u3a islington

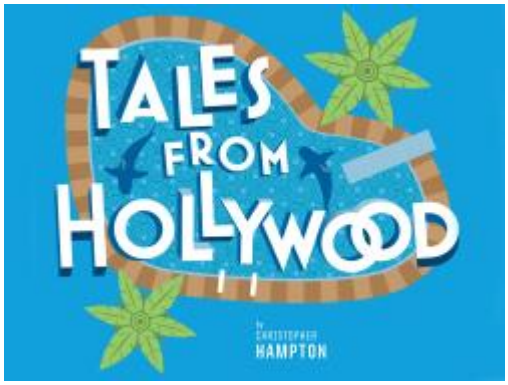
Play Reading (October 2015 to September 2019)

Here is a record of our readings in iU3A. For more recent walks, go to our web page here

October 2015

The first playreading event took place on Tuesday 13th October 2015 at the Drapers Arms, Barnsbury. The group of 15 readers were all very well prepared and we had much fun reading Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. A play about corruption in politics it had many resonances for today, full of fascinating characters, and the readers revelled in Wilde's language.

January 2016



In January we held two terrific readings of Christopher Hampton's play about exiles in Hollywood in the 1930's, Tales from Hollywood. The two groups of 13 each, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, entered into the spirit of this witty, funny but also sad play with great gusto. Both groups were excited after the readings were finished and are ready for the next one.

March 2016

In March Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard was only the second play I've prepared for the reading group and on first reading, even though I'd seen the play on stage, I was surprised by how so little 'happens'. The allocation of parts is by gender-neutral, random allocation and I got the part of Lopakhin, a rough uneducated businessman who is always aware of his peasant roots as he socialises with his land-owning neighbours. I prepare by blocking my part, page by page and then reading through the whole play in one go. I then concentrate just on my part, thinking about each interaction, how the character speaks, and his feelings about the other characters in different scenes. I jot down notes in the margin. Lastly, I read the play again quite fast, a day or so before our 'performance'.

On the day, we meet in a delightfully light, upper room at the Drapers Arms. After a short introduction we get straight on and everyone follows the script, apparently very well prepared and with deep concentration. We don't 'act' except with our voices, but a strong sense of the play's mischievous fun at the characters' inability to act decisively in their own interest is developed. I found Paul, a new member, provided the voice of two characters quite distinctively, with the aged serf particularly well played. All the male players did exceptionally well with the

myriad of young women they played, coming across thoughtfully and delicately as they depicted women tossed about at the whim of men. There's not always time to discuss the play, but that day we enjoyed our various interpretations of what Chekhov was hoping to achieve in a play he wrote at the very end of his life. (Report by Kathyrn Dodd.)

June 2016

In June two separate groups met to read Sheridan's 18th century comedy The School for Scandal. Everyone loved it, thought it a deliciously witty piece, and we laughed a lot while we were reading it. We had such fun with this 18th century comedy of manners, playing such characters as Lady Teazle, Mrs Candour, Sir Oliver Surface and Sir Peter Teazle. Both the morning and the afternoon groups of 10 people each, most who now know each other and are used to our different acting styles, and with the cross-gender roles some of our men made elegant, gossipy, sharp and witty ladies, while some women had a good go at the stuck-up and devious men of the play. It was interesting to realise that the 19th century turned more to novels and poetry and good plays didn't return until Ibsen and later Shaw came on the scene. While today wit has almost disappeared as a form of laughter — most younger people have no idea what wit means, which is a sad loss.

October 2016

In October we read Racing Demon, a 25 year old play by David Hare about the troubles of the Church of England. It has not gone out of date and was one of a series this politically active playmaker wrote about the establishment in Britain. The main character is a characteristic inner city vicar struggling to remember 'what God has to do with it', when coping with endless social problems. He is under fire from a self-obsessed curate who believes that he and God have the only answer. There's a meddling bishop who is intent on turning his episcopate into a business and finally a sad, dear priest who has to run away because he is found out by the tabloids to be gay. Lots of yummy parts. (Report by Tim Maby.)

