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Noel Coward's Brief Encounter , and: *Gone with the Wind*
(review)

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is questioned, since the victims were bribed with food to perform the actions thought most likely to garner empathy and inspire charity.

Thorndike extends the argument in favor of the power of art by an impromptu salon performance demonstrating how a representation of suffering by a live actor in a shared space could be as moving (or perhaps even more moving) than an actual person at the point of suffering in a film or photograph. Harrison himself used a variety of new media in the production, but essentially sides with the inspirational power of art. Not only does his mouthpiece, Gilbert Murray, champion the power of poetry to communicate a depth of feeling that might otherwise remain unarticulated, but Harrison consciously chose poetry and a complex structure for what could as easily have been a traditional history play written in prose.

The final section of Harrison's epic, which integrates contemporary characters and situations, takes on an oblique and mysterious tone. A mutilated Kurdish poet, modeled on an asylum-seeker who sewed his own eyes, ears, and mouth shut to protest against the United Kingdom's treatment of refugees, arrives in Westminster Abbey. His inarticulate screams blend with the images of the dead in Nansen's slides. He stands in sharp contrast to the leitmotif of the open-eyed, open-mouthed, silent suffering of the tragic mask. Neither poetry nor silence offers sufficient means to communicate human emotion.

The appearance of the ship, as in its name, should have heralded a move forward, but instead it inspired a striking sensation of stasis. Rather than introducing early in the play the production's most visually spectacular effect during the polar exploration, the directors chose instead to wait until the conclusion of the play within the play. As Bob Crowley's beautifully designed *Fram* emerged from beneath the stage, spiraling up from under the ice, its ghostly occupants bemoan the current state of would-be refugees. Nansen's spirit is dismayed as he relates the story of two African children covered in flies. These daring explorers (desperate to escape famine rather than to find fame) were ill-prepared stowaways frozen on transatlantic flights. The past and the present situations Harrison reveals are uncomfortably similar.

Perhaps paradoxically, the large number of important themes in Harrison's play is its most disappointing aspect, for no new ground is covered and no great hypotheses are made or tested. Instead, the production left audiences with the familiar understanding that facts must always be questioned, that art can convey truth very effectively to some viewers in some contexts, and that an awareness of

suffering is not necessarily followed by positive action to relieve it. While Harrison's play is peopled with many potential heroes, there is very little heroic action as he questions individuals' ability to make lasting differences. Famine, climate change, the treatment of refugees, and apathy among those with the means to relieve the suffering of others are as much part of the twenty-first-century horizon as they were during the interwar years. Mass media have failed to inspire people to demand lasting solutions, but so also have the arts.

Harrison is not deterred. His latest project was an impressive attempt to tell many stories with important overlapping themes. It was most successful as a reminder that we must continue seeking ways to reach new audiences, to retain the support of existing ones, and to inspire one another to make positive changes to our world. Communicating with the widest possible audience will require not only a regular exploration of new forms, but also the maintenance and redeployment of more familiar ones in both traditional and innovative ways.

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NOEL COWARD'S BRIEF ENCOUNTER.

Adapted for the stage and directed by Emma Rice. From the words of Noel Coward. Kneehigh Theatre Production at The Cinema on the Haymarket, London. 23 May 2008.

GONE WITH THE WIND. Based on the novel by Margaret Mitchell. Music, Book, and Lyrics by Margaret Martin. Adapted and directed by Trevor Nunn. New London Theatre, London. 7 June 2008.

In the chapter "Stereotype" in her visionary book *A Director Prepares*, Anne Bogart urges directors to ask themselves: "What do you do with the audience's inherited cultural memory?" Two recent London productions drew inspiration from classic romantic films and provided excellent examples of how a show's success or failure can hinge on its ability to dramaturgically manage the role of cliché and stereotype in performance. Kneehigh Theatre, savoring the cliché for its ripe theatricality, offered an audacious revisualization of *Noel Coward's Brief Encounter*, while Trevor Nunn and Margaret Martin's seriously flawed musical version of *Gone with the Wind* never rose above cliché and turned a soaring epic into an overlong pageant. Kneehigh's director deftly managed the performance of cliché



Naomi Frederick (Laura) and Tristan Sturrock (Alec) in *Brief Encounter*. Photo: Alistair Muir.

by respecting her audience's shared experience and transcending it through broad but passionate performances and metaphoric, easily-identifiable stage images. Ironically, *Gone With the Wind*, in its attempts to not offend with prejudicial and gender stereotype, ended up offending more with one-dimensional performances manipulated less through artistic discovery and more through misplaced political correctness. The result is that *Brief Encounter* freshly displayed a compassionate humanity that resonated with the audience, while *Gone with the Wind* never broke free of its inherited myth and merely managed to manipulate rather than move.

