

New Voices

An Anthology of Student Reviews
from the Young Critics Institute
at the Brooklyn Academy of Music

Spring 2003

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at the Brooklyn Academy of Music**

Spring 2003

Christopher Reardon
Instructor and Anthology Editor

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**The Young Critics Institute
at the Brooklyn Academy of Music**

Spring 2003

Table of Contents

Introduction: Christopher Reardon, Instructor	2
Participants	4
“Twelfth Night” reviews	5
“The Island” reviews	16
“Cinderella” reviews	31
Instructor Biography	43
BAM Department of Education and Humanities	inside back cover

Introduction

by Christopher Reardon
Instructor

“Stay. I prithee, tell me what thou think’st of me.”
—Olivia, in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night”

The critic’s job is fairly clear: to tell us what she thinks of what happens on stage. Yet like Cesario bearing Orsino’s message to Olivia in “Twelfth Night,” Shakespeare’s tangled tale of mistaken identity and mismatched lovers, it’s a more complicated task than it first appears. Reviewing a theatrical performance raises practical questions of structure, content, and tone—but also of purpose. Like the playwright, the critic must decide whom she is writing for, and why.

The Spring 2003 Young Critics Institute gave selected high school juniors and seniors in New York City a chance (at no cost to themselves) to try their hand at reviewing theater and dance. Some had performed regularly in school plays or at comedy clubs, while others had never been to a ballet. Yet they all shared an affinity for live performance and an urge to write.

Together we sought to identify elements of exemplary performance criticism and apply them to our own writing. Rather than simply telling the students how to write a review, I began by asking them to critique a wide range of published criticism. This comparative approach allowed them to draw their own conclusions about the components and characteristics of a meaningful review. At the same time, it let them reflect on the role critics play, the audiences they serve, and the criteria they use.

We also considered a framework for criticism that is sometimes used in the visual arts. Essentially, we broke down the critical process into four discrete steps: describing what we saw on stage; analyzing how the elements worked together; interpreting what the artists might have been trying to say; and judging how successful the production was. As the students rightly observed, this framework is better suited to writing about objects than about live performance. But they found it helpful in clarifying their thought processes as they tried to make sense of what they saw and heard on stage.

Finally, we worked with a tried-and-true journalistic template. Like many theater critics, the students tried to open their reviews with a snappy and inviting *lead* (the anecdote or idea that opens the piece), followed by an assertive and newsworthy *nut*, or thesis statement, that lays out their primary argument. They sought to advance these arguments with a few detailed body paragraphs, often organized around the writing, the directing, the acting, and the design. Then they aimed to leave the reader with a compelling final thought, or *kicker*, that often referred back to the lead.

Our goal was to produce a body of criticism that goes beyond simply advising readers when to head for the box office and when to stay home. Accordingly, we worked on writing about ideas—by looking at the choices artists face when mounting a production and by approaching each performance as an opportunity to reflect on world around us.

Every few weeks we attended a major performance at BAM. First we saw an atypically dark, modern-dress production of Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night,” directed by Sam Mendes. Next we watched John Kani and Winston Ntshona reprise their original roles in “The Island,” a pensive prison drama created with Athol Fugard when South Africa was still under apartheid. Finally, we took in a psychological retelling of “Cinderella” by the French choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot.

We also attended two public dialogues: a post-show discussion with the cast of “The Island” and a talk with Maillot before the ballet. Professional critics often avoid such events, preferring to judge the performance strictly on its own terms. But for these young reviewers, the chance to hear the artists talk about their work was too valuable to pass up.

Because engaging and insightful criticism hinges on good writing, we also studied the mechanics of clear, concise prose. Each student produced three reviews, one for each production, and several revised drafts. Much of our class time took the form of a writing workshop, as we critiqued each other’s work with an eye to strengthening its content, form, and voice. At the end of the course, each student submitted one or two reviews for publication in this anthology.

In the pages that follow, these young thinkers and writers weigh in on three major productions that came to New York this spring. Unlike Cesario, who answers Olivia with coy evasions (and is later revealed to be a woman in disguise), they give honest and expressive accounts of what they think. They say what they liked and why. They tell us what troubled them, thrilled them, bored them, and fulfilled them.

You won’t find them claiming that Simon Russell Beale was the most earnest and pitiable Malvolio since Laurence Olivier graced the stage at Stratford in 1955. Or that John Kani gave a more nuanced performance on Broadway in 1975. Or that Matthew Bourne’s 1997 retelling “Cinderella” out-shined the new version by Maillot. These young writers take their authority from inside. They may have limited theatergoing experience, but they can readily spot a good story well told.

My first published review, a vapid critique of “The Princess and the Pea” for my high school newspaper, pales beside the work of these students—yet I’ve made a career out of writing about the performing arts. But whether any of them ultimately pursue a career as a theater critic may be beside the point. I think of the Young Critics Institute in broader terms, as a forum where motivated students from all parts of the city can learn to observe more closely, to reflect more critically, and to write more clearly. These are skills they can use no matter what path they follow in life.

So read. I prithee, tell us what thou think’st of them.



Young Critics Institute

Participants

Joanna Arnow

Berkeley Carroll High School

Amy Chiara

School for the Physical City

Sullivan Cousins

Bishop Ford Central Catholic High School

Melissa Francis

Hillcrest High School

Lauren Gallo

Poly Prep Country Day School

Svetlana Gelman

Leon M. Goldstein High School

Alina Grosman

Brooklyn Technical High School

Irina Livitz

Brooklyn Technical High School

Irene Morgenshtern

Brooklyn Technical High School

Sam Rappold

The Summit School

Nicole Robinson

Brooklyn Technical High School

Ken Tse

Brooklyn Technical High School

Amiya Vaz

Brooklyn Technical High School

Richard Anthony Zangrillo

Brooklyn Technical High School

***Twelfth Night* Reviews**

Twelfth Night

Written by William Shakespeare

Presented by Donmar Warehouse

Directed by Sam Mendes

Set design by Anthony Ward

Costume design by Mark Thompson

Lighting design by Hugh Vanstone
(recreated for BAM by David Holmes)

Music by George Stiles

Sound design by Paul Arditti

Casting director: Anne McNulty

Technical and production manager: Dominic Fraser

Assistant director: Orla O'Loughlin

Cast: David Bradley, Selina Cadell, Luke Jardine, Paul Jesson,
Helen McCrory, Cherry Morris, Anthony O'Donnell, Gary Powell,
Simon Russell Beale, Gyuri Sárossy, Mark Strong, Emily Watson

At the BAM Harvey Theater

Jan. 16-18, 25, 26, 28-31

Feb. 1, 8, 9, 11-15, 22, 23, 25-28

March 1, 8, 9

Joanna Arnow

A Dark Night in Brooklyn

Nights are never completely dark. There are always stars, the moon, or lights that break through the blackness. The production of “Twelfth Night” now playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music brings out the sinister aspects of Shakespeare’s tale of misplaced love and mistaken identity. But the troupe, London’s Donmar Warehouse, goes overboard in casting a shadow over the comedy scenes.

“Twelfth Night” is a play about two shipwrecked twins. Separated at sea, each presumes the other dead. We first meet Viola, who lands in Illyria, dresses as a man, and takes on the name Cesario. In this guise she becomes a messenger for Duke Orsino, but quickly falls in love with him. Orsino, though, loves the countess Olivia, and when he sends Cesario to convey his passion, Olivia becomes enamored of the messenger. The confusion continues to mount when the other twin, Sebastian, shows up.

The play also explores the palpable tension in Olivia’s court. Two of her servants (Maria and Fabian), her uncle (Sir Toby Belch) and one of her suitors (Sir Andrew Aguecheek) find themselves at odds with the puritanical steward Malvolio, who becomes the subject of a cruel joke.

