

# The Filter<sup>^</sup> REVIEW

Theatre reviews (2004 – 2016), by Anthony J. Evans

## My Beautiful Friend (Parts 1 & 2)

*Rose Theatre, Kingston, March 16th 2017*

I entered the theatre wondering what the collective noun for so many literary minded, self indulgent, menopausal women is. I did feel out of place, and unsure of whether my affection for the Neapolitan series is sincere.

I "discovered" the work of Elena Ferrante via recommendations from men, and delight in telling people how much I like these "women's" novels. Maybe I thought I was jumping early on a bandwagon of men demonstrating their feminist solidarity, signalling how the existing canon of great literature (overwhelmingly "our" literature) isn't enough. But if that were the case, there'd be more men there. Maybe this isn't about men at all.

Indeed one thing the performance did well was emphasise the social constraints in addition to the gender inequalities. Lenu is escaping, and coming to terms with, the attitudes and expectations around working class females and her triumphs are in spite of both. Will she escape her roots? Her friend? Her mother's limp? Of course not. But she goes beyond them all.

I'm dreading the supposed film version but in the age of the Netflix boxset I wonder if that'd be a more suitable vehicle than the stage. I fear that the characters are too rich, and their relationships too complex, to suit theatre. We need to feel that Lila and Nino are always subtly present, but at critical moments (and in some cases after several years of physical absence) cross a line. Whilst the set was inventive and allowed the characters to demonstrate their presence in each other's thought, it failed to convey the time span. Even though I watched Part 1 (a 2 hour performance) and Part 2 (a 2 hour performance) with just a short tequila break in between, it was a fleeting experience. We weren't surprised by any reappearance, and we didn't miss anyone.

I read all four novels over a two-year period, slowing down towards the end to savour whatever was still to come. And the conclusion happened to coincide with this play. Having become so affectionate toward the world within the novels, I was unsure about confronting someone else's representation so soon. And it did feel geared towards existing fans, with the first part in particular moving quickly through events rather than exploring the basis of the central friendship. It was almost as if it were serving as a reminder to us of what had happened, rather than tell its own story. In fact, much of the play felt like the Netflix series openings that recap what happened in the previous series. I wouldn't want to watch a staging of Harry

Potter with a quick run through what happened in the first couple of books. The urge to be faithful is sometimes just not an option.

I loved the poster: Lenu intense, and Lila disengaged. For Lila though despite the physical resemblance I did not enjoy her portrayal. Lila should be cutting, not abrasive. She struck me as loud, common, and abrasive and it is a mystery why men would be obsessed.

In fact, I didn't understand the decision to allow the actors to use their own accents. I wanted to see Naples, and a specific social situation. There was no need to generalise the experience, and losing the commonality of enunciation jarred. As did the odd looking cast. Don't get me wrong, I don't *need* actors to look and sound like their characters (after all that wouldn't be acting), but there needs to be a reason. It needs to be consistent and coherent. In some cases fitting actors to roles is understandable, and it can be highly effective. But in this instance I just didn't get it. Why use the same actor to play two roles, if part of the message relates to distinguishing paternity; the physical visibility of the father in the son; cases of uncertain identity; or the surprise of seeing someone you weren't expecting? Maybe I answered my own question, but I suspect not. I suspect they only wanted a small cast. Unfortunately it meant that the cliffhanger from book 2 (Nino being in the audience) is undermined by the fact that the actor who played Nino is in the audience at the end of the book 4 (but Nino isn't). The mirror between the events on Ischia in the kitchen, then one year later on the beach, are undercut but the same actor playing a new character on that very beach. And we're supposed to see Alfonso take on the physical appearance of Lila, but we don't.

The set captured the frenzy of the neighbourhood and was sensitive to, without shying away from, the more graphic incidents. Indeed the use of dolls to represent these, and indeed to reflect the actual dolls, was truly genius. I am still emotionally moved by the critical scene involving Tina. The utilisation of the audience for the book talks worked very well (although the tension didn't have time to build for Nino's appearance).

The soundtrack seemed to introduce nostalgia for the audience, rather than the characters.

In the programme notes the Director mentioned that she wanted to dwell on Lenu's status as a narrator, and this necessitated a lot of stage time. It was a remarkable demonstration of endurance by Niamh Cusack, who held the momentum of the entire play and brought it right through the epic tale.

The affection that I personally feel for Lenu is that she embodies the imposter syndrome. Us mediocre academics/published authors struggle since we don't compare ourselves to the rest of the public, or even our peers per se, but to the unpublished geniuses that we know. Our challenge is to decide how much to draw from them – what's the fine line between fraud and simply getting things done? There's no value to Lila's unpublished work. Regardless of whether Lenu is better or worse, that's all we've got. With women, in Naples, we have to be grateful for whatever we get.

Is Lenu mediocre? Perhaps not as much as she thinks, but to some extent yes. But I think that's the point - we need mediocrity to build a tradition. If only the exceptional are treated as if they're worth the effort and investment then no one will make it.

For what it's worth, I view Lenu and Lila as two alternate paths, probably imagined by the author herself. Lila kills her babies, the author destroys their work. You need to be cruel and callous, and sometimes manipulative to boot. And ultimately we're left with Lenu: the disappearance of Lila is Elena Ferrante's acceptance of who she is.

I didn't want this review to be about Elena Ferrante, or the novels, but I guess it has to be. I was worried that this play would be opportunistic but it wasn't. It added to the story, and was highly enjoyable. 4 hours in a theatre seat may sound daunting but it's a credit to the ensemble that it flew by quickly, and I wished it lasted longer. Committing this epic emotional rollercoaster to the stage at all is ambitious and maybe impossible to do right. That's the strength of the novels. But I'm glad for the attempt, and delighted to have seen these characters through the eyes of others.

## Hapgood

*Hampstead Theatre, January 15th 2016*

I've been thinking of little else than the events of this play for a good week; is Hapgood *that* good? Famously slated during its first run, this now is the result of a rewrite and a different approach and has been warmly received by critics. I can't imagine that the play has changed that much, and view this more a reflection of Stoppard's unimpeachable reputation and our increased sophistication when it comes to pop science.

Hapgood is a play about spies but is clearly a play about science, and it is impressive. We see that spying is a zero sum game and ultimately futile for that reason. As either Hapgood (a female spymaster juggling career with motherhood) or Blair (her establishment boss) says, when referring to the Soviets, "we should write each other Christmas cards". A rugby match provides a useful background to reinforce this message, and the nihilism of competition. And yet science works. Whilst espionage offsets, science advances. My favourite passage is Kerner (a Russian physicist sent by the KGB, turned by Hapgood, possibly turned back again - "Paul [Blair] thinks I was a triple, but I was definitely not, I was past that, quadruple at least, maybe quintuple") saying that his exposure wouldn't matter. He could be a spy or not a spy, he could work for one side or the other. That doesn't matter because the science remains the same. He arrived in England not to seek asylum, but because he wanted an IBM 195. His motivation is the truth, and the scientific pursuit of truth doesn't have sides. Indeed this was a sophisticated portrayal of the scientific method, bridging quantum mechanics (in particular the uncertainty principle) with security - "the experimenter makes the choice. You get what you interrogate for".

