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# Theater/Art: London Calling

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Why do critics -- like Ben Brantley from the *New York Times* -- spend a month in London going to the theater? Because they can, of course. Happily, so can you. Or rather, it's a lot easier than spending a month in New York going to the theater. I'm ignoring the weak dollar, the high cost of London in general (which makes New York City seem cheap) and plane tickets that seem to have doubled in the last few months.

Putting ALL that aside, theater in London has always been more accessible and inexpensive than theater in New York. People go to the theater in London the way people in America go to the movies: it's something you do, not an annual event you have to scrimp and save and plan for. Even the biggest hits have tickets available, with a little planning. And you can actually call the box office and someone will answer the phone and happily set aside tickets for you and advise you about sight lines and the such. If you're lucky like me, you can throw in a sister who lives in London and wants any excuse to go to a show, so you've got a free place to stay and some tickets she'll spring for (thanks, Leslie!) and you're set. So here's a rundown of what I did on a recent visit to London.

**PSYCHO BUILDINGS** at the Hayward \*\*\* 1/2 (out of \*\*\*\*) -- My favorite event was not theater, but an art exhibit called "**Psycho Buildings.**" **The Hayward** is always at the forefront of crowd-pleasing modern art -- you'll feel very sophisticated and have a fun time as well. Last year's Antony Gormley exhibit is still in my mind (if only it would come to the US). Highlights of this look at architecture included "Show Room, 2008" by Los Carpinteros, a freeze-frame glimpse at a home space in the midst of an explosion. Some sort of massive impact has taken place at one end and you can see the effect in a room-size sculpture which shows bits and pieces of wall and chairs and even a toilet seat flying through the air, all of it suspended by wires and through which you can (carefully) walk. Tobias Putrih's "Venetian Atmospheric, 2007" is a tiny cinema showing footage of other people's art projects; stay for the one about an artist who created a pool of cement and then dropped giant steel beams into it from a great height -- it's primal fun. Mike Nelson's "To The Memory of H.P. Lovecraft, 1999, 2008" is a stunning two room work in which some sort of

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monster has been trying to get in or get out; the walls have giant gash marks, rubble is everywhere -- it's like walking into the middle of a nightmare. Rachel Whiteread's "Place 2008" is a darkened room filled with a city's worth of handmade doll houses she found -- I think it's haunting and works because they're individual and not manufactured. But the showstopper is Gelitin's "Normally, Proceeding and Unrestricted With Without Title, 2008." They've installed a lake on the one of the roofs of the Hayward and three rather tiny wooden boats are there for the riding. You and your friend get in, start rowing and suddenly you're boating above the skyline of London. I could make up all sorts of fancy ideas about this but the basic fact is that it's a thoroughly unique experience and one you may never get to repeat again in your life. If you're keen on this, make sure you come on a weekday as early as possible -- the line to get in a boat becomes very long very quickly. I'm sure there are other museums around the world who consistently come up with such revelatory, engaging programs. I just don't know about them.

**GOD OF CARNAGE** (in the West End) \*\*\* (out of \*\*\*\*) -- Yasmina Reza's new play is her most commercial since "Art." And no wonder producers love her: it's one set with four well-drawn characters of two couples and you can already imagine the endless stunt casting it will engender. Like "Art," this is a solidly constructed work with some very funny bits. It's not terribly deep or revelatory, but neither is it dismissable; "God Of Carnage" is simply a fine bit of adult entertainment about two sets of parents who come together to discuss how one of their sons has hit the other couple's son in the face with a stick. You won't be surprised that one group of parents is a bit of a power couple or that the other is hippie and liberalish. You won't be surprised by much of anything, but with a top-notch cast led by Ralph Fiennes and Janet McTeer, you won't care. I certainly wouldn't want to see this show with a lesser cast ([it's coming to Broadway in 2009](#)) but I'd be sorry if I missed it. How often do you get to see a smart, intelligent play that clocks in at 90 minutes?

**FRAM** \* (out of \*\*\*\*) -- I love going to [the National](#), where 10 pound tickets for lots of plays are readily available (good seats, too). I invariably see many worthwhile productions by simply going to see anything and everything I can at the National when I'm in town. (And if you're headed to London, [don't miss "War Horse"](#) if you can help it.) Unfortunately, state theater does sometimes get TOO worthy, as with this inert production of a play by Tony Harrison about Fridtjof Nansen, an arctic explorer who became world famous and then took up the cause of famine relief and war refugees. All very important and noble and terribly dull. If commercial considerations had played the slightest role in this play's development, I can't imagine it would get beyond the planning stages. Exactly one scene has emotional impact: various folk stand around debating whether a play could equal the emotional impact of a photograph of a starving child and the great actress Sybil Thorndike (Sian Thomas) shuts them up with a marvelous monologue about hunger that ends with her stuffing her face voraciously at a banquet table in the most disgusting, riveting manner possible. Oh, and a giant ship looms up out of the basement of the stage at the finale -- the arty equivalent of the helicopter in "Miss Saigon" and far less thrilling and necessary.