This mean-spirited plot takes on great prominence in the bold new production directed by Sam Mendes, as do the class differences. Toby maliciously growls to Malvolio, “Art [thou] any more than a steward?” This play of upper-house and lower-house affairs translates well to Donmar’s 1930’s setting, as the class system is a timeless phenomenon.

In the opening scene, Mendes blurs several minor characters into a faceless ensemble. These figures stand in their black suits like a group of pallbearers, adding to the gloomy atmosphere. It’s a questionable choice. When Viola (Emily Watson) lands in Illyria, instead of talking to a sea captain, she talks to several people who respond briefly and leave. It would have been better to have a sea captain whose lines hadn’t been spliced, because small characters often give plays interesting colors. The dehumanization of small parts contributed to the production’s nefarious undertones.

The back of the stage was dotted with candles, which beautifully accentuated certain moments like Feste’s song at the end. But sometimes they were distracting. It was hard to concentrate on Orsino’s speech about unrequited love when one candle was flickering madly just above his head.

Mendes makes good use of the oversized picture frame at center stage. When Orsino (Mark Strong) and the others speak of love, the object of their affection often stands silently in the frame. This conceit helps clarify the plot while emphasizing the way the characters romanticize each other. Olivia (Helen McCrory) lends an especially eerie presence to the stage when she stands in it, veiled and still.

However, it's unfortunate that she has a stronger presence here than in her speaking scenes. For a countess, she shows no sense of royalty or power and she squirms in her seat like an awkward child. On seeing Viola for the first time, she falls humbly to her knees. Also, her sharp and whiny voice doesn't elicit much sympathy.

Watson gives a stronger, but at times dishonest, performance as Viola. When given back a ring that isn't hers, Viola turned to the audience and gave a giant overdone shrug, indicating her confusion. It was the only time anyone broke through the fourth wall, and it seemed forced and unnecessary.

Maria (Selina Cadell) was a more believable character, mainly because of her use of props. She arranged flowers and poured tea in a way that made her seem right at home. She wasn't original though, and resembled Elsie in "Gosford Park." This is particularly odd since it was Watson, not Cadell, who played Elsie.

Toby (Paul Jesson) and Andrew (David Bradley) were funny if not overdone. Jesson had an excellent sense of timing. Anthony O'Donnell played Feste as a wise and sage-like man, which accentuated his meaningful lines but sometimes brought down the comic energy.

It was Malvolio who stole the show. The audience was right with him while he envisioned his life as Olivia's husband. His humbled, humiliated, but angry speech at the end was powerful. The transition from Fabian reading Malvolio's bewildered letter, to Malvolio saying it with him, to Malvolio coming out of the picture frame was smooth and almost eerie—perhaps the best moment of the play.

"Twelfth Night" takes its name from a festive holiday, and Mendes didn't do well to dampen the spirit of the comedy scenes. He made them artificially somber. Had these scenes been more energetic and lively, the play's darker moments would have been more striking.



Svetlana Gelman

A Most Wonderful Night

“Most Wonderful!” exclaims Olivia, one of the characters tangled in the spider web of love. The same positive exclamation goes for the Donmar Warehouse production of “Twelfth Night” now running at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater. Thoughtful and provoking, this new staging makes you wonder whether Shakespeare meant to give insight into human nature or just deliver a wacky, twisted comedy.

The play centers on the shipwrecked Viola (Emily Watson) and the housebound Olivia (Helen McCrory), who have each lost a brother. Viola disguises herself as a man, Cesario, and becomes a messenger for Orsino. While Viola/Cesario is trying to express Orsino’s love to Olivia, Olivia falls in love with Cesario and Viola falls in love with Orsino. As this entertaining love triangle spirals out of control, a prank on the pitifully amusing Malvolio comes to a tragic end. The pompous Malvolio is abused and tortured by Maria (Selina Cadell), Sir Toby Belch (Paul Jesson), and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (David Bradley).

The hilarious drunk scene in which the fool (Anthony O’Donnell as Feste) surprises the audience with a sad rather than a jolly song, serves as a perfect example of the simultaneous themes of tragedy and comedy. The entire production juxtaposes the melancholy nature of the characters and the humorous mix-up between Viola/Cesario and her twin, Sebastian.

“I’m not mad, Sir Topas, I say to you this house is dark,” says Malvolio, and surely the audience was not mad to notice that the entire stage was in the state of semidarkness throughout the production. Costume designer Mark Thompson dressed the cast in shades of black and gray, as if they are all in mourning. Set designer Anthony Ward arranged several dozen candles on the stage while the lighting designer Hugh Vanstone hung approximately 50 lamps in a random pattern overhead, making even the daytime scenes look like an endless, somber night.

Likewise, the lullaby music by George Stiles, particularly the fool’s songs, sounded sad instead of goofy and amusing. While it is clear that Sam Mendes, who directed the production, chose to focus on the theme of mourning, he constantly gives credit to the comic relief that punctuates Shakespeare’s script.

Slapstick humor and certain color choices helped balance the overwhelmingly glum atmosphere. Thompson contrasts the dark costumes of the Illyrians with the lighter hues worn by the outsiders, Sebastian and

Cesario, who awakens Olivia's love, ends her mourning, and brings happiness to the estate. Olivia enters from her bedchamber with Sebastian, draped in a white cloth that suggests both a bed sheet and a wedding gown. (The image is presaged, in a way, by the arrangement of white calla lilies Maria brings her earlier in the play.)

Helen McCrory's natural humor made Olivia's character come alive. She is first seen mourning her brother, but we can see that her intentions are superficial. First she falls for Viola and then the identical Sebastian (Gyuri Sárosy). Olivia's drastic change of clothing (from a black veil to a white gown) makes the situation both humorous and pitiful. What happened to mourning for seven years? Huh?

If you have not read the play, you might think that Feste is Olivia's grandfather or some sort of modern wizard. But as Viola remarks, "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool." Unlike the clichéd jesters who jump around and giggle uncontrollably, he is a witty figure who illuminates the play's complexities and adds to its ironies, as the production becomes simultaneously serious and wacky.

Simon Russell Beale skillfully tackles Malvolio's role, appearing shy, nervous, arrogant, pitiful, and desperate with effortlessness. His expressive walk and amusing facial expressions add to his every line. Russell Beale looks as if he enjoys performing as much as the audience does watching his lighthearted artfulness.

Mendes not only brings out the complexity of Shakespeare's text, but also strikes a balance between comedy and tragedy. These elements play off each other to a greater effect than either one could achieve on its own. It seems as if Mendes and Shakespeare worked side by side on this production, which leaves our hearts satisfied with a happy ending and our minds bursting with ideas, questions, and appreciation for their craft. Marvelously directed and brilliantly acted, this "Twelfth Night" deserved the standing ovation it got.



Irene Morgenshtern

Love and Laughter in Illyria

Cross dressing, seductive lingerie and drunken frat boys—you'll find it all in the newest revival of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," now playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater. Sounds like another silly Shakespearean comedy? Well, think again. Sam Mendes's masterful interpretation combines humor and misery in a seamless and compelling production.

As outgoing artistic director of London's acclaimed Donmar Warehouse, Mendes is leaving with a bang. The troupe's double bill of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" and "Twelfth Night" reminds us why he is one of the most respected young directors in the theatre world today.

Illyria, a mythical coastal town where love seems to be the bearer of both joy and pain, is the setting of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." Here a love triangle forms between three love-struck individuals: Olivia (Helen McCrory), Viola (Emily Watson), and Orsino (Mark Strong). One is a hopeless romantic, another a cross dresser, and the third a seductive maiden. To tell you which is which would simply take the all the fun out of it. So, interested yet? And the love triangle is only the beginning.

