

Trip Diary Sept – Oct 2015 London Italy

Sunday

I slept from about 11 last night - when I got back from the Book Club dinner and did some writing - until six this morning. With the breathing machine. Amazing. The longest sleep in memory. In the morning I read the paper and went back to sleep for two hours. Finally went out to breakfast about noon. A short walk with pictures and brunch. Then back to write. I have no ambition to see sites. And I am totally enjoying recovering energy. My mind turns to politics, plays, projects and Browne and I want to think and write. Much like a good NYC break.

The Lady's Trial, John Ford, Sam Wanemaker Theater, Globe Theater, London, King Edward VI School Players.

I went to see this because I wanted to see this theater, a small indoor theater, lit by candles, true, it is claimed, to the time of Shakespeare. John Ford wrote 1620 – 1640. His most famous play was *It's Pity She's a Whore*. *The Lad's Trial* is his last known and in tact play, rarely performed. The performing group was a school company, billed as all boys, specializing in Shakespeare productions, I know no more.

The Globe runs a massive education programme in Shakespeare and the Globe theater complex including the Wanemaker is most impressive. Lavish, did I say lavish. It takes the cult of antique theater to a whole new level.

The Wanemaker Theater is as delightful as The Globe itself, very intimate, maybe six rows deep on the ground level and three or four in the balcony. But I wouldn't say the intimacy is any greater than the Studio theater at Stratford Ont., or any small theater. The impact of 'intimacy' is overrated. Yes, it matters that the actor can perform without shouting. And ? I would like to know which of Shakespeare's play were done like this.

The production was highly uneven, Some of these teenagers have some talent and will go far. But there were many inexplicable lapses. There were obviously some problems with the one off production as part of a weekend seminar on Ford, e.g. some actors on stage in street dress, a few girls on stage in street dress.

There's of course nothing wrong with this as a educational programme – but this was billed as an all boy production true to the era. It is of interest – aside from the theater itself, to see this played out. Two of the lads were good as the 'fair maidens'. But there were numerous clunkers – one pairing of a male who was shorter than his cross-dressing partner. 'His' voice hadn't broken and 'hers' had. I think in this era of cross-dressing and 'boy love' issues there's along way to go in exploring this dimension of historical reconstruction. This production didn't advance the cause. The overall production was so uneven that I no sense of what a 'boy company' would be like. Indeed it was the male parts that were the worst. The maidens were

ok to good. The men were awful to bearable. The text called for someone mature and the boys pretending did not pull it off, not even close.

It was so awful to watch I left at the break.

The play itself is about a wife on trial for adultery and her difficulties defending herself. The play allows for doubt regarding this issue, so a more sophisticated Desdemona/Othello theme. It's hard for me to care about this. And the performances didn't carry you away as they must and sometimes do in Othello, to make it work.

The comic characters were fun, a pair of foppish nobles arguing about their women. But their lisping mannerisms derogated from the overall effect. Why are fags fighting over a woman? Again the boys can't pull off the men's parts.

Not to be harsh. It was a one off production in the context of an educational seminar – not a big time professional production. The actors must have been thrilled to be on that stage and many did very well.

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Monday London

Went with Cindy at 8:30 – arriving at National Box office at 9 – got great seats for *This Country's Good*. Then we went to the National Gallery till about noon, I don't remember being in there. Great impressionist collection. Spectacular Canteletto. Snack wit Ron and Cindy. Then to AiWeiWi at the Royal Society – where we met Debbie and Janice and the two Dave's. Then another snack with Janice, Debbie and the two Dave's. Walked back with Ron and Cindy and Debbie. Resting now. Going to theatre with Cindy and Ron. Enough socializing. Amazing we can coordinate.

My feet are holding up with four hours a day tramping around. Which is great. Two night of good sleep with my breathing device. I'm having good energy through the day so far.

I should read up more on Ai WeiWei. About the best – most clever 'political' artist. I wish he was more on side with the Government of China – although everything he criticizes deserves it. My suspicion remains – he a rich, clever guy doing everything he can to bring down the government – without regard to what will happen next.

