

Report from London (December 2022)

By Dan Venning

My last theatre-going trips to London were in 2018 and 2019, before the COVID pandemic swept across the globe, shuttered theatres, and transformed theatre-going after the world began to reopen. In the reports I wrote for *European Stages* after those trips, I identified several major trends that ran through many of the productions I saw. In 2018, numerous productions engaged, in one way or another, with the global #MeToo movement, acknowledging the assaults and microaggressions faced by women and AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) people. At the end of 2019, only a few months before the pandemic struck, Britain was gearing up for a national snap election that was, in some respects, a sort of second referendum on Brexit. In this particular moment, many of the productions I saw dealt with Britain's place (often as a former imperial power) in global politics, or the marginalized people within British society.

In December 2022, I once again spent nearly a month in London, taking twenty students from Union College in Schenectady, NY to see shows across the city. As in my previous trip, I selected shows eclectically to show my students just some of the many sorts of theatrical productions available in London: West End musicals (*Cabaret*), works at the National (*Hex and Othello*), shows in Shakespeare's Globe's indoor candlelit Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (*Hakawatis* and *Henry V*), new works (*My Neighbour Totoro* at the Barbican, *Baghdaddy* at the Royal Court, *The Doctor* and *Orlando* on the West End), and long-running mainstays (*The Woman in Black* and *Heathers*). In addition to the productions I saw with my students, I separately attended *As You Like It* at the new @sohoplacetheatre; my first West End panto, *Mother Goose*; the long-running *& Juliet* on the West End in advance of its Broadway transfer; and *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Almeida, which had sold tickets so quickly that I could not book for my large student group. While my previous London reports consisted of similarly diverse shows, in this iteration, I found few thematic links running through the content or staging of these works.

If there was a link between these shows, it was the truism that artists and audiences are rediscovering how to engage with theatre in the post-COVID landscape. Indeed, COVID continued (and continues) to affect how theatre is made and seen. About half of the audience members were masked at every performance (I was always masked). Several members of my term abroad contracted COVID while in London and had to quarantine for five days and miss performances. I had booked tickets to *Tammy Faye* at the Almeida, a new musical (with music by Elton John, lyrics by Jake Shears, and book by James Graham, featuring superstar Andrew Rannels among others, based on the life of evangelist Tammy Faye Messner), but several performances, including ours, were cancelled due to illnesses in the cast. I booked another show to make up for the cancellation: the solo piece *One Night Stand with E.V. Crowe and friends* at the Royal Court... and then that was

also cancelled due to illness (thankfully *Orlando*, which I booked at that point, was not cancelled!). And yet throughout the theatres, there was palpable joy—even in the grimmest productions—that artists and audiences were once again able to come together in the same space. Because I found few concrete links beyond the ways COVID continues to inflect theatre-going, I discuss the productions irrespective of the order in which I saw them, but in ways that allow me to draw links between particular shows.

Both the first (*Cabaret*, 1 December 2022) and final (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 23 December 2022) productions I saw were directed by Rebecca Frecknall, Associate Director for the Almeida Theatre. Frecknall is an unabashedly feminist director who reimagines classic dramatic works—often American—for the contemporary stage and her work desperately needs to be seen on major stages in the United States. Her *Summer and Smoke* in 2018 was haunting in its simplicity and Patsy Ferran justifiably won the Olivier for her luminous performance; unfortunately Frecknall's 2019 *The Duchess of Malfi* featuring Lydia Wilson was less so, sapping the play of its disturbing power in a bland, ultramodern staging that seemed to focus more on the men than the titular Dutchess. I'm glad to say that both of her productions I saw in 2022 were stellar.