It is the irrepressible "fools" in this production who add depth and humor to an otherwise predictable story. With Paul Jesson as Sir Toby Belch, David Bradley as Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Anthony O'Donnell as Feste, the "fools" are the high point of the production. These rather awkward gentlemen spend their days like overgrown fraternity boys—loafing on the couch, drinking beer, farting, and joking about it all. Cadell is also marvelous as Olivia's maid, Maria, who cannot resist conspiring with the "fools" against their nemesis, the arrogant and uptight Malvolio (Simon Russell Beale). Dressed in yellow stockings and little more than a goofy smile, he becomes the butt of all jokes, as he "seductively" pursues the uninterested Olivia.

However it's not all laughs and yellow stockings in this production. To the untrained eye, "Twelfth Night" may seem like a silly comedy, but Mendes sees a much darker side. The underlying theme of the pain love can bring is beautifully portrayed by characters like Feste and Malvolio. Feste, who is often portrayed as an unwitting fool, here is a wise old man whose songs delineate the misery of unrequited love. In one scene, as he sings

one of his many melancholy odes to love, Orsino and Viola (who is disguised as a man) unknowingly begin to hold hands as they are overcome by the power of his song.

Malvolio's character may be the most tragic of all. He comes off as arrogant and self-important at first, but then becomes a pitiful victim of cruel pranks and unrequited love. Hoping to win Olivia's affection, he is repaid by being sent to a mad house and kept locked up in a straightjacket. Watching the final scene, when it really seems like he has gone insane, viewers cannot help but reevaluate the pains we go to be loved, and the possibility that we might not succeed.

The set is elegant and inventive. Dozens of candles cover the back half of the stage. Perhaps 100 more hang overhead on cords that are raised and lowered to give an impression of night and day. These flickering lights suggest a mysterious and magical starry night. There is also a large metal picture frame in the middle of the stage. It helps illuminate various characters when others speak of them. For example, Olivia spends a great deal of time inside the frame, looking almost like a painting, as she is idolized by her many admirers. The frame also serves as a passageway when actors enter and leave the stage, marking the transitions between scenes.

Sam Mendes's rendering of "Twelfth Night" embodies the lighthearted yet clever humor that is so common in Shakespearean comedies. And although it is a bit long (the production runs three hours) it is well worth the time for anyone hoping to see Mendes's work in its prime. But hurry, for just as all good things must come to an end, "Twelfth Night" closes on March 8. So what are you still doing here? Go ... go ... shoo!



Nicole Robinson

A Night to Remember

Ever thought it would be interesting to see a Shakespearean play set in modern times? Well, then the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater was definitely the place to be on Thursday, March 6, when London's Donmar Warehouse performed "Twelfth Night." Written by William Shakespeare and directed here by Sam Mendes, this classic comedy pokes fun at the futility of humans when it comes to love. Audiences can expect two things from this production: to laugh and to be touched by the human spirit.

"Twelfth Night" tells the story of Olivia (Helen McCrory), a countess who is mourning for her late brother and resisting the advances of Orsino (Mark Strong), the duke of Illyria. Orsino is secretly desired by the shipwrecked Viola (Emily Watson), who takes on the identity of a man to be closer to the duke and unintentionally becomes the love interest of Olivia. This dramatic love triangle gets even messier when Olivia falls for Viola's long-lost brother, Sebastian (Gyuri Sárossy).

Presented with such a perplexing plot, Mendes does an excellent job of making it into something that is easy for the audience to follow. Each character had his own distinct costume and personality that made him or her easily distinguishable. For example, Olivia had her characteristic black attire and black hair, while Viola had blond hair. Malvolio was distinguishable by his swagger, Toby by his obnoxious, abhorrent manner, and Andrew for his foolish nature.

Anthony Ward's set design was very simple. It consisted of candles arranged at the back of the stage and an oversized frame at the center. The frame was an innovative way to link the characters and plot throughout the play. When the actors stood in the frame, it was almost as though they were sharing a secret with the audience, something that was not shared with any of the other characters in the play.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and controversial things about this staging of "Twelfth Night" was Mendes's decision to set the play in the modern times. Although the language is still Shakespearean, the costumes, suitcases, and guitar are reminiscent of the early 20th century. One can only guess that the romanticism and optimism of this period appealed to Mendes.

One aspect of the production that stood out was the fine acting. However, there were two actors who stood out from the rest: Anthony O'Donnell as

Feste, the fool, and Simon Russell Beale as Malvolio. O'Donnell showed an amazing ability to captivate the audience, moving them to laughter and then bringing them back to a harsh reality. He did this both with his spoken lines and his singing, which was always right on time and absolutely breathtaking.

Russell Beale gave a comedic portrayal of an uptight, nosy servant. One of his funniest moments in the play comes when he professes his love to Olivia while wearing the yellow tights he thinks she loves. At this moment, he shows us how naturally comedy comes to him. He also excels when he is bound and tied, expressing his humiliation and shame to Olivia and the other characters at the end of the play. At this point, Shakespeare seems to be reminding us that happiness for some could mean misery for another.

The ending—a melancholic solo by Feste—was not what I expected from a comedy. Perhaps Mendes is trying to say that there is no such thing as a happy ending. He deserves credit for this because he took a chance, went in an unexpected direction, and delivered a great finale.

With its superb acting and direction, this production of “Twelfth Night” is a hit that delivers many laughs as well as a dose of reality. For those who love Shakespeare and those who don't, I highly recommend this play.



Richard Anthony Zangrillo

Starry Night

After 10 years as artistic director at Donmar Warehouse, a London theater company, Sam Mendes is stepping down—hopefully to concentrate on his film career. He made his feature-film debut in 1999 with “American Beauty,” and recently received critical acclaim for his work on “Road to Perdition.”

To leave Donmar Warehouse with a bang, Mendes decided to direct William Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night,” which is now running at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater. This minimalist production, starring Emily Watson, is a highly enjoyable but also quite dark comedy. See it no matter what the cost.

“Twelfth Night” is complicated, to say the least. The main character, Viola, has been shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria with her twin brother, who is presumed dead. Viola decides to go work for Orsino, a duke, but pretends to be a man named Cesario.

Watson (“Red Dragon”) does an excellent job playing Viola. She is charming and an absolute joy to watch. Simon Russell Beale (“An Ideal Husband”) is a great straight man as the stuck-up butler Malvolio. David Bradley and Paul Jesson (“All or Nothing”) are hilarious as the play’s comic duo, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch. They bring slapstick to the play, with their fart jokes and drunken stumbling.

But the star of the show was Anthony O’Donnell as Feste. He hit every line with perfection and never missed a quip. Using wit and quick comebacks, he gets many of the laughs. One of my favorite scenes was when Feste pretends to be Sir Topas, the curate, and visits Malvolio in his cell. I could not stop laughing as he torments Malvolio.

The entire cast worked very well together. They seemed so realistic on stage that they didn’t appear to be acting. Every joke was perfectly timed. The crowd roared repeatedly with laughter, and as I surveyed the audience I couldn’t see one bored face.

Anthony Ward’s set is very imaginative. The candles in the background and overhead are mesmerizing. The large frame at center stage, where some characters stand silently when others are speaking about them, was an interesting idea. The minimalist setting shows how much you can do with so little.

I loved this production, and given that I’m not a big Shakespeare fan that

means a lot. I found myself falling deeper in love with theater, and I would love to see it again. The only bad part is that it had to come to an end.