I felt Stoppard's take on crime writing was a little rich - through Kerner he expresses the view that science is more honest than fiction. Scientists present a puzzle and then solve it. They don't save puzzles in order to mislead their audience, then surprise them with a plot twist, and take glory for appearing smart. Stoppard follows through on this promise, revealing the secret to the whole play (I think) in the very first scene (albeit still having some fun by incorporating a twist that isn't a twist), but this hardly means he isn't showing off. Indeed science writing has moved on since when this play was written, as one of the most popular forms of science writing is exactly that type of "save up puzzles, present something as counterintuitive, then reveal the explanation" that Freakonomics has launched.

Hapgood is a play about doubles (duplicate briefcases, twins, beams of light) and I suspect there are (at least) two interpretations of events that are plausible. But I really don't know whether not knowing is the point. It was fun to keep hearing the voice of Sherlock,

It's never twins

I had some reservations about performances - most of the cast seemed around 10 years younger than their roles, and this grated. When Kerner used a "moth in St Paul's cathedral" analogy to explain the relative size of an electron and its nucleus he said it as if he was thinking on his feet, despite using a moth metaphor immediately before. This reinforced the idea that the sophisticated part of the play is the link between the plotline and the science. It isn't the science itself. Prominent Physicists don't build their reputation off the back of explaining basic quantum mechanics to establishment figures pretending they don't want to know. The Seven Bridges of Königsberg is a mathematical puzzle that students learn in high school. Everyone has heard of Euler. Implying otherwise is showing off.

I did spend much of the week trying to understand Euler's proof, and was disappointed that this wasn't critical to the plot. Despite having read the play before and attempted to map out the movements in Scene 1, I was still lost when I saw it take place before me. I'm not sure if I enjoyed this, or felt disappointed that it remained so far beyond my comprehension. But opening a play with three (!) pages of stage directions is bold and watching it unfold is worth the entry fee alone. Let me repeat that - this play is worth watching purely to see an enactment of the Bridges of Königsberg. I feared it'd be less impressive than a Tommy Cooper routine with balls and cups, and whilst it was less satisfying it was more enthralling. The fact that you also get an espionage thriller, several layers of humour, and genuine tenderness rounds it into an impressive evening. I went expecting to see a microcosm of what Stoppard would later achieve with Arcadia (they even shared the same lead cast). But this stands on its own feet as a very strong play. It's tellingly Stoppard and the performances were excellent.

One last thing - the play was published in 1988 and the first performance was on March 4th. It includes the following exchange:

Kerner: The West is morally superior, in my opinion. It is unjust and corrupt like the East, of course, but here it means the system has failed; at home it means the system is working. But the system can change.

Blair: No, it can't. Come on, Joseph, *you know them* - Budapest in '56 - Prague in '68 - Poland in '81 - we've been there! - **and it's not going to be different in East Berlin in '89**. They can't afford to lose

I noticed that the passage in bold was absent.

## Aladdin

*Mayflower Theatre, Southampton, December 31st 2015*

I shouldn't really be reviewing pantomimes here, but have realised there's [a precedent](#) so what the hell. A panto is a Christmas ritual and best watched with family, and best to watch family. My benchmark will be the warmth that accompanies familiar faces on stage, and a genuine bond between the performers and their audience. This occasion was different though, and a very different beast.

On entry we were handed 3D glasses and as we made our way up to the Circle we wondered how a live pantomime could be anything *but* 3D? But the cynicism generated by fanciful special effects and the somewhat tragic combination of washed up entertainers and desperate young actors was vanquished by the professionalism of the display. Joe Pasquale is someone I've always found unfunny on television, but clearly this is his forte and it is a good thing that large scale productions can give him a career that doesn't rely on the contrived. He was confident, spontaneous, engaging and made me laugh. His delivery of highly accomplished slapstick (such as getting dragged up by the curtain; doing somersaults above the stalls; and a terrific comic sequence with several of the cast) were brilliant.

What really left me impressed was the use of 3D. On retrospect it was not a gimmick and makes me wonder how else to portray the genie if not using special technology. It worked very well and unlike many 3D movies that I've seen it went overboard and that is a good thing.

This was great entertainment and made me re-evaluate why we don't do pantos every year. Whilst it lacks the charm and genuineness of a local production staging, the all round professionalism was well worth the step up in price and expectations.

## The Winter's Tale

*Garrick Theatre, 12th November 2015*

Many months ago (long enough that November seemed too distant to be thinking about theatre tickets) I was on a train back from London after a night out. I was browsing the internet and saw an announcement that Kenneth Branagh would be directing a production of *The Winter's Tale*. I was stunned into excitement, and immediately sought 2 seats. The only place I could find any availability (at all) was a third party reseller that were charging a premium and looked dodgy. I figured that £200+ was worth paying even for the *chance* that those tickets might be genuine.

My theatre-going has been curtailed by the general ambivalence of middle age, regular work trips that take me away from home, and two young children. In some ways this foray to the Garrick went against what I used to stand for, which was a cheap night out and a close connection between audience and stage. My previous self would find an annual pilgrimage to spend a vast sum on a blockbuster performance with famous stars an insult. But if there's one thing that governs my tastes it's the bond that I have with the text. I'm not literate enough to have a wide canon of expertise nor interest. There are a few plays that I love, and if I see that they're on that's enough. *The Winter's Tale* stands above all else.

Remarkably, this is Branagh's first appearance on the London stage since [Ivanov](#). So there you go, clearly I am a cultural philistine who only goes to see actors that I've already heard of. And I also got very excited when I heard Judy Dench would be appearing as well. But I avoided any previews, to save disappointment in case the tickets were fake.

A month before the performance I even called the company and asked if they were fake. They told me there weren't, but I figured that's exactly what a fake theatre ticket seller *would* say. Then, when two tickets arrived by post a week or so before the performance, the branding and quality gave me little confidence that I would be getting in. Perhaps this just demonstrated how out of touch I was. Thankfully, all was well.