Cabaret was staged at the Playhouse Theatre on the West End, which was rechristened The Kit Kat Club. Audience members entered through the stage door and wound their way through the basement halls of the theatre, as if we were entering the venue depicted in the show. Stickers were placed over our cell phone lenses to prevent photographs and everyone was given a shot of vodka. Cast members of various genders dressed in vaguely BDSM sexual garb made eyes with us and danced provocatively. Three separate bars were set up in each lobby level and a half hour before curtain an elaborately staged dance number by the “boys and girls” of the Kit Kat Club was executed on the bar of the main lobby (Julia Cheng's choreography was impressive throughout the show, but particularly here). The show had swept the 2022 Olivier Awards but by the time I saw it all the stars who had won acting awards had rotated out. The Emcee was played by understudy Matthew Gent at this performance and Sally Bowles by swing/alternate Emily Benjamin (both of whom would take over the roles as main cast in 2023), yet this cast was spectacular. Of particular note were Michelle Bishop as Fräulein Kost (and the Kit Kat girl Fritzie), Vivien Parry as Fräulein Schneider, and Benjamin as Sally Bowles. Parry seemed to channel the spirit of Lotte Lenya with her rendition of “So What” and Bishop, under Frecknall's direction, brought genuine pathos to the role of Kost. As a prostitute at the bottom of the social hierarchy, we could understand how Kost would embrace Naziism to find anyone she could denigrate in response to the way society had rejected her. At the end of the show, Benjamin's rendition of “Cabaret” was among the strongest musical numbers I've seen live, surpassing, to my mind, recordings of Liza Minelli: the upbeat lyrics paired with her personal despair had much of the audience in tears. Sid Sagar as Cliff Bradshaw was less successful, but this may be because he seemed to have been directed to be emotionless throughout, preventing any sort of audience empathy with the character who was the analogue of

Christopher Isherwood, the queer author of the stories on which the musical is based. Tom Scutt's stage was almost in the round and his costumes implicated the audience in the rise of fascism that Kander, Ebb, and Masteroff's show depicts. The Emcee rose from the stage gleefully with a tiny party hat for "Wilkommen" as everyone reveled together in the celebration we were attending; by "Money" he was dressed in a neo-fascist demonic outfit, and at the end of the show he and the boys and girls of the Kit Kat Club wore simple, sexless brown outfits, evoking Hitler's brownshirts a century ago in the 1920s. Yet in the final moments as they marched in a circle carrying suitcases, Isabella Byrd's lighting turned the set to a stark gray, making them look like photos of men and women with suitcases on their way to trains to concentration camps. Collaboration would save no one. Thankfully, Frecknall's production (with original star Eddie Redmayne as the Emcee) is transferring to Broadway in 2024, when the August Wilson Theatre will temporarily become the Kit Kat Club.



Cabaret. Photo: Marc Brenner.

Of all the shows I saw in London, Frecknall's version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was the strongest—easily the best Tennessee Williams I have ever seen—despite the fact that it was in previews with the actor playing Blanche holding her script throughout. The production sold out within hours of tickets going on sale, but Lydia Wilson, who had been cast as Blanche, dropped out of the production for health reasons two weeks before performances began. The first week of performances were cancelled and Wilson was replaced by Patsy Ferran, who had been such a revelation as Alma in *Summer and Smoke* four years earlier. On the preview I attended, after barely two weeks of rehearsal, Ferran carried her script, occasionally glancing quickly at it at the beginning of each scene, but never looking at it again. Also at the performance I attended on 23 December, Frecknall herself stepped into the role of Eunice (without a script). Seeing her onstage in her own production was a marvelous experience. Madeleine Girling's set was a nearly bare square with a few scattered props (and periodic rain effects) and Frecknall's production raced through the words at the beginning of Williams's script at lightning pace so that the action could effectively open with Blanche's arrival in New Orleans. Yet this production was less about the conflict between Blanche and Stanley than about toxic masculinity and patriarchal abuse. Blanche was certainly traumatized, but never for a moment portrayed as "crazy," and Stanley's violence towards her throughout the play had little to do with any hatred for her per se. Instead, Stanley wanted complete control over his victimized wife Stella—and his clearest path to getting this, as for any abuser, was to isolate Stella from anyone with whom she could find mutual love or care, particularly her sister. The actor who played Stanley, Paul Mescal, was not a hulking brute but appeared to be an attractive, soulful, young husband with a somewhat silly mullet. Yet in spite of this physical attractiveness, Mescal played Stanley as a profoundly ugly man on the inside: consumed with jealousy, self-pity, and white male rage, taking out his anger most clearly on his abused wife, her sister, and his supposed "friend" Mitch. In this color-conscious production, Stella was played by the British-Indian-Singaporean actor Anjana Vasan (so she and Blanche were clearly not full biological siblings, but loved one another no less) and Mitch by Black actor Dwane Walcott. Walcott's scenes with Blanche and Stanley took on particular resonances—as Stanley viciously notes that Mitch will never achieve his own career successes, or when Blanche asks Mitch if he has been on the titular streetcar and Mitch does not respond. One of many revelations was that Frecknall's production made it seem as if Mitch must have always been written for a Black actor. Her feminist version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (which won an Olivier for Best Revival, and for which Vasan and Mescal also took home Oliviers), even in previews and with Ferran holding her book-in-hand, will make it hard for me to read or see Williams's play in the same light again.