For the last play the afternoon group met at the house of Claire and Robert Milne and we are very grateful to them for letting us do so.

March 2017

In March we tackled Tennessee Williams's riveting play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. The play, set in the 1950s, is about the deep, lacerating emotions unleashed within an extended family, as the patriarch, 'Big Daddy', celebrates his 65th birthday. We are transported to the deep south of the US, to Big Daddy's plantation, the largest in the State, as we learn that he is suffering from terminal cancer, about which he is being kept in the dark. The issue of inheritance takes centre stage as the two sons, or rather their wives, fight an increasingly vicious battle to lay claim to the estate. The younger son, Brick, is favoured by Big Daddy but he is crippled by alcoholism and depression after the death of his best friend, a fellow professional football player. An insinuation of a homosexual relationship is constantly in the air as a further reason for his unsuitability as an heir. His wife, Margaret, is frantic with both her unrequited love for a husband, who now rejects her sexually, and her determination to make sure they are not cast out into the cold. She is reminded throughout the play that she is childless and that the other son has five children with another one on the way, a much better prospect for continuing the dynasty.

Big Daddy proves the most complex character in the play as he speaks freely to his broken son

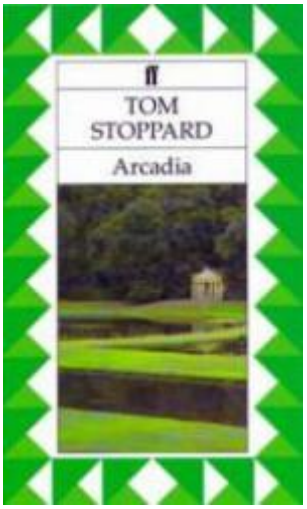
of his past and what he hopes is his future. His story is an example of the 'American Dream': born into penury, becoming a 'hand' on the plantation and then rising to the position of manager. When the two male owners die they leave the estate to him and he revels in telling stories of his subsequent greed and avarice. He also expresses a painfully misogynistic hatred of his wife and gleefully plans to sleep with as many beautiful young women as he can lay his hands on, once he is well. He is determined to keep his elder son and his disgusting progeny as far away from him as possible.

None of this has any effect on Brick's outlook and he continues to drink throughout the scene. He is waiting for the 'click' in his head, when the alcohol finally gives him some peace. The play ends bleakly with Big Daddy's groans of pain off-stage and Margaret's ridiculous claim that she is pregnant after all. At the end, she declares her love to her husband and tells him they are going to make the pregnancy real. Brick ends the play with 'Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?' We finished the reading considerably "wrung-out". Quite an experience! (Report by Kathryn Dodd.)

During January we held two extremely enjoyable readings of Hay Fever by Noel Coward. On both occasions, several new members joined us, and many of us found that reading the play out loud brought it very much to life!

Our last play read was Undiscovered Country, a strong and sometime vicious look at selfish Viennese society at the turn of the 20th century. It was not an easy play to read or to feel for the characters but we felt it stretched us nevertheless. Lots of fascinating parts.

May 2017



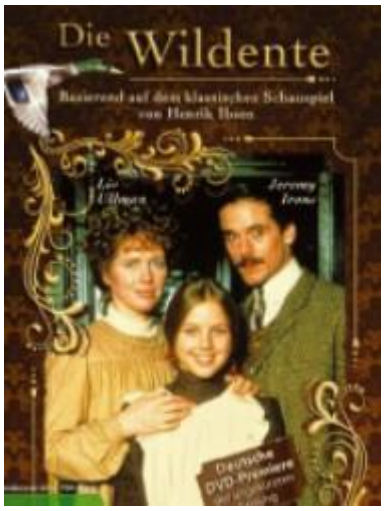
Arcadia — Tom Stoppard. In May eleven of us gathered at the Drapers Arms around a large wooden table (which is pretty much the only furniture required in a stage production of this play) and several props, ranging from a tortoise — actually a door stop but pretty convincing, and as active as a 'real' animal — to a convincing mock-up of the front page of a well known tabloid. The table was thus suitably busy. As were we. The play is a wonderful mix of the comic and the serious, as Stoppard combines serious thoughts on the transition between the classical and romantic, the interaction between carnal knowledge and scientific knowledge, mathematics, and the passing of time — and how history repeats itself.