*The Winter's Tale* throws up several challenges, and I was keen whether this production would confront them, or merely rely on an all star cast that would undoubtedly lead to a sell out regardless of the overall quality. It exceeded expectations: it was original, inventive, and compelling. Branagh provided one of the most plausible and believable depictions of Leontes' descent as I have seen. The definitive lines were delivered well, but done so as part of the

broader change in character. This wasn't an actor relying on Shakespeare's word play to signal his state of mind. Indeed the reaction to the declaration of the Oracle (the Jeremy Kyle of its day) was believable in its instant rejection and then immediate repentance. It was a joy to watch.

An important theme in the play is the strength and resilience of the main female characters - in particular Hermione and Paulina. Casting Judy Dench provided a good excuse to give greater weight to Paulina, whose importance as the voice of reason (and indeed a little vindictiveness), overwhelms her husband and every other man on the stage. Dench's centrality was emphasised by taking on the role of Time, as well. She actually carried the play forward. Seeing her vie with Leontes was intense. After the arrival of Florizel and Perdita in Sicily she is dismissive, but as the characters leave the stage she gets closer to Perdita and stops smart. Our vantage from the left stalls allowed us to see Dench's facial expression clearly, and it was the greatest moment of acting I've ever seen. Majestic.

The set was clever and the use of drapery combined well with the challenge of changing seasons. The delightful projector at the opening of the play (and indeed the general Christmas theme) not only set the play in an appropriate 19th century imperial time period, but also permitted an effective and truly scary adherence to [the greatest stage direction in theatre](#). John Shrapnel's Camillo was strong - he does a good facial expression of complete bafflement. I found Hermione hard to fathom, and was disappointed that the build up to the final revelation was met with laughter. I don't believe we should be mocking Leontes for being gullible. We should be like him, and witness magic. This is a criticism of the crowd, not the direction.

Given the strength of character in Sicily the Bohemian scenes were always going to feel like a distraction. The necessary lightness and frivolity was provided but Autolycus failed to take the show into a new direction. It was all highly enjoyable, but I was itching for the reunion. If reasonably priced tickets are still available I'd be surprised, but eat them up. This is an exceptional play that provides opportunities for some stunning performances, and this production has provided them. If you only go to one play this year, and even if you've spent a few hundred quid, it'll still be an inspired decision.

## The Real Thing

*The Old Vic, 30th April 2010*

I'm not altogether sure that 'The Real Thing' is Stoppard at his best. His renown stems from making the intellectual accessible - sprinkling dialogue with references to deep philosophy, that may appear conceited but combine to shift attention from the "theatrics" (e.g. delivery, set design) to the ideas. But I arrived at the theatre without even realising that it was published in 1982, ahead of 'Arcadia'. Indeed whilst the subject matter, at its core, is the meaning of love, the emotional exchanges are underpinned by some fascinating musings on not only love, but how we experience it, how we understand it, and how we write about it. In that regard it is a triumph.

The standout scenes of the play were the opening confrontation (the Rembrandt place mate joke is one of the funnies I've seen) and the self-realisation that the protagonist experiences following a conversation with his daughter, and then with his ex-wife. Whilst I won't reveal the wonderfully exploited device, there is a lot of R.S. Trapp present ("you cannot see the picture if you're standing inside the frame"). Indeed the protagonist - Henry - contained everything you want. Flappishly irritating in terms of his wit and banter, masking a vulnerability that you can't help but pity. Toby Stephan's performance was every bit as engaging as I was hoping for. The debate between him and Annie regarding the literary merits of an ex-cons TV play could have descended into a cliché. But it didn't. The analogy of writing-as-cricket-bat was beautifully done, as was the distinction between respecting *writers* vs. respecting *words*. The play is as much about the craft of writing as it is about the act of loving.

I don't believe the play has dated. Yes, a European common currency means that some of the early word play about francs vs. Frank etc., will lose their humour. Yes the heavy use of pop music establishes that period. But if anything the central concern about how two marriages amongst friends intertwine and splinter has become a kitsch. It stands up well, it complements the body of Stoppard's work, and offers some great parts that actors can really set their teeth into. Go see it.

## Twelfth Night

*Duke of York's, 8th February 2010*

I've never really known what to make of 'Twelfth Night'. It seems prime fodder as focal point on the debate about the gentrification of Shakespeare. As we all know, The Globe was down to earth (literally) and his plays were not written as elite entertainment. For those of us introduced to his works through a combination of examination necessity, school strips to Stratford, or as voyeurs as television stars to get back to their roots (and locate some form artistic integrity), the elitism is hard to budge. Outreach efforts tend to be patronising, and cheap tickets lose their filtering device.

In many ways the RSC is the *bête noir* to my reviewing philosophy. They produce plays for plays sake and parade a manufactured elocution that I find grating. However the ingredients for this production were amicable: a famous cast, a West End theatre, and Shakespeare's ultimate pantomime.

For that's what Twelfth Night is, and I resent following the text blindly. There's no need for this to be couched in the language of the time, as this inevitably jars with the timeless slapstick that shines through.

The production was fast paced (as well it should be) but perhaps too fast paced. The narrative device rests on a backstory that was glossed over (am I a cretin for being reminded of how well 'Lost' combines plot-forwarding with flashbacks?) and the first few acts went by in a blur. Characters left the stage before any true characterisation, and those of us not overly familiar with the text were lost amongst the merriment. The standout performances by Richard McCabe (as Sir Toby) and James Fleet (as Sir Andrew) were a refreshing distraction from the unrequited love that forms the main storyline. Indeed the goading of Malvolio (Richard Willson), the sheer belly-laughing absurdity of his yellow stockings cross gartered, the resulting pathos of his incarceration - suitably came to the fore.

From fart noises to trap doors (and an especially ingenious box-tree prop) we were witnessing comedy, wrapped up in unnecessary showmanship. As panto this works, and Gregory Doran delivered a hectic and funny interpretation. Maybe the RSC isn't as pretentious as I thought.

## Speaking in Tongues

*Duke of York's Theatre, 6th October 2009*

You know you've made it as a theatre critic when you walk through the doors and are met by an usher who says "Dr & Mrs Evans, we have upgraded your seats to the Royal Circle". Then, alas, the combination of a half-empty theatre and credit card technology makes you realise that your £10 a pop "restricted view" tickets have *merely* hit the jackpot.

The Duke of York's have been putting on decent, affordable, plays for some time, demonstrating that the traditional downplaying of the "West End" as little more than musicals and cameos is a caricature. *Speaking in Tongues* comes from Australian writer Andrew Bovell and is, in a word, "intricate". The use of video gives it a glossy, cinematic feel that sits well with it being comfortably within the genre of a "thriller". It opens with two pairs of adulterers wrestling with the guilt (and uneasiness) of their actions, their dialogue interwoven. The use of echoes and (apologies for not knowing the right word for this) the-finishing-of-each-others-sentences reminds you that this is a play, and must be a play, and lays a foundation for the interwoven plotlines.