A Streetcar Named Desire. Photo: Marc Brenner.

Nearly as successful were two new adaptations of older works: Robert Icke's *The Doctor* and the Royal Shakespeare Company's *My Neighbour Totoro*. Icke, the former Associate Director for the Almeida (the position Frecknall now holds) created this production at that theatre before it transferred to the West End where I saw it on 8 December 2022. Like his earlier revelatory adaptations *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*, *The Doctor* has since been presented at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. *The Doctor* is Icke's loose adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's play *Professor Bernhardi*, a work about anti-Semitism in early twentieth-century Europe. While holding fast to most of the events in Schnitzler's plot—which hinges on a leading doctor's refusal to admit a priest to deliver last rights to a young girl dying of a botched abortion and the ways in which that Jewish doctor is punished by society—Icke's adaptation is strikingly contemporary, engaging with identity and perception in today's world. His script notes that "Actors' identities should be carefully considered in the casting of the play. In all sections except for [an onstage debate], each actor's identity should be directly dissonant with their character's in at least one way [...] the acting should hold the mystery until the play reveals it. The idea is that the audience are made to re-consider characters (and events) as they learn more about who the characters are" (viii). For example, when a priest (who we later learn is Black) enters in Act I, the stage direction reads "*The FATHER is*

played by a white actor.” Hardiman, a particularly chauvinistic white male doctor, was played by the female Afro-Jamaican actor Naomi Wirthner. The central character, Dr. Ruth Wolff, was played by Juliet Stevenson, an actress who does not “look Jewish” at all. Wolff claims to see only talent and facts, never race or sex, and the audience is forced to engage with what *actually not seeing* these palpable facts about identity would feel like. In one particularly affecting moment, Ruth’s neighbor Sami, played by cis woman actor Matilda Tucker, is revealed to be a trans girl who appears masculine to most people who can see her within the world of the play. We periodically see flashbacks to Ruth’s conversations with her deceased partner Charlie, who suffered from Alzheimer’s, the disease Ruth seeks to cure. Charlie was played by the Black woman actor Juliet Garricks, but Icke never lets us learn Charlie’s “actual” gender or race within the world of the play. Hildegard Bechtler’s simple and evocative set and costumes (the set was simply a slowly rotating white room) contributed to all these effects. Icke’s challenging production forced audiences to engage with what they can, cannot, or will not see.



The Doctor. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

The RSC's *My Neighbour Totoro* (7 December 2022) was another stellar adaptation. It won Olivier awards for Best Entertainment or Comedy Play as well as for Phelim McDermott's direction, Joe Hisaishi's music as orchestrated and arranged by Will Stuart, Jessica Hung and Han Yun's lighting design, Tony Gayle's sound design, Tom Pye's set design, and Kimie Nakano's costume design. Also certainly deserving of an award—although an Olivier category does not exist—were Bail Twist's puppet designs, which were created by the Jim Henson Creature Shop, Significant Object, and Twist's own Tandem Otter Productions. The production was a faithful adaptation by Tom Morton-Smith of Hayao Miyazaki's 1988 Studio Ghibli animated film *My Neighbor Totoro*, about two sisters who move with their father to the rural Japanese countryside in 1955 so that they can be closer to their mother who is in a specialized hospital. In the countryside, the sisters—Mei, aged four, and Satsuki, aged ten—discover mythical creatures from Japanese folklore, including soot spirits, “Totoros” (kind and intelligent furry forest creatures varying in size from tiny to immense), and a giant cat that is also a bus in which the creatures ride. The sisters see tiny sprouts grow into giant trees overnight. Miyazaki's masterful animated film is a paean to childhood, Japanese folk culture, and imagination, made even more powerful through Hisaishi's unforgettable score. A cartoon, with all its impossible magic and music, was brought to life onstage through astounding performances by an entirely Asian cast, including twenty puppeteers in Bunraku-style black outfits, singer Ai Ninomiya, and the award-winning designers. Adult actors Mei Mac (Mei), Ami Okumura Jones (Satsuki), and Nino Furuhata (Kanta, a young neighbor boy) empathetically played young children in a way that contributed to the affective power of the production. During the curtain call, the puppeteers swiftly demonstrated how they had manipulated some of the puppets, from the hand-and-rod chickens to the immense King Totoro and Cat-Bus. Notably, production press photos never show the Totoros; they have to be seen to be believed (the production is being revived in 2023 in London and I have no doubt it will tour worldwide considering its success there).