The play moves backwards and forwards between the 19th century and the present day. We convincingly achieved this by assigning one side of the table for each period. The props took pride of place in the middle.

The humour of the play was convincingly portrayed. Although we had all read the play in preparation, and most had seen it, there were plenty of laughs, mainly intended by Stoppard, but there was one moment when noises off provided by Islington Borough's refuse collection coincided with Valentine's line: '…I mean, the noise! Impossible!'

Coffee and biscuits fortified us, the former keeping warm over the passage of two centuries, as intended by Stoppard. All in all, a challenging but rewarding reading. I for one want to see a production as soon as possible! (Report by Chris Finch.)

February 2017



The Wild Duck — Henrik Ibsen. Idealism and The Truth versus living a 'life-lie', with skeletons firmly incarcerated; does exposing the supposed truth bring happiness, does it set people free, or does the world collapse? These are the themes played out in Ibsen's intense psychological drama, written in 1884, after The Doll's House, Ghosts and Enemy of the People and just before Hedda Gabler.

Gathered in the upstairs room of the Draper's Arms in July, we wrestled with these deep questions, whilst sharing roles, and consuming the usual excellent coffee and biscuits. As ever, reading a play together is huge fun, with each reader bringing their own interpretation to the role, leading to often unexpected insights and increased dramatic tension.

Much of the play's action has taken place in the past and it is only now that the chickens are coming home to roost….and not only in the Ekdal's attic… The former relationship between old Werle and Gina; the 'generosity' and manipulation of old Werle; the fantasy world inhabited by old Ekdal and his son Hjalmar; the naïve idealism of Gregers and his damaging meddling; the desperate ignoring of the past by Gina; the bewilderment of poor Hedwig; all these aspects come together dramatically and horrifyingly in the final act when the world does indeed collapse for all the main characters, with the tragic suicide of Hedwig, and the realisation of what is meant by Truth and its consequences.

As you might imagine, the play generated much animated discussion as we debated, agreed, disagreed on the various characters, their virtues and their failings, but all agreeing it had been a stimulating and hugely enjoyable afternoon, thanks to Howard's expert casting and organisation. It was Howard's last play in this role, so thank you so much, and thank goodness you will continue to be involved in this excellent group!
(Report by Rosalynde Lowe)

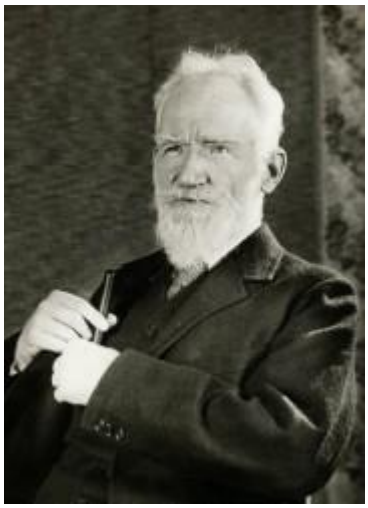
September 2017

In September 2017 the readings were of The Alchemist by Ben Jonson. The Alchemist premiered 34 years after the first permanent public theatre opened in London; it is, then, a product of the early maturity of commercial drama in London. Only one of the University wits who had transformed drama in the Elizabethan period remained alive (this was Thomas Lodge); in the other direction, the last great playwright to flourish before the Interregnum, James Shirley, was already a teenager. The theatres had survived the challenge mounted by the city and religious authorities; plays were a regular feature of life at court and for a great number of Londoners.