Kneehigh's production of *Brief Encounter*, performed in a cinema, ingeniously wove Coward's popular film with his play *Still Life*, on which it was based, fusing film and live performance in a production that said as much about our love of film as about our love of being in love. From the moment I entered the theatre, it was clear from the classic red-velvet stage curtains, the live jazz combo playing 1940's tunes, and the flashlight-wielding usherettes that this theatrical event was equally invested in both the performance and the audience. Already, the audience had been cued that they were a crucial part of the story's collective memory. Kneehigh's actors, as Bogart might observe, "connected us with time." The curtains parted, a black-and-white film rolled, and in another sly wink to formulaic devices, a film title informed us that the motion picture had been cleared by censors and "certified for hopeless romantics." With that, Rice not only declared homage to old movies, but also blatantly affirmed the inescapable sentimentality of the familiar love story.

Two audience members in the theatre's front row began arguing loudly: Laura (Naomi Frederick) and Alec (Tristan Sturrock), who were two lovers

in the midst of ending an affair while the movie plays above them. Rice set up a brilliant meta-theatrical moment as Laura is torn between the black-and-white life projected on the screen where her faithful husband Fred (Andy Williams) calls for her, and the very real life "in color" with her lover in the smoke-filled theatre. Echoing Mia Farrow's enchanted escape in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Laura suddenly jumped onstage and slipped through the screen just as her image appeared in the film next to Fred. This cinematic Laura gazed back to the viewers, reminding them again of their complicit role in the storytelling. A mournful train whistle blew and the scene moved to Milford Junction Café, where the desperate lovers met, and where most of the action takes place. Proprietor Myrtle Bagot (Tamzin Griffin), her beau and station conductor Albert (Andy Williams), her distracted assistant Beryl (Amanda Lawrence), and Beryl's boyfriend Stanley (Stuart McLoughlin) all inhabited the café. In the film *Brief Encounter*, these secondary characters mainly offer comic relief, whereas in *Still Life*, from which most of the Milford Junction scenes are taken, all three couples—the older, middle-aged, and the young—deal with the problem of revealing their intimacies in public. These four incredibly versatile actors beautifully rendered their characters and never shied away from exaggeration or stereotype if it could serve to highlight their human condition. Baggott's over-padded bum demanded recognition of her overlooked sexuality; Myrtle's ridiculous relationship with her scooter became a symbol of her maturation into adulthood.

A mournful train whistle blew and the scene moved to Milford Junction Café, where the desperate lovers met, and where most of the action takes place. The actors continuously set up clichés only to break through them by leading sing-alongs, tap dancing, playing the cello, strumming ukuleles, and even making sexually suggestive balloon animals.



Susannah Fellows (Ellen O'Hara), Jill Paice (Scarlett O'Hara), and Jina Burrows (Prissy) in *Gone with the Wind*. Photo: Catherine Ashmore.



Darius Danesh (Rhett Butler) and Jill Paice (Scarlett O'Hara) in *Gone with the Wind*.
Photo: Catherine Ashmore.

They also performed Coward's songs that Rice interpolated to serve as a knowing counterpoint to the lover's drama. The bittersweet "I'm No Good at Love," the tender "Go Slow Johnny," the hysterical "Alice Is at It Again," and the plaintive "Room with a View," while offering a break from the longing sentiment of the main story, also succeeded in thematically addressing the pains and follies of love. These versatile actors also were featured in a series of tongue-in-cheek period commercials (screened during intermission) advertising postwar products such as "Chicory Dickory Coffee." These parodic gems (which can still be viewed on YouTube at this writing) affirmed the talented cast's stylistic ease.