⌘

The Island Reviews

The Island

Written by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona

Presented by The Royal National Theatre
and The Market Theatre of Johannesburg

Originally directed by Athol Fugard
Lighting design by Mannie Manim

Cast: John Kani and Winston Ntshona

Stage manager: Martha Knight
The Company wishes to thank Peter Brook
for his assistance in the restaging of this production

At the BAM Harvey Theater
April 1-6, 8-13

Amy Chiara

A Topical Play Proves Timeless

A siren sounds, the stage goes dark, and you may not know it yet, but you are about to witness something amazing. “The Island,” originally directed by Athol Fugard, is now onstage again at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater. Maybe you saw “The Island” on Broadway nearly 30 years ago, or maybe you have heard of its two cast members, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, from the joint Tony Award they won in 1975. In any case, this revival of “The Island” will leave you mesmerized and speechless.

Creating a play is like creating a piece of art that is delivered through dialogue and movement. Often a play has some underlying moral or message that is expressed throughout the performance, but now more than ever theater serves only one purpose: to entertain. “The Island” reminds us of its greater potential: to express a vision about pressing social concerns.

“The Island” was first performed in South Africa when the country was in the grasp of apartheid. The South African government argued that peaceful coexistence of the races was possible only by separating blacks and whites, but many saw through this and began to take action. Together with the playwright Athol Fugard, Kani and Ntshona responded by creating “The Island,” set in the maximum-security prison at Robben Island. Their performance was their form of protest. Apartheid has ended, but “The Island” lives on, as a symbol of hope for anyone confronted by man’s cruelty to man.

The platform that represents John and Winston’s jail cell rises just a few feet above the stage. It holds the bare essentials: two mats and two blankets, a small bucket of water, a tin cup, and a wash cloth. Mannie Manim’s lighting makes all the difference when John gives his monologue next to a sleeping Winston. The lights dim slowly around John until all you can see is his face shining through the darkness. The scene makes you share their sorrow and grief.

Kani and Ntshona are incredible performers; they have an undeniable capacity to make you see the world through their characters’ eyes. John’s high spirits keep the duo from being cheerless and dejected, while Winston keeps steering John back to brutal reality. Then John forces him to see beyond his jail cell by telling stories. At first they recreate a scene from a western movie. Then they act out a phone conversation to their friends at home; it starts out funny and lighthearted but quickly turns into

a heartbreaking recollection of his life before imprisonment. Their personalities complement each other beautifully.

In the opening scene they appear without any props and begin to improvise, struggling to push wheelbarrows, filling holes with sand, only to dig it back up again. Every muscle in their body strains, and as you watch them sweat you begin to sweat with them, feeling their labor as if it were your own.

Near the end, John is called out of the cell and led to an unknown destination, while the focus is on Winston, who is complaining about wearing a woman's costume for the Sophocles play "Antigone" that he and John are to perform for their fellow prisoners. When John returns he has news for Winston about his appeal and his reduced sentence. Winston's reaction reveals more about his character in that moment than in any other part of the play. It's almost as if the play was told in two parts, the first illuminating John's character and the second unveiling Winston's.

A siren sounds, the stage goes dark, and you know you have just witnessed something remarkable. Many people expressed their admiration for Kani and Ntshona at the public dialogue after the performance. One man who saw the play on Broadway 28 years ago said it changed his life and career. Many others took to a less personal note, expressing praise for the production's overall impact. Either way, you could feel the reverence seeping through each person in the audience.

If you want to witness something that goes beyond entertainment, something that illuminates every instance in history where there is inequality and injustice, go see "The Island." It will open your eyes and your mind to a new form of expression, a new form of protest: theater.



Sullivan Cousins

After Apartheid, a Provocative Play Endures

In a recent post-performance discussion at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, someone in the audience asked Winston Ntshona and John Kani how much, if at all, "The Island" has changed since its 1973 premiere in South Africa. Back then, they and millions of other blacks and coloreds were subject to the most shameless and inhumane example of segregation in recorded history.

Ntshona and Kani had to break the law to collaborate with Athol Fugard, the white playwright who worked with them on "The Island." At times they passed themselves off as his gardener and driver. They also worked from memory, because a written script would have increased their chances of being censored. And instead of formally announcing their first performance, they relied on word of mouth.

The two actors were eventually jailed on charges of treason, then released after a few weeks. Now 30 years have passed, and apartheid is over. Yet when Ntshona was asked how much the play has changed, he replied "Not at all."

"The Island," he explained, is not just about the political prisoners on Robben Island, the notorious cellblock that is the setting for the play. Nor is it just about apartheid. Rather, it is a play that transcends time and borders, a play that comments on the struggle against oppression and tyranny everywhere, a play about the flawed but resilient human spirit.

The current production, developed by the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, represents the prison cell with a small platform, roughly six feet square, that holds a couple of blankets, a pitcher of water, a tin cup, and a rag. The inmates, named Winston and John, have to crouch, bend, and climb around each other to move. The physical restrictions showed the dehumanizing effects of the apartheid system, which tried to break the wills of its opponents and turn them into beasts of burden.

In the opening scene, the two men appear to be digging holes on opposite sides of the stage. They dig and grunt and sweat, carting their wheelbarrows of sand to the other's hold, filling it up again. This scene, done in pantomime, shows not only the monotony of prison life but also the cruel, dehumanizing way the inmates are treated by the white guards. Later, back in their cell, John and Winston admit that the task made them hate each other. But in the end, their friendship proves strong enough to withstand the oppressive forces that torment them.

The roles came naturally to Ntshona and Kani, who have been performing “The Island” around the world for many years. They brought an ease to their acting that made it seem like they were doing what they do every day of their lives. They examine their wounds and talk about life before prison as naturally as they would have alone with each other on Robben Island—without 900 people watching.



Melissa Francis

An Island of Reality

If you're looking for a dose of reality, then I recommend you see "The Island." This play, originally directed by Athol Fugard in 1973, is about two inmates on Robben Island, a notorious prison for dissidents during South Africa's apartheid era. As an African-American theatergoer, I feel that not enough socially relevant plays reach the stage. But "The Island" bears witness to just how hard black South Africans struggled to gain freedom and independence.

The current revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater leaves a powerful impression, giving insight on the lives of the two African men. The relatively simple set speaks volumes: A small platform at center stage represents the cell where the two prisoners, John (John Kani) and Winston (Winston Ntshona), are confined.

They have little more than a bucket of water, some chalk, and a pair of blankets. John and Winston joke with each other and rehearse "Antigone," a play that they hope to perform for their fellow inmates. Occasionally they whisper to other inmates (we can't see them), or they pretend to call their friends and families, using a tin cup for a phone. The cell illustrates the restrictions placed on their movement and freedom, and sets off a timeless struggle between two men.

John and Winston will awaken your sense of human dignity. When Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona first created "The Island," they made do without a written script. Otherwise, it might have been censored—or used against them as evidence of treason. It's amazing that they performed it despite the risk. Eventually, Kani and Ntshona were imprisoned for several weeks. They might not have been released so quickly if they hadn't won a Tony award a short time earlier for their 1975 performance on Broadway.

The duo performed the play in many different countries to rave reviews. "The Island" has been translated and published in several languages. John and Winston are superb actors whose work reveals man's inhumanity to man, a phenomenon that persists in every culture. They also continue to teach audiences about the horrors of apartheid, which should never be forgotten, and their people's struggle to overcome it.

Although apartheid has been abolished, and John and Winston have aged since they first performed this play, they still deliver performances that merit standing ovations. I recommend "The Island" for anyone—of any

age—who is willing to reflect on an era that revealed the best and worst of the human spirit.

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Lauren Gallo

Playing to a Captive Audience

The Starbucks poster boy sits on my right, wearing a too-cool zip-up and faded Diesel jeans. When the two performers enter the stage and engage in arduous physical labor, we wince. The actors appear animal-like from our Urban Outfitters perspective, and our intentionally worn-in jeans reach a new level of superfluosity.