The venue for which Jonson apparently wrote his play reflects this newly solid acceptance of theatre as a fact of city life. In 1597, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (a.k.a. the King's Men) had been denied permission to use the theatre in Blackfriars as a winter playhouse because of objections from the neighbourhood's influential residents. Some time between 1608 and 1610, the company, now the King's Men, reassumed control of the playhouse, this time without objections. Their delayed premiere on this stage within the city walls, along with royal patronage, marks the ascendance of this company in the London play-world (Gurr, 171). The Alchemist was among the first plays chosen for performance at the theatre.

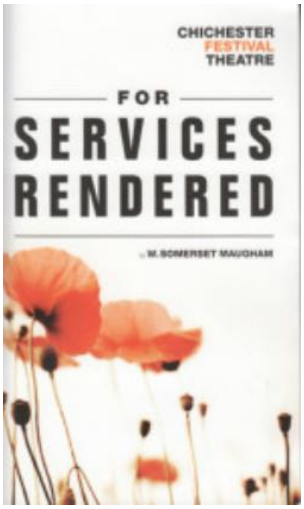
Jonson's play reflects this new confidence. In it, he applies his classical conception of drama to a setting in contemporary London for the first time, with invigorating results. The classical elements, most notably the relation between Lovewit and Face, are fully modernised; likewise, the depiction of Jacobean London is given order and direction by the classical understanding of comedy as a means to expose vice and foolishness to ridicule.

January 2018



Our group enjoyed two readings of Arms and the Man, by George Bernard Shaw, in January 2018, which went very well; there were two new members who had joined us at the U3a Open Day last Autumn. Our members appreciated the play as highlighting GBS's views on war and peace and the role of the military, the development of his characters during the course of the play, and the strength of his female characters in the context of GBS's strongly held views on Women's Rights. ("Raina" was said to be based on GBS's relationship with the Reformer Annie Besant.)

March 2018



For Services Rendered by Somerset Maugham (2nd reading March 2018) — Two unhappy sisters, two cads, a dying mother, a bankrupt, a suicide, a complacent paterfamilias and a blind veteran of the First World War. Sexual harassment, sexual misery and the promise of assisted dying. There is no shortage of dramatic ingredients in Somerset Maugham's For Services Rendered (1932) which we read in two separate sessions at the Drapers Arms in March. Men physically or economically destroyed by the war; women, at least women in small country towns, finding their new liberty a delusion.

The play was first produced at the height of the Depression, but the shadow of the war still darkens the lives of everyone in the Kentish doctor's house. Maugham sets up the scene with cunning deception: 'Tea is laid. It is five o clock on a warm afternoon in September. Mrs Ardsley is sitting in a chair, hemming a napkin... She is very quietly dressed. The Maid brings in the tea'. Mrs Ardsley breaks the silence and opens the action: 'Is it time for tea?' she enquires.

Much tea gets drunk during the course of this play, and everything is set up for a typical couple of hours in an old West End theatre with a neat and comforting resolution at the end. But this is a very angry piece about English smugness, opportunism and injustice, as was proved by a marvellous revival at the National Theatre in 1979 and at Chichester three years ago.

I think when we were preparing for this reading at home, many of us must have heard the creaking of dated dialogue and obsolete forms of grammar and speech, and wondered how it could possibly make an impact today as 40 years ago. But it did, which made us realise — as these readings do time and again — that whatever seems stale on the page can spring to life as soon as you start reading it aloud with other people. It helped, of course, that Maugham provides a strong narrative framework in three acts, with a beginning, middle and end, and plenty of swerves and surprises along the way. Not to mention, parts for everyone.

It's hardly Chekhov, or even Shaw, or even a true state-of-the-nation play. It confines itself to the middle professional classes: solicitors, doctors, gentlemen-farmers, entrepreneurs. But I think we were all surprised at the tension and emotional drama we evoked round the big table on the sunny first floor at the Drapers. I wondered if For Services Rendered has now passed the danger point where a play dies because it is 'dated' beyond relevance and and begins to merge slowly into the dramatic canon as a true representative of its very unhappy time. Reading it made clear that only the surface dialogue is sometimes a bit dusty; the emotions still blaze darkly within. [Report by Michael Ratcliffe].