In this embracing of, rather than running from, cliché, Rice was intelligently utilizing what Bogart calls the act of "burning through" the stereotype. This was accomplished through inventively engaging the audience's imagination by exploding the drama's antiquated sentiment with the actors' exquisite movements or transformational use of props. When Laura's and Alec's eyes first met, "warning bells" rang wildly at the train platform and the two were "swept away by love" as waves crashed on a projection behind them, and the entire company's bodies responded by contracting and expanding rapturously. Later, a passionate tango led them to literally "hang from the chandeliers," deliriously in love. A duster became a Pomeranian dog on a leash; the ritual of teatime was displayed as a magician's act; and in homage to countless film farewells, as the lovers kissed on the train platform, an actor waving a crinkled newspaper on a stick, as if it were caught in the wind, wielded it over and around the oblivious couple. The cliché was pointedly ridiculous though no less endearing. Neil Murray's set design used strong recognizable images with two iron towers connected by a moving bridge reflecting the industrial nature of the train station, and a café suggested by the spare use of an upright player piano serving as the counter, a samovar, a table, two chairs, and a few cups and saucers. This innovative production was unforgettable for its breathtaking use of media in re-visualizing the story. In a final memorable moment, as Alec's train pulls out of the station, thus leaving Laura forever, he surprisingly extended a sheet over the stage as a speeding train was projected upon it, symbolizing their relationship's locomotive force. In that heart-racing moment, the cliché had been simply acknowledged, powerfully enhanced, and given new appreciation with a reimagined embodiment. Kneehigh's sensitive revisualization of this ill-fated love affair made me unashamedly proud to be a "hopeless romantic" and wish for two tickets to Milford Junction.

Unfortunately, I was not left with a similar feeling after enduring *Gone with the Wind*, which, ironically,

by trying to avert the controversial pitfalls of a story steeped in man's inhumanity, lost all of its humanity. Naturally, any production risks being compared to the beloved film and its iconic performances and images. Sadly, this production glibly tried to circumvent some of the film's controversial stereotypes by not focusing on the horror and destruction that formed the actual backdrop for the story. The issues of slavery, war, death, and adultery all became neutralized, seemingly for fear of offending. Whereas with *Brief Encounter* the characters were liberated from the restriction of theatrical convention and able to explore the dynamics of the liminal space between stage and screen, the characters in *Gone with the Wind* never fully inhabited the space in which they existed or allowed it to inform them. The actors in *Brief Encounter* met the audience halfway and forged a contract based on recognition of the truths inherent in the cliché; the actors in *Gone with the Wind* were forced to hide stereotypical aspects of their characters and consequently presented untruthful performances.

While *Brief Encounter* used musical numbers to exaggerate romance lovingly, *Gone with the Wind*'s score stayed mired in mediocre sentiment and inferior material derivative of other musicals. Margaret Martin's compositions seemed to be all built on the doggerel A-A-B-B-A pattern with no internal rhyme schemes, so that I guessed the couplet's completions long before they were sung. Composer, librettist, and lyricist Martin absurdly based "Reconstruction Planning" on the piano roll that usually accompanies the arrival of a villain in a silent film, effectively reducing the fall of the South to a cartoon melodrama. The second-act spiritual "Wings of a Dove" sounded suspiciously like *Ragtime*'s "Wheels of a Dream," and Scarlett's unimaginative act 1 finale, titled "Gone with the Wind," its melody following Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, tritely intoned: "The life I knew so well / Has become a living hell . . . / Gone with the wind."

Martin saved the jaw-dropping *Waiting for Guffman*-like moment for Prissy after she was asked the lead-in, "What you gonna do when you free, Prissy?" With a smile and a musical flourish, she replied, "Read!" and sang the show's most melodious song, "A Life I Can Call My Own." Here was misunderstanding and misuse of stereotype. There is no argument that many would view our shared cultural memory of "Prissy" as the scatterbrained, hysterical servant to be a prejudicial stereotype based on race and gender. But rather than working through that inherited memory to find a deeper truth, Martin and Nunn presented a somber neutral character in an absurdly unrealistic moment. It must be noted, though, that Jina Barrow's powerful performance almost overcame the wooden material,

and she stopped the show with her impassioned vocals. Unfortunately, Darius Danesh (Rhett) and Jill Paice (Scarlett) were largely constrained by their adherence to the comfortable recreations of forms created by the iconic performances of Gable and Leigh.