I have to doubt the virtue of hauling around tons of re-bars for art exhibits. Even if associated with earthquake victims. Why is it he and the cognoscenti speak their protect in such obscure ways. Is direct criticism in plain language passé. Perhaps I understand why he has to be indirect. Chinese are notoriously indirect – is that racist? The ones who are really racist are the conceptual artist who make a fetish of

being obscure and call it art. Poetry is deliberately obscure. I'm not patient with obscure political poetry. To me it's an excuse that nothing happen.

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Our Country's Good

Our seat were fab. The performers were all terrific and I don't think they were mic-ed. The parts written for them were meaty - convicts deported to Australia and their guards/soldiers etc. The plot is the usual - the redemptive power of the theater. The convicts put on a play - *The Recruiting Officer* - and discover their literate, controlled and more charming souls. The harshness of discipline in the convict colony is unrelenting. The tales of the injustice of their convictions and deportation are gripping and intense. Various scene in the play are rehearsed but there is no lesson draw out of the content of the play. The prisoner / actors seem reformed as nice people as they prepare to go on stage. The unspoken message is that they will make something of themselves in the new colony. While some pine for England the others don't. I always thought the title meant that their NEW country is good. Indeed I often misspoke the title as *This Country's Good*. It ends with the bow and anthem of the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* - which comes off as patriotic to England. But a Prologue to the play written by one of the convicts and finally spoken at the end gives a different meaning - they were transported for 'our country's good' - for England's good - to get rid of the criminal lower class.

The overall performance on the revolving Olivier stage is dramatic and gripping. A dozen actors get great ranting parts and do them well. This is a superb cast.

I suspect the original script gave a little more opening to my first meaning of the tittle, that the new country was good and there were potential here - they could bring civilization etc. etc. I can't say where or when but I believe I've seen it before and came away with that meaning. This production focused on the harsh criminal system that crushed these folks and sent them away for 'for the country's good'. The anthem ending comes across as England was *right* to do this and it was necessary and when the production is done there will be nothing but more harshness for the convict actors.

I was carried along by the fine performances. There was no strong sense of the tragedy at the end. The wreckage and evilness of the vindictive prison / deportation system is lost to the grandeur of closing anthem. Nor do you get any sense of tragic false consciousness as the actors sing the anthem in praise of their oppressors. Perhaps this is another example of grandiloquent actors inverting the meaning of the play to send the audience home happy.

Still, a great evening in the theater.

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The group gathered for pizza after from various theater adventures. Everyone seemed to have good time. The others were at *Curious Incident*.

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Tuesday

I didn't sleep well and was exhausted by the time I'd been to Half-Price and bought a ticket. Got a haircut, went to bookstore, feed myself a bit and came back to the hotel to go back to bed.

I should have gone sightseeing but did not. Preferred to read and write when I woke up.

The bookstore, Foyles, was excellent, full stock on most topics. Haven't seen anything this good in NYC for years. Is Britain surviving the Internet smash-up of literacy?

I slept and then wrote some difficult stuff then went out to see *Gyp of mothersy*. And met up with the group for drinks in the hotel bar after. (Praise the gods of technology for texts and phones et al. We can be all over the place and still be in touch.)

[Add to tragedy of mother more on final years.]

Gypsy

Imelda Stauton is Momma Rose. She is a terrible terrible mother and a very loud and effective actress. Beyond pushy and ambitious. There is no admiring her at the end for her perseverance. Her conceit is not cute. You feel so sorry for Gypsy to have grown up with her and think she wonderful for not socking her. Momma is played nasty, and sung nasty. The last scenes are riveting as Momma proclaims herself, the right mix of tragic and disgusting.

I knew the music and thought the show sentimental and 'Broadway'. It was a revelation to see the underside of the story and the music. The production had great integrity to stick to this till the end.

Other than being great for all these reasons this production was hooky - the sets and lighting were corny - as if it were a revival thinking it should look like it did fifty years ago. *On the Town* played that card better. I actually don't like the music very much - too simple and low brow and Broadway.

This is another example of learning of the New York musical theater. Another show that has a plot with teeth. It's not just tunes.

