. And the critics blame Shakespeare for not producing what he never had the slightest intention of producing. There is evidence that Queen Elizabeth I was so delighted with the character of Falstaff in the two parts of Henry IV that she commanded the writing of a play about Falstaff in love; and that, in compliance, Shakespeare wrote his Merry Wives in fourteen days, with nothing in mind but providing a joyous entertainment. Merry Wives is not tragedy, nor tragicomedy. It is not even comedy; it is farce pure and simple (also impure and not-so-simple). And it is a most significant item in the canon, through being the only play the Bard ever wrote entirely about the ordinary citizenry of his own day and locale. Actually, it is a transferral to the stage of the comic medieval French verse-tale genre known as the fabliau. The fabliaux and the play depict contemporary society and diction, delight in practical jokes, revel in adultery and cuckoldry, and indulge in frank and often obscene language.

In this RSC production, Shakespeare's fabliau (in which cuckoldry actually never happens) has been contemporized to what many describe as modern day Windsor-

upon-Avon. This is in keeping with the play's intention of being more current than it pretends to be. Set in the 1400s (the same period as Shakespeare's history plays), it is in fact very much rooted in Elizabethan England circa 1600.

Desmond Barrit plays a portly John Falstaff in a tweed suit that has seen better days. He personifies gluttony in all its manifestations: food, money, sex. His very fatness is a physical embodiment of excessive passion. Insatiability of desire and unwarranted conceit make him surprisingly naive. In order to solve his money problems he decides to seduce both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford simultaneously, sending them the exact same love letter. It doesn't take the women long to figure out his motives and they plan a series of humiliations in order to exact revenge. Inadvertently, their scheme lures Frank Ford (Alice's insanely jealous husband in an ill-fitting wig) into their web of trickery and he becomes an active part of what was supposed to be an entertaining ménage à trois.

I loved the pairing of the much more discreet (perhaps slightly older) Meg Page with the vivaciously sexy Alice Ford. Women are so often pitted against one another in film and literature, that it is truly refreshing to see this beautifully divergent pair stand up to men by tapping into their own intuition and artistry. Their solidarity is stellar and that's why they get the last laugh.

Two of the most hilarious moments in the play are Falstaff's "illicit" visits to Alice Ford's house. She has carefully orchestrated the scene of the seduction – low lights, floor cushions, slinky outfit, flirtatious mien and some obligatory Marvin Gaye. Completely oblivious to the absurdity of the situation, Falstaff is more than happy to

get into the groove and boogey wholeheartedly to “Let’s get it on.” When Frank Ford arrives on the scene, seething with suspicion, Falstaff is quickly relegated to the dirty and smelly laundry basket, which is later emptied into the Thames. But does that discourage Falstaff? No, he thinks the ladies are playing hard to get with him. His optimism is touching. He sees himself as the victim of bad timing rather than anything else.

After enacting a series of confused mêlées (which always end badly for Falstaff), the ladies take their husbands and families into their confidence. They plan one last collective deception. Falstaff is asked to dress up as Herne the Hunter and meet them in secret near the old oak tree. In English folklore, Herne is an equestrian ghost, with antlers on his head (wearing horns means to be cuckolded, a subject of immense hilarity for medieval and Elizabethan audiences). Herne is a forest keeper, a maintainer of boundaries. It's a particularly ironic role to assign Falstaff, whose licentious appetites erase all boundaries and encroach on other people's minds, bodies and capital.

Once he gets to the rendezvous, Falstaff is attacked by countless fairies and goblins (Ford and Page families and friends in disguise). However, he takes the joke quite well. He has acquired a certain measure of self-knowledge (and hopefully wisdom) through this long series of denigrations. Falstaff's resilience is so impressive because of his ability to project his own desires onto others and live in a world defined by his imagination rather than reality. Once he's trapped and confronted with the truth, a kind of intervention on the part of the town, perhaps he is finally able to mesh his truth with that of the world.

There is evidence to suggest that Merry Wives might have been a Halloween play, Halloween being the pagan holiday that preceded All Saints Day and marked the transition from autumn to winter. Meg and Alice decide to purge their families of Falstaff's corrupt influence at midnight, on October 31st, which is considered to be the "threshold between mischievous license and saintly conduct."[1]

There is another story in the play that's intertwined with that of Falstaff. It's the story of Anne Page (Meg's daughter) who is an object of desire for several young men. In spite of the many match-making schemes, all delegated to and executed by the efficient Mistress Quickly (who looks like a corporate personal assistant), in the end Anne is successful in marrying the man she loves and thereby defeating everyone's marriage ploys. The nocturnal chaos that surrounds Falstaff's final disgrace is essential to Anne's success. Something Falstaff can be legitimately proud of.

---

[1] Fairies, Fractious Women, and the old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture by Regina Buccola: http://www.amazon.com/Fairies-Fractions-Women-Faith-Apple-Zimmerman/dp/1575911035

The Merry Wives of Windsor by Caldwell Titcomb: http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1959/7/9/the-merry-wives-of-windsor-phoist/#

Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSDHetrzgXQ

Cast

Desmond Barrit – Sir John Falstaff
David Charles – Sir Hugh Evans
Anita Dobson – Mistress Quickly
Paapa Essiedu – Fenton
Calum Finlay – Abraham Slender
Alexandra Gilbreath – Alice Ford
Stephen Harper – Bardolph
Martin Hyder – George Page
Julia Innocenti – Neighbour
Ansu Kabia – Nim
Sylvestra Le Touzel – Meg Page
Carla Mendonca – Neighbour
Thomas Pickles – Peter Simple
John Ramm – Frank Ford
Naomi Sheldon – Ann Page
Ged Simmons – Pistol
Bart David Soroczynski – Dr Caius
David Sterne – Justice Shallow
Simeon Truby – Host of the Garter
Obioma Ugoala – Jack Rugby

Creative

Directed by Phillip Breen
Designed by Max Jones
Lighting by Tina McHugh
Music composed by Paddy Cunneen
Sound by Simon Baker
Movement by Ayse Tashkiran
Fights by Renny Krupinski
Assistant Director Edward Stambollouian

...

The Orphan of Zhao
Swan Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company
1/3/13

"Records of the Grand Historian" was written by the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian between 109 and 91 BC. It recounts Chinese history going all the way back to 2600 BC. The story of the Zhao family forms one of the chapters of this book. It was later adapted by dramatist Ji Junxiang in the 13th century, for his play "The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao." European translations of the play began in the 18th century and included, most notably, one by Voltaire in 1753. Voltaire appreciated the Confucian, moralistic dimension of the play but described it as "nothing but a

heap of incredible stories." He made the play more substantive and appealing to European audiences by weaving a love story through it. The original play was known to be extremely stark.

"The Orphan of Zhao" is often compared to "Hamlet" due to its preoccupation with revenge – a depraved father figure vs a conflicted, emotionally torn heir to a family fortune who must exact vengeance in order to do his duty. In this production Tu'an Gu, the evil father figure, riffs on the Danish Prince when he proclaims solemnly: "To be or not to be…" and then continues with "… powerful, one must be feared". That's exactly how far that comparison goes.

I found more meaningful parallels with the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus. Considering the extraordinarily ancient roots of the Zhao family saga, such parallels would make more chronological sense as well.

The Egyptian Pharaoh orders the murder of all male Hebrew newborns. Moses's mother is successful in having her child spirited away. He ends up in the bosom of the Egyptian royal family and is brought up as one of their own. As a youth he becomes increasingly disillusioned by the injustice meted out to the Hebrew masses. Eventually he revolts against and destroys his surrogate family, the very system of power that nurtured him as a child.

The mythic-size sacrifice demanded of Dr Cheng can be compared to God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac, although such filicide is eventually averted. In the play, Dr Cheng sacrifices his infant son for the sake of justice (and possibly for the preservation of an aristocratic bloodline?) which is seen to be as definitive as a divine decree.

This brings me to Confucius and the necessity for a social hierarchical structure. Confucius was mainly concerned with humanism. He held altruism (ren), moral uprightness (yi) and a system of proper norms (li) to be of utmost importance, so much so that one should be prepared to sacrifice one's life for these essential moral values. However, Confucian ethics were politicized during the Han Dynasty in order to legitimize the power and privilege of the ruling elite. We see these moral and political forces interacting with one another in the play.

Giving up one's life for honor and justice is a recurrent theme in the play. The staging of these suicides and killings was problematic for me. Although each honorable death was followed by a symbolic sprinkling of red petals that seemed to fall from the sky, their staging lacked gravitas and meaning. It was evident that these mechanical (almost absurd) sacrifices provoked cultural otherization more than anything else. Rather than an appreciation of what honor, altruism and moral rectitude can mean (at a time when these words are losing their meaning), we are left with subliminal assertions about the West's life-affirming superiority.

I understand that the original play, with its brilliant ancient history, might have been spare in its structure. Perhaps this adaptation by James Fenton was an homage to the original text. If such were the RSC's intentions then a predominantly Chinese cast could have brought more authenticity to Fenton's words. Only 3 actors, out of the 17 member cast, had Asian origins and they were mostly relegated to minor roles. When confronted with their unfair casting, the RSC came up with two arguments: 1) their casting was color-blind – they simply hired the best actors for the job, 2) the same cast would have had to perform in 2 other plays as artistic director Gregory Doran explained to the Guardian:

…The Oprhan of Zhao is part of a three-play season. A single company will also perform Alexander Pushkin's Boris Godunov and a new version of Bertolt Brecht's Life of Galileo by Mark Ravenhill. "The RSC have led the way in non-culturally specific casting, but there was no way I was going to do this with an exclusively Chinese cast that would then go through to those other plays," said Doran.

It's interesting how the RSC's second statement invalidates the veracity of the first. A Chinese actor commented on how sad it was that Asian actors were not deemed good enough to play themselves, an especially sharp observation since much of the acting in this production was not up to snuff. It was flat for the most part and in the case of the Princess, dramatically overboard. Perhaps it's the double whammy of actors trying to act like they imagine actors from another culture would have acted in the 13th century. It creates too much emotional (and cultural) distance.

Some of the otherworldly elements in the play were much welcome and added some texture to it, e.g. the ghosts of people who had died trying to do the right thing. The final scene between Dr Cheng and the ghost of his grown-up son, who had been sacrificed as an infant, was touching.

Royal Shakespeare Company under fire for not casting enough Asian actors by Matt Trueman: http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/19/royal-shakespeare-company-asian-actors

British East Asian actors speak out against "The Orphan of Zhao" by Daniel York: http://www.racebending.com/v4/featured/british-east-asian-actors-speak-the-orphan-zhao/

Cast

Matthew Aubrey – Ti Miming
Jeremy Avis – Ballad Singer
Adam Burton – The Assassin
Joe Dixon – Tu'an Gu
Jake Fairbrother – Cheng Bo
Lloyd Hutchinson – Han Jue
Youssef Kerkour – Captain of the Guard
Chris Lew Kum Hoi – Ghost of Dr Cheng's Son/Demon Mastiff
Siu Hun Li – Demon Mastiff/Guard
Patrick Romer – Gongsun
James Tucker – Zhao Dun
Graham Turner – Dr Cheng
Stephen Ventura – Emperor Ling
Philip Whitchurch – Wei Jang
Lucy Briggs-Owen – The Princess
Nia Gwynne – Dr Cheng's Wife
Susan Momoko Hingley – Princess' Maid
Joan Iyiola – Demon Mastiff

Creative

Director – Gregory Doran
Designer – Niki Turner
Lighting – Tim Mitchell
Music – Paul Englishby
Sound – Martin Slavin
Movement – Will Tuckett

…

Sauce for the Goose
Orange Tree Theatre
1/3/13

French playwright Georges Feydeau was born in 1862. He came into his own during the Belle Epoque, which was a time of peace and prosperity in Europe before the devastation of WWI. Much of this era's wealth was the product of aggressive overseas colonialism, including the scramble for Africa. As a result, capital and political stability were secured in western and central Europe. The arts and sciences flourished in Paris and the idea of flânerie (defined as "the gastronomy of the eye" by Balzac) was all the rage. Feydeau's plays dominated the theatre scene while cabarets such as Le Moulin Rouge and Les Folies Bergère provided entertainment to the less affluent.

