

## Theatre reviews

May 18, 2020

If times were normal, I would be driving home from Sydney after seeing two shows. I would also be writing about seven shows I had seen since my last column. When I go to Sydney I generally see two shows, and catch up with my doctor, my physio, my old work colleagues and other friends. I do miss these opportunities but, like everyone, I have had to adapt. I love politics while disliking some politicians and their decisions, and having so much extra time I am exposed to their arguments. The debates around schools just upsets me as they are not listening to, or caring about, the adults in schools. I am now even more in awe of you, my teaching colleagues.

I have been able to catch up with some of the remarkable material that is being made available, but I do miss sitting in a theatre with an audience and being immersed in the play along with others. The last time I had that experience was eight weeks ago at the Drama Theatre, while enjoying Marieke Hardy's new adaptation of Dario Fo's *No Pay? No Way!*. I had seen this play many years ago at the New Theatre and loved it. The New had also produced Fo's other big hit, *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*. His plays, which he writes with his wife Franca Rame, are political while also being very, very funny. This production hit all those marks.



Standing out in a great production of *No Pay? No Way!* were the ever-reliable Helen Thomson and Glenn Hazeldine. The set was also very funny. The curtain call was done to the music of *Bella Ciao*, a song from the Italian anti-fascist resistance that is so joyous that you have to clap along. It was a song of resistance again recently when Italian residents sang it to show their support for each other during lockdown.

I did have another theatre experience in Taree seeing the film of the Old Vic production of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*. It was directed by Matthew Warchus (*Matilda*) and starred Andrew Scott in the lead, with a gender twist. His award-winning performance is extraordinary. Films of great productions from London are presented as part of National Theatre Live. They have really developed great techniques for presenting plays on film.

They normally get a very limited release, but they have been releasing some for screening through YouTube during this lockdown time. So far I have watched *Jane Eyre*, *Treasure Island*, *Twelfth Night* and *Frankenstein*. I was not happy with *Treasure Island* as I felt that the filming further heightened the already over-heightened style of the production. The technical effects were, as always, nothing short of extraordinary. No matter what the show, the National Theatre always excels in the technical areas. They have a huge budget, and some years ago came up with a new kids show called *War Horse* that is still playing around the world.

Sometime in the early '60s, I had my first experience of British theatre and saw Judi Dench in *The Winters Tale* and Donald Sinden as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. I have never forgotten seeing Sinden appear in his yellow stockings, and was later similarly impressed with John Bell. In this production, the great comic actress Tamsin Greig gave a five-star performance as Malvolia and she appeared as a singer on a giant stairway with twirling rotators on her breasts. As with the other two productions, I could not help but feel sorry for the characters. Shakespeare can be very cruel and this production directed by Simon Godwin was the production

that told the story most clearly.

In 2011, the National presented an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, directed by Danny Boyle and starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Johnny Lee Miller. It became a multi-award-winning production, and had the conceit of having the two great actors alternating the lead roles of 'The Creature' and "Frankenstein" in different performances. Over the past two days, I have watched actors in both roles and I can only say —wow!

Nick Dear's adaptation features the themes from the original, including sex, love, class, the place of women in society, the fight between science and humanity, and industrialisation. These are all played out as part of the story of Frankenstein creating a creature to whom he would not even give a name. It eventually ends with them both chasing each other as the creature leads Frankenstein on a chase to the North Pole. This plays out on an incredible set and with performances to die for. I think I enjoyed the show with Miller as the creature, but that could well be because it was my second viewing in 24 hours and I understood the play so much more. This is theatre at its very best.

Still, I can't wait to be sitting in the theatre surrounded by people again. The audience is a major factor of any show as it adds a dynamic that needs to be acknowledged in the rehearsal period. But while we wait a few more months, there are many online treasures to be enjoyed. Just go to YouTube and take a look.

**Frank Barnes** is retired and has been thinking with admiration of his teacher colleagues during these difficult times. He feels how they have coped is outstanding despite being treated badly by some politicians.