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theater

Curtain Call

Queer stage report from London and New York City

by Jon Kretzu

During the past six months I have made two trips each to London and New York City to catch up on the 2007 theater/music seasons, and the results were a bit dispiriting. True, there were some remarkable moments and some brilliant performances, but in general the work this season has been marked by complacency, giving old formulas glittering facelifts and overinflated praise by the press and public alike. And all of it at ever-increasing, fundamentally ridiculous prices.

Most of the work I saw in London this season was almost worth the inflated price. Actress Fiona Shaw and director Deborah Warner, one of the theater world's most respected collaborative teams, created a production for the Royal National Theatre of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* that had the lacerating intensity of a comic nightmare. It will be hard to shake off the memory of Shaw's face—one moment shining with joyous affirmation, the next a grimacing, howling death's head—set against a vast expanse of collapsed rubble. Together, Shaw and Warner made Beckett's despairing aria of hope into unforgettable music.

Nearby at the poshly renovated English National Opera, Warner was also responsible for a visionary new production of Benjamin Britten's final masterpiece, *Death in Venice*. This operatic adaptation of Thomas Mann's classic novella became a shimmering dreamscape in Warner's hands, and abetted by Tom Pye's shifting designs of light and shadow and the incredible Ian Bostridge's quietly devastating account of the beauty-obsessed protagonist, it was a most memorable evening.

Less memorable was the inexplicably successful West End revival of *Cabaret*. Director Rufus Norris loaded his Weimar-chic production with loads of full-frontal male and female nudity, bisexuality, porn-shop gymnastics and S/M costuming—and yet it all added up to a dull, inert evening that could not hope to erase the memory of Sam Mendes' haunting revival of a few seasons ago.

The biggest news on the West End front was, of course, the appearance of little Harry Potter, I mean Daniel Radcliffe, in a much-heralded revival of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. The good news was that Master Radcliffe gave an accomplished, honest performance in what was a courageous choice for his onstage debut. After all the media furor surrounding his appearance in a series of explicit press photos for the show (which resembled gay porn as shot by Walt Disney) and prurient jokes about his extended nude scene (yes, Harry Potter was nude, and yes, he has all the proper accoutrements), what was most effective about Radcliffe's work was his focus, intensity and vulnerability. The image I will take away from the show is his wide-eyed, somewhat shocked expression at the uproar greeting his curtain call—the look of a 17-year-old boy thrust before a clamoring mob.

Unfortunately, the production surrounding Radcliffe is anything but definitive. Hot director of the moment Thea Sharrock has found nothing new to say about Shaffer's somewhat dated script outside of adding a lot of dry ice; the marvelous Richard Griffiths is totally miscast as the tormented Dr. Dysart (his life force passion and bonhomie at



Ian McKellan starred in an overblown, shamelessly theatrical version of *King Lear*.

total odds with the arid, passionless, internally desiccated analyst); and John Napier has distorted his original rough magic design into something resembling a cross between a W Hotel lobby and a Greek bathhouse. Of course, commercially none of this matters, as the show completely sold out its London run and no doubt will easily sell out its upcoming transfer to Broadway next spring.

By far the most shining light on the West remains Stephen Daldry's production of the new musical *Billy Elliot*. The show had its premiere two years ago (and finally reaches Broadway next season) and is hands down the most exhilarating new British musical I've seen since *Les Misérables*.

Based on Daldry's heartwarming 2000 film, *Billy Elliot* tells the sweet tale of a young boy growing up in the harsh world of a Northeast England mining town who dreams of escaping the stifling surroundings and becoming a ballet dancer. Set against the



David Hyde Pierce earned a Tony Award for Kander and Ebb's swan song, *Curtains*.

JOAN MARCUS