This socio-cultural landscape is evident in Feydeau's storyline, e.g. he contrasts hedonists living in a demi-monde of unfettered drinking, gambling and sexual liaisons with the bourgeoisie and its preoccupation with respectability. Feydeau himself was a known womanizer who separated from his wife after 20 years of marriage. He lived at the Hôtel Terminus until he was committed to a mental asylum where he died of syphilis.

Marriage, adultery and deception form the core of Feydeau's plays, which are peopled by recognizable, everyday characters caught in an intricate web of lies. Situations collapse onto one another, leading to a domino effect of increasing calamity and despair. Though the structure of the play is mechanistic, the satirical commentary that accompanies descriptions of social as well as sexual norms is lively and engaging.

In Sauce for the Goose, Lucienne is committed to gender equality even when it comes to matters of adultery. She is being hotly pursued by her husband's friend, Pontagnac, when we meet her. Later we find out that she is also being courted by the suave Redillion. An affair is out of the question, however, unless her husband cheats on her. After she discovers her husband's liaison with the passionate Teutonic Heidi (a trove of politically incorrect foreigner gags), she decides to take revenge. I liked her chutzpah and looked forward to an interesting denouement. However, Lucienne's quest for equality turns out to be a simple trick meant to arouse her husband's jealousy and win him back. The same goes for Mrs Pontagnac. Both married women are kept chaste to the very end, even though their husbands have definitely strayed. These sexual double standards are articulated by Jerome, Redillon's manservant, when he distinguishes a "tart" from a respectable married woman.

The only sexually liberated woman in the play is Armandine. She seems to live in Redillon's demi-monde and could very well be a prostitute. Heidi is sexually aggressive, actively seeking her married lover and demanding a continuation of their affair. Perhaps her transgressions can be more easily overlooked on account of her foreignness. In short, for all its sexual intrigue, the play remains conventional in its subscription to social norms, although it is not timid about exposing bourgeois hypocrisy.

Feydeau's formula starts with an elaborate set-up, followed by a manic middle, which then leads to a resolution. The complexity of his plot, with its perfectly timed blunders, mishaps and coincidences, is often described as a "jack-in-the-box construction."

Feydeau's farces are famous for their challenging stage directions. Their reliance on endless entrances and exits through stage doors further emphasizes the need for precise timing. The Orange Tree Theatre, which is an in-the-round theatre, did a brilliant job with Sauce for the Goose. Actors mimed the opening and closing of doors while an off-stage extra provided the appropriate sound effects. The set furniture was quickly converted from coffee table and couch to plush bed. The cast was able to bring rich and credible characters to life. It was their polished performances combined with Sam Walters' creative staging and Feydeau's hilarious twists and turns which made this a terrific production. Sam Walters is known for reviving forgotten plays. I can see why.

Cast

David Antrobus – Pontagnac
Vincent Brimble – Pinchard
Beth Cordingly – Lucienne
Rebecca Egan – Heidi
Stuart Fox – Vatelin
James Joyce – Jean/Victor
Damien Matthews – Redillion
Brian Miller – Hotel Manager
Amy Neilson Smith – Madame De Pontagnac/Clara
Auriol Smith – Madame Pinchard
Jonathan Tafler – Soldignac
Sarah Winter – Armandine

Creative

Written by Georges Feydeau
Translated by Peter Meyer
Directed by Sam Walters
Designer Sam Dowson
Lighting Designer John Harris

…

In the Republic of Happiness
Royal Court Theatre
1/5/13

Martin Crimp's fragmented "In the Republic of Happiness" is an investigation of form and language rather than conventional theatre. It's described an "an entertainment in three parts." Crimp elaborates further: "For years I have been trying to write a play that would go alongside Attempts on Her Life, which is the kind of play that sets out to create a sieve in which you could collect all the residue, all the psychic shit that flows through us all." Some reviewers, such as Michael Billington, have suggested that the tree parts of the play are Crimp's attempt at a modern Divine Comedy: "After the Inferno of family relationships we then see the Purgatory of self-preoccupation before we get a glimpse of Paradise in which Bob and Madeleine become a modern Dante and Beatrice." There are certainly some common elements, such as the transition from dark to light over the course of the play, but in Crimp's hands, Dante's allegorical journey of the soul towards God is outfitted with rich Surrealist automatism.

Part 1: Destruction of the Family

The title of the first act is reminiscent of Louise Bourgeois's 1974 sculptural piece called "The Destruction of the Father." She described its narrative as follows: "The children grabbed him [the father] and put him on the table. And he became the food. They took him apart, dismembered him. Ate him up. And so he was liquidated…the same way he liquidated his children. The sculpture represents both a table and a bed." Crimp's first act mirrors some of this radical psychoanalysis. It's the portrait of a dysfunctional family (parents, children, grandparents) having Christmas dinner together. There are in semi-darkness as they're scrimping on light bulbs. One of the daughters is pregnant but refuses to name her child's father. The family's dysfunction takes a terrifying turn after Uncle Bob appears on stage. He begins to enumerate the ways in which his wife, Madeleine, hates them – working on each member of the family with careful malice. We begin to suspect that he might have impregnated his niece. It's the ultimate desecration of familial sanctity.

One of the themes discussed in this act is downward social mobility or "generational entropy." The grandmother of the family is a physician and part of the wealthy middle class. However, her children have moved down the social ladder and the future looks even bleaker for her grandchildren. This is a socio-economic reality in Britain.

Part 2: The Five Essential Freedoms of the Individual

In this act, the play shifts totally away from plot. The actors take their place in a row of seats facing the audience. Behind them is a jumbotron with color bars in it. They are part of a TV talk show – the ultimate reality-based, modern-day amusement. The use of "entertainment" to reveal and shape our collective mentality, simplified to its lowest common denominator, called to mind the parlor walls in Fahrenheit 451.

Much of Fahrenheit 451 is devoted to depicting a future United States society bombarded with messages and imagery by an omnipresent mass media. Instead of the small black-and-white TV screens common in American households in 1953 (the year of the book's publication), the characters in the novel live their lives in rooms with entire walls that act as televisions. These TVs show serial dramas in which the viewer's name is woven into the program and the viewer is able to interact with fictional characters called "the relatives" or "the family." Scenes change rapidly, images flash quickly in bright colors, all of it designed to produce distraction and fascination. When not in their interactive TV rooms, many characters, including Guy Montag's wife Mildred, spend much of their time with "Seashell ear thimbles" in their ears—miniature radio receivers that play constant broadcasts of news, advertisements, and music, drowning out the real sounds of the world. Throughout the novel, Bradbury portrays mass media as a veil that obscures real experience and interferes with the characters' ability to think deeply about their lives and societal issues. Bradbury isn't suggesting that media other than books couldn't be enriching and fulfilling. As Faber tells Montag, "It isn't books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books…. The same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisors, but are not." In an interview marking the fiftieth anniversary of the novel's publication, Bradbury indicated that some of his fears about mass media had been realized. "We bombard people with sensation, he said, "That substitutes for thinking." [1]

In this sharply satirical section, Crimp touches upon many contemporary dilemmas. The actors are not assigned any specific lines and they compete for airtime in voicing these ideas.

The myth of individualism (bordering on narcissism) is discussed at length and linked to the disintegration of the family unit and of the community at large. The talking heads on stage make forceful proclamations such as "I write the script of my own life, I am the one, I am in control," yet they're all completing each other's sentences and regurgitating the same banal ideas. Andy Warhol said that "in the future everybody will be free to think exactly what they like – and they will all think the same." This is what Crimp is trying to stress as well – the illusion of individual choice and freedom.

Noam Chomsky has written a classic on the subject, "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media." Chomsky explains: "The elite media are sort of the agenda-setting media. And they do this in all sorts of ways: by selection of topics, by distribution of concerns, by emphasis and framing of issues, by filtering of information, by bounding of debate within certain limits. They determine, they select, they shape, they control, they restrict – in order to serve the interests of

dominant, elite groups in the society." Arundhati Roy calls it perception management.

Consumerism is an essential part of this management. Materialism and conformity go hand in hand. In other words, excessive consumerism assures citizen docility. The "happiness = extravagant consumerism = patriotism" formula was evident in the aftermath of 9/11, when President Bush advised traumatized New Yorkers to go shopping. Yet Americans have not been able to attain sustainable happiness. The fallacy at the core of this argument for limitless consumption is that we pre-suppose limitless growth. George Monbiot: "Our economic system depends upon never-ending growth, yet we live in a world with finite resources. Our expectation of progress is, as a result, a delusion."

"The freedom to separate my legs (it's nothing political)" is a discerning expose of the erosion of civil liberties in the name of national security. It's timely satire. Not only are we forced to go through checkpoints and submit to invasive body searches every time we travel but President Obama just signed the NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act) which codifies indefinite military detention without charge or trial into law for the first time in American history. It also legalizes extra-judicial executions. An important sign of being an obedient citizen is to disavow politics: "there is nothing political about my body, nothing political about my holiday hat, don't give me that crap about the rich and poor, stop droning on about what constitutes a just war, don't you come here telling me what my life's supposed to be for…" Many of these obsessive mantras are set to music and transformed into cheery songs.

"The freedom to experience horrid trauma" embodies the oprahfication of mainstream media and culture, so that "15 minutes of fame" trump all concerns about privacy. It's not just about confessional or reality TV, it's also about the internet. Blogs and social media have shoved the intensely personal into the public domain. We must be able to "put it all behind us and move on" through collective, do-it-yourself, Chicken-Soup-for-the-Soul kind of therapy.

Finally, "the freedom to look good and live forever" is about living longer than ever in human history. It's also about focusing on the present to the detriment of long-term memory. It's about selecting and deleting that which is unpleasant or inconvenient such as massacres and our complicity in them. This is something I am acutely aware of. My new series of artwork (titled "This heirloom") is based on the idea of collective forgetting and explores ways of reconnecting to the past.

Paul Taylor summarized the second act of the play thus:

The self-serving delusion that you can lead an apolitical life, the individualism that's just a type of paranoid narcissistic conformity; the culture of victimhood and therapy-speak – these things are skewered in an overlapping aural mosaic of escalating craziness ("My horrid abusive baby plus flashbacks of my abusive priest!") and in the

tartly funny songs (with music by Roald van Oosten) that imagine an almost post-human existence ("It's a new kind of world/And it doesn't come cheap/And you'll only survive/If you don't go deep"). Ending with a relationship now shadowed by dementia, this deep, provocative play refuses to heed that advice.

Part 3: In the Republic of Happiness

The last section of the play is prefaced by a line from Dante: "You are not on the Earth as you believe." Uncle Bob and Madeleine have now arrived in the Republic of Happiness. After a stunning set change, in which the entire stage is lifted vertically as if inside an elevator shaft, we move into a brightly lit white room, with a serene view of a river on the back wall. Is this final destination heaven or a psychiatric clinic? The view of the river from the French window looks eerily like a René Magritte painting. Magritte, a Belgian surrealist, is known for his poetic imagery which challenges our perceptions of reality. His surprising juxtaposition of objects from different worlds and his experiments with scale, produce an uncomfortable sensation. That seems to be Crimp's intention as well. Something is terribly wrong in this perfectly shiny, sterile environment. One can sense mental violence – forceful mind manipulation. Uncle Bob is being brainwashed to believe that he is "happy." He must be a mouthpiece for a well scripted and carefully rehearsed message directed at his fellow citizens. In the end, "happiness" turns out to be an empty and meaningless jingle (the 100% happy song) that he must sing with conviction.

…You can say anything provided you follow my rules.
…You forget how happy you are, how happy this world makes you.
…I am molding billions of malleable human cells through you.

It reminded me of the psychological torture, the state-sponsored curing of non-conformist mental fallacies, in Orwell's 1984.