May 2018

In May we enjoyed reading the Anthony Minghella play Made in Bangkok. At first glance for several of our members, it was difficult to feel any empathy or sympathy for any of the

characters in this story about "sex tourism" and exploitation, but reading the play out aloud helped us to come to a greater understanding about the play, the characters seemed more "nuanced", and the storyline more complex.

September 2018

The Government Inspector by Nicolai Gogol (11 and 25 September 2018) — in deepest provincial Russia, word goes out that a government inspector is arriving incognito, to the consternation of corrupt and negligent local officials. As the play opens, the Mayor has summoned these to inform them of the disturbing news, and as each ponders the likely consequences for himself, the audience is treated to a series of darkly comic revelations of their villainy. Hardly has this news sunk in, when it is reported that a young man from St Petersburg has been staying at the local inn for the past two weeks, and the lightning conclusion is reached: this must be the government inspector. In fear and trembling the officials line up to pay their respects and to sound out whether he can be bribed to give a good account of them back in St Petersburg. The 'government inspector', Khlestakov, in reality a spendthrift young clerk, is bemused by these visitors, but only too happy to take up their offers of 'loans' and the hospitality of the Mayor's house. He senses he is on to a good thing, takes advantage of the romantic illusions of the Mayor's wife and daughter, and having pocketed numerous bribes is persuaded by his wily servant to depart before his luck runs out. As the Mayor triumphantly receives the congratulations of his fellow citizens on the engagement of his daughter to this eminent official from St Petersburg, Khlestakov's identity is revealed and the arrival of the real Government Inspector is announced…
First published in 1836, this political satire of the corruption of imperial Russia, was much criticised in the reactionary press at the time, but was actually staged at the intervention of Tsar Nicholas I. Though the theme of the penniless stranger arriving in town and being taken for a VIP was already a classic of comedy, this play has stood the test of time. It continues to be frequently performed and adapted, both for its wonderful comic wit and structure and because political corruption – and its satirical potential - remains so topical.
Fast and furious in pace, The Government Inspector made for a very enjoyable play-reading, in an excellent translation by Stephen Mulrine. Its large cast meant that each reader played several parts to sometimes confusing, but hilarious effect.

2019

Our **November** 2019 reading was Caryl Churchill's highly original 1982 play *Top Girls* about the inequality of the sexes in the work place and the powerlessness of many women to shape their own lives, which has become a modern classic. We can see now that Churchill was influenced by, but already challenging, the idea that our first woman Prime Minister would be ushering in a feminist revolution. The play is full of sadness, irony and wit. Its originality lies in the brilliant first act, in which Marlene, the manager of an employment agency, invites to a working lunch several iconic women of history and literature who have (or have not) shattered the glass ceiling: among them, the legendary Pope Joan; Isabella Bird, the Victorian explorer, and Dull Gret, the warrior-giantess who strides vengefully towards the mouth of hell in Bruegel's painting. They share their experiences of, variously, power and subjugation. After this surreal start, the play returns to the contemporary world of Marlene's crisp secretarial service in London and the miserable lives of the Essex family from which she has escaped. It is always fearless and often funny.

I don't think I've ever been in a U3A group where the men outnumbered the women by five to two, and the irony was not lost on us that we should, perhaps for the first time, be reading a play with an all-female cast. Strong men took a deep breath and reinvented themselves as a medieval Japanese courtesan, Chaucer's Patient Griselda, quarrelling sisters and desperate teenage girls. This worked surprisingly well. The greater challenge, though, was more technical. Churchill attempts to reproduce the competitive spontaneity of everyday speech by having the characters at times overlap each other — interruptions marked in the text by an asterisk or a slash. This is the kind of apparent 'spontaneity' that requires long and intense rehearsals. We do not rehearse, but we read the plays and do our own homework at home. We worked out the technique as we went along and got better all the time. It was a very stimulating afternoon. (Michael Ratcliffe)