My Neighbor Totoro. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

Coincidentally, another production I attended was also an adaptation of a film released in 1988: Kevin Murphy and Laurence O’Keefe’s *Heathers*, based on the cult film written by Daniel Waters and directed by Michael Lehmann (13 December 2022). The musical adaptation of *Heathers* has similarly achieved cult status with young musical theatre aficionados, despite never having been staged on Broadway. It opened off-Broadway in 2014 at New World Stages, then premiered in the UK (with a few rewritten songs) at the off-West End venue The Other Palace in 2018, transferred to the West End later that year, transferred back to The Other Palace after the pandemic in 2021, and closed in 2023. All of these productions were directed by Andy Fickman. *Heathers* is set in Westerberg High School in the 1980s and centers on Veronica, a girl who manages to gain acceptance from the popular clique of Heather Chandler, Heather McNamara, and Heather Duke, at the cost of her friendship with the unpopular Martha Dunnstock. Veronica begins a relationship with a new boy at school, the soulful outsider J.D., who reveals himself as a full-fledged sociopath, poisoning the lead Heather and murdering two jocks who try to sexually assault Veronica. Veronica goes along at first—penning a fake suicide note from Heather Chandler that takes the school by storm and later helping to stage the killings of Ram and Kurt as a murder-suicide as if the two were closeted gay lovers. But when J.D. decides to blow up the entire school, Veronica finally takes the

initiative and stops his murderous rampage. At the off-West End Other Palace, Fickman's production as designed by David Shields lacked any technical spectacle but the energetic performances by young actors Erin Caldwell (Veronica), Nathanael Landskroner (J.D.) and Maddison Firth (Heather Chandler) brought the mostly young audience to their feet. O'Keefe and Murphy's songs from the show are superb, particularly Veronica's joyously sexual "Dead Girl Walking," Kurt and Ram's Dads' "My Dead Gay Son," J.D.'s "Our Love is God," the Heathers' show stopping poppy "Candy Store," and the eleven o'clock number "Seventeen," an ode to high school life.

While *Heathers* had a significant run on- and off- the West End, it pales in comparison to *The Woman in Black*, which opened in London in 1989 (only one year after the original films of *Heathers* and *My Neighbor Totoro* were released), closing in March 2023 after running thirty-three years on the West End. Scores of actors have played the roles of Arthur Kipps and the young unnamed Actor who endeavors to bring Kipps to life (as well as the uncredited ghost role) and playwright Stephen Mallatratt died in 2004 less than halfway through the show's immensely long run (Dame Susan Hill, from whose 1983 novel Mallatratt adapted the play, is still alive and still writing). I was especially glad to see the show on 6 December 2022 only months before it ended its historic run. It has made its way into numerous British school curriculums and part of the audience was filled with teenagers in school uniforms who had been bussed in to see the show on the West End. Robin Herford's production, simply designed by Michael Holt, takes place "in this Theatre in the early 1950s" and begins when Arthur Kipps (Julian Forsyth, when I saw it) attempts, poorly, to tell his haunted ghost story for the stage. With a few simple props, the young Actor (Matthew Spencer) takes on the role of the young Kipps, while Kipps himself plays every other character (save the ghost) from his past. Through the power of the imagination, affecting performances, one uncredited woman actor, and a few carefully placed jump scares facilitated by Kevin Sleep's lighting design and Sebastian Frost's sound design, the audience is transported from a bare stage into a small seaside town and its haunted house on the moors. Rumors abound of ghosts in London's theatres—including the murdered actor William Terriss at the Adelphi and the 18th Century "Man in Gray" at Drury Lane—and if such ghosts do exist, I expect the Fortune Theatre will be a stage haunted by *The Woman in Black* for some time to come.



The Woman in Black. Photo: Mark Douet.

In contrast to the simplistic power of imagination celebrated in that show, *Hex* at the National Theatre (5 December 2022) demonstrated the ways in which spectacle—and powerful performances—cannot save a thoroughly misconceived production. Staged in the National’s massive Olivier Theatre, with its marvelous gigantic drum revolve stage, *Hex*, a musical adaptation of the Perrault’s *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale, is obviously a pet project for Rufus Norris, the artistic