[1] Fahrenheit 451: Themes: http://www.litcharts.com/lit/fahrenheit-451/themes

Interview with Martin Crimp, Writer of In the Republic of Happiness:
http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/blog/interview-with-martin-crimp-writer-of-in-the-republic-of-happiness/

In the Republic of Happiness, Royal Court, London by Michael Billington:
http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/13/republic-of-happiness-review

In the Republic of Happiness, Royal Court, London by Paul Taylor:
http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/in-the-republic-of-happiness-royal-court-london-8412800.html

Cast

Anna Calder-Marshall
Emma Fielding
Seline Hizli
Ellie Kendrick
Stuart McQuarrie
Paul Ready
Michelle Terry
Peter Wight

Creative

Director Dominic Cooke
Set Designer Miriam Buether
Costume Designer Moritz Junge
Lighting Designer Peter Mumford
Composer Roald van Oosten
Sound Designer Paul Arditti
Musical Director James Fortune

…

Constellations
Duke of York Theatre
12/5/13

It's hard to believe that Nick Payne's perfectly conceptualized "Constellations" was inspired by two documentaries: "Vanishing of the Bees," which is about the disappearance of bees due to colony collapse disorder, and "The Elegant Universe," which discusses contemporary theoretical physics, especially string theory.

"Einstein's theory of relativity does a fantastic job for explaining big things," [Brian Greene, author of The Elegant Universe] says. "Quantum mechanics is fantastic for the

other end of the spectrum — for small things. The big problem is that each theory is great for each realm, but when they confront each other, they are ferocious antagonists, and the mathematics falls apart." String theory smooths out the mathematical inconsistencies that currently exist between quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity. It posits that the entire universe can be explained in terms of really, really small strings that vibrate in 10 or 11 dimensions — meaning dimensions we can't see. If it exists, it could explain literally everything in the universe — from subatomic particles to the laws of speed and gravity. So what does this have to do with the possibility that a multiverse exists? "There are a couple of multiverses that come out of our study of string theory," Greene says. "Within string theory, the strings that we're talking about are not the only entities that this theory allows. It also allows objects that look like large flying carpets, or membranes, which are two dimensional surfaces. And what that means, within string theory, is that we may be living on one of those gigantic surfaces, and there can be other surfaces floating out there in space." [1]

Although Constellations embraces the concept of parallel universes, it is less about science and more about dramatic form. Payne reduced the story to bare essentials, using two characters only, in order to better investigate the play's structure. It's a simple love story told in a most unusual way. Boy meets girl at a barbecue but that meeting contains infinite possibilities and we witness many of them in quick succession. As each likely occurrence is investigated further, it leads to another set of multiple outcomes. Soon we begin to discern the vastness and complexity of time and space, of the cosmos wherein we exist. Each single moment of our lives is pregnant with limitless potential.

The boy in question is Roland, a beekeeper. He is traditional, a caregiver who envies the simplicity and discipline of a bee's life. The girl is Marianne, a chatty scientist who specializes in string theory. She finds it difficult to bring the different elements of her life together. The hunt for the ultimate theory of physics, which explains everything, is as relevant in her personal life as in her work. Over the course of the play, the exponential outcomes of their relationship become tragically circumscribed and fixed. This brilliant honing of the storyline from unmanageable infinity to increasingly narrow scenarios is accomplished through intermittent scenes in which the actors are bathed in a golden light (a twilight afterglow). Together these flash forward scenes anchor the story in one particular universe and foreshadow the play's denouement, ever so subtly.

Paul Taylor describes this dramatic construction beautifully: "Cubist visual art crunches together many moments in time within the instantaneous stillness of a picture. Here it's as if a magic wand has been waved over such a work so that it comes alive, the multiple variations elapsing elastically in the constantly re-angled present tense of stunningly well-deployed stage time."

The play is non-linear, with scenes skipping back and forth in time, so the dialogue in each repeating scene becomes a sort of comforting refrain. Tom Scutt's set, with its large hovering balloons, is simple and eloquent. Does it represent the Big Bang

and the formation of constellations and universes? Do the balloons represent possibilities and is this why they begin to fall away as the story progresses? Or is it Marianne's grey matter that is degenerating? By the end of the play, her ability to find words and articulate thoughts is greatly diminished on account of the disease attacking her brain. Lee Curran's lighting is an integral part of the play's architecture. Each outcome is separated by a burst of light (and sound) in the dark and the flash forward scenes are distinguished from the rest of the play due to their sepia glow.

Constellations is an ideal platform for showcasing an actor's skills. Both actors in this production are breathtakingly sharp, switching effortlessly between multidimensional variations in time, place and emotion. Their stellar individual performances and unmistaken chemistry make it easy for them to color in their characters, dot by dot, shift by shift, angle by angle. They have no difficulty in filling up an empty stage.

Constellations are star configurations that we imbue with meaning based on our vantage point. They enable us to project a mythology onto a dark, unknown sky. Nick Payne's clever play is laced with the same magic and mystery.

It reminded me of the 1998 German film "Run Lola Run" which is composed of three runs, in which Lola starts from the same point in time and space but arrives at different outcomes based on slight deviations in action. Like the play, the film contains flash forward sequences which show how other people's lives were

affected by their varied encounters with Lola (a reference to chaos theory's butterfly effect). The film raises questions about free will vs determinism, and so does Payne's play.

---

[1] NPR – A Physicist Explains Why Parallel Universes May Exist: http://www.npr.org/2011/01/24/132932268/a-physicist-explains-why-parallel-universes-may-exist

Playwright Nick Payne discusses Constellations: quantum multiverse theory, love and honey: http://www.theatrevoice.com/9222/nick-payne-discusses-constellations-%E2%80%93-a-play-about-quantum-multiverse-theory-love-and-honey/#.Un-735Tk_e6

Constellations, Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court, London by Paul Taylor: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/constellations-theatre-upstairs-royal-court-london-6292328.html

Cast

Rafe Spall as Roland
Sally Hawkins as Marianne

Creative

Nick Payne: Writer
Michael Longhurst: Director
Tom Scutt: Designer
Lee Curran: Lighting
David McSeveney: Sound
Simon Slater: Composer
Lucy Cullingford: Movement

…

The Architects
Biscuit Factory
1/6/13

The Architects is inspired by the Greek myth of the Minotaur. Briefly, this is how it goes. Crete's King Minos refuses to sacrifice the beautiful white bull Poseidon gifted him. He breaks his promise and decides to keep the Cretan bull. As punishment, Aphrodite makes his wife Pasiphae fall in love with the bull. Pasiphae orders Daedalus, a master craftsman and architect, to build her a hollow cow, in which she mates with the bull. As a result of the union, her son, the Minotaur, is half man, half

beast. As he begins to feast on human flesh, Minos traps him inside a complex labyrinth designed by Daedalus. For years, the Minotaur is sustained by human sacrifice, until Theseus, with the help of Minos's daughter Ariadne, succeeds in killing the monster. Daedalus suggests Theseus tie a string to the door of the maze in order to find his way back. After Theseus elopes with Ariadne, Minos is enraged. He imprisons Daedalus and his son Icarus inside the labyrinth. Daedalus fashions wings for himself and his son out of feathers and wax. They are successful in escaping from their prison but Icarus flies too close to the sun and his wings fall apart. He falls into the sea and drowns.

Although there are constant references to this mythology, especially from the standpoint of the Minotaur and the story of Daedalus and Icarus, the play is more about present day economic malaise in Europe. Greece is used as a symbol of the separation between Europe's nostalgic past and its lackluster, economically depressed present – we have to ponder the differences between Greece as the cradle of civilization and Greece as it stands today in the midst of penury and street riots.

The Architects is a production of Shunt, an innovative company that specializes in experimental theatre. As we enter the Biscuit Factory, a huge warehouse space, there are no ushers to direct us. We have to find out way through a labyrinth. It's connected to various small rooms and dead ends, some outfitted with video screens projecting images of lost audience members in other parts of the maze. The idea is to confuse and disorient. We end up in what looks like a cafe adjacent to a stage where three musicians are playing elevator music. We're not sure this is where we're supposed to be (is it an anteroom leading to the actual theatre?) but we sit down like everyone else. There is a bar behind us offering people beverages.

In the last room, at the end of the labyrinth, we passed by a small replica of a cruise ship. We are now on board. After a while the lights go off. When they come back on we see an exceedingly pregnant woman in an expensive silk dress, limping along, in one high-heeled sandal, to the other side of the cafe. She reaches into a hollowed out cow with a glass middle and rear and retrieves her other sandal. She kisses the cow and disappears. It's Pasiphae expecting her son, the Minotaur. The lights go out again and come back on. We are introduced to the architects, our Danish hosts. They are extremely zealous in welcoming us and shake hands with each and every audience member. After an interesting lecture on architecture and how it can change the world, our hosts (now crew members) begin to "sell" us the cruise. Abundant food, great parties, drawing classes, sports, making love to a dolphin inside a hollowed out shell – no problem, the sky is the limit.

We soon find out that the ship's crew works for a debauched, obscenely rich family, mostly sprawled around in leopard print and Hugh Hefner dressing gowns, partaking of food and wine. They skype in periodically to castigate their employees. They appear on enormous video monitors and totally dominate the narrative when they do so. Greece's powerful ancient gods are today's Silvio Berlusconis. It must be said that in matters of taste and lifestyle, our "elite" have probably not strayed very far from Zeus et al. As we travel past different Mediterranean ports, the crew assembles to sing in unison.

However, things soon begin to go awry. Vandalism, drunkenness and sex orgies are followed by food shortages, power outages, and finally violence. The ship has been taken over by some kind of evil. Although we never see it, we are given plastic forks to defend ourselves. The crew becomes increasingly panicked. Something's got to give. Audience members are separated in two groups – men and women. We are led to different areas in which we are told via teleprompters that even though we were much valued by the crew, we must be sacrificed. It is pitch dark. We now move to a third area, where we witness an aerial sequence in which acrobats dance vertically, hanging from ropes. The ropes begin to fall. One acrobat disappears, then the other. Are they Daedalus and Icarus? Back on the cruise ship they were introduced to us as the crew's "children." In fact both of them gave us a kiss goodnight before being sent to bed.

On an elevated stage in the same viewing area, a Minotaur is stabbed and killed. The back wall is lit and we discern a giant alcove at the top. A semi-nude family, wine glass in hand, is posing in it as if in a giant window display. There is a white bull next to them. We wait for a while looking at the frozen actors, the dead Minotaur, the fallen ropes. We wait some more. Finally some people begin to move towards the light streaming in through a door. We follow suit, at our own pace. The door leads us back to the cafe. We sit down. Is the play over? We wait. Finally people begin to exit. We go back through the labyrinth but this time there is a string that guides us through it.

This is sensation theatre.

Shunt founding member David Rosenberg explains how the company was interested in exploring "fear mongering and what it would take to make an entire country sacrifice their children." The cruise ship represents a nation, a group of people organized under a single government. We are allowed to eat, drink and fornicate to excess but we cannot disembark or change course. In times of financial distress, we are not told the truth. Rather monsters are invented to keep us distracted. Fear mongering is so extreme that we are willing to sacrifice everything for security – even that which is most valuable to us, our civil liberties and our children. The corporate elite who control our world are just as corrupt as ancient gods – cruel, callous, greedy, and fatally self-absorbed. Our "elected" politicians are nothing more than their minions. They use propaganda to disorient and confuse us, to sell us fairy tales about terror and evil, until these over-produced charades end with an anti-climax. The play's message is quite succinct, even though it's wrapped in oversized myth.

This is the kind of theatre that settles down in one's mind and begins to blossom with time. Initially I found the play to be too gimmicky, too concerned with being innovative to be truly profound. I still find the parallels between contemporary Europe and Greek mythology to be a bit forced but I appreciate the thought that went into making these connections, in assembling a cast of colorful characters, in the creative use of space, in seamless audience participation. This is sensation theatre.

