

## Theatre Visits – January 2019 – December 2019



Here is a record of the iU3A Theatre Visits group visits in 2019. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

### 2019

#### January



The first **January** 2019 visit was to the **Hampstead Theatre** to see *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov in a new version written and directed by Terry Johnson. He used contemporary language, but not gratingly so, in a beautifully lit and costumed 1890s Chekhovian setting — the family estate in a forest of silver birches. It was pleasing to have each set change revealed at the raising of the gauzy curtain rather than watching shadowy stagehands shifting furniture and props.

The only other production of this play that I have seen was many years ago with Donald Sinden as an elderly, shouty, tiresome Vanya. To see Vanya played by an actor of the right age, Alan Cox, made the inevitability of wasted years ahead more poignant and ironic.

I thought all the performances were excellent, not least the understudy playing glamorous Yeliena. The actors brought out the strengths and very human weaknesses of Chekhov's characters, often with comic effect, particularly in the second half. I came away with an overall sense of the sad waste of unfulfilled lives, missed opportunities and a refusal to see what was blindingly obvious. At least nobody shot themselves — that gun in the cellar had me worried until the very end. (Tricia Bury)

For the second **January** 2019 visit 35 members of the theatre group went to see William Congreve's restoration comedy *The Double Dealer* at the **Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond**. Although some of us got a bit confused with what was happening because of the quick repartee and the doubling up of parts (Zoe Waites played both Cynthia and Lady Touchwood — to a very high standard), most of us had a really enjoyable afternoon. The play was well acted, directed, well paced, funny and had just the right number of sharp asides to the audience. In fact, some of our members were a bit surprised when a member of the cast sat beside them, or addressed a remark to



them!

I would certainly recommend this play to anyone — but swot up on what it's about before you go! (Pat McGinley)

## February



In **February** we went to see *Company* with high expectations after reading rave reviews, and the memory of a visit to an excellent production of 'Follies', another Sondheim classic, fresh in our minds from a few months ago. We were certainly not disappointed, although at its premiere in 1970 no one could have imagined that nearly 50 years later the central male character would have been reimagined as a woman. It works superbly, and

Sondheim himself gave approval to the reversal, which makes total sense as Bobbie's married friends urge her to settle down and marry at her 35th birthday party as her biological clock ticks away.

Marianne Elliott the director and the designer give it a dreamlike quality with a touch of *Alice in Wonderland*, with a set of sliding rooms that almost float like her birthday balloons. The songs are well sung and performed in an innovative way, especially in the case of 'Barcelona' and 'Getting Married Today', and the performances are universally superb with Rosalie Craig as Bobbie, taking you into her mind with her wonderful facial expressions, and Patti LuPone and Richard Fleeshman also having standout numbers in what is a sensational production all round. (Daphne Steele)

## March

In **March** the Theatre Group went to see *Home, I'm Darling*, a new play written by Laura Wade. It opens on to a set of a house decorated in 1950s style, where the main character Judy is preparing breakfast whilst her husband Johnny is upstairs getting ready for work. We are lulled into thinking this is a period piece as Judy sends Johnny off with his lunch box and waves him goodbye at the door and then starts to tidy up, in her swirly 50s striped dress, all to a 50s rock and roll soundtrack, but we then see her bring out a laptop from a drawer and the illusion is dispelled. The story tells of Judy and Johnny's choice to live a perfect 50s lifestyle, she as a housewife at home keeping everything in place, wearing her apron, emptying new packets of groceries into old containers, and dressing in several changes of vintage petticoat-enhanced 50s dresses as the scenes change.



The story raises issues about the roles of men and women in their relationships at home and at work, about the value of having a 'perfect' life, and the division of household chores. We are introduced to Johnny's female boss, whom he is attracted to, and to Judy's mother Sylvia who actually did live through the 50s but not as Judy is interpreting them. Sylvia gives an outline of the life she knew with the hardships of women not being treated as equals to men. Through various scenes we see the strain of keeping up the perfect 50s life, and how it has caused friction between what they each want from their lifestyle choice, and also financial issues impacting on them with only one wage. At one point Johnny asks of Judy '...and what is it you do all day..' to which the audience gave a collective intake of breath, indicating a very different set of values today! The final scene relives the breakfast of the first scene, but with breakfast preparation shared by the couple, and Judy dressed for her job as they both leave to go out for work.