“The Island” was written thirty years ago to expose the absurdity, immorality, and injustice of South Africa’s racist government. Now it serves as a reminder of the apartheid era, as well as a testament to inequities that still remain widespread.

The Market Theatre’s production, currently running at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater, features John Kani and Winston Ntshona, who created the play in 1973 with the playwright Athol Fugard. “The Island” has successfully outlived apartheid. Unfortunately, the actors have yet to realize their vision of a just society.

John and Winston, the appropriately named characters, are in jail on Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and other South African political prisoners were once held. They work day in and day out at the whim of their white prison guards, digging useless holes in the sand and filling them up again. They live on each other’s company, two small mats, and a single tin cup of water. They are preparing to perform for their fellow inmates the Greek tragedy “Antigone,” the famous story of the questionable guilt of a woman who breaks the law by burying her brother. Throughout the play, John tries desperately to pacify Winston’s temper and motivate him to practice for their upcoming performance, while Winston grudgingly obeys.

In this production, our presence seems very much a part of their actions. Although their exhaustion is so acute, so horrifyingly real and rhythmic that they don’t speak for some ten minutes into the performance, they know that they are performing, and that they are sending us a message. They speak English, a language that seems slightly uncomfortable to them, and they make references that seem intended to impress us, such as imitating an American cowboy. Somewhat shamefully, we laugh out loud.

The play is meant to be funny, but in a melancholy way, because their interaction is a show, a statement, and not the “Real-Life Glance into the Lives of Inmates” that one might expect. Their effort is desperate after their torturous day of work. Their own entertainment is pathetic; at one

point they pretend to call a friend back home on an imagined telephone. We laugh at their excitement, but the mood darkens when Winston, in a memorable spotlight, asks about his young children, and we realize exactly how lonely these two men are. Winston's loneliness is so real and so striking in this light that it nearly turns our laughter to sobs.

Their excitement and comparative energy in the morning, after a likely unfulfilling night of sleep, comes as a relief after the painful work the day before. But here again we are jolted back to their reality. The emptiness of their cell is emphasized by the starkness of the stage. Our eyes have nothing to focus on but the actors, and their frequent and drastic changes in mood are all the more striking in this desolation.

As the day wears on, these energetic risers become subservient beings in handcuffs, obeying the unseen guards without hesitation. This is an entirely two-man show, and the decision not to cast actors as the guards makes the play more universal, because we never see the faces of the oppressors. When John is allowed to return to his cell alone, without supervision, his amazement and excitement is both touching and humorous.

Our world of freedom is being criticized here. Not that we feel badgered, more intrigued, but in a way we are on trial, much like Antigone in John and Winston's own performance within a performance. Winston plays Antigone, the accused, and John is King Creon, the state. When Creon addresses Antigone during her trial, he is addressing us, too. John tries forcefully to convince us of the inhumanity of their treatment, which seems a bit redundant after we witness ... everything. We've watched them endure a cycle of dehumanizing digging; we've seen one using his own urine to cleanse the other's wounded eye. Nevertheless, John's speech is moving. We deserve to be resented, to be reminded of our own wealth and privilege in light of their circumstances.

When John refers to "your 'Reserved for Whites Only' section," we can't help but look around the audience and realize that his statement holds true here at BAM, too. When he says, pointing at us, "There are still a few liberals about here," we are again directly brought into the trial, and made out to be hypocrites. How can we advocate equality and civil rights and yet allow these men to endure such circumstances? The fourth wall is down, and our involvement is at its peak; laughter is necessary, if for no other reason than to ease the discomfort of our own trial. But our nervous chuckles don't undercut the message of this performance. John and Winston are living in conditions that are simply wrong, and every onlooker would gladly sell their Diesel jeans if it could make the lives of these two cellmates any easier.



Sam Rappold

An Island in a Sea of Despair

Athol Fugard's "The Island," now playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, feels like a melancholy struggle against time.

In this revival of their 1975 production, John Kani and Winston Ntshona return to play two inmates at the Robben Island prison in South Africa. The play is set in the apartheid era, and we are led to believe that the two men—also named John and Winston—are there for defying that law, giving the play a relevance both historical and political, as well as a timeless quality.

The show opens with John and Winston digging with imaginary shovels and hauling the imaginary dirt in imaginary wheelbarrows. I'm not sure exactly how long this scene was, but I'm sure it lasted longer than the patience of anyone in the house. It is only later that we learn that this serves as a metaphor for the endless waiting they have to do, which is the show's prevailing theme.

Most of the play takes place in their jail cell, represented here by a solid slab that looks like concrete. About five feet square, it holds two blankets, a washrag, a piece of chalk, and a bucket of water.

The plot centers on the two men's attempt to perform "Antigone" at a prison concert in a few days. This is the most entertaining part of the play: watching the interactions between the anxious John and the reluctant Winston as they attempt to coordinate the play. The plot thickens when John learns that he has won an appeal and will be released in only three months. He doesn't know whether to be happy or to denounce it as a trick. Here we are confronted again with the theme of waiting as John realizes how slowly the anticipation will make the next three months move. The play's mood becomes more grim as Winston delivers a bitter speech expressing his jealousy over John's good fortune and his fear of the loneliness once John has left.

Watching this, you pity the characters so much—and yet you know you are powerless to help them. It is a painful reminder of what real men once had to endure.

At the end of the play we get to see John and Winston's short performance of the trial and punishment of Antigone, using as props the items in the cell and some stolen from work sites. The wording of this performance will ring eerily in the ear of any American today as King Creon denounces

the “liberals” in his country who side with foreign terrorists. It is clear that John and Winston hope to make a statement, through their play, about how unfair their imprisonment is. Antigone (Winston) stands defiant as Creon (John) sentences her to life in prison. She says that as she goes to “the island,” she will know her act of defiance (burying her dead brother, who had been labeled a traitor) was an honorable one.

This play is nothing if not depressing, but not simply because bad things happen. It is depressing because it transports you wholly into the minds of two men in a dehumanizing situation, and lets you see it through their eyes.

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Nicole Robinson

An Island in a Sea of Nothingness

Man's Inhumanity to Man. This theme is as old as time, but it still proved potent and affecting on April 10, when John Kani and Winston Ntshona performed "The Island" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater. From beginning to end, the audience seemed to be at the mercy of the actors, who gave the show all they had. In a sea of nothingness, "The Island" provides solid ground for the thought-provoking, powerful theater we all yearn for.

This apartheid-era masterpiece was written in 1973 by Kani, Ntshona, and Athol Fugard. It tells the story of two men, John and Winston, imprisoned on Robben Island for opposing the apartheid system. Due to circumstances, these two men form a lasting friendship and look to each other for support. They live together, eat together, sleep together, and walk together in chains. They also prepare to perform a play for their fellow inmates and guards. They have chosen "Antigone," is a classical Greek play about a woman who stands up for what she believes and buries her brother against the king's wishes. Her punishment for disobeying the king's orders is death. To Winston and John, this play makes a statement about the importance of remaining loyal to their cause: ending apartheid and freeing their people.

The set design for "The Island" was small and confining, giving the sense that the prisoners are trapped. A raised platform served as their cell. The props included two sleeping mats, a pail, and a washcloth. This simple set design helped focus the audience's attention on the actors, who used imaginary shovels to dig imaginary sand and walked side by side in imaginary chains. Kani and Ntshona were convincing enough that they made a questionable decision appear brilliant.