Can't Pay, Won't Pay by Dario Fo. Our **September** 2019 reading was the fast-paced and extremely witty *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*, set in an old, worn, second floor flat in a run-down area of Naples (though it could be such a place in any city). The main characters are two strong women, who are neighbours and friends, Antonia and Margherita, and their rather bewildered but dogmatic husbands, Giovanni, a long time member of the Communist Party, and Luigi, who is determined to take provocative action against injustices. In addition there are some hilarious small but important parts, all originally played by the same actor with minor changes of facial hair, of a Sergeant, an Inspector, an Old Man, and an Undertaker.

The plot is straightforward even if the playing out of it is not; think of the classic farces you may have seen, with misunderstandings leading to even greater muddles, with huge comic effect. (We sometimes had difficulty reading our lines, being convulsed with laughter.) One theme is of two strong women, along with some of their neighbours, who object vociferously to the prices they have to pay for food in their local supermarket, and after an altercation with the timid shop manager, decide only to pay what they consider to be a fair price and no more, filling their bags with masses of food, and taking it home. These they need to hide from their husbands who they know will object strongly to their actions. The other theme is the rising militancy of the trade union workers at the local factory who walk out in protest about the dreadful food in their canteen, not paying for it.

As the action progresses, the situations resulting from the women desperately trying to hide all the stolen food become increasingly mad and comical, while underlying the hilarity is the very real unhappiness and resentment at the lack of opportunities for them and their children, the ineffectiveness of the politicised trade unions, and the greed of the factory bosses. In the end, the characters are strengthened by being part of a large protest, and come together with renewed respect for each other, to fight against injustice (Rosalynde Lowe).

Wonderfully enjoyable readings of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004), an angry and very funny play, so widely known through theatre performances and film that it needs no further comment.

This was followed by *Separate Tables* (first performed in 1954), the collective name of two one-act plays by Terence Rattigan, both taking place in a boarding house on the English south coast — studies in repression, loneliness and desperation, alleviated by humour and gestures of generosity and humanity. At the time the critic Kenneth Tynan commented that the second play offered "as good a handling of sexual abnormality as English playgoers will tolerate" — the protagonist tries to conceal from his fellow guests a report in the local newspaper of his sexual harassment of women (in an early draft, homosexual advances).

The pathos of these plays was countered by the robust comedy of the next play, Moliere's *Tartuffe*, in an engagingly witty rhymed translation by Ranjit Bolt, which provoked lively interpretations by readers. When first performed in 1664 its portrait of a religious imposter aroused huge controversy — the Archbishop of Paris threatened with excommunication anyone who performed in, watched, or read the play, and public performances of the play were banned. At the time of our reading, an adaption of Tartuffe was playing at the National Theatre, throwing a very different light on Tartuffe; some group members had also seen other adaptations (as when transferred to Muslim settings (RSC Stratford, and the Arcola theatre), and these experiences added to our enjoyment of the play reading.

1980s Britain is the setting of Alan Ayckbourn's social farce, *A Small Family Business*, where we watch the erosion of notions of morality by entrepreneurial greed. A father's desire to spare his daughter from prosecution for petty shop-lifting leads to the gradual revelation of an entire family's shameless involvement in criminal business, culminating in murder and deliciously farcical mayhem. Farce is clearly best when performed on the stage, but it works too on the page!

Finally, a return to Rattigan, but a very different play — *The Winslow Boy* (1946), based on an actual case in which a young cadet was expelled from naval college for stealing a cheque from a fellow cadet, and his family's endeavours to clear his name. Although successful — the boy is cleared of theft — the play shows the obstacles to obtaining justice and satisfying honour and the heavy toll it exacted from his family. We were impressed by Rattigan's skill in structuring the play to highlight the drama of this prolonged quest. Legal issues, pre-World War I parliamentary politics and the suffragette movement are quietly introduced, while the characters remain fully drawn, including the youthful cadet himself, cheerfully unconcerned with the outcome of his case.