The play was entertaining and thought-provoking with comedy used to highlight the issues being raised about gender equality and relationships and women in the workplace. The costumes were colourful and the characters were very well played. Those of us who met afterwards for a chat reminisced about the 1950s but agree we wouldn't like to relive them! (Brenda Hood)

## April



The **April** theatre visit was to see *The Price* by Arthur Miller.

## May

The **May** theatre visit was to the National to see *Top Girls*. Caryl Churchill gives us a historical perspective on selected women through the ages and from varying cultures. There is a dinner party, where they have a chance to tell their stories; a common theme is their relationship to their offspring. This is largely managed by the men in their lives. We see women's difficulty managing their fertility in a patriarchal society.



The play moves to contemporary life and the social climber 'heroine' Marlene, whose baby does not fit into her executive world: this world, rather than the domestic sphere, provides the background for her exploits. The wife of her male competitor is given short shrift when she asks Marlene to step aside in favour of her husband. This scene exemplifies the 'go getting' and perhaps cruel side to Marlene. However, many men in a similar situation would not hesitate to follow that course of action.

Marlene's ideology is based on the individual who can travel through life unencumbered, and the depiction of the times is of relevance today. Caryl Churchill was basing her play on Thatcher's Britain and we need to look at that world from our perspective. That is why I feel it was appropriate that the National Theatre revived this play, so that a new younger audience are able to experience and discuss it. This means they can address the parallels of our own time and the time of the writing of the play. (Susan Caffrey)

## June



Our first **June** visit was to the Park Theatre, Finsbury Park. Topped and tailed musically by "Should I stay or should I go?" and "You can't always get what you want", *The Last Temptation of Boris Johnson* is a drama comedy of two halves, the first loosely based on events leading up to the Brexit referendum of 2016 and the second pure fantasy from the mind of its author, Jonathan Maitland, looking into his crystal ball ten years from now. I came to this play with fairly low expectations, having read only one of several negative reviews and I wish I could say I found it as funny as the playwright himself suggested in his pre-performance talk. Comparing notes with fellow theatre-goers during the interval, I clearly wasn't the only person who was underwhelmed by the first act, despite the best efforts of



the cast led by the brilliant Will Barton, who impersonates Johnson to a T. The conceit of former political party leaders appearing as spectres to influence Johnson in his decision to advocate remaining in or leaving the EU, while imaginative, fell rather flat.

Things definitely got better in Act 2, with much more audience reaction and many more laughs at how things have turned out in 2029 for the now knighted Boris Johnson and pious clergyman Michael Gove. Unsurprisingly Johnson's making yet another bid for the leadership of the Tory party, but his inability not to succumb to temptation has caught up with him, yet again, as his misdemeanours are about to be exposed in a sensational new biography... (Celia Ballantyne)

In **June** the group returned to the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond to see Terence Rattigan's play *While the Sun Shines*, which was a great success when first staged in 1943; by all accounts it is also well received by 2019 audiences.



The play is based on an ingenious plot including a few misunderstandings or mix-ups and characters that may appear stereotypes at first: The Earl of Harpenden (Bobby) a typical stiff-upper-lip, wealthy, English member of the nobility whose reactions to shattering news seem limited to "oh!"; Joe, the muscular, confident and gauche American airman, ever so impressed by English nobility titles ("I slept with an earl!"; "What shall I call you? Duke?"); Colbert, the small, moustached over-romantic, passionate French Lieutenant with an accent straight out of 'Allo 'Allo; The Duke of Ayr and Stirling, impoverished gambler from *Dad's Army*; Lady Elizabeth, his demure daughter, betrothed to Bobby; Mabel Crum, the good-hearted tart who turns out to be a shrewd business woman. And the butler, just proper.