All four actors were terrific, and the reason I noticed the play in the first place - John Simm - touched upon both the plucky, flawed nature of Danny Kavanagh ('The Lakes') and the cynical detective Sam Tyler ('Life on Mars'). The small, intimate cast, switching between characters, held the complex play together well, and despite the nihilistic and punishing (and at times quite terrifying) themes it was an engrossing evening.

## Arcadia

*Duke of York's Theatre, 24th July 2009*

The only other production of 'Arcadia' that I've seen was staged in a small Oxford playhouse with a distinctly AmDram feel. It was about 10 years ago and a school friend shouted "poor" in judgment of the actor playing Bernard Nightingale. That incident lived with me as a testing ground for how an audience should behave, and the production lived with me as a testimony to the brilliance of Tom Stoppard.

'Arcadia' is decidedly AmDram. Whilst it has its share of poignancy it is above all else a vehicle for some fantastic dialogue. The fact that Stoppard decorates that vehicle with so much intellectual commentary (e.g. chaos theory, Fermat's Last Theorem, landscape gardening, romanticism, modernism, leave anything I've missed out in the comments...) shouldn't detract from the accessibility of the piece. It is barnstorming, and watching it performed really makes you realise that.

As is likely the case Samantha Bond's version of Hannah Jarvis was too shrieky and het up. If that sounds misogynistic it probably is, but Lady Croom (played by Nancy Carroll) is *supposed* to be over the top, but did it without grating. Indeed she was brilliant, as was the perfect comic delivery by George Pott's Ezra Chater. My only frustration with this play is that the protagonist - Thomasina Coverly - is such a precocious, annoying person. It's unavoidable, but it's hard to enjoy watching her on stage. Especially in light of the eerie finale, this is a pity.

Performances like this make me realise why I enjoy theatre. It's not because I feel I have anything meaningful to contribute, or even a desire to be seen as anything other than a naive and unsophisticated philistine. But it's just good fun. It makes you think, it makes you laugh, and - with an appropriate pause at the end - it makes you clap.

## The Winters Tale

*The Old Vic, 1st July 2009*

Surely the finest stage direction in the history of theatre (and possibly the most famous too) is

Exit, pursued by a bear

I confess to being a little vulgar, and in the same way that you can infer the quality of a curry house by its lime pickle, this stage direction can (for me) make or break a production. Sam Mendes went for comedy, as a large (incredible) bear walked behind Antigonus and just as the seasoned South Bank audience couldn't suppress a pantomime style "it's behind you" any longer a crack of thunder shook the stage. Afterward we debated whether the stage direction actually took place (or whether the thunder represented the end of the section), but it was all jolly good fun.

'The Winter's Tale', in essence, is about the sublime juxtaposition of fun on the one hand (genuine, country-dancing, rollicking fun) and the deepest, darkest depths of despair that simmer before erupting. The way Mendes coped with the seemingly inexplicable was fantastic. The lighting alluded to Leontes *imagining* his wife's misdemeanours, and these dream-like sequences lended plausibility to a fundamentally implausible play, (whilst I have reservations about the range of Simon Russell Beale this is one of the most believable Leonte's you'll see). And whilst I think the play can be staged without resorting to magic, the use of real magic to reveal the message from the oracle provided coherency. As ever the issue of Mamillius rested uneasily (we're not supposed to have forgotten about him at the end), but there's such a range within the work I imagine the actors *love* it.

As part of 'The Bridge Project' the ensemble blended British theatre royalty with American populism, but I can't help feeling that the same cast simultaneously appearing in too such different plays doesn't work.

Ethan ~~Hunt~~ Hawke [thanks Mandy] has greater stage presence than I'd feared, and gave a resounding performance (although he played Autolyous a little too sinister for my taste), and the casting split the English and US actors in a fluent manner (indeed the set design "bridged" the production as well). However the character of Hermione should be, above all, stoic, and the elegance and poise on show exposed the youth of the actress. I know the 'The Bridge Project' is more than a gimmick, but I can't help feeling that the same cast was a disadvantage. Finally, a minor quibble: "At my request he would not" should not be funny. It's *frightening*.

## The Cherry Orchard

*Radlett Arts Centre, Thursday 19th March*

*The Old Vic, Wednesday 17th June*

This is a little harsh, I know, but given that I've seen two different productions of Chekhov's 'The Cherry Orchard' within the space of a few months, I've decided to write a joint review. The first was an "AmDram" (at least I assume it was) travesty at our local arts centre. The second was a Hollywood gilded triumph on the South Bank. Contrasts abound.

Kevin Spacey is currently advertising American Airlines, claiming that it's hard to define what constitutes a "good" seat, but that you know it when you find it. In Radlett, we spent the second half in the dead centre of the single tiered-raked seating. These would be the most expensive seats in any theatre, and the "sweet spot" that most actors tend to deliver to. As regular followers will know by now, I am not a fan of this style of acting, believing that it's the role of a decent actor (and indeed producer) to forge an individual contract with each member of the audience. We are not an "audience", we are a collection of participants. But on paper, we had the best view in the house.

By contrast, regardless of where the "best" seats at the Old Vic are, the "worst" are almost certainly P5 and P6 in the Lillian Baylis Upper Circle. The Old Vic arches in not so much an Upper "Circle", but a rectangle.

Consequently unless you are in the centre of the seating you will be facing the opposite side of the audience, not the stage. Indeed 5 and 6 are the first seats in the back row (closest to the stage), so you are sat perpendicular to the stage and so high up you can only make out about two thirds of it. As I reminded Faith, this was why the tickets are only £10 (and they are clearly advertised as restricted view), so I don't have a problem. Indeed my philosophy is that I'd rather watch 4 shows with a craning neck than 1 show in the plum centre. Yes, I can't see all the action, but I've paid 30 quid less than you and you. So, on paper, the worst view in the house.

But the "view" is misleading, because we don't come to theatre to watch. If we did, we'd buy it on DVD. Complaining about the "view" is like being at Goodison Park next to someone whingeing that you can't see the far corner spot. If you want a perfect view from the half way line, watch it on Sky. The reason we turn up is precisely to crane our necks, miss some of the action and be too close to others - to let people piss in our back trouser pocket and vomit up a three week old meat pie. In footie, in theatre.

Indeed the seats at the Vic were infinitely "better" than the ones in Radlett, because they were (i) cheaper; (ii) at a decent performance. In Radlett, I was

thinking that an even better seat would be one at the bar. At the Old Vic, I wouldn't have been anywhere else. And this is the point. You don't need to see everything to experience it. You don't need to be plum centre to appreciate the quality of the performance. It's priggish to think otherwise.