**FUCKING MEN** \* 1/2 (out of \*\*\*\*) -- For a serious change of pace, I went to the [Finborough Theatre](#) to check out "Fucking Men," a gay spin on "La Ronde" by Joe DiPietro. The Finborough is a pocket-sized theatre (currently featuring "Many Roads To Paradise") with a very good record of launching plays, especially ones with queer themes. Their most recent success was the debut of theater critic Nicholas De Jongh, whose ["Plague Over England"](#) uses actor John Gielgud's embarrassing arrest in a public restroom to tackle decades of gay history. It will be remounted in the West End in the fall and promises to be an event. This play is not. The couplings extend from an escort and a closeted soldier to a grad student and a college kid having a trick to a married man, a deeply closeted movie star and so on. Oddly, the attitudes of the characters make the play seem to be written in the early 80s rather than today. But the large 10 person cast is solid (with Chris Polick and James Kristian (despite Kristian's wavering accent) standouts) and the proceedings are directed very well by Phil Wilmott, who keeps the transitions flowing and the action brisk.

**PIRANHA HEIGHTS** \* 1/2 (out of \*\*\*\*) -- None of it works, really, but there's something to be said for the fertile mind of playwright Philip Ridley who gives us about four bad plays for the price of one in this over-stuffed, satirical, experimental, violent bit of nonsense at the [Soho Theatre](#). Two brothers are feuding over who gets to keep their mum's flat when a guy invited by one of them -- Medic -- shows up with his Muslim girlfriend Lily in a hijab and starts pummeling his way through any opposition. Medic is very arresting at first, but his magnetic charm is undercut when the even more psychotic teenage son Garth shows up and soon has Medic on a leash (metaphorically, but give him a day and Garth might make that literal). The rug is pulled out from under us so many

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times in this show we eventually give up and sit on the floor. John Macmillan and Luke Treadaway as Medic and Garth have the most fun but ultimately cancel each other out. But everyone has a notable aria or two thanks to the feverish words of Ridley and I was intrigued enough to imagine that with the proper focus and a strong director that Ridley has something very powerful inside him. Besides, the Soho Theatre (**currently showing "The Diver"** as well as sundry arts events) is always worth a look.

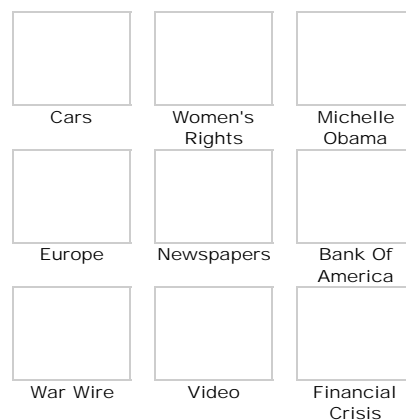
**THE PITMEN PAINTERS** \*\*\* (first act) \*\* (second act) \*\* 1/2 overall (out of \*\*\*\*) -- Destined to be a TV movie or feature film, this play **at the National** is based on a true story about coal miners in the early 1930s who wanted a little education and attended a night class of art appreciation. Mind you, none of them had ever seen even a photograph of a painting, much less a painting itself. Their instructor decided the best way to proceed was to have them paint and then discuss those. He soon realized some had genuine talent, they became more serious and even exhibited and turned into quite the cause celebre for a while (look, even untutored primitives like coal miners can create art!). Act One of the play (written by Lee Hall who worked on the movie and musical versions of "Billy Elliott") is great fun in the vein of "Educating Rita." A top notch cast breathes life into some obvious jokes about modern art and then spins it again into something deeper -- why DOES a coal miner who paints drap pictures of coal miners seem "authentic" but a coal miner who tackles abstract art seem full of himself and unconvincing? Their banter is top-notch, even if the instructor is such a prig, you have trouble seeing how he inspired them in the first place. It's funny, true and spot-on and climaxes with a moving trip to London where they all go to a museum and see masterpieces for the first time. Each man stands forward with a thought of a comment and I got a pleased feeling -- this wasn't a grand, ambitious masterpiece but it had tackled a compelling tale and done it justice. Unfortunately, it was only the first act. I felt worried. At about 90 minutes or so, I'd just seen a very complete, whole story. I didn't NEED anything more. I felt I knew everything I needed to know and couldn't imagine a second act was necessary. Unfortunately, the second act was where all the "drama" occurred - one of the men goes off to war and never returns, another is tempted with an offer to leave coal mining completely and just paint, the instructor makes hay with their fame and lands a prestigious job and so on. None of it mattered. The story -- when it was less dramatic -- was far more satisfying. I didn't learn a single thing in the second act I didn't already know. "The Pitmen Painters" is a perfect example of a story where less would be more. How often do you see a play or movie or book and reach a certain point and think, "This is done; I'm happy. Why do more?" Shorter plays, shorter books, novellas even. Less ambitious is frequently more satisfying.

