

Theatre Visits – January 2014 – December 2015



Here is a record of the iU3A Theatre Visits group visits. The group was formed in January 2014 but reviews of the visits weren't started until June 2014. So below records (currently) these visits from June 2014 through to December 2015. For more recent visits and future plans, go to our [web page](#)

2014

January to May – no reports were made of these visits unfortunately.

June



Our previous visit was to *Handbagged* at the Vaudeville Theatre. A transfer from the tiny Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, it has proved a great hit and we were very lucky to get to see it. Moira Buffini's play looks behind closed doors during the Thatcher era. "Is Her Majesty a socialist?" asks Thatcher at one point. "I don't think she's an actual Trot, old love," replies Denis soothingly. We liked it: we thought it clever as well as funny with things to say about theatre and our perception of history as well as a still-polarising time in politics.

July

No visit held.

August



Previously, we saw *Porgy and Bess* at the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park. We loved the show: an energetic version of the Gershwin's great 'folk opera' more in the tradition of the great American musical than some 'operatic' versions. The music includes some of the great songs of the 20th century: 'Summertime', 'It Ain't Necessarily So' and 'I got plenty of nuttin'. We were very lucky on the day: it rained before the start and torrentially almost immediately afterwards. The only rain during the show was, appropriately,

during the storm scene. (Alan Cranston)

September



The Autumn programme kicked off with a visit to St Martin's Lane, abuzz with freedom pass holders. Shakespeare in Love was an afternoon's delight. Smart stage sets with choreographed scene changes. No Holkham beach, but there was a rowing boat on the Thames. That was when Will discovered that Tom was Julia from Cheam. The action leapt from bawdy Southbank to opulent ball rooms. Keeping up with the script was hard; as soon as one literary gag was twiggged another was lining up. And as for the X factor audition, it ended

up all right on the night. The final laugh was quite rightly given to "Spot" the dog. (Frank Bacon)

October



A large group of us went to a performance of Great Britain at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Very contemporary in its subject matter, the play exposes the unholy alliance between the press, the police and the government. From the foul-mouthed, hard bitten editor of The Free Press and his highly ambitious news editor, Paige Britain, to sleazy politicians, PR gurus and a hapless police commissioner, the characters are composites of many thinly-disguised figures known to all of us. Biting, fast-moving and very funny, Great Britain

also has the power to make us question why we continue to be fascinated and titillated by our gutter press. (Celia Ballantyne)

November

A visit to an old paint factory in Dalston was an unexpected pleasure. Reeves for artists, not Dulux for bedrooms. A sparkling evening of comedy, wit and romance. Everyone got the right girl at the end except for poor Bob Akers who had to go home alone to his faithful dog. Audience interaction was really well done. In Georgian times it was mostly vegetable throwing, but how did they get those handsome hunks sitting opposite to be part of the scene! Obviously, being a bloke.... I was stricken by Mrs Malaprop. And the programme came full of history of the times and even a recipe from Hannah Glasse 1747, "To make a pretty Sweet Lamb or Veal Pie". (Christopher Elsom)



Eighteen members of the theatre group turned out on a cold and windy evening to see The Rivals in the delightful Arcola Theatre in Dalston. It was truly worth it. This restoration comedy was very funny and beautifully acted, particularly by Gemma Jones as Mrs Malaprop and Nicholas le Provost as Sir Anthony Absolute. It was rich in plots and sub-plots, disguises, duels and deceits. The play lent itself well to the small, intimate space of The Arcola and the actors cleverly engaged the audience from the outset in the connivances. The

simple scenery and music added to the charm of the piece. It was almost three hours long but the complicated plots needed time to unravel. A thoroughly entertaining night out in good company. (Margaret Wearing)

December



Two outstanding experiences within a week – Sophocles' Elektra at the Old Vic and The Rivals at the Arcola (more reviews below). Elektra was presented in an intimate, almost contemporary, way by Kristin Scott Thomas, on stage throughout in a relentlessly demanding role. Yet by contrast with The Rivals, which was effective in being faithful to the original whilst remaining fresh and funny, Elektra lost something through seeking 'relevance'. I should have preferred a sense of space, a declaiming of the truths,

involvement of the gods and a full, commenting Chorus. It is very cheerful that we get together on these outings to share ideas and have a drink. The Arcola bar is homely, an untidy sitting room with sofas, while the Young Vic bar is lively, with the occasional famous face. (Susan Archer)



In early December we saw Shakespeare's Henry IV pt 1 at the Barbican Theatre, starring Anthony Sher as Falstaff. In discussion afterwards most of us (one strong dissenter) agreed that we had enjoyed it a lot, citing particularly its strong visual impact and, with one exception, the clarity of delivery (surely so important in Shakespeare). There was general agreement that the interpretation/characterisation of Hotspur didn't work for us, his energy and hot-headedness came over as mania. However all in all it was well worth

seeing. (Pamela Watson)