Now to the performances. I think a simple rule of theatre should be that accents match costumes. There's nothing wrong with taking a play and putting it into a different context. One of the best productions of 'The Winter's Tale' was a Russian one, in Russian (but not in Russia). Mamillius looked like Alexei, which was haunting. But if a play is set in the set period, and actors dress accordingly, why are their accents allowed to stand as anachronisms? Not only this, but they put on fake accents that aren't of the period! As an example, both the servants in both productions spoke with Cockney accents. Yes, I get that they're staff, and yes, in the UK that accent signals such. But this isn't set in Victorian England. At least Hollywood dresses up language as much as the costumes. It's a pet hate of mine - Cockneys in theatre. Silly stuff.

It was engaging to see true theatre so soon after a local production. My biggest pet hate of theatre is actors who over act. Those who are almost shouting out I AM CURRENTLY DOING SOME ACTING. I SPEAK IN A WAY THAT SHOWS I AM ACTING. LOOK AT MY ACTING. I AM AN ACTOR. But even though the West End and South Bank routinely throws up some PROPER ACTING (as opposed to some *being*, and some *engagement*) it doesn't grate as much as provincial towns that seek to fit into a middle class and under-experienced audience's conception of what acting should look like. The Radlett performance contained no real depth of character, and whilst I assume Ranevskaya was supposed to be comic she appeared more like a hysterical drag artist. I kept expecting here to shriek "I'm a lady!", which I don't think Chekhov had in mind when he wrote this as a comedy. It was an erratic performance with a small cast that went through the motions without really delivering something remarkable.

By contrast Sam Mendes did a terrific job. As ever Simon Russell-Beale exuded stagemanship and compassion. I think he went overboard on the triumphalism of the final scene (surely the events give sufficient dramatic power). The cast was well balanced and Tom Stoppard didn't seem to innovate too much with the translation. That said, I'm not skilled enough to comment critically on the script or even the acting. All I can do is say whether the actors spoke to me. And they did

## Ivanov

27.11.08, Wyndham's Theatre

Not since my English A-levels had I seen a play so soon after reading it. I had become used to watching performances based on plots that I'm barely familiar with, being introduced to characters for the first time. But this was different. This was a tense and nervous occasion, hoping that the event would do justice to a work that I am deeply fond of. I read the short, symmetrical play on a flight back from Belgrade which I think is the perfect context. Nikolai Ivanov is an unpleasant but morally ambiguous anti-hero. Belgrade is a city where pragmatism reigns, built on such convoluted history we can barely distinguish the heroes from the villains. In both cases our intellect revolts in a fit of misunderstanding, and despite feeling ethically repulsed we're left with infatuation, and an sincere emotional bond.

I was looking forward to this play as soon as I heard about the Donmar's much-trumpeted residency at Wyndham's Theatre, but was late getting organised. In the end I secured the very last ticket, on the very last night of the run. I suppose it makes sense to watch this play alone - it isn't light entertainment, it isn't trivial. You need to invest in it, need to believe in it, and it was fitting that I jumped onto a train in the pissing gloom of late November, grumpy after watching a meak Australian display in the Rugby, ready to see how this would go.

**Ivanov is an arl arse.** Grumpy, gloomy, wracked with guilt about his own dissatisfaction with life and his inability to do anything about it. His farming efforts have failed. He owes money to his neighbour and is surrounded by people he loathes. He's fallen out of love with his wife and with himself. Remnants of a once proud, ambitious hero lie shattered as he stumbles through sheer existence. We are introduced to him with a gun shot fired by the irritating schemer Borkin, the manager of the Ivanov estate. The real meat of the play are the relationships that Ivanov has despite longing for solitude. He is so unmoved by his wife, Anna, he can barely communicate with her. She sacrificed her faith (and thus her dowry) to marry Ivanov, and is now dying from TB. Ivanov lacks the financial resources to send her to the Crimea, or the emotional resources to comfort her. As rumours fly about his original motives the young Sasha (daughter of Ivanov's creditor) declares her love for him, or rather her love for who he used to be and her confidence that she can rescue him. Just as Ivanov dares to dream that he's found his energy, Anna arrives.

Amidst this turmoil, the only voice of certainty is Anna's doctor, Lvov, unafraid to denounce Ivanov at every opportunity. He is appalled to think that Ivanov's past and prospective marriages are fuelled by pecuniary motives, and even more repulsed when he realises that this is a commonly held belief. Amidst the mud slinging, rumours and accusations Ivanov remains stoic, repeating that he's never lied. The play leapt to life in the exchanges between Kenneth Branagh (Ivanov) and Tom Hiddleston (Lvov). The former believes in the integrity of honesty, the latter rejoicing in the assertion of his own moral superiority. The man who speaks most about morals, sees morals so clearly, so willing to accuse others of moral bankruptcy, turns into a farce, and we're forced to feel sympathy for the broken man who sees the world as it truly is.

Throughout Branagh was outstanding, and it was a treat to watch. The play gave plenty of opportunity for him to demonstrate his genuine talents. This was a blockbuster - Branagh as lead, Stoppard as author, Grandage as director - but it was also formidable quality. There is a real challenge to bring Ivanov to life on stage, to get across such internal misery *and despondency* whilst still being the lead and having to make oneself heard. The assembly pulled it off, with busy and entertaining scenes involving the extended cast to complement Ivanov's soliloquys and pounding dialogues. This culminated majestically in the final scene. Ivanov cannot bear being in the company of multiple people and stands uneasily. Whereas in Act II he finds comfort in the guitar (a wonderful use of the Russian role for folk), in Act IV a cello case lies empty - part symbolising the lost duets from earlier in the play, part symbolising that Ivanov is beyond escape. When he finally gives up, the play concludes with a wonderfully subdued yet blistering end. Standing ovation. Thrilling.

There is always a danger that something so ambitious doesn't quite become the sum of its parts, and there were certainly a few points of uneasiness. The script played up the wit within the text, and although at times it provided a comic respite by ridiculing Ivanov's frustration with the incestuous and dull monotony of his social circle, there was also a tendency to take bluntly serious (and achingly soulful) laments as light commentary. As ever, the audience seemed intent on extracting humour from the merest offering, possibly even when the delivery commanded sobriety. Although the play was originally intended to be a comedy, I would have preferred the darkness to take priority. There were also a few irritations with the text. I believe Stoppard's intention was to modernise, but why? One of the real joys of reading Chekhov is the essentially pre-modern nature of his work (with streams of consciousness and intellectualisation etc.), and there is a wealth of

decent translations in existence. Yet at times (and I'm not a linguist so this is just a general feeling) sentences seemed *clumsily* modern, references seemed anachronistic, or simply out of context. This was all the more evident in contrast to the set design, perfectly faithful to the original - this wasn't (and shouldn't have been) a modern revival. It was (and should be) the triumphant demonstration that top quality theatre can be financially viable in the heart of the West End. More praise for the Donmar, for implementing a vision of what theatre should be.