Thursday

Imperial War Museum

I went for the famous war art which wasn't there as far as I could see. On tour? But saw an excellent WWI exhibit, a wow, with dim lights, digital maps, loads of info on the home front, no glory to the generals, about life in the trenches. Not architecturally grand, like Warsaw and the Washington Holocaust Museums, but right up there. The rest of the building wasn't so great.

Hangman - Royal Court - Martin McDonagh

Pure black comedy, slip stick, seems to me very British, although McDonough is Irish. Very enjoyable. There were dialects I couldn't understand, Northern. Great blustering actors, all. Not sure I understood what the 'bad guy' who pretended to abduct the daughter, thought he was doing, but did it matter. The first act annoyed me at times for its seeming predictability but that set up the second act which was largely full of surprises. No deeper meaning attempted. I can see this as West End comedy hit. I'll bet the script is very dull the read and comes alive with a terrific set of actors.

What are the equivalent comedy hits in Canada - George Walker, *Kim's Convenience*. They are defined by their structure, very traditional, audience, shallow - go to the theater to be entertained, social sub-group being satirized. More or less TV sit-com.

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Friday

Palace of Westminster - Houses of Parliament

- audio tour - the buildings are well preserved and lavishly decorated - the tour commentary was good, a lot of complex history and tradition well summarized - natural pride in the surviving democracy -
- Cindy Ron and I had a cheap Chinese lunch - not so good - and walked home

Faranelli and the King - Mark Rylands -

Dramatization of the supposedly true story of the castrato singer Faranelli and the king of Spain whose melancholy and insomnia was soothed by Faranelli singing. Farnelli moved to Spain and never returned to the stage. The play itself – newly written – is poor. Perhaps it was once good but butchered in rehearsals by cuts which favoured the glamor on stage of great voices and singing but made a mash of ending. Who knows what happened as / when the king dies. One very strange element of staging – when the castrato has to sing a ‘real’ singer, dressed just like Faranelli comes on stage and we see two. Was the singer – who seemed quite good to me – utterly incapable of uttering the few lines the actor had to speak? Who knows. Not awful, just puzzling. My guess is that Mr. Rylands is such a big star that a good script got butchered so he could have more stage time. He speaks well. Perfect for the melancholic king. But all too in love with himself in the king’s opening mad scene.

Still it was good to watch. The set was classic royal court and the costumes grand. It was my image of a Handel opera of the intimate sort. It was lit by candles and the backdrops on flat painted canvas and lowered by pulleys. Quaint. Period. More of the current rage of antique reproductions of ancient theater.

Went to dinner with the group after the show but the restaurant was so loud I had to leave. I knew when I went in it would be that and should have left then. We were directed downstairs so I postponed. Three minutes down there and it was over. Reminded me of Max and I on Ossington the other night – going into one restaurant and turning around because of the noise. It’s obvious younger ears don’t have this problem. My hearing still seems acute – very, I think – when not drowned by the roar of a crowd. London overall seems loud.

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Saturday

Nell Gynn Globe Theatre

Terrific all round – with the minor exception that it wasn’t moving. Thus four stars not five. Excellent satire, mock Restoration comedy, great character actors, great rapport with the audience, Good history. Great to feel the play in the Globe. At time hard to understand the dialect. Good feminist theme of female sexual power.

No a strong enough story line how Nell survives the death of the king.

A great evening in the grand theatre.

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Sunday

Went for a walk in am to take pics for Max.

Travel to London City Airport by taxi. Good call to take a taxi – got to see a lot – west beyond Canary Wharf – confirmed my observation about the architectural quality of new buildings

Should have renewed my passport more than 3 months before expiry BA about not to let me on the plane. They made a phone call to Italian Immigration - who didn't care. Arrived in Florence on time. Norman waiting – slightly more stressful than usual

Dinner in Trattoria Camillia – veal and porcini mushrooms sauce – good but not spectacular – tomatoes and basil and balsamic vinegar – very good – chocolate tort – good but seemed a bit too much flour – white wine ok – no salt on table or in bread – liked the restaurant – small – busy – mix of locals and tourists – pleasant meal -

Midnight and I'm feeling good -

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Monday / Florence

am - Main Square and Palace - great -
aft - Walking Tour - Sex, Drug and the Renaissance
pm - dinner - another place rec'd to Norm – food not so g

Tuesday

-am - Uffizi - an appalling crowd – much restoration - for
- aft -
- pm - another place rec'd-ed to Norm – near Duomo – less formal – had gorgonzola salad and ribs

Wednesday

- am – Bargelo - excellent – lunch with a view of the Duomo
- aft - shopping
- pm – Japanese

NEW YORK - NOVEMBER 2015

Greetings

I'm in NYC as of today lunch time. Returning Sunday.

