

[OMG!/NYC/NEW DRAMATISTS/SOUTH PACIFIC and BILLY ELLIOT](#)

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At the New Dramatists annual NYC fund raising luncheon (May 19, 2009), this year in honor of Horton Foote and New Dramatists' (ND) alums (like moi), I sit at Jeffrey Hatcher's table with ND alum playwrights Robert Shenkkan and James Nicholson, both old friends; terrific writers, terrific guys. Give each of them a copy of my novel ANTON'S LEAP.

Exiting the Marriott's men's room at the ND luncheon, I say hello to (OMG!) Edward Albee. Edward (who produced two of my plays in the 60s) has just given a moving tribute to Horton Foote and urged the new, New Dramatists to tell directors who try to rewrite their plays, "Bug off!" Edward and I chit-chat a bit and then we're both off. I forget to give Edward a copy of ANTON'S LEAP. Damn! I'll send him a copy.

In the Press Room at the ND luncheon, I say hello to the three (OMG!) Billy Elliot's starring in the Broadway hit and ask which one I'll be seeing the following night. They aren't sure.

Say hello to (OMG!) Joe Masteroff (writer of CABARET and SHE LOVES ME). He looks great. Tells me he's ninety years old. I say: if you're ninety then I must be (OMG!) "whatever" years old! "You're a youngster," he says. Back in the day, when the world was young, seasoned playwright Joe M took emerging playwright Frank G to a luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria, where we extolled the glories of the New Dramatists—then we ate what I recall seems like the same chicken lunch we were eating at the New Dramatists bash (nothing really changes).

See SOUTH PACIFIC at Lincoln Center: OMG! Beautifully reconceived and staged by Bartlett Sher; gorgeously lit, costumed, designed; magnificently sung and acted by Laura Osnes and William Michals. It's American operetta, of course, with 1940's bite, and Broadway-sailor MR ROBERTS' shtick—and a truly glorious Rodgers and Hammerstein score and lyrics. For me, BALI HA'I, hovers over the entire production and helps sustain the bittersweet romanticism right to the end.

I have always been somewhat distant from Hammerstein's view of the world as a ". . . cockeyed optimist. . . a dope with a thing called hope. . ." My view is more—"What entangles my hair is profound despair and I can't comb it out of my head—not this head." But Hammerstein's deeply felt optimism and compassion and astonishing craft win me over this time—fully—and make me want to explore his lyrics anew. The man is a master at theatre storytelling through spoken and sung words (He also co-authored the SOUTH PACIFIC book with Joshua Logan). And, since Hammerstein's words came first, they also inspired Rodgers to some of his most memorable melodies. "THIS NEARLY WAS MINE" is a perfect example of an integrated theatre song (one of Rodgers' great waltzes) that is so consequential a moment in a character's life that only his

singing can express the depths of his anguish. And, incidentally, it's a song I can't get out of my head (not this head).

I do wonder, though, if the character ensign Nellie Forbush (as written) would use a word like "bromidic" in her song, "I'M IN LOVE WITH A WONDERFUL GUY". Hammerstein probably said, "So what? I love the word." (So do I actually; and it does sing).

When the floor covering the SOUTH PACIFIC orchestra slides back, revealing the over 30 musicians, and the Robert Russell Bennett orchestrations kick in, you're instantly back in the golden age of American musicals—when \$4:50 was top ticket price—and you are swamped by a tsunami of breathtaking melody.

I had forgotten how potent the theme of the evils of prejudice and hate are in SOUTH PACIFIC. Must have been quite explosive, back in the day.

Wonderful being back in the Vivian Beaumont. Roomy, almost stadium, seating. My mind shoots back to the 1960s when I was observing rehearsals for the opening play at the Beaumont: DANTON'S DEATH.

Off to the new Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The old collections are like old friends and all the hundreds of diverse visitors from all over the world milling about begin to resemble cubist heads. OMG! In the Picasso room, is that a blue-period woman I see that I have never seen before? I do declare—'tis!

Still at MOMA: I always thought the skinny, skinny, elongated sculpture, THE STANDING YOUTH, was by Alberto Giacometti. No. It's by Wilhelm Lehmbruck. Amazing piece. Each section is distorted (the big toe, for example, is longer than the penis; even the right testicle is longer than the penis; the neck is stretched like a ballerina's and is definitely longer than the Penis and the toe -- combined!). But somehow the whole thing works as a balanced piece. How does an artist do that?

