

THEATER

Heading east to the West End

Portland theater director makes pilgrimage to a source of inspiration

BY JON KRETZU

After 18 years of annual visits, I am still reduced to childlike glee at the prospect of spending time in London. The combination of respectful tradition, passionate commitment to excellence and an audacious need to stretch artistic boundaries to the breaking point and beyond give the London theater and opera scene an excitement and fervor that make my time there an irreplaceable source of inspiration and fulfillment.

Having recently returned from a bingeing trip of 18 shows in 14 days, I can report that the current crop of work is extraordinarily strong.

Take advantage of those off-season prices and go! Many of these shows will make their way to Broadway and eventually to the hinterlands, and one especially strong work is expected on the West Coast soon.

Heading the pack is Robin Phillips' stunning revival of the Eugene O'Neill masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. One of the most painful and emotionally naked plays ever written, it demands everything from its interpreters. Phillips' production is alive to all the nuances of this wrenching piece and finds a powerful current of sensuality and physicality underscoring O'Neill's script written, as he said, "in tears and blood."

The men of the cast give marvelous performances, but it's Jessica Lange who elevates the evening to something extraordinary with her devastating portrayal of one of the theater's great heroines, Mary Tyrone. Wandering through the production's evocative, fog-bound setting, Lange plunges directly to the very core of this haunted creature and charts the character's descent into loneliness, anguish and drug-soaked euphoria with unforgettable honesty.

Next door to the tortured Tyrones is a delicious revival of Noel Coward's 1920s soufflé *Fallen Angels*. This lighter-than-air confection rises or falls on its leading ladies, and in Felicity Kendal and Frances de la Tour this production has two of the London stage's finest comedians. Watching Kendal and the sublime de la Tour do their extended second act drunk scene is a master class in style, timing and audacity—it is Coward champagne of the driest and finest vintage.

At the Old Vic, Matthew Bourne's *Adventures in Motion Pictures Dance Company* (which created the fascinating, homoerotic *Swan Lake* and the 1940s cinematic *Cinderella*) is presenting its new smash cult hit, a brilliant reworking of Bizet's *Carmen* as a 1950s American film noir slyly renamed *The Car Man*. A combination of pulp fiction, William Inge, Tennessee Williams, *West Side Story* athleticism, '50s hot rod sex and



blood melodrama and cheap sleaze—all set to Bizet's eternally energetic music—*The Car Man* is vastly entertaining and a total guilty pleasure.

Bourne is a clever artist who draws from a deep well of cinematic, literary and pop culture references to create his pieces. It is his own unique brand of camp artistry, and it can make for an exhilarating evening. Not unlike *Swan Lake*, *The Car Man* manages to be both a vivid piece of dance drama as well as a lusty potboiler of cheap theatrics that revs up an audience's temperature—and should do quite well when it tours the United States later this year (including proposed West Coast stops in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles).

I hope most of the original cast members come over here, as their sizzling energy is what truly makes the piece work. Especially memorable are the show's three leads: the sensual Saranne Curtin as the most fatale of femmes and the pair of duel-to-the-death gay lovers, Alan Vincent as the stud title character and the remarkable Will Kemp as the Don Jose figure who grows from a Sal Mineo-like innocent into a tortured, obsessive killer. This is a star-making performance.

The Royal National Theatre is playing host to two productions that show them off at their best. Director Jeremy Sams and a

fearless cast of comedians have reimagined Michael Frayn's classic farce *Noises Off*, and the result is breathless brilliance. It is the essence of farce—

anarchistic, chaotic, lethally dangerous and brutally funny. Yasmina Reza's marvelous new play *Life X 3*, premiering at the National, is a trio of clever and engaging variations on the theme of a dinner party gone dreadfully wrong. In this witty, understated tour de force, a quartet of wonderful actors moves from situation comedy to slapstick tragedy on a journey to the very heart of what makes daily life both mysterious and utterly predictable.

Other current offerings at the National are more of a mixed bag. Although director John Caird has created a new production of *Hamlet* that is a heavy-handed, ponderous and often curiously uninvolved account of one of the world's greatest plays, it is memorable for one reason—but what a great reason it is. Simon Russell Beale is one of the treasures of the contemporary English stage, and his *Hamlet* has been long anticipated. The result is a beautifully modulated, sensitive and mercurial portrait that towers above the surrounding mediocrity.

Also at the National is Harold Pinter's never-produced screenplay adaptation of Marcel Proust's legendary novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, which has been somewhat clunkily adapted to the stage by Pinter and director Di Trevis. Although I appreciated the effort and the work of the huge and varied cast, the piece seems to demand a more poetic and visually inventive account than the one on view.

Another hit at the National is also something of a disappointment, but it is a grand, unforgettable one. Trevor Nunn's all-star account of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* is inflated, overstated, grandiose, self-indulgent and utterly fascinating. Nunn's group of actors attack the piece like lions at a feast. On stage it's every artist for himself, led most outrageously by Vanessa Redgrave, a true force of nature, whose grotesque, hysterical and sometimes shockingly truthful



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portrayal of Madame Ravnaskaya is a car accident of a performance—just try looking away from it for a single second.

Some of the best theater I saw this trip was in the opera house. My favorite opera company, the often outlandish English National Opera,

was responsible for the most satisfying event of my trip: David Pountney's thrilling new production of Giuseppe Verdi's rarely performed early masterwork *Nabucco*.

This tale of lust, greed, madness and political intrigue set in the time of Nebuchadnezzar was updated in Pountney's visionary concept to include references to contemporary Middle East struggles, the Holocaust and any number of recent political coups. This incredible production encompassed the entire auditorium and audience with its costumed orchestra members and chorus spilling out of the orchestra and into every part of the decaying, industrial ruin of Stefanos Lazaridis' epic designs.

A great cast headed by American soprano Lauren Flanigan—making a magnificent London debut with a gutsy, take-no-prisoners performance—filled the Coliseum's vast space with a thunderous outpouring of pure, high-voltage electricity. Evenings like that are reason enough to get on a plane and make a trip to this best of artistic worlds—the magic that is London. **JK**

JON KRETZU is associate artistic director of Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland and thoroughly loves a busman's holiday.



A scene from *Noises Off*

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