Trailer: http://www.shunt.co.uk/atrailer.html

…

People
National Theatre
1/6/13

Alan Bennett, a leading British dramatist, is known for writing about England's post World War II malaise, produced in part by the loss of its empire. He has a

considerable following in England and is viewed as the voice of the people. When asked about his latest play "People," he appropriately described it as a "play for England, sort of." "People" is a tragicomedy about a decaying country trying to cope by selling its history. Bennett points an accusatory finger at the National Trust, which is eager to turn a dilapidated South Yorkshire country estate, along with its dilapidated aristocratic owner, into a prettified part of the heritage industry. Bennett's heroine, Dorothy, represents old wealth. She is completely averse to the idea of opening up her house (and herself) to the public and becoming a tourist attraction. She is nostalgic for an England where people and things were allowed to age and die a natural death. It reminded me of Martin Crimp's "In the Republic of Happiness" and the "freedom to look good and live forever."

Dorothy is so allergic to the crass commercialization of histories, both private and collective, that she is willing to consider radical options like having a shady business concern (today's banksters and assorted corporate elite) lift up the entire house and transport it to Dorset or Wiltshire. She is also amenable to the house being used as a filming location, by an old friend of hers, a director of cheap porn. "This is not Allegory House," Dorothy exclaims in order to diffuse any obvious analogies to England and its gradual degradation, but there it is, the idea that the most private and sacred of human experiences can be commodified and sold on the market for profit. Tourism is a form of pornography after all – it involves the same violation of privacy, the same indiscriminate mass consumption of history and culture. Like most plays we saw in London, this one too refers to the malediction of Thatcher's 1980s, when "everything had a price" and "if it didn't have a price, it didn't have a value." The house's shaky foundations are referred to frequently in the play (it rumbles once in a while before settling down). So many natural resources have been extracted from under it, that its very integrity is now in question.

June, Dorothy's aggressively pragmatic archdeacon sister, finally gets her way and the National Trust takes over the narrative. The scrubbing and enhancement of history is brought home to us through an excellent metaphor – chamber pots lying in the attic and once filled by Rudyard Kipling and Bernard Shaw, are sterilized and refilled with fresh urine. The idea of celebrity urine is heightened and extended to celebrity Eucharists – even religion, the domain of the spiritual, is not left unscathed by the economics of demand and supply.

Once the National Trust takes possession of the house, it is magically transformed (before our very eyes) into a glittering gallery displaying relics of the past. The lofty Dorothy, a glamorous model and actress of yore, is now relegated to the sad role of tour guide. She gives her favorite necklace, probably the most valuable thing she owns, to a young make-up artist who made her feel grand, even if it was for just a few hours, and for a porn flick shoot in which she delivered a few lines. She doesn't tell the young woman her necklace's financial worth. It's a gesture rooted in friendship, devoid of any monetary return.

Bennett is known for "blending the satiric and the elegiac" - this quiet, elegant ending certainly fits that description.

The play is called "People" because it talks at length about liking or disliking people, about too many people passing through the house, about PST (People Spoil Things). It's an amusing contradiction: the vulgarization of history and culture by opening it up to the public assumes a certain ownership of that history and culture. Does it belong to the wealthy dynasties (including the British royal family) who inherit

"culture" through no achievement of their own, or to the working class that sustains that culture, tucked away in servant quarters, concealed from view by leafy trees? Whose history is it anyway?

Cast

Frances Ashman
Linda Bassett
Ellie Burrow
Selina Cadell
Philip Childs
Jack Chissick
Giles Cooper
Carole Dance
Andy de la Tour
Frances de la Tour
Peter Egan
Miles Jupp
Barbara Kirby
Nicholas le Prevost
Jess Murphy
Alastair Parker
Robin Pearce
Alexander Warner

Creative

Director: Nicholas Hytner
Designer: Bob Crowley
Lighting Designer: James Farncombe
Sound Designer: Rich Walsh
Jonathan Watkins photo by Catherine Ashmore
Movement Director: Jonathan Watkins
Short film by Jon Driscoll

...

Sleeping Beauty
Sadler's Wells Theatre
1/6/13

Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty begins cleverly in 1890, the year the original ballet premiered in St Petersburg. The score, Opus 66 by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, had just been completed the year before, in 1889.

We soon fast forward to Aurora's coming of age in 1911.

Jenny Gilbert describes the change in costumes and set design as starting with "severe, late-Victorian opulence, a palace apartment of black marble and dim gold brocade, then, 21 years later, a very Rex Whistlerish picture of a garden party."

Victorian garden party

Bram Stoker's Dracula appeared in 1897, so the ballet is imbued with turn of the century gothic motifs.

Not only does Bourne change the ballet's historical setting but he also tinkers with important elements of Charles Perrault's La Belle au Bois Dormant. He gives Aurora unprecedented agency. The princess is procured by Carabosse and we are, therefore, uncertain of her roots. She is an unstoppable, wildly athletic baby, portrayed by a fascinatingly life-like rod puppet.

As she grows up, she retains her irrepressible spirit. She is in love with a working class lad, the palace's gamekeeper, and she is seen gallivanting barefoot at her coming of age tennis party. She is drawn to the danger and mystery of Carabosse's son, who is the one to exact revenge after his mother's death. Both Carabosse and Caradoc (her son) are played by Ben Bunce, a tall, broad-shouldered dancer, with the charisma of Freddie Mercury and the smoldering intensity of a young Antonio Banderas.

Coincidentally, half the fairies are played by male dancers, most prominent amongst them being the Lilac Fairy. It's obvious that Bourne is toying with gender expectations. "Fairy" is pejorative slang for gay. Bourne confronts this prejudice by turning it on its head. The male fairies are powerful Goth characters, the Lilac Fairy being a definite vampire. In fact they are more manly and charismatic than the gamekeeper who plays the traditional Prince character, an amalgam of male virtues.

Since Aurora is already in love with the gamekeeper, this becomes a tale of true love, sustained over a 100 years. It's more about reconnecting and realizing one's eternal passion, less about a random crush. As Caradoc also lusts after Aurora, the Prince faces serious competition and Aurora has some choices. Both Caradoc and the Prince are vampires (the gamekeeper is bitten by the Lilac Fairy in order to become immortal and survive for a 100 years).

Caradoc tries to "convert" Aurora to his vampire life-style in a sacrificial marriage ritual. On the other hand, the Prince is happy to wed her as she is and dive into a cross-species marriage that also cuts across class lines. Their marriage does not involve any grand ceremony (the entire royal court disappears after Aurora's awakening), they just go to bed together and are covered by a silk sheet. They re-emerge with a baby, a daughter who is even more adept at flying than her mother. She is obviously half vampire, half human, the product of true love.

Although there are references to the original Marius Petipa steps, Bourne's ballet is robust and sensual, even comical in places. Aurora gets to dance more than in the original choreography, once again a nod to her independence and restless energy. Hannah Vassallo is dazzling in that role.

Many critics have said that the use of a recorded orchestra rather than live music took some of the spontaneity and emotion out of the ballet. It may be so but the visual wizardry of this production is breathtaking. The sets and costumes by Lez Brotherston are exquisite. The use of color (black in the first scene where Aurora is awarded gifts by the good fairies before being accosted by Carabosse, white at her birthday garden party, and red at a vampire soiree that seems to be set in a swanky bar) and the lighting design by Paule Constable are stunning.

It's the kind of theatre-inspired ballet you've never seen before, and are not likely to ever see again.

IoS dance review: Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty, Sadler's Wells, London by Jenny Gilbert: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/ios-dance-review-matthew-bournes-sleeping-beauty-sadlers-wells-london-8395803.html

Matthew Bourne's Sleeping Beauty, at Sadler's Wells, review by Louise Levene: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/dance/9755472/Matthew-Bournes-Sleeping-Beauty-at-Sadlers-Wells-review.html

Cast

Adam Maskell
Ashley Shaw
Ben Bunce
Christopher Marney
Christopher Trenfield
Daisy May Kemp
Daniel Collins
Danny Reubens
Dominic North
Edwin Ray
Hannah Vassallo
Joe Walkling
Kate Lyons
Katy Lowenhoff
Kerry Biggin
Leon Moran
Liam Mower
Luke Murphy
Mari Kamata
Nicole Kabera
Phil Jack Gardner
Pia Driver
Sophia Hurdley
Tom Jackson Greaves

Creative

Directed and Choreographed by Matthew Bourne
Set and Costume Design by Lez Brotherston
Lighting Design by Paule Constable
Sound Design by Paul Groothuis

…

The Dark Earth and the Light Sky
Almeida Theatre
1/7/13

Nick Dear's play is a tentative, low-key biographical drama about Anglo-Welsh writer and poet Edward Thomas. Thomas's life story is told through the voices of other characters – his wife Helen, his friend the American poet Robert Frost and his intellectual confidante Eleanor Farjeon. Thomas was an elusive, troubled man and much of the play is an effort to fit together the disparate pieces of his life into a somewhat coherent jigsaw puzzle.

Thomas used to go on long rambles into the English countryside. He observed nature with acute precision. Perpetually dogged by self-doubt and depression, mapping nature was perhaps his way of finding himself. It was also a way to spare his wife and children, whom he tormented when in the depths of despondency.

Frost and Thomas

Thomas met Robert Frost in 1913, in London, when neither of them had made a name for themselves. Frost encouraged Thomas to write poetry, which he produced abundantly relatively late in life (143 poems in just two years) before he was killed in 1917 at the battle of Arras, in France.

An important subtext in Dear's play is the demystification of Thomas's death. What prompted his decision to enlist, his insistence on being sent to the front line? Was it the expression of an innate death wish or a generic indifference to life? Painfully self-conscious, was Thomas looking for freedom in the anonymity of the trenches? Had the war and its symbolic defense of English soil and landscape provided him the focus and purpose he needed? Was he simply trying to prove his mettle? Or was it the grand exit he was looking for? After all, he explained his last minute, impromptu dropping out of a walking race in school on the basis of how "the tragic singularity of getting out of the race was as satisfying as victory."

Directed by Richard Eyre, the staging of the play is simple and beautiful. An earth covered stage is combined with a backdrop that captures changing light, as in a watercolor painting. At night, pinpricks of light create an effortless starry sky.

Thomas's wife Helen is free-spirited, irrepressible and devoted. She provides the overarching narrative of the play and is played with whole-hearted gumption by Hattie Morahan. Frost is played with American can-do bluster and confidence (but with a confused accent) by Shaun Dooley. Pandora Colin's performance as Eleanor Farjeon is contained – filled with quiet adoration. I would have liked to know more about the cerebral relationship and unrealized passion between her and Thomas. For someone suffering from profound emotional malaise, Edward Thomas was capable of inspiring constant love and devotion in many. That aspect of his personality might have been a rich contradiction to explore. Pip Carter as Edward Thomas channels many of these subtle and not so subtle dilemmas. Yet the play lacks lyricism.

Paul Taylor describes Thomas's poetry as "ostensibly pastoral but often leading us to the mysterious, unsettling edges of consciousness." Edna Longley talks about the quiet creative voice in his poems "which excavates scrupulously, but whispers what it loses and finds in the dark." I feel strongly that these enticing, tenuous whispers were missing from the play.

I understand Thomas's uncertain, self-effacing disposition. It is obvious in his poetry, especially when one compares it to Frost's. Vernon Scannell talks about how the similarity between their work is striking: they both use the rhythms of common speech, their imagery and themes are rooted in rural landscapes; "the wind and rain blow through their lines and one meets, in both of their worlds, rustic characters." Yet "the movement of Frost's lines is more confident, smoother, less hesitant and exploratory than the Englishman's, and this is not merely evidence of greater expertise. It is an indication of their basic difference, a difference of temperament."

Apart from a few lines of poetry quoted by Frost and a recital of "Lights Out" as the grand finale, the play is not suffused with Thomas's work. It reflects Thomas's temperament in its oddity and nostalgia, in its undercurrent of mystery, yet it lacks tenderness, humor and beauty.