BILLY ELLIOTT, The Musical. OMG! Tonight it's David Alvarez playing Billy to the packed house. Nothing of the operetta here. It's a biting (serviceable) Elton John pop score combining a class struggle with a Cinderella story. The show is hip, driving, moving, funny (with its share of showbiz sentiment) and features a standout performance that I can hardly believe. This 14-year-old David Alvarez does ballet, taps, sings, acts, is funny, is charming, has a credible British working-class accent and - in one number - does a Peter Pan in the air while a male ballet dancer stays on the ground, and they execute an amazing pas de deux. Also, the boy can spot and spin with the best of them. The ache to dance in this Billy is overwhelming, and each move that Alvarez makes renders that ache palpable. David Bologna plays Billy's friend Michael, who likes to dress up in women's clothes (like his father does). Bologna is already an outstanding comic. I hear that every other young performer who plays Billy is a gifted, formidable show-stopper.

My friend, who saw the show when it opened in London, tells us that this BILLY ELLIOT features Broadway-dazzle production values that weren't in the original production and that at times seem to technically swamp the simplicity of the story (the high-tech stairway, for example, that spirals up from the trap and becomes Billy's miner's son's working-class bedroom). But, finally, the performers and the strong story transcend the Broadway dazzle and deliver the goods. My friend agrees.

Just when you think the curtain calls are over, Alvarez brings on the entire BILLY ELLIOT cast and what follows is a five-minute production number that raises the roof. Can't wait to see the other Billy's strut their stuff. OMG!

And talk about (OMG!) timely! The bringing down of the British miner class by then ruling class—that pits Billy's mining family against the Thatcher government—resonates like crazy in our own economic climate.

SOUTH PACIFIC and BILLY ELLIOTT. Both about something. Both class acts! Both fall into my category of "Entertainments that Confront." Broadway, the way it should be—as a model for the best of theatre! I wonder, though, if I'll be buying the BILLY ELLIOT CD of the score for my musical theatre collection? I will, however, add this SOUTH PACIFIC production CD to my collection (along with the new recording of Rodgers and Hammerstein's ALLEGRO, the first Broadway musical I ever saw).

At the newly renovated American Wing of The Metropolitan Museum of Arts. Back in the day, Sandy and I would walk across Central Park from our W 87th Street floor-through, \$135 a month, brownstone apartment to the Met and stop first at The American Wing (OMG! How I loved the pewter candleholders in those days!).

Transformed, this new American Wing; now a magnificent three or four story courtyard, facing Central Park, features American sculptures; and various levels, feature replicas of early American rooms and one stunning floor that has glass cases filled with great American paintings, furniture, glass, that are usually kept out of sight, in storage.

We also visit the costume collection of stunning (bizarre to me) fashions in a show about how fashion models fashion the times. Also visit the great Impressionist rooms and look in on a painting that plays a part in my novel ANTON'S LEAP. Back then (when I first researched the painting, because she looked like my heroine), the painting was thought to be a portrait of Mlle Charlotte du Val d'Ognes and attributed to the painter David. It has now been authenticated as a painting called YOUNG WOMAN, PAINTING, by a painter named Marie-Denise Villers. I have no idea what I can do with this information now.

And on 55th and 9th Avenue we discover the new Alvin Ailey dance school. The students are performing their Spring Celebration Concert. More dazzling young talent in a packed 300-seat theatre. I like THE END OF THE BEGINNING, a kinetic whirlwind, with a score by Philip Glass and choreography by Troy Powell – where the pounding

music builds and repeats driving percussive clusters that bring the young bodies on and off stage in stunning leaps and complex patterns. Very disciplined and well trained, this company of young black, white, and Asian-American dancers. The evening ends with excerpts from Alvin Ailey's gospel masterpiece, REVELATIONS—with the stunning images of the beautiful black lady, all in flowing white, and with her enormous white umbrella, and the section of the ladies in yellow, with their yellow fans fanning away. OMG!

Dancing down 9th Avenue to return to our hotel on the warm balmy NYC night, we pass restaurant after restaurant filled with mostly young people. The Fleet's in and dozens of American sailors in scrubbed whites are laughing it up with girls seated at the sidewalk tables. Any minute, one expects the sailors to break out singing and dancing the old Bernstein number, "NEW YORK, NEW YORK, --IT'S A WONDERFUL TOWN!" OMG!

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