My sniffles and coughing lingered on and on, but seem reduced today, finally. My strength seems to be coming back, after sleeping 10 - 12 hours a day for two weeks.

Two goods.

Seven bads.

I face serious dental surgery when I return - to extract a fractured tooth and put in anchors for two implants.

The Star is now moving to amend their Statement of Defense. I think they will lose this, but maybe not. A win just makes the trial more difficult. The amendments probably add several rounds of difficult procedural motions to my work agenda before trial. This seriously threatens the trial date. I'll explain the mechanics and issues when I get back. Bottom line - despair, despair, that this case will ever be over. Yes I love it. But I'm developing high anxiety disorder.

My NYC task is to read the trial transcript and prepare for the re-run. That's calming!!!

This evening I dine with Norman and his gay dinner group of 20 years standing. The ones who survived the plague. If I'd stayed in NYC this might have been me. Definitely depressing.

Tuesday evening, hot ticket, - Charles III - the attempted overthrow of a living monarch by his own children. In Shakespearean drag. Might be better than it sounds.

Saturday, two plays with Mary Rowe. Maybe she'll cheer me up with tales of slaving for the rich. Maybe not.

Return to Toronto Sunday where my book club has committed to sponsoring a Syrian refugee family. Pity the buggers - rescued by five librarians and six lawyers. They named their rescue group 'Beaconsfield' after my street where we first met. Not aware that the street was named for Lord Beaconsfield who was Disraeli after he wasn't Disraeli any more.

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Second Report

My Dinner With Norman

Prime and Beyond is a not fancy-looking Korean Steak house in the East Village. Reviewed in The Times for its 'wet' and 'dry' aged beef, which refers to how they store the rotting beef before they cook and serve it.

It was Tom's month to chose the restaurant in this 20-year, running, never-the-same place, gay supper club. To which they graciously invited a foreign faggot. 'We're five so were eligible for the Family Platter, a little of everything, mix and match. 'Oh let's.' 'Then we can sample a bit of each.' A bit of dry Porterhouse, and wet Porterhouse and dry rib eye, and wet, and dry ... and wet ... and compare. And add in a few bits of soggy, fried zucchini (The zucchini is definitely wet aged, our server

confided, the only certain way to get the full sog effect the chef prefers, or was taught him by his Manchurian great aunt.

They bring the raw cuts to the table first, before cooking, so you can see all the fat and gristle, for which their specially selected rare, beef is famous all over West Paterson, New Jersey - where Sonny Liston robbed drug stores as an aspiring young teenager - and which they call marble because you can't chew it after its cooked, only suck on, it with three kinds of sea salt, gathered from remote Japanese islands by irradiated ex-fishermen ... sucking is excellent when your teeth don't function very well. 'Dry' is better ... *they say* ... because dry aged beef withers and shrivels more and so you get more flavour ... which Americans call 'flavor' per milligram. My comparison sucking could not scientifically prove this to be true, because I ran out of the blacken oyster salt between the dry and wet rib eye ... but generally I agree with all the top food-ist that dry, withered and shriveled, gives more flavor to suckers.

(I would like Alex's opinion.)

The mound of inedible gristle on my tiny, very thin, square, white, plate was embarrassing, to me, but no one said anything. Americans are so polite. Or were they hogging the best bits before they let the foreign faggot at the taste treats at the other end of the table and embarrassed by their geopolitical triumph. Embarrassed seems unlikely. Maybe they have better teeth. Or maybe they actually swallowed it.

I liked this restaurant very much because we were about the only people in it so I could hear the people at my table talk. (which is unusual in New York, (hearing, not the talking) Very articulate they were on the different kinds of sea salt. I can't remember exactly, but they were very passionate about everything. The zucchini, to start. And other things as well... like Trudeau is 'cute' ... 'Canadians are very nice ... and polite'.