The film "Amadeus," directed by Miloš Forman and written by Peter Shaffer, is adapted from Shaffer's stage play. It is also told tangentially in the voice of court composer Antonio Salieri. Would it do justice to Mozart, the artist, if he were portrayed as a child prodigy turned irresponsible adult, without the overwhelming magnificence of his music? Wouldn't Beethoven be a cranky old man going deaf if his story was divorced from his musical masterpieces? Jane Campion's film "Bright Star" is about Keats's life and work. Although it is not necessarily filled with the literal recital of Keat's poetry, it remains true to its lyricism and imagery, in fact its themes are intertwined with his life story to present a vivid picture of Keats, the poet. I felt that Nick Dear's play lacked this fleshing out. It felt incomplete.

For all of his introspective stoicism, Thomas did long for some response to his work. In James Priory's words:

Thomas defines this language of whispers as a continuous, scrupulous song which resists conceit and exhibitionism, yet remains supple and insistent, bidding and demanding a response. Whispers convey a desire to be heard by "those like me made" who will not reject the idiosyncratic voice, but sift and answer it.

I wish the play had elicited such a response.

Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and the road to war by Matthew Hollis: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/29/robert-frost-edward-thomas-poetry

Whispering in the Dark: the Poetry of Edward Thomas by James Priory: http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=1114

Content with Discontent: A note on Edward Thomas by Vernon Scannell: http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=10499

Biography of Edward Thomas: http://www.poemhunter.com/edward-thomas/biography/

Cast

Pip Carter as Edward Thomas
Pandora Colin as Eleanor Farjeon
Ifan Huw Dafydd as Philip Thomas
Shaun Dooley as Robert Frost
Hattie Morahan as Helen Thomas
Dan Poole as Bott / Major Lushington

Creative

Writer Nick Dear
Director Richard Eyre
Design Bob Crowley
Lighting Peter Mumford
Sound and Music John Leonard
Casting Cara Beckinsale
Dialect Jill McCullough
Voice Gareth Valentine
Movement Scarlett Mackmin
Assistant Director Ed Viney

…

The Arabian Nights

Tricycle Theatre
1/8/13

After I got out of the tube station at Kilburn, I marched into a convenience store to ask for directions. I couldn't remember the name of the theatre, so I began to rummage through my bag, looking for my ticket. The store clerk smiled and said, "There is only one theatre here. Just keep walking straight down this road and you'll see it on your left." Loved it – a community-oriented theatre, firmly rooted in a multi-racial, multi-cultural, working class neighborhood.

Here's the Tricycle Theatre's mission, in their own words:

The Tricycle views the world through a variety of lenses, bringing unheard voices into the mainstream. It presents high-quality and innovative work, which provokes debate and emotionally engages. Located in Brent, the most diverse borough in London, the Tricycle is a local venue with an international vision.

Now under the leadership of Artistic Director Indhu Rubasingham, the Tricyle was presenting one of its least overtly political plays, Mary Zimmerman's The Arabian Nights. Not that the play lacked all political context. It was written in 1994 as a reaction to the Gulf War. The idea was to explore the rich culture and ancient history of the Arab world and in doing so, debunk some of the unidimensional stereotypes proliferated by war propaganda.

The Arabian Nights

The Arabian Nights (or One Thousand and One Nights) is a collection of historical tales, legends, romances, tragedies, comedies, poems, riddles, songs, farces and erotica, compiled during the Islamic Golden Age (starting in the 9th century). The frame tale, which contains many stories within it, is about a Persian king who discovers his wife's infidelity. He executes her and decides to marry a virgin every day, only to murder her at dawn. After he marries his vizier's daughter, Scheherazade, she begins to recount a series of exhilarating, fantastical stories, always leaving him with a cliffhanger at dawn. The king's curiosity gets the best of him and Scheherazade is spared night after night, until after 1001 nights, the king professes his eternal love for her and gives up his murderous routine.

The tales are set in places as diverse as Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, North Africa, China, India, Turkey and Greece. They use complex storytelling devices in order to create a rich tapestry. The stories can be magical, profound, comedic, satirical, lewd

and brutal. They have inspired and been co-opted and recycled by writers all over the world (e.g. Giovanni Boccaccio, Jorge Luis Borges and Paulo Coelho).

Zimmerman's goal of reintroducing the West to Islam's glorious history and literature is achieved in several ways:

• The selection of stories to be included in the play becomes important. Zimmerman picks tales of love, adultery, avarice, cruelty and revenge as well as lessons of enlightenment derived from the Quran, she even takes on an elaborate fart skit. However, she does not include Aladdin, Sinbad or Ali Baba. While Western translators have grouped these stories with the Book of One Thousand and One Nights, they have different origins and evolved separately from Scheherazade's story-cycle.

• Zimmerman puts Islam back into the Arabian Nights. Rather than being confronted with Disney-like, Orientalist caricatures of Arabs and Muslims, we encounter real characters rooted in a vibrant religious tradition and history. Allah's name is invoked frequently, as is the convention in most Muslim cultures. People are shown praying and wearing the hijab although costume design is updated to include a counter-culture, rap element. Some of the baggy pants worn by the actors could have been easily sported by MC Hammer.

• Jihad (a current Western obsession) is demystified. Although Zimmerman does not go far enough in explaining the predominantly spiritual meaning of jihad, she does emphasize how it's justified on the basis of self-defense only and cannot be interpreted as a generic war cry against all "infidels."

The first half of the play is mostly farce, with a lot of slapstick comedy. It explores the bawdy side of some of the tales.

The second act is more magical, not only in terms of storytelling that enthralls and transports one to another time and place but also visually. Lighting design is used to create constantly shifting, mysterious worlds. One scene is particularly memorable. It's one of the stories of caliph Harun al-Rashid, who ruled the Abbasid Empire with its capital in Baghdad, from 786 to 809. Harun al-Rashid finds out that someone is impersonating him. He follows that man, across the river, on a barge. Both boats are given form by the people sitting in them and rowing in unison. It is pitch black – the only light we see is streaming timidly from lamps hanging from poles, held by some of the people in each boat. As Scheherazade continues to narrate her story we are completely mesmerized. When the two similarly clad men meet each other, Harun al-Rashid realizes that he is meeting himself. His doppelganger is played by the same actor who plays king Shahryar. This is one of the last tales told. We are nearing the end of king Shahryar's psychosis and the beginning of his new life with Scheherazade. Perhaps it's a last ditch effort on Scheherazade's part to close the loop, to mirror reality in such a way that Shahryar too can finally find himself.

The grand finale is a cacophony of diverse voices, all weaving and interweaving the warp and weft of stories, all twisting and turning the strands of human myths and histories in order to create a loud and colorful brew. Maybe this is what Mary Zimmerman has been trying to say all along – our common humanity can be best ascertained by our common need for stories.

It reminded me of Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis's work:

Other cultures of the world are not failed attempts to be modern, failed attempts to be us. Each is a unique and profound answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive? When asked that question the peoples of the world respond with 7,000 sources of knowledge and wisdom, history and intuition which collectively comprise humanity's repertoire for dealing with all the challenges that we'll face as a species in the coming centuries.

[...] Race is an utter fiction, we are all cut from the same genetic cloth, we are all, in fact, descendants of a relatively small number of ancestors who walked out of Africa some 60,000 years ago and, on this epic journey that lasted 40,000 years, carried the human spirit and imagination, over the course of 2,500 generations, to every habitable corner of the Earth.

The great corollary of that genetic revelation, in terms of social anthropology, is that if we accept that we're all cut from the same genetic cloth, it means by definition we all fundamentally share the same kind of raw human genius. And that brilliance and potential is made manifest through technological wizardry and innovation–which has been the great achievement of the West–or, by contrast, invested into unraveling the complex threads of memory inherent in a myth, or understanding nuances about the relationship between human beings and the spirit world. All of those things are simply a matter of choice and cultural orientation.

The Arabian Nights, Tricycle Theatre – review by Henry Hitchings: http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/the-arabian-nights-tricycle-theatre--review-8392350.html

The 2009 CBC Massey Lectures, "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World": http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/massey-lectures/2009/11/02/massey-lectures-2009-the-wayfinders-why-ancient-wisdom-matters-in-the-modern-world/

Wade Davis on What it Means to be Human and Alive: http://www.treehugger.com/treehugger-radio/wade-davis-on-what-it-means-to-be-human-and-alive.html

Cast

Jonathan Bonnick (Madman/Ensemble)
Denton Chikura (Harun Al Rashid/Ensemble)
Tunji Falana (Prince of Fools/Ensemble)

Sandy Grierson (Sharyar/Aziz)
Eva Magyar (Azizah/Ensemble)
Itxaso Moreno (Jester's Wife/Ensemble)
Adura Onashile (Perfect Love/Ensemble)
Tahirah Sharif (Dunyazade/Ensemble)
Harmage Singh Kalirai (The Wazir)
Ony Uhiara (Scheherezade/Sympathy)
Hemi Yeroham (Jester/Ensemble)

Creative

Director: Lu Kemp
Designer: Ben Stones
Lighting Designer: Richard Howell
Sound Designer: Elena Pena
Choreographer: Ann Yee
Illusion consultant: Darren Lang
Assistant Director: Finn den Hertog
Original Music: Take It Easy Hospital

…

Twelfth Night
Apollo Theatre
1/9/13

This original practices, all-male production of Twelfth Night, one of Shakespeare's finest romantic comedies, is an absolute delight. There is a sense of intimacy between the actors and the audience. The set is made of warm oak, partly lit by old-fashioned candle chandeliers. The backdrop is fashioned from the same mellow oak and fitted with two doors. Some members of the audience are seated on stage in two cozy galleries and get to interact with the actors. Prior to the play, we get a glimpse of what happens backstage as the cast is made up and costumed in front of us. The Elizabethan costumes, packed with lace and brocade, are sumptuous. Period music is played on period instruments by musicians looking down at the stage from a galliered landing. The attention to detail is lavish and there is throughout the play a sense of ease and shared joy which is incredibly energizing.

Mark Rylance's Olivia is a treat. White-face and majestic "comportement" endow her with a Geisha-like otherworldliness. She takes imperceptibly dainty steps and seems to glide on stage. However, her prettiness and controlled mannerism fall by the wayside once she falls in love. It is hilarious to see all the social and cultural masks drop one by one as Olivia gives herself to lust and passion. She stammers and trips her way into unrequited love, struggling at each step to maintain some semblance of composure.

Stephen Fry's Malvolio is stuffy and conceited, yet touching in his eagerness to please Olivia (even if it means sporting yellow stockings and a foolish grin), which leads to much confusion and priceless scenes between them.

Johnny Flynn's Viola embodies the gender-bending muddle of Shakespeare's play – it's a man, pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man. I found his performance to be superb. There is a delicate vulnerability, a shy modesty to his performance which is hard to resist. No wonder both Olivia and Orsino fall for him.

This is one of the things I like about Twelfth Night, its beautiful exploration of human sexuality in all its fluid, pliable and complex manifestations. The attraction between Viola (Cesario) and Orsino starts way ahead of the revelation of Viola's true gender and identity. Even after that revelation, Orsino continues to call Viola by her male name, Cesario. Perhaps he's used to it or maybe there is something erotic about the forbidden nature of homosexuality.

Twelfth Night marks the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the end of 12 days of Christmas, a period of Elizabethan celebration and revelry associated with the

inversion of rules and social disorder. Shakespeare's comedy embraces this chaos in many ways. Besides all the gender-confusion, both Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek bring a festive and rebellious spirit to the play: "care's an enemy to life". Their excesses are juxtaposed against Malvolio's stinginess and dictatorial control.

This twinning of opposites runs throughout Twelfth Night. Viola and her brother Sebastian are two sides of the same person and like the coming of Christ, these outsiders cure both the lovesick Orsino and the grief-stricken Olivia simultaneously. Love is presented as an uneasy blend of pleasure and pain. Characters fall in love with the idealized image of who they perceive to be their true love – Orsino doesn't know Olivia very well and Olivia persists in projecting her own feelings onto Cesario (Viola). They are not in love with a real person but with their glorified shadowy twin. "I am not what I am," Viola explains to the love-struck Olivia. But Olivia insists, "I would you were as I would have you be." The only character who doesn't suffer from double-vision is Feste, Olivia's jester. He takes a longer, richer view of life and is deeply aware of its cycles – its ups and downs, its highs and lows. He sees the other characters' folly when they indulge in all or nothing extremes.