## Major Barbara

This production launched the Travelex £10 season, and we'd taken due advantage. It was approaching 5pm as we took a stroll along the South Bank, and ducked into the National to see what was on. I've never read or seen a Bernard Shaw play before, and was expecting nothing more than I would from any other Victorian dramatist - moral debate with intellectual foundations, witty interplay between caricatures, and perhaps a little boredom due to the sheer effortlessness of the experience. With Nicholas Hytner as Director I felt this was a sure bet, and everything good about the outreach of the NT.

The performances were excellent, especially Simon Russell Beale as Undershaft - the armaments tycoon and estranged father to Major Barbara. Barbara is an idealistic member of the Salvation Army providing ample room (duly exploited) to discuss Christianity, big business, poverty and war. Perhaps due to the overt idealism, I didn't find Barbara convincing, nor her fiancée - Cusins - a professor of Greek. It felt something of a let down for the physical dominance of Undershaft to be matched by a moral strength and conviction that eclipsed the younger members. The pragmatic opportunist did seem to win out, and the mental reconfigurations that allowed Barbara and Cusins to inherit the empire seemed nihilistic.

But there were no real villains in this play, and possibly no heroes. I didn't see this as an attack on the futility and hypocrisy of the Salvation Army (which is possible due to Hytner's stewardship), but struggled to gather which side I would be cheering for. The revelation that financial support is provided by a distiller and Undershaft himself, seemed less revelatory than the manipulative conduct of the shelters inhabitants - and as Undershaft noticed straight away, the manipulative behaviour of the shelters staff. But if the moral is that money corrupts, it's necessary to stray somewhat into the political ideology underpinning the play. Would our attitudes to Undershaft differ if he was a manufacturer of medicines, rather than bombs? Would we feel the same if instead of declaring that he'd sell his wares to anyone, he instead (and more accurately) specified states as his clients?

There was a lot of substance to this beguilingly minimal production. A small but robust cast, three scenes, attention on dialogue and interplay. It was neither emancipating nor thrilling, but was exactly the type of theatre that should always be available.

## Sleeping Beauty

*Bournemouth Pavilion, 27.12.07*

On December 27th I was waiting for the curtain to rise at the Bournemouth Pavilion, and Faith jokingly asked "Are you going to write a Filter<sup>^</sup> REVIEW?" Up until then it hadn't crossed my mind, but I thought why not? After all, what form of entertainment more deliberately seeks to blast through barriers between stage and audience than pantomime? When else are such lavish, formal, theatrical events put on for the masses? Cultural purists sneer at the ubiquity of Andrew Lloyd-Webber contaminated musicals throughout Piccadilly, but they're high brow compared to the Christmas season of pantomime. Across the land, from the grand palaces of seaside resorts to the amateur dramatics in local village halls, the people come out for acting, orchestration, and vocals. Mock it, but don't ignore it.

I must be one of a few theatre critics (albeit amateur) who detests "the theatre". Too often I sit like a caged moron being spoon fed "culture", wondering how long I've got to wait until I can get a drink, and whether I've time to sup a pint *and* go to the loo before the second half. No such thing at the pantomime. We had a block of about nine seats in the back two rows, and were constantly up and about. Behind us became a holding area for tetchy babies, with young parents amusing their kids whilst glimpsing the performance. My youngest niece found great humour in hurtling up the aisle, her mother trailing in her wake, struggling to catch up, as the chorus sings "Don't stop me now/ I'm having such a good time/ I'm having a ball".

[Sleeping Beauty](#) was everything you expect - dodgy celebrities (I must be getting old, I hadn't heard of any of them), one-liners, a little political satire, strong vocals, cross-dressing, audience participation (from a distance), ridiculous love story, good vs. evil, redemption, etc. It even had special effects whereby the Prince defeated a stage-filling virtual fire-breathing dragon. The spoof of "The Weakest Link" had the adults laughing, the toilet humour fuelled the kiddies. And didn't they enjoy it - the aisle was a constant stream of girls dressed as princesses, on their way to the toilet, or to get an ice cream with a tiny plastic spatula.

The performances were fine, and a curious mixture of panto old-hands and young starlets. All seemed to be somewhat embarrassed to appear, as according to the program they were simply "thrilled to be doing panto". Of course you are...

Panto is familiar, and somewhat hard to go wrong. Not quite as fun as I remember, when my uncle was Dame and I'd get on stage to sing a song, but given the scale of the event and size of audience it's always impressive to leave so enthusiastic about such a spectacle. Jolly good fun.

## Rock 'n' Roll

Rock 'n' Roll has every ingredient required for stupendous theatre: when Tom Stoppard (arguably our greatest living playwright) is produced by Trevor Nunn the results are guaranteed to be impressive. And Stoppard's subject matter - the fall of communism - is as intriguing as it is exciting. As Mark Lawson managed to establish during a recent painful interview on Radio 4, the death of Stoppard's mother has allowed him to return to Czechoslovakia, and use the medium of drama to make his point.

And the point is that economic freedom and political freedom are necessarily intertwined. Jan's freedom of expression - his freedom to listen to the Plastic People of the Universe, and to grow his hair long - are treated as dissidence and subversion. Simple Rock and Roll is the prism through which to view the institutions that support rival economic systems, and is an interesting departure for Stoppard. He is comfortable and confident at utilising intellectual pursuits within his plays (chaos theory in "Arcadia" is a classic example), but here he opts for a cultural phenomena. It's important that he does so, because Max's Marxism is too central to the themes of the play, and therefore intellectualising ideology would become absurd. Rock and Roll is the perfect foil because - like feminism and pacifism - they are social constructs that raise consciousness. They are genuine constitutional moments where "we the people" make our point.

This is majestically staged in the final scene, as Jan and Esme attend a Rolling Stones concert in Prague, and we - the audience - are on stage. Despite this triumphant ending it should be clear that participative democracy is *neither* the struggle *nor* the prize. Ultimately the promotion of Rock and Roll as the mechanism by which upheaval occurs runs counter to the intentions of it's fans. Jan is *not* a dissident and is *not* searching for a revolution. In one blindingly insightful moment Stoppard points out that politicians are frightened by indifference, not by dissidence. This play is about the right to apathy, not the right to Rock 'n' Roll or even freedom itself.