The action takes place in the Earl's apartment at The Albany, the morning after the night before. The butler goes into the bedroom to wake Bobby and the ball starts running. All those misunderstandings have clear and simple explanations: after a night of drinking — was Bobby on his stag night? — Joe has somehow crashed into Bobby's bed! Next to appear is the demure Lady Elizabeth, who has come for her wedding the next day. She seems to have spent most of the night on the train in conversation with the French Lieutenant she has invited to stay at Bobby's apartment. Bobby has to leave and Elizabeth is left alone in the apartment. Joe mistakes her for another of Bobby's friends and makes a pass at her, not to her displeasure. Now Colbert enters; he has fallen for the Lady and is trying to convince her she is not really in love with the man she's about to marry and he hopes to win her over. Now, to make the situation more complicated, the Duke visits; he wants to settle some financial matters with the Earl before the wedding. Then enters Mabel, who had been invited for a drink to keep company to the American soldier, very charming and sexy. Later on in the play, when Bobby hears of Elizabeth's change of mind about marriage, he will propose to her.

So will she accept? Who will Elizabeth choose between: the French Lieutenant or the American airman? Sorry, no spoiler at this point!

Of course not everybody is on stage at the same time. There is this convenient place called "the kitchen" where various people hide at strategic moments, allowing action in the main room, creating very entertaining silly situations, which works very well in this small theatre: you feel as if you too are in that apartment and it helps connection with the characters, who are all very well acted, particularly Mabel Crum.

I am not so sure the play is that dated after all. The recipe works: a background of war, soldiers who behave like big boys, a mix of intrigue, mistaken identity, and enough innuendos, some of them sexual, add some ambiguity and you get a situation where (as someone says in the play) "England has again managed to muddle it up". That has been my impression over the past couple of years.

Don't worry, there is a happy denouement. In the play anyway. (Gilbert Vieri)

## July



The **July** visit was to Bridge Theatre to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

My heart sank when a group of singers dressed like refugees from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* entered the performing area and processed through bemused promenading audience members, singing a dirge-like song. 'Shall I slip out now, while no-one in the group is looking?', I thought to myself, 'I have a seat at the end of a row as usual ...' What a mistake that would have been!

These days 'colour-blind' and 'gender-blind' casting has become the norm in many theatre productions but Nicholas Hytner's production gave a more nuanced take on this. Actors Gwendoline Christie and Oliver Chris doubled the roles of Hippolyta/Titania and Theseus/Oberon as usual, but in a fascinating directorial decision, Hippolyta had been given Oberon's lines and vice-versa. Christie's physical presence made this believable — she was no slight, sylph-like being but an imposing figure who commanded the stage. And I loved the resulting Oberon-Bottom pairing: one was not sure who was more surprised or delighted by Bottom's 'translation'!

The rest of the casting offered many pleasures from the genuinely (for once!) funny mechanicals, especially Quince with her clip-board; the dungaree-clad Snug and Snout; and the four lovers, as they hurtled from bed to bed and partnership to partnership. The amazing aerial acrobatics of the apparently circus-trained fairies kept one's attention through the play and the interval but, and I may be in the minority, I found David Moorst's Puck very irritating.

The production was again a promenade performance, with the set — largely beds of course — being reconfigured throughout the play, the audience marshalled around it. Having also seen the earlier promenade production of *Julius Caesar* where the audience were integral to the production I didn't get the same feeling here — but they were certainly having a great time!

I've seen plenty of productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* over the years but this one is certainly up with Peter Brook's seminal 'white box' RSC production of 1970 in my personal ranking. (Liz Simpson)

## August

In **August**, we travelled to Chichester in ideal weather (no rain!) to see the musical *Oklahoma!* at the Chichester Festival Theatre, a lovely venue near a restaurant where some of the group had a very enjoyable lunch.

The 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* was based on the Riggs play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which is today rarely performed, while *Oklahoma!* is an acclaimed and popular American musical. A recent production in the States took home best revival at the 2019 Tony Awards, beating *Kiss Me Kate*.



