

## Theatre Visits – January 2017 – December 2017



Here is a record of the iU3A Theatre Visits group visits in 2017. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

### 2017

#### January



Our first visit of 2017 in **January** visit was to see Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus* (first produced in 1979) at the **National Theatre**. The production made excellent use of the stage facilities of the Olivier Theatre. The introduction of musicians on to the stage both supported the singers of extracts from Mozart's operas and integrated the music with the play very well. The ensemble acting was very good and there was an outstanding performance from Lucian Msamati as Salieri. The play is very well crafted and provided entertainment of a high

quality. In addition, two important issues were raised: the first was by Salieri when he reflected that although he had led a moral life and worked hard to develop his musical gifts from God his compositions would never match the genius of Mozart. His anger with God and the decisions he made after this realisation structure the second half of the play. The second issue was that of the relevance of the private lives of artists to their work. The afternoon was very enjoyable both for the quality of theatre and for the ideas that we were left thinking about. (Margaret Caistor)

#### February

In **February** a good number of us arrived at the **Old Vic Theatre** to see Yasmina Reza's play *Art*, translated by Christopher Hampton. Apart from going weak at the knees at the prospect of seeing Rufus Sewell live I had no expectations, having never seen the original production. Pretentious Serge, humourless Marc and jokey Yvan form a seemingly ill-matched trio of friends who've hit their midlife crisis and whose friendship threatens to fall apart, set off by Serge's acquisition of an (almost) pure white painting for an astronomical sum of money. Serious and laugh-out-loud by turns, this 20-year-old play still resonates with today's audience and 90 minutes flew by, helped by the superb cast of Rufus Sewell, Paul Ritter and Tim Key. Stand-out moments included Yvan's



increasingly hysterical explanation as to why he'd arrived late for dinner (wedding planning, anyone?) and the seeming death throes of their friendship when the three men consume a bowl of olives with all the camaraderie of a firing squad. You could have heard a pin (or pip) drop. (Celia Ballantyne)

## March



**March:** It was no surprise that this delightful production of *Travesties* at the **Menier** would subsequently transfer to the West End. Forty years after its initial debut, Tom Stoppard could make only the smallest of adjustments to this bubbly intellectual farce, which has lost nothing of its

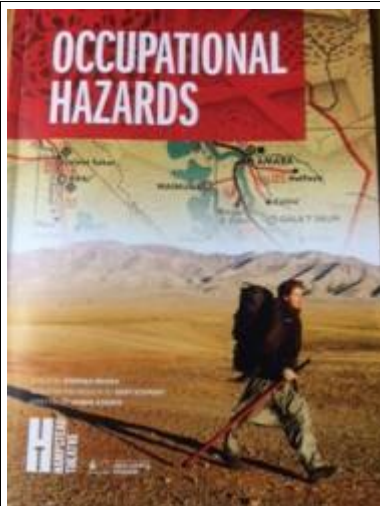
relevance to the world of today. Within a brilliant cast, Tom Hollander is truly outstanding, playing the central role of Henry Carr, who in his dotage has amnesiac fantasies about being a major player in the events of 1917, in contrast to the reality of having been simply a minor official in the British Consulate in Zurich. In actual fact, his role as Algernon in James Joyce's amateur production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, led to the play becoming the external framework of *Travesties* and the source of much of the comedy. News of the 1917 Russian Revolution found Lenin and his women still in Zurich, from whence he was soon to board his secret train through Germany, back home. Not quite simultaneously, Tzara, founder of "Dada" leading to surrealism, appeared in Zurich, but his incorporation into the structure of the story together with Joyce and Lenin creates a perfect backdrop for the dramatic questioning of all that contributes to History, Art and Politics. The **Apollo**, which first opened its doors in 1901 is a most charming example of a Victorian musical theatre and added much to the pleasure of our visit. (John Schrader)

## April

For our **April** visit we saw Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* directed by John Tiffany. This was a multi-award nominated, top quality production and cast. The lighting and sound were understated and quietly effective. The direction was sensitive and the cast delivered sound performances of Tennessee Williams's launchpad autobiographical play, first staged in 1944 and telling the poignant story of the Winfield family's attempts in St Louis to survive and hang on to their social status after hard times. The mutually dependent family triangle is well played with the characteristic emotional highs and lows and Williams's prose beautifully delivered. I enjoyed the first act and Cherry Jones's southern matriarch was impressive. It wasn't until the second half, with the arrival of The Gentleman Caller, that the play finally delivered real poignancy and Laura and Jim's scene lit up the stage, by candlelight. Kate O'Flynn as poor Laura was movingly convincing. I did feel that there was something missing from this performance but, not knowing the play very well, I couldn't really put my finger on what exactly that was. (Jeanie Phillips)