With my activist inclination, I could not help noticing the doomed crossing of class boundaries and how that transgression is open to ridicule. Malvolio's love for Olivia is laughable not only on account of his unattractive personality but also due to the social chasm that exists between them. Many describe Twelfth Night as Shakespeare's "transvestite" comedy but I think that it goes much deeper than that. He's asking very profound questions about gender and class. What makes us male or female, noble or commoner, master or servant? Is it just the clothes or is it something more innate and substantial?

What could be better than to investigate these timeless questions in a production that remains true to period practices but succeeds in being spontaneous and amazingly contemporary in its warm and vivid depiction of the human condition.

Conversations with John Lahr: Mark Rylance:
http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/tny/2011/05/conversations-with-john-lahr-mark-rylance.html

Cast

Samuel Barnett as Sebastian
Johnny Flynn as Viola
Mark Rylance as Olivia
Stephen Fry as Malvolio
Liam Brennan as Orsino
Peter Hamilton Dyer as Feste
Colin Hurley as Sir Toby Belch.

Creative

By William Shakespeare
Directed by Tim Carroll
Designed by Jenny Tiramani
Music by Claire van Kampen

…

RICHARD III
Apollo Theatre
1/9/13

What shines in this production, apart from the same wonderful set design we'd enjoyed earlier with Twelfth Night, is Mark Rylance's extraordinary, mould-breaking performance. Shakespeare's Richard III is based on the character of "Vice," in Medieval morality plays, who is known for his "impish-to-fiendish humor." Rylance takes this characterization to a new level by becoming a jester and transforming one of Shakespeare's tragedies into a macabre comedy. He adopts a manic guffaw that is warmly jovial rather than terrifying. His limp and withered arm are pitiful, not ugly. As a fool, he is given license to say and do things that others are not. Since he is not perceived as a physical threat he gets more access and has more opportunities to ingratiate himself. He hugs and kisses other characters profusely, invading their private space and worming his way into their lives and deaths.

Shakespeare endowed Richard III with a "figural position" – the ability to interact with the audience as well as with other characters on stage. In fact, the dichotomy between how Richard is known to us (through his asides) and how Richard tries to appear to other characters is the source of the play's humor. This effortless movement in and out of the play's dramatic action is beautifully suited to Rylance's talent for breaking the fourth wall. As soon as he walks on stage, we begin to share a sense of complicity with him. Even with the twisted personage of Richard III, it doesn't take Rylance long to have us in his pocket. As we begin to laugh too readily at his sinister jokes, he feigns outrage and motions us to pipe down.

Rylance's performance darkens over the course of the play. His disconnection becomes more and more evident. There is an especially disturbing scene in which he wipes his wife Queen Anne's tears and dabs his own eyes with them. Literal emotional transference? As Richard III moves from infantile goofiness to psychotic disconnection and fury to a mind at war with itself, his asides grow thinner and less playful, until he is completely locked within the play. When he assaults his own mother, the elderly Duchess of York, we know that he has descended into madness. He is haunted by the ghosts of those he murdered. Not only are they present in his dreams but they also appear on the battleground, where he is fighting for his life. His own mind has turned against him and is defeating him – that's the only sign of a break in consciousness, right before he is killed.

I know that Shakespeare purists might have a problem with Rylance's take on Richard III. It is true that it's hard to imagine Rylance's grinning goblin as a warrior king, who died on the front lines, in the thick of battle. It is also difficult to make a connection to the same character, in earlier history plays. However, I believe that this production is more of a standalone piece. The fact that Queen Margaret is missing from Carroll's staging confirms this directorial decision.

The play is rarely performed unabridged; often, certain peripheral characters are removed entirely. In such instances extra lines are often invented or added from elsewhere in the sequence to establish the nature of characters' relationships. A further reason for abridgment is that Shakespeare assumed that his audiences would be familiar with the Henry VI plays, and frequently made indirect references to events in them, such as Richard's murder of Henry VI or the defeat of Henry's queen Margaret.[1]

Queen Margaret's choric figure foreshadows Richard's doomed end – she adds texture to the play. She also gives voice to an interesting belief that Richard III was the curse of God on England, in punishment for the dethronement of Richard II. His evil Machiavellian rule was a kind of cleansing, which ensured a return to universal goodness and light. This reading presupposes the position of England as the world's axis, both materially and spiritually. This idea of Divine Right and Appointment is still very much at work today – empires come and go but colonial exceptionalism endures.

Finally, it's good to remember that Richard III is somewhat of a propaganda piece. It's based on Thomas More's "History of King Richard III" which is an excessively unflattering portrayal of the king and a tribute to the reigning Tudors. The Tudors had seized Richard's throne in the Wars of the Roses, a series of dynastic wars between 1455 and 1485, in which competing branches of the royal family (Lancaster and York) fought over England's throne.

Now that Richard III's bones have been discovered under a parking lot in Leicester, there is a new drive to re-examine reality and correct some of the myths and political distortions written into history during the Tudor era.

---

[1] Wikipedia: Richard III (play):
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_%28play%29

The Shape of a Life by Stephen Greenblatt:
http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/02/the-shape-of-a-life-richard-iiis-twisted-bones.html

Cast

Samuel Barnett as Elizabeth
Johnny Flynn as Lady Anne
Mark Rylance as Richard III

Creative

By William Sshakespeare
Directed by Tim Carroll
Designed by Jenny Tirimani
Music by Claire van Kampen

…

Uncle Vanya
Vaudeville Theatre

1/11/13

As a dramatist, and from all reports as a man, Chekhov had no final solution to the problems of life. Quite simply, Chekhov did not have a message. He was showing life as he saw it during the social and philosophical milieu of his day. His characters are carefully composed amalgams of the gentry and provincials of his time. Each one rings perfectly true as a character. Inherent in many of the ironic satiric characterizations is an implied criticism of certain human and class weaknesses. But it is not a specific human or a specific class. Chekhov's detached and observant eye looked with gentle amusement and genuine sympathy on the fault-riddled characters he created. He did not judge them. He did not offer suggestions on how to improve them. This is why Chekhov's major plays end neither happily nor wholly tragically. He did not presume to have the answers to the questions he posed. [1]

Chekov's objective, non-sermonizing approach is plainly evident in "Uncle Vanya," a tragicomedy about wasted time and unrealized dreams. It's a straightforward plot about ordinary lives, yet its realism is moving in how it highlights universal truths.

Here is a short synopsis of the play from Wikipedia:

The play portrays the visit of an elderly Professor and his glamorous, much younger second wife, Yeléna, to the rural estate that supports their urban lifestyle. Two friends, Vanya, brother of the Professor's late first wife, who has long managed the estate, and Astrov, the local Doctor, both fall under Elena's spell, while bemoaning the ennui of their provincial existence. Sonya, the Professor's daughter by his first wife, who has worked with Vanya to keep the estate going, meanwhile suffers from the awareness of her own lack of beauty and from her unrequited feelings for Dr. Astrov. Matters are brought to a crisis when the Professor announces his intention to sell the estate, Vanya and Sonya's home and raison d'être, with a view to investing the proceeds to achieve a higher income for himself and his wife.[2]

Peter Toohey has argued that Uncle Vanya is "built around the confining boredom of 19th century Russian country estates." In this boxed-in, provincial life, hemmed in by drudgery, arrivals and departures become extremely important. The Professor and his wife's visit introduce chaos into the well-established routine of the estate. Their indolence and restlessness are contagious and provide a counterpoint to what seems to have kept country life together – steady work.

Their intrusion triggers a reckoning on the part of the characters who live on the estate. They begin to re-evaluate their lives and self-knowledge turns out to be paralyzing and bitter. There is an existentialist sense of loss of personal volition, of being an anonymous cog in a larger social narrative.

Vanya realizes how he has been used by his brother in law, a man whom he admired but now understands to be a self-absorbed charlatan. Astrov becomes acutely aware of his disconnectedness. He is burned out and cares more for forests than people.

There is a stunning motif of contemporary environmentalism expressed in his inner most thoughts.

ASTROFF. I have my own desk there in Ivan's room. When I am absolutely too exhausted to go on I drop everything and rush over here to forget myself in this work for an hour or two. Ivan and Miss Sonia sit rattling at their counting-boards, the cricket chirps, and I sit beside them and paint, feeling warm and peaceful. But I don't permit myself this luxury very often, only once a month. [Pointing to the picture] Look there! That is a map of our country as it was fifty years ago. The green tints, both dark and light, represent forests. Half the map, as you see, is covered with it. Where the green is striped with red the forests were inhabited by elk and wild goats. Here on this lake, lived great flocks of swans and geese and ducks; as the old men say, there was a power of birds of every kind. Now they have vanished like a cloud. Beside the hamlets and villages, you see, I have dotted down here and there the various settlements, farms, hermit's caves, and water-mills. This country carried a great many cattle and horses, as you can see by the quantity of blue paint. For instance, see how thickly it lies in this part; there were great herds of them here, an average of three horses to every house. [A pause] Now, look lower down. This is the country as it was twenty-five years ago. Only a third of the map is green now with forests. There are no goats left and no elk. The blue paint is lighter, and so on, and so on. Now we come to the third part; our country as it appears to-day. We still see spots of green, but not much. The elk, the swans, the black-cock have disappeared. It is, on the whole, the picture of a regular and slow decline which it will evidently only take about ten or fifteen more years to complete. You may perhaps object that it is the march of progress, that the old order must give place to the new, and you might be right if roads had been run through these ruined woods, or if factories and schools had taken their place. The people then would have become better educated and healthier and richer, but as it is, we have nothing of the sort. We have the same swamps and mosquitoes; the same disease and want; the typhoid, the diphtheria, the burning villages. We are confronted by the degradation of our country, brought on by the fierce struggle for existence of the human race. It is the consequence of the ignorance and unconsciousness of starving, shivering, sick humanity that, to save its children, instinctively snatches at everything that can warm it and still its hunger. So it destroys everything it can lay its hands on, without a thought for the morrow. And almost everything has gone, and nothing has been created to take its place. [Coldly] But I see by your face that I am not interesting you.

Both Vanya and Astrov are attracted to the beautiful Yelena. She returns Astrov's affection, but their love is impossible. Sonia admires Astrov as well, with silent forbearance, but nothing can come of this one-sided devotion. Yelena is cognizant of her misguided marriage to a much older man. She sees herself as "second rate," as an "incidental character" in life. There is no fully realized erotic encounter in the entire play. Passions must remain suffocated and submerged. Even the play's climax, where Vanya tries to shoot the Professor and misses, is a pseudo-climax that doesn't lead to a definitive denouement.

Chekov was a modernist. Along with Ibsen and Strindberg, he pioneered “indirect action” which is a technique whereby some of the action in the plot happens off-stage. Broken conversations and unseen events create disorientation. This is why Chekov’s plays seem to be suspended in time. We are never sure about how much time has elapsed between different acts. For example, Astrov’s seduction of Yelena seems abrupt, almost forceful. Yet we are told indirectly that he has been visiting the estate quite frequently. The intimacy between them must have built up to that moment, which we are suddenly made privy to.

This idea of creating distance between the audience and the performers on stage, of revealing the artifice of the play, reminded me of Cezanne and the birth of modern art. Cezanne too made the two-dimensionality of painting manifest. He showed us the tools of the artist – flat canvas, line, shape, pigment, texture. Modern art used art to call attention to art and that’s what Chekov seems to be doing as a playwright. It is interesting then that one of the most common complaints about this production of Uncle Vanya, directed by Lindsay Posner, is its two-dimensionality, its likeness to television (fittingly Sonia is played by Downton Abbey’s Laura Carmichael). Vaudeville Theatre’s shallow stage is held responsible for some of this flatness and so is the stolidly traditional, stiff approach to the play, where performance eclipses feeling. This two-dimensionality becomes meaningful in the context of Chekov’s modernist audience “estrangement.” It also struck me as being visually representative of the characters’ lives, which remain frustratingly thwarted and unfulfilled. Finally, the cramped stage is a metaphor for the crowding inside the house – emotional disquiet created by the compression of psychological space.