One of the most striking things about "The Island" was the acting. In one word, it was breathtaking. Kani and Ntshona gave a performance that rocked the audience. With a script that gives the actors no breaks, they showed the audience that they were prepared. Their chemistry on stage seemed effortless. In one scene, after a day of hard work at the beach, the two prisoners enter their cell and pretend to talk on the telephone to an old friend. John asks about all the new gossip, while Winston struggles to get an ear in on the conversation. This back-and-forth exchange between the two characters was both amusing and clever, showing how deeply they yearning for their family and friends.

When John is told that he will be released in three months, Winston

predicts that John will forget him and move on with his life, while Winston spends the rest of his life in prison. The audience could feel the emotion that was flowing from both actors, and the atmosphere in the theater was one of sympathy not only for the main characters, but for oppressed people everywhere.

“The Island” is like chocolate cake for those of us who crave a sugary snack. It is thought-provoking theater with a purpose: to teach us about the human capacity for injustice. Even for those who are not interesting in learning, it is still a pleasure to see such superb acting. Either way, you will leave this performance feeling the theme of the suffering of man at the hands of other men echoing in your head.



Ken Tse

A Worthwhile Return to 'The Island'

If there's been a play about the suffering and oppression of Africans in their own homeland as moving as "The Island," which is playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theatre, I haven't seen it. "The Island" was first performed in the 1970's in South Africa without a written script. Its creators—Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona—rightly feared that a script could be used as evidence that they were defying apartheid, the severe segregation of blacks and whites.

"The Island" is a two-character play about a pair of men, John and Winston, doing time on Robben Island, once a notorious prison for political dissidents in South Africa. Played by their namesakes, Kani and Ntshona, they constantly bicker with each other, especially since Winston will not cooperate as they prepare to perform "Antigone" at a prison concert. The tone changes when John learns that his sentence has been reduced and he has only three months left. There is nothing bad to say about this stirring play, or its current production by the Market Theatre of Johannesburg. The plot, set, and characters all come together well.

The plot is almost a standard for most stories about ethnic oppression; we follow the lives of those who have fought against it and lost, and now they're in prison. Having an entire play take place in a cell is hard to pull off, but "The Island" succeeds. Normally, I would be disappointed that there is only one backdrop and few props. However, the magnificent acting easily makes up for this. For example, in the opening scene Kani and Ntshona rely on gestures to convey the sense that they are shoveling. At first, you say to yourself, "What are they doing?" The small number of props reinforces the deprivation these prisoners face, but everything the actors need is on stage. Working with nearly nothing is the ultimate statement of what few resources black South Africans had during apartheid.

The action that takes place in this one cell is brilliantly imagined. Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona conjured up a convincing jailhouse environment when developing this play. However, they showed that the prisoners had very different lives inside the prison. It all seemed so realistic. Focusing on the relationship between John and Winston in their cell was an original concept. It makes you think, "Is this what really went on?" Although the play is fiction, it evokes a larger truth.

The actors play the characters believably, sharing even their names. John makes the most of his time in prison and cracks jokes. Winston, however,

seems angry and indifferent. He appears to be more lazy, especially when he hesitates to practice for the play as Kani asks. Deep down he is very compassionate and a good friend to Winston. As revealed in his imagined phone call home, he cares deeply for his family, too. These traits are evident within the first few minutes of the play, when they interact in their cell.

Another admirable aspect of the play was the complete change of tones at unexpected moments. For example, when John makes the telephone call and begins speaking about his family, the comedic tone vanishes and gives way to one of sad concern. A similar shift occurs when John learns of his reduced sentence. These shifts between comedy and seriousness play on the audience's emotions. If a play can be so strong and daring as to do that, it definitely has proven itself to stand above the rest.



Cinderella Reviews

Cinderella

Under the presidency of H.R.H. the Princess of Hanover
Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo
Directed and choreographed by Jean-Christophe Maillot

Music by Sergei Prokofiev
Scenery designed by Ernest Pignon-Ernest
Costume design by Jérôme Kaplan
Lighting design by Dominique Drillot

Cast: Paola Cantalupo, Bernice Coppieters, Chris Roelandt,
Gaëtan Morlotti, Samantha Allen, Lara Maria Fernandez,
Nicholas Khan, Alina Lagoas, Nathalie Leger, Gioia Masala,
Carole Pastorel, Aurélia Schaefer, Ader Uriagereka

At the BAM Howard Gilman Opera House
April 29, May 1-3

Alina Grosman

A Barefoot Beauty Finds Her Prince

No pumpkin? No mice? One would imagine that the story of Cinderella wouldn't be the same without these extravagant magical elements. But the new production on stage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Gilman Opera House quickly dispels such doubts. Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, under direction and choreography of Jean-Christophe Maillot, serves up two hours of eye-candy, giving a new psychological twist to a familiar fairy tale. Along with its striking scenery and the funky (in a good way) new-age costume design, Maillot's ballet reexamines the classic fairy tale, rewrites it slightly and presents it as a masterpiece on stage.

Retelling a classic can be a difficult, if not dangerous, task. Putting a modern spin on a familiar story like Cinderella invites critical comparisons with the original. But in a public dialogue before one recent performance, Maillot made a compelling point. Because we already know the story, no stage production can compete with the mystical elements—such as the pumpkin carriage and the mice horses—already uniquely envisioned in our imaginations. So Maillot focuses on realistic and psychological elements, like the characters and their relationships. The father takes on greater significance in this production. He concerns himself with his daughter's welfare, and in turn is always overlooking and watching from the sides, even though he succumbs to the persuasions of the other sex and marries the wicked stepmother. It is also interesting that the same dancer plays the mother and the fairy godmother. Although there is no speech—only dancing, accompanied by the music of Sergei Prokofiev—the story seems more nuanced and full.

The set appears very modern at first, but it suits the fairy tale well. It consists of several huge blank panels that resemble pages of a book. The scenery was designed by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, who associates Cinderella with the pages of the storybook version he read as a child. These blank panels sometimes have images cast on them by lights to depict certain crucial elements, such as the invitation to the ball. The set isn't the only thing that's controversial. The futuristic costumes designed by Jérôme Kaplan define a whole new approach to characterization in the ballet, along with adding to the visual feast. Cinderella appropriately wore a simple silver gown that resembled the one her mother wore, while the evil stepmother and the stepsisters wore dragon tail-like attachments with red fabric over them, emphasizing their haughtiness.

With all this new action going on, it would seem that the story could get a bit confusing. To help clear things up, and add comic relief, there is a

story with the story. The servants, under the direction of the fairy godmother, perform the story of Cinderella, for the character Cinderella. This functions not only as encouragement for Cinderella to have hope, but portrays her story as an eternal classic that predates Cinderella herself.

Maillot once proclaimed: “My aim is to take the classic world—its codes, its aesthetic, its dancers—and find a new approach.” There is no question that he has found this new approach to bring to light great themes of love and loss to a classic. Maillot proves “Cinderella” timeless, not only for the child but for the analytical adult as well.



Irina Livitz

Bring in the Old, Take Out the New!

Who hasn't heard the story of Cinderella? It is as international as love. But the new ballet production by Jean-Christophe Maillot, currently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House, offers a different take on the timeless fairytale, which makes you wonder: Is change always good?

Maillot and his company, Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, set the classical music of Sergei Prokofiev against a vivid backdrop. The stage is like a canvas, with each scene is painted onto it through the skillful dancing and lighting. Large panels that look like the pages of a book are strategically placed on the stage and move to accommodate each scene. Words and images are projected onto the sheets and stage to suggest different locations. The costumes range from Cinderella's simple dress to the stepsisters' elaborate costumes and headpieces, which are out of this world. The variation in color adds another layer of paint to the stage and the story. From the fairy dust to the makeshift boat, the sets and costumes were masterfully done.