director and chief executive of the National. Norris, who directed the production, also wrote the lyrics and developed the concept along with Katrina Lindsay. The convoluted book for *Hex* is by Tanya Ronder and music is by Jim Fortune. Lindsay's set and costume designs are spectacular, including a castle that descends from the upstage wall, three flying fairies who deliver their performances while suspended midair, and numerous other delightfully staged creations, including bumblingly misogynistic princes who wish to wake the sleeping beauty, a chorus of poisonous thorns, and many more fantastical effects. The plot centers on the "low" Fairy (the marvelous singer Lisa Lambe), who loses her powers after accidentally "hexing" the young princess Rose (Rosie Graham) and putting her into a sleep until she can find a true love's kiss. Fairy wants to regain her powers and join the effervescent "High Fairies" (Kate Parr, Olivia Saunders, and Rumi Sutton), so seeks a prince to undo the curse; she finds him in Bert (Michael Elcock), the half-human son of Queenie (another superb singer, Victoria Hamilton-Barritt), an ogress who has turned vegetarian in order to resist her urges to consume human flesh. After a convoluted plot that also involves generations of stewards named Smith and Smith-Smith (Michael Matus), Fairy sneakily preventing Queenie from eating her grandchildren (Rose and Bert's children Duncan and Dyllis), and much more, Fairy succeeds and is elevated to "high fairy" status—renouncing her lifelong goal only seconds later to rejoin her earthbound friends. Tone shifts abound—the show was billed for ages eight and up, but in addition to fairy-tale hijinks it includes a baby-eating ogress, graphic descriptions of animal slaughter, and a "comic" song from the princes about sexual coercion. Even worse is the music: Fortune's tunes and Norris's lyrics are sometimes earworms precisely because of their banality (Bert cannot stop singing about his name in "Prince Bert," impressively and athletically choreographed by Jade Hackett; Rose and Bert's romantic duet "Hello" consists mainly of the words "Hi, Hi, Hello"). Of the twenty-eight songs, eight are reprises (with one song reprised twice). *Hex* aspired to be a creative retelling of fairy tales along the lines of Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, instead it demonstrated what happens when an artistic director of a major theatre is too enamored of his own project.



Hex. Photo: Johan Persson.

The other production I saw at the National, Clint Dyer's staging of *Othello* (16 December 2022), was far more successful. *Othello* is a deeply troubling play, written by a white man over four hundred years ago but engaging with the charged issues of racism and spousal abuse and murder. Probably my favorite analyses of this play come from the Black British actor Hugh Quarshie (see "Is Othello a Racist Play on YouTube).and Ayanna Thompson's new intersectional feminist introduction to Arden revised edition (2016)both of which acknowledge the ways in which the play remains strikingly painful today, especially for Black or woman/AFAB readers and audiences. Dyer's production, in the National's smaller proscenium Lyttelton Theatre, with a set designed by Chloe Lamford that looked like some sort of public forum, began with a stagehand sweeping the stage as images were projected on the upstage wall showing the long and troubling production history of this play. In Dyer's production, almost every character, from ensemble members to Cassio (Rory Fleck Byrne), Bianca (Kirsty J Curtis), Montano (Garteth Kennerley), or the Duke of Venice (Martin Marquez) was also credited as "System"—in other words, these people were part of a system of oppression that would lead to Othello and Desdemona's deaths. Only three characters were not also listed as "System": Othello (Giles Terera), the Black man oppressed by systemic racism, Desdemona (Rosy McEwen), his white wife who rejects the system to love a Black man,

and Iago (Paul Hilton, who was as superb in this as he had been in the benevolent roles of Walter and Morgan in *The Inheritance*), who manipulated the system to destroy Othello and Desdemona. Notably, during the trial in Act I, Iago sat to the side alongside Roderigo/System (Jack Bardoe), making a noose out of a long rope. Iago and Roderigo assumed that the trial would be perfunctory and Othello would be executed—and they might have been right, had the Turkish invasion of Cyprus not required Othello’s military leadership. But perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the production was how Dyer conceived of the role of Emilia/System (Tanya Franks): throughout the production, one of her arms was in a cast and she had a massive black eye. She was obviously being abused by her husband Iago, yet no one commented or even subtly acknowledged this fact. Dyer effectively communicated that systems encourage horrific cruelties (towards women by men, towards Black people by white society) and react violently not to abuse but instead to those who dare to oppose these oppressions.



Othello. Photo: Myah Jeffers.