2015

January



In January we saw Charles III which we thought a most stimulating and bold play. We found it rather shocking in its anticipation of a situation that could actually arise, and we couldn't imagine that anyone in the Royal Family would have seen it. Tim Pigott-Smith gave a terrific performance as Charles, with much nuance and poignancy. All the cast was good and the role of Kate was especially sharp. Written in prose, verse and rhyming couplets the play had a Shakespearean feel to it with many references to similar

situations in his plays. During the signing of the abdication document you could hear a pin drop in the house - not a cough or murmur. Will it work on Broadway? Who knows, but for us it was a superb afternoon in the theatre. (Howard Lichterman)

February



In February we saw *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* David Hare's adaptation of the book by Katherine Boo, who spent 3 years living in the Annawadi slums on the edge of Mumbai airport. She recorded daily life in all its extremities and David Hare has been faithful to the book, though possibly not dramatising it sufficiently as a theatrical play. An extraordinary group of Asian actors played a myriad of characters, and the slice-of-life look at how they dealt with each other in their desire to make more money and try and get out of the slum

into the ever-growing middle classes made for some very powerful and uncomfortable scenes. Members of the group who had been to India opened the discussion to a wider look at India today - all very stimulating. (Howard Lichterman)

March



Our early March play, *Taken at Midnight*, started life at the Chichester Festival and later transferred to the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Set in the years 1931-38, it is a powerful look at how a mother tried to get her lawyer son released from a German detention camp after he interrogated Hitler in 1931 in a trial of four 'brownshirts'. The tension built so that the second act never let up in its acting or storytelling. We saw a brilliant performance from Penelope Wilton as Irmgard Litten, the mother of Hans Litten.

Some scenes were so powerful with the audience so rapt in the drama that you could have heard a pin drop. In our subsequent discussion, we considered the period in detail, including the British response to the growing Hitler menace, and tried to list other plays that dealt with the '30s pre-war period, coming up with *Cabaret* and *The Sound of Music!* (Howard Lichterman)



Our late March play, *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett, is a sad and funny look at possibly the last couple left on earth after some kind of disaster, who have been married for a long time and for whom most of the bloom is gone from their relationship. In the first act, the wife Winnie is buried in a mound of soil and is visible from only the waist up. She spends her time dealing with banalities, emptying her purse, discussing the items inside. The second act she is visible from the neck up only so she cannot deal with

anything other than what she sees around her. Her husband Willie appears to live in a cave nearby only making short forays into the surroundings. The language and Beckett's poetic use of it is quite brilliant and the pain we feel for a couple nearing the end of their lives and the metaphor of being 'buried alive' as they slowly die gave us some of the most moving scenes you could ever hope to see. Those seeing the play felt both the pain and the fun at the same time and agreed that it was an extraordinary experience with a superb performance from Juliet Stevenson. (Howard Lichterman)

April



I last came to the Hampstead Theatre nearly fifty years ago when it was a "theatre club". Now in a delightful new building, it was then a long shed, less of a theatre than some school halls. Its original enthusiasts such as James Roose-Evans would have loved its flexibility to shift the shape of the stage and seating around: the hoop shape around her 'sitting room' suited our April show Stevie very well. The production was beautifully cast. Linda Baron was totally convincing as the no-nonsense intelligent Yorkshirewoman and Zoe

Wannamaker was perfect visually as Stevie, and mixed very naturally the telling of her life story with wistful quotations from her work. Chris Larkin did nicely as the occasional announcer and 'man in her life' – a stolid, hefty fiancée in one period, and a camp car-driving fan in another. An appropriate play for our pensioners' matinee: lots of words, not too much action, and deep or humourous thoughts about death. (Tim Maby)

May



Seventeen members braved a blustery May day for Man and Superman, a marathon but with plenty of action to keep us hooked. Shaw's 1903 play stands the test of time, if not many feminists would now agree with his view of women. This modern dress version also had a very impressive Sierra Nevada. Terrific performances particularly from Ralph Fiennes as the hero, Tim McMullan as the swarthy brigand/devil and Nicholas Le Provost particularly fine as an angel. Some of us were able to chat

after the show to Nicholas Le Provost, a school friend of one of our members. Between shows, he had to hurry off to voice coaching before the evening show but he filled us in on some of the ups and downs of life in the theatre. (Margaret Wearing)

June



Gypsy is another great West End transfer from Chichester Festival Theatre. It portrays the rise of burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee in the 1920s. Focussing on the relationship between Gypsy Rose and her mother, the fearsomely ambitious Momma Rose, it depicts a period in American theatre history when traditional vaudeville acts were losing popularity. Our June venue, the Savoy Theatre is an Art Deco Gem, and a slick production allowed the strong cast and familiar songs such as 'Everything's coming up roses' to

carry the audience along. The high spot was Imelda Staunton as Momma Rose - when did you last join in a standing ovation at a midweek matinee? (Liz Simpson)