The dancers began their performance quite skillfully. The ballet opens with a touching scene between Cinderella's mother and father, who are frolicking around—obviously in love. They flow freely and lightly, and this may have been the high point for Bernice Coppieters, who plays both the mother and the fairy godmother. The delicacy of her opening performance shows her beauty as a dancer, but she is not able to maintain it through the performance. When she plays the fairy godmother, her movements are more limited because she is constantly walking or being carried, rather than dancing. Maillot's idea that Cinderella's mother was always watching over her is clever, but it is never fully expressed through the movement.

Maillot also emphasizes Cinderella's relationship with her father, danced beautifully by Chris Roelandt. Through his movements, it becomes obvious from his loving gestures and close, personal contact that he cares deeply for her. Maillot's exploration of this relationship adds to the familiar story without taking away any of its meaning. Furthermore, Maillot retains the traditional roles of the stepmother (Lara Fernandez) and the stepsisters (Francesca Dolci and Geneviève Van Quaquebeke). Fernandez's movements, sharp and jagged at times, reveal the true nature of her character, and the clumsy stepsisters display their poisonous nature through their obvious sibling rivalry and greed.

Cinderella herself (Paola Cantalupo) appears as delicate silk cloth. Her body moves freely and with visible innocence. Her facial expressions, steps, and gestures effectively express her emotions. This is in strong contrast to the prince (Asier Uriagereka), whose movements seem harsh and hollow. He comes off as a silly teenager, raging with hormones, which defeats the whole purpose of Cinderella: to show that true love can be found.

Whenever Maillot shifts from emphasizing the strong elements of the original Cinderella, such as the father-daughter relationship, to changing the story line, he encounters problems, as do the dancers. Maybe Prokofiev's score can't accommodate Maillot's reinterpretation; his forced additions to the plot do not flow well with the music. So, if Cinderella has succeeded as a fairytale for centuries, why change it now? With a classic like Cinderella, perhaps it's better to elaborate on the old than to create anew.



Irene Morgenshtern

A Fresh Look at a Familiar Fairy Tale

A woman with glittery feet dances across the stage, mannequins come to life, and prince charming finds his princess. It's the stuff fairy tales are made of—or, in this case, a ballet. Les Ballets De Monte-Carlo, under the direction and choreography of Jean-Christophe Maillot, has turned the story of “Cinderella” into an unforgettable spectacle of color and movement and brought it to the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The story of Cinderella and her glass slipper is a familiar one. Good father, evil stepmother, two evil stepsisters, a magical fairy, and few singing mice (at least according to Disney). However, Maillot turns this somewhat bland and trite fairy tale into a spectacle for all the senses.

Cinderella has always been the star of her own story. But in this version, set to Prokofiev's score, the abused girl doesn't get to hog the spotlight. Here her father, who is rarely even acknowledged in previous versions, plays a pivotal role as he guides his only daughter through life, while mourning the death of his beloved wife.

The evil stepmother is both lustful and vengeful as she makes certain Cinderella never experiences a shred of happiness. The evil stepsisters are almost android-like as they mirror each other in all their movements. However, it is Bernice Coppieters who steals the show, performing as both the deceased mother and the fairy godmother. From her romantic last dance with the father (Chris Roelandt), to her last good deeds as the fairy godmother, she illuminates the stage with her grace and charm.

Ernest Pignon-Ernest's sets make use of tall white panels that resemble sheets of paper and move in accordance with the scene. Dominique Drillot paints on them with light. In the opening scene, he projects handwriting that tells part of the story. Later, he conveys the grandeur of the ballroom and the sails of the ship as the prince searches for Cinderella. The effect is mesmerizing. The panels almost mimic the movement of the dancers as they float around the stage.

The color-coordinated costumes by Jérôme Kaplan also play a major role. The ballet opens with Cinderella, dressed in a brown potato sack, holding her deceased mother's beige satin gown. Her father spends most of the play clad in mournful black, while his new wife flaunts a purple corset. The two stepsisters wear seductive red corsets with dragon tails and cone shaped wigs. At the ball, Cinderella wears a satin gown that closely resembles the one her mother wore earlier. It is only at the end, when

Cinderella is safely in the arms of her prince, that her father sheds his mournful attire.

The most surprising change in Maillot's production is the absence of the glass slippers. Instead Cinderella's feet are covered in glitter, which has an even more dramatic effect. When word gets out that the Prince is searching for his beloved, the stepsisters try to make over their own legs to resemble the mystery woman's beautifully sculpted feet. Instead, they unveil grossly disfigured feet that not even a mother could love. However once Cinderella reveals her pure and white foot, the Prince knows he has found his Princess.

Like any good theatrical production, this one offers some comic relief. Many of the laughs are delivered by the Pleasure Superintendents, who double as mannequins and model the stepsisters' dresses. Later, at the fairy godmother's request, the mannequins come to life and tell the story of "Cinderella" to Cinderella herself. They grossly exaggerate the story with the help of a few floppy wigs and rather awkward courting gestures. However, the result is magnificent as dancers make fun of the ballet they themselves are performing in.

Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo's production of "Cinderella" really is a fairy tale brought to life. With handsome princes, wicked stepmothers, and beautiful fairies, even the most jaded viewers cannot help but want to twinkle their own toes after seeing this Cinderella twinkle hers.



Sam Rappold

A Cinderella Not of This World

I recently saw Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo's production of "Cinderella" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House. I found it amusing yet confusing, strange and outlandish.

The ballet, set to music by Sergei Prokofiev, opens with a duet by Cinderella's mother and father (Bernice Coppieters and Chris Roelandt). Treasure this dance, for it is the best in the show. It begins as the two share a gravity-defying kiss. Their lips meet, but they do not embrace, and their arms sway freely like undersea plants. The dance goes on with the two floating across the stage. It shows just how deeply in love they are, and as they dance, they seem to be in rapture just from the physical nearness of each other. Ever so often the mother pauses, doubling over and wincing in pain. This occurs about three times in the dance, until she at last collapses dead in the father's arms.

It is here that the story as we know it begins, and also where things start to become strange. In the next dance we meet the wicked Stepmother and Stepsisters (Lara Fernandez, Francesca Doici and Genevieve Van Quaquebeke). Their matching costumes make them look like alien life forms. They wear form-fitting leotards, purple for the stepmother red and beige for the sisters, and white head caps (like the ones swimmers use) that completely cover their hair. It is not just the costumes that make them seem alien; their steps also seem somehow inhuman.

The strangeness continues as the invitation to the ball arrives and Cinderella (Paola Cantalupo) is told she can't go, at which point she begins to cry into what appears to be a giant bowl of guacamole. (It was supposed to be lentils, but who can tell?) Soon Coppieters returns to the stage, this time as a fairy determined to aid Cinderella in her plight. I was fortunate enough to have attended a dialogue with Jean-Christophe Maillot, the ballet's director and choreographer, who presented some interesting ways to look at this character. The fact that she is portrayed by the same dancer as the mother suggests that perhaps she is really the mother's spirit, returned to help her daughter find happiness before moving on to the afterlife. The fairy remains present through most of the ballet, dancing invisibly and intangibly around and through the other dancers as they go about their business.

Shortly after the fairy shows up we see the most confusing sequence in the play, an abridged version of the story that lasts about twenty minutes. The sequence seems to be a parody of the more familiar story of Cinderella.

Everything in this sequence is exaggerated to ridiculous proportions. The costumes are bulky and colorful, the dances are silly, and there are several “in jokes.” For instance, to help her daughters’ feet fit into the glass slipper, the stepmother rips off their toes.