Another successful and contemporary staging of a Shakespearean play was Josie Rourke's gorgeous intersectional production of *As You Like It* (15 December 2022), the second play to be staged at the new @sohoplacetheatre, an ultramodern complex that is London's first purpose-built West End theatre to open in fifty years. Staged in the round, Robert Jones's set consisted mainly of a large piano center stage where Michael Bruce played underscoring for the action and accompaniment to the songs (Bruce also composed all the music) throughout the show. When the characters entered Arden, leaves fell from above, covering the stage in an autumnal tapestry. At that point, Jones and Poppy Hall's Elizabethan-style costumes gave way to more contemporary, rustic attire. Particularly noteworthy was the casting: Leah Harvey (a Black nonbinary female-presenting actor who uses they/them pronouns) played Rosalind—and Harvey was not the only nonbinary actor in the cast: Cal Watson (they/them) played Le Beau and the second de Bois brother. Several of the actors and their characters were deaf, including Rose Ayling-Ellis, who played Celia, and Gabriella Leon, who played Audrey. These identities mattered in the play: Celia and Audrey communicated using a mixture of British Sign Language (BSL) and sign-mime, and most of the characters communicated with them in this way. But the vicious Duke Frederick (Tom Edden) refused to communicate with his daughter in sign, forcing her to lip read and to speak orally to him. Duke Frederick also used his daughter's disability against her: turning his back to her as he spoke in anger, so that she could not read his lips and understand what he was saying. The play's scenes of reconciliation and love at the end were particularly moving because of these intersectional identities. Instead of returning in "women's weeds," Harvey's Rosalind simply walked offstage and back on, and then Alfred Enoch's Orlando recognized them. Ben Wiggins's Oliver demonstrated his reformation by struggling to learn BSL so that he could communicate with Celia, with whom he had fallen in love. In fact, the American actor Martha Plimpton, always excellent in Shakespeare, despite a solid performance as a female Jacques, with the famous "All the world's a stage" speech, was one of the least compelling parts of the production. Rourke's staging demonstrated that Shakespeare's fictionalized Forest of Arden can allow us to imagine and visualize a world where everyone can be celebrated, no matter their race, gender identity or expression, or disabilities.



As You Like It. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

The same day I saw *Othello* at the National in the evening (16 December 2022), I had also attended a matinee of *Henry V* at the nearby Shakespeare's Globe, meaning that I saw three Shakespearean productions in London within two days. Unfortunately, Holly Race Roughan's staging of *Henry V* was the least inspiring of any of the productions I saw during my time in London, including the misconceived *Hex*. Roughan had a clear concept: that war and power could corrupt even the most well-intentioned leader and that brutally violent men can come to be revered as heroes. Over the course of the play, her Henry (Oliver Johnstone) transformed from an optimistic, well-intentioned ruler to a dangerous psychopath, raging at his people, ordering executions without a second thought, and killing the Dauphin at Agincourt in retribution for the insult that helped spark his war. Henry's scene with Katherine had not a single spark of romance, but was the culmination of his violence as he demanded her hand in an overtly political marriage, and then the play ended with the scene (usually much earlier in the play; Act 3, scene 4) between Katherine and Alice (Eleanor Henderson) as Katherine began to learn English in preparation for her

forced marriage. Perplexingly, this was followed by an epilogue where the actress who had played Katherine, Joséphine Callies, transformed into a modern immigrant, responding to a British naturalization exam; perhaps a comment, albeit unrelated to the earlier action of this production, on the fact that England, which had once had imperialist dreams of conquering foreign lands, after Brexit now places major barriers against Europeans who wish to become British citizens. While Roughan's concept was clear, everyone spoke Shakespeare's verse excellently, and the production was one of the best lit I've seen in the indoor Wanamaker Playhouse (designer Moi Tran's metallic upstage wall reflected the candlelight that serves to light productions at this indoor recreation of Shakespeare's Blackfriars playhouse), little else made sense. Except for Johnstone as Henry, the nine remaining cast members played all the other roles in the play, often with only the smallest costume or accent change meant to indicate a change in character. However, sometimes this convention wasn't followed: an actor removing a coat might mean a change in character, or simply that character removing their coat. Even for a Shakespeare scholar, it was often unclear to whom Henry was speaking; I could tell that my fellow audience members were totally befuddled. This is the sort of misconceived production that sadly leads modern audiences to feel that they "just don't understand" (or like) Shakespeare.



Henry V. Photo: Johan Persson.

