

Theatre reviews

August 13, 2020

When the pandemic began, I knew I would miss my regular trips to Sydney to catch the theatre and occasional movies on the big screen and meals with friends. At that stage, I imagined theatres would probably start operating again in September or October. I now think it is more likely to be next year. Social distancing is not only a concern for the audiences, but the actors as well. As recent clusters in Victoria and New South Wales have taught us, it could be some time before it is safe to open up our society again. I have realised just how important theatre and the arts have been to my life. I have been able to watch lots of great theatre on screen mainly from The National Theatre London. That is a great privilege as many (including myself) consider the National Theatre to be the best in the world.



Small Island by Helen Edmundson, based on the novel by Andrea Levy, deals with racism in Britain created by the lead character coming from Jamaica at the end of World War II and staying through to 1948. *Les Blancs*, by the writer of *Raisin in The Sun* Lorraine Hansberry, is a big production set on a mission in Africa. It deals with Britain's colonisation and the subsequent damage done to all involved by the assault of the African continent. This was a big sprawling production directed by Yael Farber.

Last year, the Sydney Theatre Company produced Terrence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*. I felt somewhat ambivalent about it at the time, but remember feeling it needed to be played in a much more naturalistic way. This production starred Helen McCrory as Hester, and I loved it. It is not an easy play, but it deals with a breakup's effects on Hester and those around her. Rattigan was gay but as the play was in the 40's and 50's, he was unable to come out. It is felt by some that most of his plays are actually about gay characters, but I find that difficult to believe. I think he really understood his characters.

This House by James Graham first performed to sold out houses in 2013. It is set in 1974, when Parliament was hung and Thatcher was lurking in the background. It is directed superbly by Jeremy Herrin, and it captures the humour and antics of life in the Party Whip's Office. It gave me a lesson on our political system while also providing entertainment.

We all think we know Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as there have been many films adaptations. This brilliant play was adapted by Nick Dear and directed by Danny Boyle. It was a massive production starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller, who played both Doctor Frankenstein and the Creature in alternate performances. I watched both productions one after the other. It was an exciting and enthralling show.

Then there was Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, directed by Josie Rourke at the very small Donmar Warehouse, which is a favourite London theatre of mine. The way they pulled off this very big show on this very small stage was nothing short of a theatrical miracle. Starring Tom Hiddleston as the traitor, this was a very physical production with a very graphic hanging at the end, powerful and mesmerising.

Twelfth Night saw director Simon Godwin cast the brilliant Tamsin Greig as Malvolia. The text was clear and

the plot easy to follow, as it also was in the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that directed by Nicholas Hytner for the London Theatre Company at the Bridge Theatre. The members of the audience were groundlings and followed the action around the theatre with Gwendoline Christie as Titania, David Moorst as an acrobatic and cheeky Irish Puck and Hammed Animashaun as the best Bottom I have seen. This was the best and clearest Shakespeare production I have seen.

I really like Alan Bennett's *Madness of George the Third* but, despite Mark Gatiss being excellent as the King, this was a very disappointing production from the Nottingham Playhouse. Many of the actors missed their laughs. But everything can't be great.

Then there was *Hamilton* on Disney+. It is even better than expected and I can't wait to see it on stage at the Lyric Theatre next year. Despite the absolute joy I have experienced from these filmed plays, there is nothing like sitting with an audience and breathing and living the experience with them. May we soon be able to do so.

You can also catch *Newsies* on Disney+. This is a high-energy story of the young paper sellers and a strike they have against Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. It is worth watching if only for the energetic dancing.

Frank Barnes is retired and is still an activist.