Perhaps Chekov is contrasting spacious countryside living with the congestion of urban centers. The Emancipation Reform, which abolished serfdom in Russia, was

introduced by Tsar Alexander II in 1861, when Chekov was one year old. Although Chekov's writing is hardly polemic, it does reflect the breakdown of an old social order and subsequent discussions about class, rights, and obstacles to communication across that class divide. He investigates his characters' relationship to the land. Peasants are deeply connected to it and depend on it for their sustenance. The rich whisk by it in fancy carriages and simply appreciate the view. They have no idea of its reality – the trees and bio-diversity that Astrov is so invested in.

The play ends with the departure of the urban outsiders (Yelena and the Professor). Everything returns to normal. Marina, the old nurse, embodies this stability. She is relieved that they will now be able to schedule their meals as usual. For Vanya, Astrov and Sonia, there is less relief or hope. Death seems to be their only chance of being visited by happy visions.

SONIA. What can we do? We must live our lives. [A pause] Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through the long procession of days before us, and through the long evenings; we shall patiently bear the trials that fate imposes on us; we shall work for others without rest, both now and when we are old; and when our last hour comes we shall meet it humbly, and there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we have suffered and wept, that our life was bitter, and God will have pity on us. Ah, then dear, dear Uncle, we shall see that bright and beautiful life; we shall rejoice and look back upon our sorrow here; a tender smile–and–we shall rest. I have faith, Uncle, fervent, passionate faith. [SONIA kneels down before her uncle and lays her head on his hands. She speaks in a weary voice] We shall rest. [TELEGIN plays softly on the guitar] We shall rest. We shall hear the angels. We shall see heaven shining like a jewel. We shall see all evil and all our pain sink away in the great compassion that shall enfold the world. Our life will be as peaceful and tender and sweet as a caress. I have faith; I have faith. [She wipes away her tears] My poor, poor Uncle Vanya, you are crying! [Weeping] You have never known what happiness was, but wait, Uncle Vanya, wait! We shall rest. [She embraces him] We shall rest. [The WATCHMAN'S rattle is heard in the garden; TELEGIN plays softly; MME. VOITSKAYA writes something on the margin of her pamphlet; MARINA knits her stocking] We shall rest.

---

[1] Virtual Theatre on Chekov: http://script.vtheatre.net/chekhov3.html

[2] Wikipedia on Uncle Vanya: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Vanya

Uncle Vanya – Study Guide by Michael J. Cummings:
http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/Chekhov.html

Why Life is So Boring by Anthony Gottlieb:
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/books/review/book-review-boredom-a-lively-history-by-peter-toohey.html?pagewanted=all&_r=3&

Cast

Vanya – Ken Stott
Yelena – Anna Friel
Astrov – Samuel West
Sonya – Laura Carmichael

Creative

Adapted by Christopher Hampton
Director Lindsay Posner
Designer Christopher Oram

…

Matilda the Musical
Cambridge Theatre
1/10/13

"Matilda" is a classic, upside-down children's story by Roald Dahl. With his usual contempt for heartwarming schmaltz, Dahl gives us sleazy, incompetent parents and sadistic, child-tossing school principals; intelligent little girls full of ideas and gumption and painfully timid teachers; imaginative, rebellious children and petty adults with limited mental and emotional ranges. Even the good adults in the story have something missing – whether it be spine or insight – and end up learning much from the scrappy kids around them.

"Matilda" incorporates powerful social commentary on modern life. Television addiction and the subsequent decline in IQ (Matilda loves to read books but her dad orders her to watch more TV), the sense of entitlement that comes from what is considered to be good parenting ("My mother says I'm a miracle!") and the utter destructiveness of bad parenting (Matilda's neglected teenage brother, who was raised on TV, is so disconnected and comatose, that he seems to suffer from mental illness).

Ultimately, "Matilda" is a coming of age story, not so much for little Matilda as for her teacher Miss Honey. It's amusing that societal rules require adult guardianship for the protection and betterment of children, when the child heroine in this story exhibits much more maturity and confidence than all the adults in her life. "Matilda" is also about the importance of intelligence and knowledge – books, alphabet blocks, classrooms, and libraries form the backdrop to most of the musical and Matilda is able to solve her predicaments by using her brains. Even her psychokinetic powers have something to do with her cleverness and boundless imagination. The juxtaposition of Matilda's brilliance against her family's comically frivolous way of life contains a pretty succinct message: gender, age, money or looks don't matter –

you are what you think. This is a story about shaping one's own life and identity, whatever age one might be, and about not being shy to rebel against oppression.

Rob Howell's set design is surprisingly malleable with wooden blocks transforming easily into bedrooms, libraries, classrooms, playgrounds and school gates. The music and lyrics are stirring and the dance numbers energetic. Most of the cast is composed of children, which makes the boisterous but perfectly executed choreography impressive.

Matilda's father exudes all the greasiness of a used car salesman. Her mother is a Latin-dance-crazed mix of vanity and resentment. Matilda's hammer-throwing headmistress is played by a man in drag. He's incredibly tall and muscular – a believable danger to children's happiness. Miss Honey is sweet and self-effacing, yet constantly struggling to define herself. Finally, Matilda is a little firecracker. She's bright, irrepressible and strong, even though she's pintsized. To this production's credit, Matilda is not cutified or polished into a generic child star. With her disheveled hair and stubborn mien, she looks real. I know, I have one of my own.

Cast

Matilda will be played by Eleanor Worthington Cox, Cleo Demetriou, Jade Marner and Hayley Canham
Bertie Carvel as Miss Trunchbull
Steve Furst as Mr Wormwood
Josie Walker as Mrs Wormwood
Peter Howe as Michael Wormwood
Hayley Flaherty as Miss Honey

Melanie La Barrie as Mrs Phelps
Matthew Malthouse as escapologist
Alastair Parker as Sergei
Nick Searle as henchman
Emily Shaw as acrobat
Marc Antolin as henchman
Verity Bentham as cook

Creative

From the book by Roald Dahl
Adapted by Dennis Kelly
Music & Lyrics by Tim Minchin
Directed by Matthew Warchus
Choreography by Peter Darling
Set & Costume design by Rob Howell
Lighting by Hugh Vanstone
Sound by Sismon Baker
Illusion by Paul Kieve

…

The Silence of the Sea
Trafalgar Studios
1/11/13

The Silence of the Sea is based on a novella of the same name written by Jean Bruller, under the pseudonym Vercors. The book came out in 1942, during the Nazi occupation of France. Bruller was part of the French resistance and a co-founder of an underground publishing house called Les Editions de Minuit.

During WWII, a German officer is billeted to a cottage in a coastal village in France. The cottage belongs to an old Frenchman and his niece. Unable to stop the "occupation" of their home by the enemy, they use silence to resist this encroachment on their lives. The German officer (Werner) is no stereotype. He's a music composer, sensitive, well-educated, painfully courteous and, to top it off, an enthusiastic Francophile. Initially, he's in thrall to German propaganda. He doesn't apologize for the war – he thinks great things will come out of it. He rhapsodizes about France's soul and culture and imagines that its merger with Germany's military muscle will lead to a stronger Europe. His remark that he enjoyed a stunning view of the sea because "a tank gives you great height" is an incisive encapsulation of what he doesn't understand about occupation.

Over the course of the play, Werner tries tirelessly to communicate with his French hosts. He jests, philosophizes, makes intimate revelations, entertains. He never forgets that he's a guest in their home. He remains standing during these one-sided conversations – he's never invited to sit down. But on he goes, continuing to rave about French thought and ideals.

The young woman's relationship with her uncle is unorthodox to say the least. He felt obligated to provide her shelter after his brother died as a consequence of the

war. We never see her speak to her uncle. Perhaps their silent resistance to Werner enables them to bond, however imperfectly. She loves her piano and speaks through the language of music. As she touches invisible keys to produce musical notes, she seems ethereal, otherworldly.

On a furlough to Paris, Werner sees the real face of occupation. His good friend, the Magician, and sundry Nazis humiliate a French waiter with incredible contempt and cruelty before committing violence against him. Werner encounters his friend the next morning – he's sprawled on the floor in a drunken stupor. Werner crushes his hand with the heel of his boot and rushes out.

When he gets back to the cottage by the sea, he's a changed man. His entire world has crumbled. He relates the terrible waiter story to his hosts. His mind is in turmoil. He goes up to his room and terrible noises issue from it. Is he on a rampage or is his mind reeling from complete chaos? We find out later that nothing has been smashed or moved in his room. At the end of his anguished tribulations, he comes down the stairs and bids his hosts farewell. He has asked to be transferred to the Eastern front where he knows certain death awaits him. For the first time we see him in a Nazi uniform. He acknowledges his role as an occupier. He cannot continue to be a part of the occupation.

The play is first and foremost about the awfulness of occupation and what it does to human beings. It's a relationship of domination and subordination, not one of respect and equality. Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon have written extensively about the psychology of occupation and colonialism. It deadens the occupied. The old man talks about not being able to celebrate beauty anymore. Césaire describes it as the "thingification" of the occupied and the decivilization of the occupier in that he gradually returns to savagery. Fanon explains this toxic relationship as follows: "The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular, a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing." The play highlights how this relationship is systemic and how it imposes limits on what individuals can do to overturn it.

It reminded me of Somerset Maugham's powerful short story "The Unconquered" which is also set in Nazi-occupied France. Ang Lee's film "Lust, Caution" based on the 1979 novella by Eileen Chang, is also at its core about the emotional and social detritus that accompanies colonial ventures. It is set in Hong Kong and Shanghai, during the Japanese occupation. For all of the play's articulation of this sad and miserable reality, I wondered if audiences would be able to make the connection with present day occupations, in which they themselves might be complicit.

The Silence of the Sea is also about communication. Language is important in defining Werner's emotional trajectory. Initially he relies heavily on possessive pronouns – everything is available for him to own. It's an obvious allusion to Germany's military expansionism. Werner's speeches are abstract, theoretical,

idealistic, disconnected from reality, whereas the narration provided by the old man is factual and down to earth. One is trying to rationalize a gross injustice while the other is intimately familiar with that reality. The girl, who is isolated in her own way, shares her love of music with Werner. They both speak the language of Bach's eighth prelude. Yet there is a communication barrier, which is too hard for them to surmount.

At the end of the play, when Werner leaves, the girl let's an anguished "I…" escape her lips. This is the first word she has spoken – it's a reminder of how the "I" is annihilated by a system of oppression which dictates how people must relate to one another. The play emphasizes the power of silence and juxtaposes it with relentless, effusive talk and chatter (provided by the German officer). A moral right does not have to be explained, whereas a moral wrong can never be justified, even with the most sophisticated oratory.

The young woman is played by Simona Bitmaté, an Audrey Tatou look-alike. She's a seemingly delicate, much put upon young woman with surprising internal strength and intensity. Her silence and invisible piano endow her with poetry and mystery. No wonder Werner entertains her with magic tricks. Werner is played by Leo Bill. He is arrogant and charming, annoying and pitiful, a buffoon and a magician. Finbar Lynch (the old man) is practical and plain-spoken in his narration, with just the right touch of sarcasm. His characterization is extremely credible. The set design is minimal (the actors mime everything), making the play's soundscape crucial. It is provided by Gregory Clarke.

The death of a bluebottle is woven into the storyline and it reminded me of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in which the death of an albatross brings about the curse of a "living death" – what better way to capture life under occupation.

And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow!

Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious sun uprist:
Then all averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist.
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
That bring the fog and mist.

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst

Into that silent sea.