The set, designed by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, is deceptively simple. The stage is decorated with many giant sheets of paper arranged in different ways for different locations. Maillot explained in the dialogue that he was alluding to the fact that most people are familiar with this tale as a bedtime storybook. (Most Americans are more familiar with the Disney movie, but I guess they figured giant VHS tapes would be too cumbersome.) The way these plain pages are moved around and rearranged to unerringly give you the proper sense of place is truly impressive.

On the whole, this production is amusing. It has its quirks, but if you can see past them you will enjoy yourself.



Ken Tse

A Story without Words

For anyone looking for something new, “Cinderella” is currently playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Howard Gilman Opera House. Directed and choreographed by Jean-Christophe Maillot, it retells the classic fairy tale without words, relying instead on intense physical motion. If you have never seen a story told through ballet, this very enjoyable production will amaze you.

The heart of the performance—the dancing—leaves an lasting impression. The dancers’ speed, flexibility, coordination, and intensity combine as if some unseen force propels the dancers around the stage.

In the opening scene, Maillot conveys the sadness of Cinderella’s father during his dance with her mother. Instead of telling the story through words, he relies on motion. Without words, the characters can better release their emotions, in this case through the dancing. At the ball, for example, the characters release their feelings with intense, explosive moves of the body.

It was perfect how the music and dance came together. Soft music yielded soft moves, and intense music yielded intense moves. The music also set the mood of each scene, bringing us closer to the feelings of the characters and the feel of the scene.

What is amazing about this performance was that there is relatively little acting or plot to comment on. All you see and feel is the music, the dance, and the set. The set consists of movable panels that are reconfigured for each scene. The costumes range from traditional ballet leotards to fantastically eloquent gowns. The costumes and sets created a visual appeal that complemented the dance.

The story seems better without words. The dance makes up for all of it. It is harder to interpret because we hear nothing but music, and see nothing but dance, but we feel the story. I left feeling closer to the characters than I would at a play because instead of telling me, they showed me. That is the power of the dance. One can appreciate this performance, without saying a word.



Amiya Vaz

Without Her Slippers, Cinderella Goes Astray

Quick! What does $2 + 2$ equal? You would say four, and I would too. But what if I told you that it did not equal four, because I decided to change fundamental mathematical rules? You would call me crazy, right? Well, this is what I thought when I heard Jean-Christophe Maillot's reinterpretation of "Cinderella," now at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House. This production, danced by Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, certainly does a good job of conveying Maillot's thoughts about the familiar fairy tale. Unfortunately, it proves that a reliable story should not always be tampered with.

The story of Cinderella is familiar to anyone who grew up with—or at least heard of—the animated Disney version. After her parents die, a young girl is forced to live with her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. They treat her cruelly, yet one night she is given the chance to go to a prince's ball (after being forbidden) when her fairy godmother magically appears. There she meets the prince and they fall in love, yet she cannot tell him who she is. When she is forced to leave early, she accidentally loses her slipper, and the prince uses it to track her down. In typical, fairy-tale fashion, the prince and Cinderella are reunited and they live happily ever after.

While there are many versions of this story, they invariably portray Cinderella as an unloved girl who ends up living happily ever after with the prince. In Maillot's version, however, the father (Chris Roelandt) remains alive for the entire ballet. Not only that, but he becomes a main character, often more visible than Cinderella herself (Paula Cantalupo). This major change altered the entire development of the story. At a public dialogue before the show, Maillot explained his decision, yet I can't help wondering if others watching the ballet without any prior information would have accepted this alteration. Even I had a hard time understanding why Maillot bothered changing the story. While the father's story is sweet, as he mourns his dead wife and recollects memories of her, there is still that nagging question: "Why concentrate on him?"

The father was so sympathetic that the audience feels worse for him than for Cinderella. He was fooled into marrying the evil stepmother and he cannot stop her and her daughters from mistreating Cinderella. While watching the first act of the ballet, it is easy to be drawn to the sadness that Cinderella and her father share. Yet by the second act, Cinderella is once again being ignored—but this time by the audience, which is more engrossed with the father's pain than hers.

Casting the same dancer, Bernice Coppieters, as both Cinderella's mother and the fairy godmother was Maillot's best decision. It gave a magical quality to the relationship between Cinderella and the memory of her mother. The fairy godmother indeed provides a ray of light on Cinderella's dismal life. Coppieters captured one's attention as soon as she entered the stage, even when she was only showing her arm.

The costumes and stage design were colorful, loud, and abstract. This made the ballet very pretty to watch, yet it also distracted observers from the actual performance. I can't remember how many times I found myself admiring the interesting purple and red garments of the minor dancers instead of concentrating on the main dance between Cinderella and the prince at the ball. It is quite possible that Maillot intended for the audience to be distracted, so that he could prove to the audience that the story of Cinderella is ultimately boring (as he said) and that it is the people around her who provide this fairy tale with its ageless appeal. More likely, the designs were just a good choice made to make the production attractive. But they unintentionally shifted the focus away from the personal struggles of the father and Cinderella.

If you are very comfortable with change and can accept people tinkering with ideas that are seemingly unchangeable, then this production of "Cinderella" is highly recommended. If, however, you are slow to accept that $2 + 2$ might not equal 4, then it will leave you unsatisfied and questioning Maillot's decisions. While the dancing and the stage design are appealing, you will ultimately leave the performance wondering, "What happened to Cinderella and her struggle?"



Instructor Biography

Christopher Reardon writes about the performing arts for *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Dance Magazine*, and other major publications. As a contributing editor to *The Ford Foundation Report*, he has also filed stories on AIDS, street theater, human rights, and other issues from more than a dozen countries—including Brazil, Egypt, Nigeria, and Vietnam. He holds degrees from the University of Notre Dame, where he majored in the classics and humanities and minored in German, and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where his work was honored by the Overseas Press Club. He later returned to Columbia to study dance, theater, and the creative process as a midcareer fellow in the National Arts Journalism Program. He lives with his wife and daughter in a former *Daily News* printing plant a few blocks from the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

BAM Department of Education & Humanities

BAM Education & Humanities is dedicated to bringing the most vibrant, exciting artists and their creations to young people and their families. The Department presents performances and screenings of theater, dance, music, opera, and film in a variety of programs: ***Generation BAM*** for high school students, ***kaBAM*** (Kids at BAM) for second to eighth graders, ***BAMfamily***, the ***BAMkids Film Festival***, and ***Screening Modern Times***. In addition to the work on stage, programs take place both in school and at BAM that give context for the performances, and include workshops with artists and BAM staff members, study guides, and classes in art forms that young people may never have had access to before. These programs include ***Shakespeare Teaches***, ***The Music Program***, ***Dancing into the Future*** (with Chuck Davis, David Dorfman and others), and the ***Young Critics Institute***. In addition, the Department collaborates with the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation to provide an arts and humanities curriculum to students who create an African Sculpture Garden at BAM and perform on stage in BAM's ***DanceAfrica program***. The Department produces programs surrounding the Next Wave Festival and BAM Spring Season, including the ***BAMdialogue*** series, ***BAMtalks*** and symposia, which join BAM artists in discussion with the community.

Young Critics Institute

In spring 2003, BAM offered the *Young Critics Institute* for the fifth time. In an intensive ten-week program that took place after school at BAM, selected high school juniors and seniors studied with Christopher Reardon, a professional performing arts critic, to learn more about theater and dance and to hone their critical writing skills. Participants attended and reviewed three BAM performances (*Twelfth Night*, *The Island* and *Cinderella*) and attended a *BAMdialogue* with Jean-Christophe Maillot, the choreographer of *Cinderella*, interviewed by Lynn Garafola. Guest critics included Gia Kourlas, a freelance dance critic, and Gordon Cox, critic for *Newsday*. This is an anthology of some of the reviews that the students wrote over the semester. Both the program and theater tickets were at no cost to the students.

Education and Humanities Department Staff

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