Among the unforgettable songs are 'Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'', 'The Surrey With The Fringe On Top' and the show-stopper 'Oklahoma'. The choreography was brilliant, with a wide range of dance and movement from fight scenes to ballet. The sound system and the orchestra were excellent, the performers, all two dozen of them, were convincing, and the stage set was ideal.

It is one of those musicals where the actors are full of energy and enthusiasm and one comes out of the theatre humming the tunes. (Janice Bewley and Hilary Sands)

## September



The **September** visit was to see 'The Night of the Iguana' by Tennessee Williams.

## October

Our October visit was to see *Fiddler on the Roof*, a classic Broadway musical from 1964 based on stories by the great Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem. It turns a few of the stories into a Broadway musical full of humour, pathos and brilliant choreography, originally done by Jerome Robbins but now with additional choreography from Matt Cole. The book is by Joseph Stein, a leading Broadway librettist who won the Tony Award for his book for *Fiddler*. The music and lyrics are by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, for which they jointly won the Tony for Best Musical of 1964. It is one of the most popular musicals of the 20th century and has enjoyed success in every corner of the world.



This production by Trevor Nunn is one of the best I have seen, except of course for the original, directed by Jerome Robbins, which I saw with the great musical actor Zero Mostel when I was 18 (he played the role over 2000 times). Another actor who made Tevye his main bread earner was Topol, who played it in London, in the film of 1971 and in a revival in London for a total of 3500 performances. To me, Andy Nyman is on their level giving us a humorous, poignant but powerful Tevye, totally unsentimental, to whom 'Tradition' is the most important thing in his life. A superb

performance by our great musical star Maria Friedman as Golde, his wife, makes her sympathetic, warm, strong but also not sentimental. The first act is vivid and lively and the second act is more sombre, leading us to the sad end when all the inhabitants must leave their village of Anatevka.

Most of the group adored the show, though there were a few negative comments, possibly from some of the group who are not great fans of musicals and felt the humour in the first act was too frivolous. To me, that is the Jewish way of dealing with a sad and tragic life in the stetl and is perfectly in keeping with the original stories. This a show that really earns a 5 star review. (Howard Lichterman)

## November



Our **November** trip to see *Touching the Void* provided a gripping afternoon, brilliantly acted, holding the audience at the edge of their seats as a literally “do or die” drama unfolded, with a climbing disaster and major injuries to the central character, in an utterly remote part of the Andes mountains, with no hope of help. By skilfully using flips back and forward and presenting some of them in the form of a dream by the injured stranded

climber, the play showed us what prompts and even compels such people to undertake these massively risky challenges, how it affects those around them, and the utter determination and will to survive when things go wrong. The suspense was so great and so well done that a portion of the audience thought the play had finished, and started applauding, assuming a different ending from the actual one, which happened five minutes later. All in all, a triumph! (Jan Filochowski)

## December

In **December** the iU3A Theatre Group escaped from the dystopia of our times and had a Really Good Laugh at Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* at the Garrick.

The play is in three stages, beginning with our watching a second-rate touring company at rehearsal, then turning inside out so we see the same scene being mimed from backstage. Finally there is a disastrous “live” performance with the cast all being overwhelmed by instances in their private lives. All the ingredients of a traditional farce are there: plenty of slapstick and splendid vulgarity: actors fall down; trousers fall down; lacy knickers and suspenders are worn. There are

smutty references and double entendres. All very fast and funny, and an excellent preparation for the pantomime. Directed with attention to perfection of timing, this is a play about bad timing: wrong entrances, wrong doors, wrong people, missed chances, missed sardines. Yes, it is about “Life”, but laughing at itself and at our unawareness.

My favourite identification was the emphasis on the way inanimate objects can become hostile: telephone wires, door locks, curtains. (See Dickens, and David Copperfield, when he is unable to eat his dinner because the two lamb chops on the plate have a life of their own and are working against him.) The most delicious



example of this came near the end when the bossiest character is trying to get control of the play and actors. But alas for her dignity: her skirt has got caught up in her knickers.

Nostalgia Note: Does anyone remember Many Years Ago (!) queuing, sitting on a stool, an hour before the performance, outside the gallery entrance, to get a seat in the gods. 2/6 I think? (Susan Archer)