## May



**The May** theatre visit was to **Hampstead Theatre** to see *Occupational Hazards* by Stephen Brown. This play was based on Rory Stewart's 330 page account of his nine-month involvement in the administration of post-Saddam Iraq, working in two provinces in Southern Iraq. The book with its hundreds of characters was distilled into a play lasting about 100 minutes and with a cast of ten actors. There was a terrific performance from Henry Lloyd-Hughes as the idealistic Stewart and the set with its sliding concrete walls and flickering neon lighting seemed suitably harsh and desert-like. One member of the group wrote that she thought that the 'play was brilliant — thought-provoking, strong acting and very imaginative staging ...'.

I did wonder whether it would have worked better as a radio play and notice that subsequently it was broadcast on BBC Radio 's Theatre on 4. (Sue Welsford)

## June

In **June** we paid our annual visit to the **Open Air Theatre** in **Regent's Park** to see *On the Town*. The Park has become expert at musicals these days and we are rarely disappointed. This delightful and exuberant musical dates from 1944 and is the first musical composed by Leonard Bernstein, at the time assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. It has been revived a number of times over the decades and was turned into a film in 1949 with Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly.



This revival used mostly a young cast who danced their socks off, maybe a little too much dancing v. story? The only star that I thought had the full measure of the times (after all these sailors had only one day in NY and might later be killed in the war), was Danny Mac as Gaby. Though all the others each gave something of their own to their characters. To see how times have changed, a ballet for two originally for a lonely sailor and a dream version of Ivy Smith, Miss Turnstiles, was updated to a pas de deux between two men ... well it is 2017! There are some great numbers, some of the lyrics of which we will discuss at the next theatre discussion on 6 July. (Howard Lichterman).

## July



**July** — *Lady Day* at **Emerson's Bar & Grill** told the story of Billie Holiday's tragic life through music and words. It took us through Billie's history of prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, racism, imprisonment for narcotics offences and ill-treatment by the men she loved. The production was set in a small bar in Philadelphia, shortly before Billie Holiday died of cirrhosis and heart failure. Audra McDonald performed a range of Billie's songs, including a standout performance of 'Strange Fruit'. This sombre, brave song from 1939

movingly tells of the horror of lynchings in the deep south of the USA. Nobody sang this song like Billie. Audra McDonald came close. The tables on the stage and in the first rows of the stalls, along with the excellent trio on piano, bass and drums, conjured the atmosphere of a small bar. I am a big fan of Billie Holiday and was



surprised and impressed by the way in which Audra McDonald, an operatically trained soprano, captured Billie Holiday's broken, destroyed voice. Standing ovations all round. (Maggie Howell)

## August

No visit.

## September



Our annual iU3A visit in **September** to the **Park Theatre** to see Joe Orton's *Loot* attracted a very large party of members, many of whom were revisiting the play 50+ years after its opening. This venue always enhances our enjoyment: the welcome; the explanatory talk beforehand; the intimacy of the theatre. Many of us had memories of the play, and the general agreement seemed to be that it was no longer 'outrageous'. My memories go back to the 1970 film, which I saw with my mother! I am sure she was outraged by the criticism of the Catholic Church. My recollections are of feeling threatened, of dark and sinister threads. I did not feel this at the Park until well into the second act. It was, though, an excellent production, strong on farce. But I missed some of Inspector Truscott's speeches — an essential part of Orton's message — as

overpresented, at speed, I felt. But I was still very disturbed by the farcical treatment of the 'corpse' made all the more pointed by being played by an actual person. Joe Orton, who described the content of 'Loot' as being "the essential me" wrote the part of Inspector Truscott for his friend Kenneth Williams, who played the part in the opening production — originally titled *Funeral Games* — at Cambridge, and which was a flop. Williams realised he was miscast, and it is interesting to read his Diaries on the subject of *Loot*:

*"10th Feb 1965 — We rehearsed on the rewrites all day; Trying to find an ending; Trial and error game; 3 weeks to rehearse; 19th Feb 1965 — opening show went like a suet pudding. Playing this stuff is like trying to catch bath water."*



Williams and Orton remained close friends however. They would lunch together in Lyons (remember Lyons?), though he resented the play's ensuing successful run. Years later, in 1980, Kenneth Williams wrote in his diary: "I re-read the copy of the play which Joe gave me. Can't help wishing it had a better tag line, but certainly I think the final moment should have Dennis and Hal exchanging a conspiratorial nod and wink when Fay kneels in reverence." And so, a bow to Joe Orton and Kenneth Williams. (Susan Archer)

## October

In October the theatre group saw the Park Theatre's production of Chris Hannan's play *What Shadows*. Is Enoch Powell's later life worthy of attention? Only perhaps because of his 1968 speech prophesying that immigration would bring disaster. Delivered with uncanny verisimilitude by Ian McDiarmid playing Powell, the speech forms the play's central moment. But it should be met with a serious rebuttal. This, sadly, never really occurs. The task should have been performed by one of the cast's white protagonists. Instead, it is left to the lone black female character, who is undermined by being set up to doubt the basis of her own anger. Powell is given too easy a pass. The play frequently confuses concern over loss of identity and prejudice with racism and its crucial component of power. With some fine performances, the piece is a clever attempt to rehabilitate a disappointed egoist who chose to seek notoriety at the expense of those least well-placed to reply. (Chris Hignett)



## November



The **November** visit was to *Oslo* at the **Harold Pinter Theatre**. The play gave one an insight into the conflicts which arose and continue to arise between the Israelis and the Palestinians, at the same time showing the difficulties for the Norwegian government when mounting the 'backdoor' strategy in the early 90s. After low level negotiations by economists on both sides, diplomatic negotiations were eventually made possible. A Norwegian social scientist was responsible for orchestrating the talks; he did this in order to show how his theory could work in the management of conflict. For him face-to-face negotiations were a key element in the strategy, because the protagonists would understand the personal circumstances of the other side. His wife 'moved on' the talks with her diplomatic skill.

The humour was often bitter, for example when a joke about a tortured bear showed the power of Mossad. A tour de force was accomplished by the actor who played an Israeli diplomat, mimicking Arafat. The short-term failures and interruptions brought out the human frailties, including various eruptions on both sides. For us, as the audience, there is a poignancy, because we know there is still no peace, although some achievements were made via the Oslo accord. (Susan Caffrey)

## December

Our **December** visit was to the **National Theatre** to see *Follies* by Stephen Sondheim, which is now considered a masterpiece. It is ostensibly an evening party given in 1971 by the old theatre impresario for all his Follies girls from 1918 - 1941, when the Follies closed. Most of them haven't seen each other for at least 30 years so the excitement amongst them all is palpable. The story settles on two married couples, Sally and Buddy, and Phyllis and Ben. When they all met up in 1941 the girls were roommates at the theatre and the boys were their dates. It all seemed to be going along smoothly, except that Sally realised she loved Ben and not Buddy, whom she subsequently married. Over the following 30 years Sally and Buddy lived the life of a salesman, travelling and settling in city after city, winding up eventually in Phoenix, Arizona. But Sally is not happy and longs for the Ben she lost to Phyllis. Meanwhile Ben and Phyllis have become a smart, sophisticated NY couple, he working for the UN and various Foundations and she educating herself at the Museums of NY. But real love seems to be gone.



Meanwhile the stage is covered with ghosts of the showgirls all dressed up in their finery, and the earlier foursome of Ben, Phyllis, Buddy and Sally. They never, of course, really meet up but there is an essence of memories in the air. This is one of the most chilling aspects of the show and takes us back to a time which is past and can no longer really be recaptured.

There are two types of songs: the Pastiche songs where the ex-Follies girls think back to their time in the Follies, and the book songs, which the two couples sing as a way of furthering their story. *Follies* has no interval — 2 hours and 20 minutes straight through. There are great production numbers and solo songs and the show is perfectly cast with not a weak link in them. At the end, some of the group came up to me and said 'why didn't you tell us it was so sad?' Nevertheless, the work of a master. (Howard Lichterman)