Hakawatis: Women of the Arabian Nights, a new play by Shakespeare's Globe writer-in-residence Hannah Khalil, which I had seen two days earlier at the Wanamaker (14 December 2022) was far more successful. A testament to women's empowerment, storytelling, and collaborative creation, the play follows five women (Wahida the Dancer, played by Houda Echouafini; Fatah the Young, played by Alaa Habib; Zuya the Warrior, played by Laura Hanna; Akila the Writer, played by Nadi Kemp-Sayfi; and Naha the Wise, played by Roann Hassani McCloskey) who are imprisoned and awaiting their marriage to, sexual assault by, and subsequent execution at the orders of the unseen King, who is currently married to (the also unseen) Scheherazade. In contrast to the original version of the tale, it is not Scheherazade but these women who come up with the stories that Scheherazade will tell her husband, saving all their lives. The play includes riffs on classic stories from the 1001 Nights along with new tales, as if they are stories from these women's lives, or ones told to them by their mothers, sisters, cousins, or female friends. At one point, they argue about a story that Zuya tells, which metaphorically depicts male violence and women cleverly overcoming it: Akila realizes that it will enrage the King and might lead to everyone's death, and that this is not the moment to share that particular tale. The women argue about self-censoring, but ultimately agree with Akila that "there is a power in words. Stories. They must be told in the right way and at the right time" (61). The five very different women, placed in the same dire situation, forge close relationships, and earn their freedom, but, as they leave after 1001 nights, they vow to find some way to free Scheherazade (who had shared their stories) from her vicious husband. The moving play, presented with an Arab cast, was aided by the material conditions of the Wanamaker playhouse, where the candlelight (actors had to hold light sources at the same time as playing their roles) enhanced the sense that Rosa Maggiora's set was indeed a dank prison room, one of the many sorts of cages (metaphorical or literal) throughout history from which women have had to escape.



Hakawatis. Photo: Ellie Kurtz.

Like *Hakawatis*, *Baghdaddy* at the Royal Court (8 December 2022) was a new feminist Arab play—but in every other respect the works could not have been more different. Written by Jasmine Naziha Jones, who also performed the central character, Darlee, a second-generation British-Iraqi girl from age eight to twenty, the play, which is dedicated to Jones’s father, delves into the relationship between Darlee and her Iraqi Dad as the girl comes of age during wars between the West and Iraq. The expressionist play was staged by Milli Bhatia on a set of stairs designed by Moi Tran—similar in some respects to Chloe Lamford’s set for *Othello*—and also featured a chorus of “Quareens”—“spiritual companions from another dimension,” two female and one male, helping Darlee “reconcile her childhood memories with Dad’s story” as an immigrant (2). Part clown show and part fictionalized reconstruction of a traumatic childhood, the show built up to two monologues: Darlee’s railing against a so-called democratic Western society that has never fully accepted her and Dad’s lament for his family who died in the Iraq war after he came to the UK. The play—and Jones’s performance as a fictionalized version of her younger self—was deeply painful but felt only half-formed, perhaps as do any of our half-remembered recollections of childhood.



Baghdaddy. Photo: Helen Murray.

Orlando (17 December 2022), as adapted by Neil Bartlett from Virginia Woolf's novel and staged by Michael Grandage at the Garrick Theatre on the West End, featuring the nonbinary actor Emma Corrin as its titular immortal gender-defying character, was another sort of coming-of-age story. Of course, Orlando comes into his/her/their own over the course of centuries (and also it's no coincidence that Orlando shares the same name as one of the romantic leads in the gender-bending *As You Like It*). Excepting Corrin and Deborah Findlay, who played Mrs Grimditch, a very long-serving confidant to Orlando and the audience, the remaining cast (consisting of one man and eight women or nonbinary performers) all played both a chorus of Virginia Woolfs and Orlando's many, many loves. When Orlando appears, the audience briefly sees him frontally naked (Corrin wore a prosthetic penis for this moment) and when Orlando transforms into a woman, she is once again naked (although this time only seen from the waist up). The play was a celebration of transformation and potentiality, ending by acknowledging that Orlando might thrive in the world today (or an approaching future, signified by an intensely bright door at the top of Peter McKintosh's set that Orlando passed through at the end of the play) in a more accepting world that Woolf herself, who committed suicide in 1941, could only dimly imagine. The play was especially moving to my students on the mini-term, several of whom are trans and/or nonbinary; one said she

was going to get a tattoo of that bright door that signified the possibilities of the future if we are willing to “try courage” (78).



Orlando. Photo: Marc Brenner.