The design team presented a visually admirable production marred by questionable choices. Instead of the classic image of a pristine white neo-classic Tara, in John Napier's design we saw a shabby and weathered porch more at home on *Tobacco Road*. This design ultimately failed, because the audience didn't witness the brutal transformation of the elegant antebellum South as seen in the charred remains of once-resplendent Tara. Napier backed the stage with a full cyclorama glowing with the familiar blazing orange sky borrowed from the film's opening titles. The set design, constructed entirely of wood, denied one of the most persistent metaphoric images from the famous story, that of the land. In both the book and the film, the elements of earth, wind, and fire are crucial to plot and character development and oddly they were absent in this production's design. The larger-than-life melodrama might possibly have been more believable if the archetypal forces of nature loomed over the fate of these characters. But the sprawling narrative never seemed to properly fill the New London Theatre. The fall of Atlanta had about it the underwhelming ludicrousness seen in *This Is Spinal Tap* when the wrongly sized Stonehenge is flown in. Here, the cyclorama glowed red, a little smoke billowed, and the columns on the plantation slowly fell over with a groaning "kerthunk." Andreane Neofitou's costumes were sumptuous and didn't spare on the crinolines, fans, and bloomers, but she obviously copied the lead's dress from the film, and often it seemed that Nunn had a set of *Gone with the Wind* collector dolls that he was moving about to strike familiar moments in vivand tableaux.

In the end, the musical barely escaped camp when Melanie's ghost appeared, urging Scarlet to sing:

For this I learned the hardest way,
Tomorrow is another day.
The future calls
The past is gone . . . with the wind.

Frankly my dear, . . . three and half hours with *Gone with the Wind* was no *Brief Encounter*.

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DESSA ROSE. Book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. Music by Stephen Flaherty. Based on the novel by Sherley Anne Williams. Directed by Rick Lombardo. Musical Direction by Todd C. Gordon. Choreographed by Kelli Edwards. New Repertory Theatre, Watertown, MA. 7 May 2008.

Most of the critical praise enjoyed by lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty since their collaboration began with *Lucky Stiff* in 1988 has centered on the wildly successful *Ragtime*. *Seussical the Musical*, although a critical failure, remains tremendously popular, profiting from myriad community, school, and regional theatre productions. The team's songs from *Once on This Island*, *A Man of No Importance*, and even the animated film *Anastasia* have entered the repertoire of the aspiring musical theatre performer. One wonders, then, why one of their most recent endeavors, *Dessa Rose*, which premiered at Lincoln Center in 2005, remains comparatively unknown. Although *Dessa Rose* raises provocative questions about historiography, the New Repertory Theatre's production (May 2008) suggests that the musical suffers from intrinsic problems of structure, narrative, and embodiment that are perhaps insurmountable.

As with *Ragtime*, Ahrens adapted *Dessa Rose* from a novel containing several narrative lines. The product, however, was less successful. In the absence of Terrence McNally's skillful book-writing and with less time for workshop development, Ahrens and Flaherty may have lacked opportunities to resolve the inevitable problems of stage adaptation. (*Ragtime* benefited from a three-year development process that included workshops, a concept album, and two pre-Broadway engagements in Toronto and Los Angeles.) Devotion to the structure of the source material may have contributed to the musical's uneven narrative framework. Sherley Anne Williams's episodic novel is divided into sections providing three separate points of view: that of Adam Nehemia, a journalist out to capture the story of a murderous slave for his eager publisher; Rufel (Ruth in the musical), a white woman abandoned by her philandering husband on his plantation; and the title character, a pregnant slave-coffle rebellion leader. While the clever contrast of narrative voices functions effectively in Williams's novel, it causes complications in the musical. Lacking the clear transitions and structural consistency of *Ragtime*, *Dessa Rose* is an uneven experience for the spectator: the narrative voices guiding the audience through the musical shift among Ruth, Dessa, and occasionally Nehemia, their perspectives sporadically jumping from temporal points of view.