Down dropped the breeze, the sails dropped down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

(From The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Cast

Finbar Lynch (Older Man)
Leo Bill (Werner)
Simona Bitmaté (Young Woman)

Creative

Director: Simon Evans
Designer: Ben Stones
Lighting Designer: David Plater
Sound Designer: Gregory Clarke

…

Julius Caesar
Donmar Warehouse
1/12/13

Phyllida Lloyd's Julius Caesar is an all female production set in a single-sex prison. The Donmar, which is supposed to be a boutique theatre outfitted with velvet seats for sophisticated audiences, is stripped down to look like a grey and grimy warehouse, furnished with unwelcoming plastic chairs. Bunny Christie's design is spot-on with its corrugated walls, metal stairwells, prison cameras and searchlights. We're inside a slammer.

The entire cast is dressed in grey hoodies and sweatpants and the props they use are the kind that might be available to prisoners putting on a play – toy guns, plastic gloves, metal carts, a tricycle and coarse trench coats. They also have some electric guitars and a drum set, which they employ to full advantage. The heavy metal music they play is loud, strident, assaultive.

Frances Barber plays Julius Caesar as a bully. She's butch, psychotic and obviously in control of the inmate social structure. I wish that her hamminess had been replaced with more dignity and sinister charisma. Cush Jumbo, in the role of Mark Antony, is her lesbian lover. The famous Mark Antony speech acquires a whole other dimension when delivered by Caesar's fierce, heartbroken paramour. Cassius is played by Jenny Jules. Not only is she an intelligent manipulator of the human psyche, but she also brings fire and excitement to the role. Her interaction with Brutus is particularly captivating. Harriet Walter's performance as Brutus is nothing short of brilliant. She endows the part with the complexity and naive idealism it deserves and makes transparent the inner conflicts that plague her relentlessly. She struggles to justify her actions in order to remain honorable. It's a fight worth witnessing.

Caesar is murdered in a violent scene where a bottle of bleach is forcibly emptied into Barber's mouth. The murder is filmed by one of the inmates, in real time, and projected on several surveillance monitors.

One of the play's most visually memorable moments is Caesar being feted by her prison devotees. A crowd of masked inmates carries her. They are all sporting her face. It's disturbing. It reminded me of the Venetian masks in Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut." In the film, masks signify illegitimate, secret, promiscuous activity. The scene is also an apt metaphor for a cult of personality, the idea of using mass media to create a god-like, ubiquitous image. Modern day politicians do it all the time and their constituents are often happy to indulge in ready to ingest hero worship.

What about the play's all-female cast, against the backdrop of a women's prison? I think it worked on many different levels.

In her review of the play, Alexandra Coghlan writes:

There's no ignoring gender in Julius Caesar. Whether it's Portia's "I grant I am a woman" speech, an enfeebled Caesar likened to a "sick girl", or Cassius raging against oppression – "our yoke and sufferance make us womanish" – the issue is written into the language and ideological fabric of the play. So all those who might be tempted to rage against the travesty of Phyllida Lloyd's all-female production for the Donmar should take their complaints directly to Shakespeare's door.

In short, Shakespeare's testosterone-pumped play is clearly asking for it – the need to negotiate gender roles in order to create interesting shifts in how the play feels and how the characters bond and work with one another. It's also a great way to

explore femaleness, by contrasting it with the masculinist world of the play. The naked body of the soothsayer prisoner in one of the final battlefield scenes is a case in point; the fragile vulnerability of her body is set against the brutality of war.

Some reviewers dismissed the play as an "absurd contrivance," a "gimmick" and compared it unfavorably to Mark Rylance and the all-male cast of Twelfth Night and Richard III at the Apollo Theatre. Although I enjoyed Rylance's star turn as much as anybody else, I found such criticism to be sexist and asinine. The women in Julius Caesar brought as much heart and talent to their roles as did the men at the Apollo Theatre. These reviewers embody society's resistance to seeing women, especially those of a certain age, on stage or in film. Alexandra Coghlan explains:

Her [Phyllida Lloyd's] public rationale is primarily a practical one – redressing the balance that gives women (and particularly those over 40) far fewer character roles than men in classical theatre. Pragmatic in philosophy, in practice it's an approach that yields some exhilarating results.

Exhilarating indeed. The staging of the play in a women's prison is genius. The political dynamics of prison life echo those of the Roman Republic: gang hierarchies and the dynamics of power, loyalty and tenuous allegiances, conspiracies, rivalries, corruption, and outright war. When presented in the restrictive confines of a penitentiary, the human need to rebel against suffocating authority becomes even more lucid and urgent. As soon as the inmates indulge in their liberation fantasies by eliminating the dictatorial Caesar in a theatrical production, the prison wardens intercede and put them in their place. That's institutional authoritarianism for you. The audience too is playing a part, within the limits of institutional rules dictated by society and state. They are part of a larger societal play, in which they're watching a play within a play.

Lloyd's production was also criticized for the ensemble being "uneven in caliber." This might have something to do with the inclusion of ex-offenders in the cast, all graduates of the non-profit Clean Break, which "uses drama to help women in the criminal-justice system." It reminded me of Deborah Luster's beautiful black and white photographs of the Angola Prison Drama Club's staging of "The Life of Jesus Christ" at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

The theatre offers us a chance to recognize our humanity by offering us glimpses of ourselves and allowing us to share that important experience with others. Prisons dehumanize inmates and performing Shakespeare can empower them.

"I think Shakespeare is fantastic in terms of teaching us about what it means to be human, exploring the full range of human emotion," says [Jonathan Shailor, founder and director of The Shakespeare Prison Project] referring to his belief that connecting with Shakespearean characters can develop a greater self-awareness, discipline and moral reasoning. And among inmates, this seemed to ring true.

Even though the second half of the play, with its slack battle scenes, was a bit less successful, all in all, this was an electric, thought-provoking production. Exactly what theatre should be.

Julius Caesar, Donmar Warehouse by Alexandra Coghlan: http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/julius-caesar-donmar-warehouse

Theatre in prison – Reaching for the stars: Another way to reduce reoffending by Askham Richard: http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21567975-another-way-reduce-reoffending-reaching-stars

NPR Audio Slideshow: Prisoners At Play In 'The Life Of Jesus Christ': http://www.npr.org/2012/06/23/155456533/audio-slideshow-prisoners-at-play-in-the-life-of-jesus-christ

The Theatre of Empowerment, The Shakespeare Prison Project: http://shakespeareprisonproject.blogspot.com/

Cast

Jade Anouka
Frances Barber
Clare Dunne
Jenny Jules
Cush Jumbo
Harriet Walter

Creative

By William Shakespeare
Creative Team
Director: Phyllida Lloyd
Designer: Bunny Christie
Lighting Designer: Neil Austin
Sound Designer: Tom Gibbons
Composer: Gary Yershon

…

Old Times
Harold Pinter Theatre
1/12/13

I wanted to see "Old Times" because of Harold Pinter's Nobel lecture in 2005, when he was awarded the Prize for Literature. Entitled "Art, truth and politics," it is, in

large part, a scathing critique of American imperialism. What I didn't remember was that he had discussed "Old Times" in that speech. He had talked about truth being forever elusive in drama, about there being many truths. He had explained how his plays are "engendered by a line, a word or an image" and for "Old Times" that word had been "dark."

'Dark' I took to be a description of someone's hair, the hair of a woman, and was the answer to a question. [...] I found myself compelled to pursue the matter. This happened visually, a very slow fade, through shadow into light.

[...] 'Dark.' A large window. Evening sky. A man, A (later to become Deeley), and a woman, B (later to become Kate), sitting with drinks. 'Fat or thin?' the man asks. Who are they talking about? But I then see, standing at the window, a woman, C (later to become Anna), in another condition of light, her back to them, her hair dark.

That's exactly how Ian Rickson's production of the play starts. Husband and wife, Deeley and Kate, (played by Rufus Sewell and Kristin Scott Thomas) are seated across from each other on comfortable couches, talking about the imminent arrival of Kate's friend, Anna (played by Lia Williams). During this entire conversation, Anna stands in the shadows, a dark silhouette against the light streaming in from the window. It's the exact visual cue that had inspired Pinter.

Deeley questions Kate about her relationship with Anna. She tells him that Anna was her only friend back in her youth when they shared an apartment. Deeley is obviously curious, Kate remains vague in her answers. Once Anna makes her entrance they begin to reminisce about their past. Anna does most of the talking. Kate remains silent and non-committal.

Soon Anna and Deeley begin to vie for Kate's attention, not just in the present but also in the past. They compete against each other for Kate's possession with songs and elaborate recollections. As the piece progresses their narratives begin to conflict and challenge one another. Pinter is analyzing memory – its unreliability, its suspect relationship to truth and the possibility of its devious misuse. "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place," says Anna. Memory can mix with desire and become vivid and real, even when divorced from truth.

Throughout the first act, Kate remains passive and aloof, while the other two characters try to give her shape through their words. They talk about her as if she were "dead." In fact, she does seem to exist on a different plane.

In the second act, we move from the drawing room to the bedroom. The orientation of the furniture (two beds instead of two couches) is flipped around. Kate is taking a bath and in her absence Anna and Deeley lead us to believe that they might have known each other. There is unmistakable sexual chemistry between them but that too becomes a weapon in their battle for control.

Once Kate reappears on stage, everything changes. No longer is she detached or ethereal. She articulates her own version of the truth with such frightening, irrefutable authority that both Deeley and Anna are left speechless. Instead of being seated for the most part, as in the first act, Kate is now standing. She is in control. At the end of the play, Deeley is left sobbing quietly while Anna turns off the lights and lies down on a bed, as if she had died in accordance with Kate's memory of her death in their apartment, many years ago. Memory is no longer an abstract interpretation of a defunct past, it overwhelms the present.

"Old Times" is one of Pinter's most enigmatic plays. To me, this piece is more about memory, truth, language and power than a specific storyline.

Pinter's obsession with language is on full display in this piece. Kristen Palmer describes it as "the self-conscious use of language – characters commenting on words that they don't hear often, misunderstanding the object of sentences, using strange constructions. The careful placement of pauses, of stage directions, of laughter – that seems menacing." These linguistic devices are combined with slippery memories in order to present a skewed world where there is no distinction between truth and fiction. We are confronted with the complicated relationship

between memory and the arbitrary construction of the past, of history, which in turn delineates identity and the outlines of the characters in the play.

In the first act, Kate seems to represent an idea, an object of desire, which is fleshed out by the other two characters. Kristin Scott Thomas plays her beautifully as an alluring, languorous puzzle. Deeley and Anna bully each other in order to control the narrative, through the intentional use of memory, language and sexual one-upmanship. Yet they are left defeated when Kate finds her own voice and destroys their version of the truth in a terrifyingly final way.

In his article, Demolition Man – Harold Pinter and "The Homecoming," (The New Yorker, December 24, 2007) John Lahr explains Pinter's approach to playwriting:

The thrill of the play is its realization of Pinter's aesthetic: a precarious balance between ambiguity and actuality. "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false," Pinter said in his Nobel speech. "A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." This paradoxical approach forces both the actors and the audience to play harder. Both are drawn into a highly charged dramatic metaphor in which, as Pinter said, "everything to do with the play is in the play."

The characters' parries, challenges, and volte-faces are violently emotional improvisations, whose drama is only underscored and heightened by Pinter's signature pauses. "The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear," he once wrote. "It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place."

He continues:

I was drawn to the charisma of the work in the same way that Pinter—I later learned—had been compelled by Shakespeare. "You are called upon to grapple with a perspective in which the horizon alternately collapses and re-forms behind you, in which the mind is subject to an intense diversity of atmospheric," he wrote in "A Note on Shakespeare," in 1950, six years before he started to do a similar thing with his own plays.

Cast

Kristin Scott Thomas as Kate
Rufus Sewell as Deeley
Lia Williams as Anna

Creative

Harold Pinter: Playwright
Ian Rickson: Director

Hildegard Bechtler: Designer
Peter Mumford: Lighting
Stephen Warbeck: Music
Paul Groothuis: Sound
Sam Jones CDG: Casting
Sonia Friedman Productions

…