Less successful in its feminism but still a delightful spectacle onstage was the jukebox musical *& Juliet* (20 December 2022), directed by Luke Sheppard with a book by David West Read and featuring over two decades of pop songs written by Max Martin. It’s hard to believe that Martin wrote so many of the best-known hits for artists including Bon Jovi, The Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, Britney Spears, Robyn, Kelly Clarkson, Kesha, Justin Timberlake, Demi Lovato, Katy Perry, The Weeknd, and more. The show bills itself as a feminist revision of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Anne Hathaway, in a frame story, accuses Shakespeare of not giving his doomed heroine enough of a voice or agency and imagines a new ending in which Juliet doesn’t kill herself after awakening to find Romeo poisoned. Taking off from that premise, Juliet (still played, when I saw it years after it opened on the West End, by Olivier-winning Miriam-Teak Lee) goes on an adventure across Europe, along with her friends including the trans character May (now played by nonbinary actor Joe Foster). The show is raucously self-aware (a jukebox sat visibly near the center of Soutra Gilmour’s set and the spectacularly lit titles that descended from the flyspace at the opening,

interval, and close resembled nothing more than a West End/Broadway marquee) and builds to Juliet's rendition of Katy Perry's "Roar," which indeed stopped the show for at least a minute of applause after Lee's performance of the song. The show has since transferred to Broadway, where Justin David Sullivan, the nonbinary actor who played May, declined to be considered for Tonys since the awards continue to require actors be nominated in binary gender categories for men and women. Thankfully, the production has fixed its original gaffe of casting a cis man as a trans character (Arun Blair-Mangat originated the role of May on the West End), but the supposed feminism continues to ring a bit hollow even as Anne, Juliet, and her friends sing about women's empowerment. Perhaps this is because all of the authors and the director of the show were men: as noted in *Hamilton* (another musical created almost entirely by men that was intended to reimagine the past more inclusively), "who tells your story" matters and it's too bad that the producers of *& Juliet* didn't find a woman to write the book or direct.

Just as much frothy fun, but with a lot less pretense, were two holiday shows I saw towards the end of my trip. *Who's Holiday!* at the tiny Southwark Playhouse (19 December 2022) was a solo holiday drag show which was the final work to which I brought my students. Written in 2017 by Matthew Lombardo in the comic verse of Dr. Seuss, the play imagines Cindy Lou Who from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* all grown up, bleached blonde, hard drinking, foul mouthed in rhyme, having escaped a relationship with the Grinch, and planning a Christmas celebration despite constant cancellations from her friends. The play is thoroughly dirty and definitely not for the young children who might still read Dr. Seuss. But, as directed by Kirk Jameson, it is perfect for camp as performed by Miz Cracker, an American drag queen who gained fame on the television show *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, and in the end *Who's Holiday!* still celebrates the joy and spirit of Christmas every bit as much as its less transgressive source material.



Who's Holiday. Photo: Mark Senior.

My first West End panto was equally delightful, if far more spectacular. Jonathan Harvey's *Mother Goose*, directed by Cal McCrystal at the Duke of York's Theatre (20 December 2022), the same theatre where I had seen *The Doctor* a few weeks earlier, featured stand-up comedian John Bishop as Vic Goose and the legendary Sir Ian McKellen in drag as Mother Goose (the panto Dame), using wit and constant references to contemporary British politics to facing down holiday financial struggles from exorbitant energy bills. Their struggles are abated by the arrival of a goose (Anna-Jane Casey) who starts laying golden eggs and gives *Mother Goose* the chance to achieve her dreams of stardom. The songs, dances, and audience participation were all delightful—when one nearby audience member heard that *Mother Goose* was my first panto, she let me know she had been to hundreds and that this was among the very best she'd ever seen. Yet no one was enjoying themselves more than Sir Ian, obviously gleeful at the chance to ham it up in the sort of work he had adored in his youth. As he delivered key lines from Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings* or Portia's "The quality of mercy" speech in the tenor of Mother Goose, his wry smile was infectious and had the audience grinning just as much as he was. On our feet at the end, we were all celebrating the holiday spirit together again, in the theatre.



Mother Goose. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

The holiday spirit that suffused *Mother Goose* and *Who's Holiday!* in some ways ran through all these productions, even the darkest like *Othello*, *Henry V*, *The Doctor*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, since we were, once again, able to be in London's excellent theatres together. COVID will remain part of our world for some time to come: many audience members remain masked, theatres have to cancel performances and hire more understudies (or even have the director go on for a role in a pinch!), and more. This is probably a good thing: it has led to conversations about how the arts can be safer and more equitable for everyone. I expect to return to London at the end of 2025 and I am excited to discover what will suffuse the city's theatrical scene then, when it will have been half a decade since the height of the pandemic.

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