Which you hear all the time down here. Nice! They think we're nice!

'Who me? Are you talking about me?' I said, lowering my eyes and voice and subtly straightening my tie and biting my lip and tongue together.

'We are,' they said grandly. 'And you are funny. Canadian are very good comedians.'

The bill for this was obscene about which I did not complain, cunningly playing to type. You get what you pay for. And the truth is you can learn things from obscenity. Like - how else would I get to witness this unique and complex, and expert, extortion-delusion so very, very, up-close.

When I got home I re-read and re-read the NYT review of Prime and Beyond on the Internet. Incredibly, carelessly, some experts might say, it had not been erased. Indeed I had been in that same place, in that same world.

Totally confabulous! Better than Broadway! 'Immersive' is a word used far too loosely about theatrical experience. Leave the lights on and watch the actors put on their make-up. Bah! *My Dinner With Norman* - that was immersive!

Tom is now king of the 'top five' short list for the most expensive dinners, inflation-adjusted, in 20 years. Ben said Tom had the top three! Tom demurred.

Two. Norman said he was now entirely displaced from the list. George said he should try harder or he'd get kicked out of the club.

Lou was the most interesting talker. He is an analyst, not of money, rather food and people. He revealed *the latest*, from a roman-a-clef, *Hysteria*, he is reading, that Anna Freud was a lesbian for fifty years, living under her fab father's roof (which, as they pronounce it, rhymes with *doo-fus*) with her lover and her three children from a former marriage. Did you know daddy analyzed her, twice. It turns out she was hopelessly happy, both times, and he couldn't understand or change that, so they kept their diaries and session notes locked in the secret Freudian archives. Forever!

No one knows anything about this, except Lou ... and the tell-all writer and Anna herself who titled her secret Diary 'Hysteria' ... and dad, of course, (who gave her the standard woman's diagnosis 'hysterical') and ... did I mention Lou ... and now me ... and you!

The secret Freudian archives somehow, always, comes up every time I come to New York and talk, I mean really talk, to an unemployed, white male over fifty, and never, ever, at any other place or time. Why is that?

To think, all of this could have been mine, if I had stayed in NY in 1981.

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Charles III

The highest and best example so far of 'modern Shakespeare'. *Wolf Hall* was an excellent, a modern dress, Shakespearean style retelling of an ancient tale. Now this grand fantasy of a modern and plausible constitutional crisis involving Charles and children. With meaty thoughts about the monarchy's gutted relevance and continued use as pomp for the masses. Succeeds as serious tragedy. Imagine, I felt sorry for Charles. A ghost - Dianna! A drunken Prince Harry. Shakespeare magnificently plundered. Iambic pentameter no less. Well played by everyone on stage.

A View From the Bridge

Here's a great American classic I think of as a blue collar, melodrama, potboiler stripped down and done as Greek tragedy. The Brooklyn and Italian accents were very uneven and jarring when compared to the leads fab performance. The casting was questionable. Catherine did not look 17. Rodolpho was a beefy hunk who was completely unconvincing as a maybe queer and pansy. Mostly that didn't matter because the core idea, the remake of the play, bare foot and on a blank stage, was

worthy and revealing. Occasionally the sexual connection between uncle and niece was overdone but mostly no. An interesting problem. The usual Edie Carbonne is fat and sexually 'past it' so the sexual tension makes sense that he is attracted to her – she is vulnerable to his genuine caring. His homophobic jealousy can be comic. Here Mark Strong is a 'hottie'. Makes sense the young girl is attracted to him but not that he is attracted to her. What do I know. The problem with remake was that when Eddie the longshoreman says really stupid things about Rodolpho singing that would be funny in a sitcom version they fall flat in the Greek version. Definitely Mark Strong as Edie Carbonne was excellent.

Steve

I wanted to hate this because, because, it was sitcom-style, gay soap opera about gay couples having apparently (gay) normal relationship problems. I hate being made over as normal.

So I hate the concept and purpose but enjoyed the show.

But the show was well done, quick, funny and filled with NY musical references – the world of characters on stage. I felt I was being shown a slice of NY life.