Stoppard is a master at dealing with chronology (Henry IV shows this perfectly), and Rock 'n' Roll takes us from 1968 to 1990 in a believable manner; the characters develop and the constant soundtrack works well. To cope with this timeline the set was inspired: a rotating disc split into four, allowing quick scene changes and fluid movement between time and space. The acting was a little RSC for my taste, and demonstrated how Stoppard, alas, can bring out the worst in an audience. There was a smug ripple of laughter whenever something vaguely intellectual was mentioned, which is a shame because Stoppardian references should be just part of the

conversation, rather than stocking fillers. I wonder if my training as a Sovietologist obscures my viewing pleasure, implying that Stoppard only writes for the layman, not the expert. I'm not sure.

Still, at times it bordered on being a musical, and how musicals *should* be (i.e. uplifting, well written, and compelling). The audience was as genuine a cross section of theatre-goers I've ever seen, and if it can draw Mick Jagger and Timothy Garton-Ash to the opening night we know it's hit that perfect boundary between intellectualism and entertainment. A riveting play, played well.

Stoppard is always dealing with ideas, and it's been inevitable that he'd deal with ideology. It's been worth the wait.

## Henry IV at the Everyman

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever heard is:

If ever you think you see a play within a play sit tight, belt up, and hang on; you're in for the ride of your life!

Too right. I adore trickery in theatre, and wondering where the stage ends, and performances begin.

The Everyman was the perfect forum for this production: entrances through the aisles, dialogue off-stage, and levels of acting and performance thickly layered like a rich oil painting. This was energetic, and involving: the chronology and stagemanship produced twists and deceit. Who knows what? And when?

Pirandello's 1921 masterpiece, sculpted with telling Stoppardian flair, was at heart light and farcical, yet penetrated deeply.

It is the modern day, and yet everything before us suggests past. Four youths are in the King's court, in period dress, yet anachronisms abound and we learn that it's a charade. 20 years previously several Italian aristocrats staged a pageant where guests were to come in character, as any bygone figure. The spurned lover of Matilda (who decides to come as Matilda, Countess of Tuscany, sworn enemy of Henry IV)... decides to be Henry IV. His research is absolute, and descends fervently into the role. An accident with his horse causes unconsciousness, but Henry carries on. From the programme:

It isn't until he draws his sword, brandishing it in all earnestness, that it becomes clear he is no longer acting his part. The fall has plunged him into madness and he truly believes himself to be Henry IV

His sister, worried for his mind, pays actors to live as his courtiers, and keep up the pretence. On her deathbed, she sends a Doctor to visit the King, and he brings all the family. Matilda, (now 20 years older) comes with her lover Belcredi, her daughter Frida, and Henry's nephew Di Nolli – son of Henry's sister, and fiancée to Frida. Deeply anxious, they adorn in period clothes, acquire characters of the time, and become part of the fantasy. Assured of Henry's insanity they leave the stage to form an elaborate plot to shock him back into the 21st century, leaving the King alone with his young minders.

A prompt wit, majestically delivered, and the staged court becomes just that: Henry was sane!

Confiding in his attendants, with humility and wisdom, Henry admits to having regained his identity some time before. Not wanting to leave a comforting environment, where life is past, and therefore the future known, he delighted in his mockery of his old acquaintances.

As night draws to a close, the bewildered boys give sympathy to their ruler and expert lighting transcends fantasy to become truth. Yet they breach his confidence, and all characters assemble with everything known. My disappointment that so much of the significant moments in the story (the throwing from the horse, the brandishing of the sword) happened prior to Scene 1 dissipated when arguments boiled to a conclusion, and Henry stabs Belcredi. Spontaneous, and impulsive, Henry's glimpse of reality was too much – a dramatic clash, and he's lapsed back into madness. History has repeated itself, as is destiny. Henry: *"we are what we were"*

The play was Shakespearian; it was a philosophical treatise on themes of psychosis and reality. Henry mocked his visitors for fulfilling the desire of a madman, asking what was truly fantasy: *"let us not forget the other charade, the life we lead as puppets"* Indeed, all of life is a stage and such piercing flashes of reason were common (*"no amount of earnestness hides the masquerade"*).

It also had Shakespearian devices, such as the power of portraiture to reflect, and replace actuality. More obviously, the King's madness was a furtherance of Lear, inverting sanity to question rationality. Upon regaining his mind, Henry realised he'd been right all along and continued the charade. Whether mad or sane, there was no discontinuation in his action; both states became conjoined. In the end, the moment he stopped seeing himself in the portrait of Henry was unspecified and insignificant. What was rational for the mad, was rational for the sane.

Arguably the greatest accolade of them all, is "the greatest living playwright", and Stoppard must be prime contender. This play was wonderfully him. The central importance of time, and metaphysical time at that is nothing simple. Yet the witticisms, the put downs and the humanity lulled your brain into thinking that it wasn't thinking at all. But it was.

The cast had a kaleidoscope of credits, and impressive credentials. Francesca Annis (5 nominations for the BAFTA in 'Best Actress'), Ian McDiarmid (Star Wars episodes I, II, III, V, VI), James Lance (Teachers, The Book Group, I'm Alan Partridge): an eclectic mix. They combined excellently, yet nothing took away from McDiarmid's thrilling depiction of Henry.

The Donmar is a true theatrical powerhouse, and that in it's first tour it chooses Liverpool is a coup. Gemma Bodinetz and Deborah Aydon's first season at the Everyman promises a rich future, and they've set a fantastic standard to maintain. This truly was a pleasure to experience, and an inspirational piece of entertainment. It excited, left questions unanswered, yet probed deeply into insight. Lear tells us there's reason in madness, and Henry adjoins: there's also madness in reason.

## Beautiful and Damned

A review of 'The Beautiful and Damned'... (which was shit).

The lives of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre created a legacy perhaps unrivalled. They weaved such a rich tapestry that it's been a constant surprise to me that their memory has been left as the fiction they created. In their novels and short stories, all of which owed as much to one as the other, fact blurred with fiction; experience and aspiration was their inspiration. Perhaps, they gave so much of their life to their art, there was no point exploiting what was left.

Their legend is a gift to the gossips. Analysis is plentiful, yet transference to the stage or film is rare. Consequently there's a responsibility for that which is. Major biographies of each are controversial; the underpinning of their creativity, and interdependency of their works have become a weapon for feminist revisionists. An exaggerated picture of a suppressed talent; Scott holding back Zelda's burning inventiveness, refusing to be outshone. Dishonesty abounds on both sides, yet controversy must be acknowledged.

Alas, under the pretence of a tribute to the Jazz Age, 'The Beautiful and Damned' is unashamed of its allegiance to the feminist critique. Recurring judgement is passed out, culminating with an aggressive Scott confronting Zelda for publishing 'Save me the Waltz' at the same time as his own 'Tender in the Night'. This was the natural consequence of an earlier scene, when Scott's publisher advised them to submit Zelda's stories under Scott's name, until he finished his novel. The necessity and consent of this decision was glossed over.