July



In July, more than twenty members sampled West End Theatre at its most traditional, seeing Hay Fever, Noel Coward's comedy of bad manners at the Duke of York's. Was the play dated? Is it still funny? Are the Bliss family, led by Felicity Kendal, so unbearably narcissistic and rude that you can't really laugh at them? Opinions varied widely! I have seen the play several times over the years, and it is funny only if you make the characters as real as possible. Sara Stewart as the metropolitan vamp Myra and Michael Simkins as the diplomat out of his depth in bohemian Cookham got this right. But the tone is set by the star, and Felicity Kendal, ogling the audience, moving her voice from a high squeak to a throaty growl, gave a master-class in pure technique that was about as funny as a clockwork mouse. Shame. She can be so good. (Michael Ratcliffe).

August



Seventeen members overcame a tube strike to reach our August venue and ultimately cheerfully join the standing ovation for this 'tongue in cheek' production of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers. We laughed at the cleverly directed and humorous interpretation of a dated script; we drummed our feet to the rhythm of the familiar music and we agreed that we had some of the best seats at the popular Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. There was critique of the polka dance, reflection on the role of women whose intelligence wins over male attitudes, and admiration for the dance skills and athletic energy of the cast. Particular congratulations go to Alex Gaumond as Adam, Laura Pitt-Pulford as Milly and director Rachel Kavanaugh. Well worth it. (Ruth Gee)

September



In September, 20 of us saw The Beaux' Stratagem, George Farquhar's late-Restoration Comedy at the National Theatre. Director Simon Godwin brings a lightness and energy to this tale of two young London fortune hunters out to prey on unsuspecting country heiresses. Little do they suspect their reception in Lichfield; a savvy innkeeper and his streetwise daughter, a pantomime highwaymen, a French/Oirish priest, a sottish husband, his lovesick, deadpan servant and the rest. Of course, they succumb to the intelligence and charm of the two would-be heiresses. As well as comedy, the play offers a thoughtful commentary on social and economic restrictions on women and a celebration of both the joys of marriage and the liberation of divorce. I came away thoroughly entertained and thinking that the play could, almost, have been written last week. (Jeanie Phillips)

October



We had two theatre visits in October – the first to Hampstead Theatre to see Mr Foote's Other Leg which had rather a "marmite" reception – members liked, loved or really hated it. Their reaction possibly depended on whether they were fans of Simon Russell Beale - the one-legged hero of the tale. Some felt that Ian Kelly had perhaps tried to cram in too much material from his book on Foote which made for rather a ramshackle play, but it was nevertheless a fascinating story about the cross-dressing 18th century comic actor Samuel

Foote and his contemporaries.



The other visit was to the cinema to see the live screening of Hamlet. Maybe after all the hysteria about Benedict Cumberbatch it was not surprising that some members were a little disappointed by the production. Not because of his performance but there was a feeling that the set was so overpowering that it drowned some of the other performances

November



Our November visit was to Hampstead Theatre for The Moderate Soprano – a new play by David Hare. He has taken a fascinating look at the creation of Glyndebourne and the people involved. The benefactor John Christie was brilliantly created by Roger Allam and Nancy Carroll was poignant as his wife and singer Audrey Mildmay who appeared in the first few productions. The other characters involved were Fritz Busch and Carl Ebert, exiles from Nazi Germany who were, respectively, a brilliant

conductor and director in their homeland. Without their involvement Glyndebourne would never have been the success it was. Another figure well-drawn was the administrator Rudolf Bing, who later became director of the Metropolitan Opera in NY. A shifty and vain man he nevertheless was essential for the business side and, from my own experiences in NY, a tremendous director of the Met. This play and cast should have a much longer life when it ends at Hampstead. (Howard Lichterman)

December



Our December theatre visit was to see Tom Stoppard's Hapgood at Hampstead Theatre, which I enjoyed despite (or maybe because of) the confusing, convoluted plot (or should that be plots?). The opening in the changing room of the swimming pool, where it was impossible to keep track of the doors, the towels and the briefcases was great fun and reminiscent of traditional farces. Whilst I have no understanding of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, quantum physics or particle theory, I found the exposition

fascinating - a bit like when you can't find your keys when you look for them, but they appear when you aren't looking. The discussion of doubles and the same thing being in two different places at once slid nicely into the double - or triple - agents, the twins or not twins, "Mother" and mother and the boxes. I expected Schrödinger's cat to appear at any minute - or not. I enjoyed the games, the tricks and the clues - such as when Hapgood's "twin" revealed to us that she was in fact Hapgood by giving the chess move. I'm not sure that I fully understood the play but I enjoyed it and it was good knock about stuff. (Maggie Howell)

2016

January

Will be added at next update.