**A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHT DREAM AT THE GLOBE** \*\* 1/2 (out of \*\*\*\*) -- Mark Rylance has just won a Tony in the not-to-be-missed "Boeing Boeing" revival. He's just becoming known in the US but in the UK he's been a source of bottomless enjoyment (pun intended), especially for his leading role in turning **Shakespeare's Globe** into such a critical and popular success. (Rylance was the artistic director, often helmed and starred in many shows.) Many of my happiest theatrical moments of the past decade are thanks to him in one way or another. So I was genuinely distressed to hear that he stepped down from the Globe in an unhappy manner. I had assumed he just decided it was time to move on when in fact the idiotic board at the Globe apparently had come to knock heads with Rylance, even though he'd made the Globe such an undisputed triumph. But move on he has and in the last year or so, I've continued to go to the Globe and without realizing why he'd left, felt his lack in numerous shows. I still wouldn't miss going to see anything at the Globe (at 5 pounds for groundling tickets, it's the best bargain in town), but the miss versus hit ratio has seriously increased. And so this ok **Midsummer**. One picks and chooses after so many Shakespearean productions, especially since it's so rare for a play to be an across-the-board success with so many triumphs from the past overshadowing it. In this one, I found myself more pleased than usual by the young lovers -- I was really engaged in their travails. I usually have very little patience for Puck or Bottom and that remained true here. In fact, my favorite Bottom remains Rylance, who stepped in at the last moment for an ailing actor at the Globe, script in hand, and charmed the pants off the crowd. I love the Globe and miss him all the more for it.

**THE COMMON PURSUIT** \*\* (out of \*\*\*\*) at the Chocolate Factory -- **The Chocolate Factory** has been a source of great productions for quite a few years, most notably the revival of Sondheim's "Sunday In The Park With George" that I saw with delight in the West End and again on Broadway. A revival of Simon Gray's comedy "The Common Pursuit" was my first chance to check out their venue. It's nicely small and I would have loved to see "Sunday" here in such an intimate setting. This play about college chums who start a literary magazine had been well reviewed but left me

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cold. Decently presented, but the play itself remained very much of its time and little more. Still, it was nice to see the space and the restaurant was certainly bustling. I can't say much for the roast beef but the desserts of course must be top notch to live up to the name.

**THE LORD OF THE RINGS** \* 1/2 (out of \*\*\*\*) -- This musical played in Toronto for less than a year and lost a lot of money. Now it's played in London for 14 months and still lost money. But they're not done yet: there's a German-language production and a tour of Australia and Asia in the works because they'd like to lose some more money. Some insist the show was substantially rewritten after Toronto, but it seems the same in most respects based on reviews I read. If you're a huge fan of the books and movies (as I am) and really, really want to see the musical, then go ahead. Otherwise, stay away. It's dark, gloomy and almost incomprehensible to anyone but ardent fans like myself. (I don't speak Elvish, but I know a disturbing amount about the books.) Men on stilts playing Ents totter onstage, say a few words and then totter off again. Elves for some reason are forced to make dramatic gestures with their hands every time they speak. Most of the songs involve Galadriel wandering in from off stage to warble a Celtic tune while our heroes battle on. What could any of it possibly matter to anyone who doesn't know the answers to Gollum's riddles in "The Hobbit" because they've read the book so many times? A few effects work very well, such as the Balrog that ends Act One. And a brief song hints at what might have been. Frodo and Sam are in Mordor, headed for the Crack of Doom and feel certain they'll never see home again. They sing a simple folk tune, "Now and For Always" that lets them release the emotions they're too British (I mean Hobbit-ish) to voice in any other way and it's moving in a simple, unaffected way. And then the dreary spectacle takes over again. It reminds me anew how remarkable it is that the films not only don't suck but are tremendously satisfying. Thank God for Peter Jackson.

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