Indeed Scott's entire career was neglected ; not once did we see him write, suggestion being that intoxication fuelled his pen to the destruction of those around. The misconception that Scott was a flamboyant author is common: his spelling mistakes were legendary, and he was an alcoholic. But this belies the meticulous care for his craft, and his almost scholarly attention to his works. Although he churned out short stories for cash, (referring to himself as a prostitute), F. Scott Fitzgerald the genius novelist who defined and personified an age was absent from this play. The scenes in Paris of permanent party were only part of the truth. Hemingway, in 'A Moveable Feast' said :*" Scott also showed us a large ledger with all of the stories he had published listed in it year after year with the prices he had received for them and also the amounts received for any motion picture sales, and the sales and royalties for his books. They were all noted as carefully as the log of a*

*ship and Scott showed them to both of us with impersonal pride as though he were the curator of a museum."*

To delve so deeply into the lives of Scott and Zelda, using them as a vehicle for this performance, but without touching upon the craft of authorship is shameful. Further evidence that this was the trumpeting of Zelda came in the treatment of their respective afflictions. Whilst Zelda the schizophrenic was painted with sympathy and compassion, Scott, the alcoholic, received blame and contempt. There was implied, (but clear) causality, with no empathy for the vice of addiction. The party scenes were followed by hang over – a reckless abandonment before Scott's tragic demise. No mention of his later life, where he was sober for two years living a modest life in Hollywood with Sheilah Graham. In real life, his latter day companion had considerably abstained from the funeral, and now, her memory was vanished by this production, conveniently erased for the story. Instead, upon Scott's death the female protagonists, dressed in black, wail out a song with the recurring chorus of "Being a women" – an unsubtle slight.

Alas, it was not the only unsubtle jeer toward the memory of Scott. For example the scene in which Zelda publicly mocks the size of his manhood. Undoubtedly clouded by legend, the historical evidence of this episode, as far as I am aware, is penned by Hemingway. At a luncheon Scott confides that Zelda complained that he couldn't satisfy her, but after they visit the Gents, Hemingway judges it normal. "*Check the nude male statues at the Louvre*" was his advice.

It struck me as fabrication to take such an anecdote, (written by Hemingway in an attempt to mock), and present it as fact. Scott never enjoyed the speculation that followed, and to refer to it out of context demonstrates a lust for gratuity. It is a pathetic weapon, and irrelevant. What more obvious way is there to belittle a man...?

Given that this musical would probe so speculatively I was dismayed that they left out so much of the good stuff: Scott and Zelda racing around the Place de la Concorde in a stolen delivery-cart, the boxing match between Hemingway and Morley Callaghan, (where Scott, acting as time-keeper, forgot to stop the round after two-minutes which prompted the break down in his friendship with Hemingway) or indeed the dinners with Pound and Joyce, and the artistic climate in Paris at the time. Countless anecdotes of humour, neglected in favour of speculative molestation.

The cameo of Hemingway was a curious one, for although he had stage presence, and a remarkable likeness, he hovered like a spectre. Whilst his

animosity toward Zelda was accurate, his drunken advances toward her were actually groping the truth. Her rebuttal, and statement that he was nothing more than a hairy chest again alludes to, without explaining, an actual event. But the insult was levied by a critic (who Hemingway confronted in his Editors office by ripping open his shirt to compare hair), and unless an audience is expected to know this, Zelda's lines merely present an untruth. It led us to a cringingly awful quarrel between Scott and Hemmingway over Zelda, which spilled over into literary style itself. An inaccurate caricature of the unemotional grafter vs. the forlorn romantic. This was an utterly false depiction of both authors, again underlining that this production had no care for Scott the writer.

Indeed the Fitzgerald's bequest of one liners was inexplicably passed up; the only one I caught was Zelda saying "*Marriage shouldn't be a backdrop to drama; it should be the drama*, which was sadly thrown away. There is enough content in their essays, stories and novels to assemble a sparkling musical by merely piecing together their own words. The script and lyrics truly were dire as every opportunity was taken for a spot lit soliloquy. The very point of acting is so that characters need not explain every thought and emotion to the strain of nauseating music. "*Zelda, I'm reading your letter. Over, and over again*", and a little later "*Zelda, I'm trying to sleep*", what next - "*Zelda, I'm entering stage right...*". I was laughing out loud for most of the songs.

Not that it was all cringe worthy, mind. Although mostly evoking images of a special needs school outing to the set of 'The House of Elliot', some scenes truly were marvellous. The fountain of Champagne that lit up a fantastical ball was memorable; characters gradually dishevelled into a manic orgy of dance, ending in the fountain itself. Extras threw water into the stalls, and Zelda was released. Inspirational.

So too, the finale. The cast romanced onto stage into a wonderfully choreographed routine, lapping up the undeserving applause. Indeed if the musical was precisely that, and played to these strengths it would have been fantastic. But by delving into literary history, pursued with a clear bias and presented as such, it mocked, rather than celebrated its protagonists.

Zelda embodied the ideal that Scott created, ("*I married the heroine of my stories*"), and shared with him all that they'd become. They were emotionally devoted, in a beautiful imperfect love like any other. As Scott struggled with alcoholism, and Zelda with schizophrenia, the physical togetherness ceased, yet the burning, enduring love remained. They now lie side by side, their remains pecked away by vultures furthering their own agenda. With such

perfect ingredients, and so many opportunities for a truly dazzling testament to an age, it sometimes shocks just how bad theatre can be. And this was truly awful.

## Charles Wootton, and Every Yellowman

Liverpool was once the gateway to the new world; people left Pierhead with hope and optimism for a better life in the US. The mouth of the Mersey river was a Conradian opening toward prosperity.

In 1919 a mob of over 200 chased the Black seaman Charles Wootton down to the banks of the Mersey, and as he swam for his life a pelting of stones ended him.

The Mersey has seen a lot of blood.

Such blood is seeped within the walls of the city, from the "immigrants served" sign in the Pig and Whistle to the inspiringly majestic buildings paid for by the slave trade. A fitting host, therefore, for 'Yellowman' by Dael Orlandersmith

Faith and I saw the play on Friday night, and were both utterly drawn in. The simplicity of the format: a dual monologue by two intertwined characters who never lock eyes, manages to hold attention by the quickening pace of the racial tensions, as Alma and Gene retell their deep South passage into adulthood. It paints a bleak picture of humanity, via two exceptional performances. Themes of identity and determinism emerge.

Currently at the Everyman the Pulitzer nominated, critically acclaimed masterpiece is highly recommended. And with tickets from just £8, it seems that the black hole of Liverpool's City of Culture claims is being amended, and the black secret is being confronted.