

Saturday, May 11

Theatre as Nation

Today we will be headed to two of Essin's favorite places in London: The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and The National Theatre. Both are state supported institutions, and both have investments in preserving and producing theatre texts as part of British history.



V&A

The V&A is a collection of museums “dedicated to the power of creativity” with a mission to “champion design and creativity in all its forms, advance cultural knowledge, and inspire makers, creators and innovators everywhere.” Whereas the National Gallery and Tate Museums focus on fine arts, the V&A in South Kensington focuses on design and craft, the arts that touch citizens everyday lives. Significant to our study of spectatorship, this also includes theatre!

It is possible that the Theatre Collection, Rooms 103-106, will still be closed (reopening “summer 2024” is a bit vague, V&A website). If so, you can select a different collection like fashion, jewelry, metallurgy, whatever strikes your fancy. Regardless, these are the questions you will ask:

- What are the objects being selected for viewing?
- How do the objects perform as fragments of something larger or broader?
 - In other words, this is an object that was meant for a different purpose than being displayed in the museum, so how does the museum help you see or understand that broader context? Can you get a sense of the larger cultural practice or event for which the object stands in?
- What kind of “stage” has the museum provided to help the object perform its meaning to museum visitors?
- What is the nature of museum spectatorship? How does the design of the museum characterize its spectator or visitor? What does it assume about you and your spectatorship?

Finally, before you leave the V&A, consider this quotation from *Destination Culture* by Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett and her argument about how museums operate as both tourist destinations and stages for cultural performance:



“Tourism needs destination, and museums are premier attractions. Museums are not only destinations on an itinerary; they are also nodes in a network of attractions that form the recreational geography of a region and, increasingly, the globe...Museums have long served as surrogates for travel, a particularly important role before the advent of mass tourism. They have from their inception preserved souvenirs of travel, as evidenced in their collections of plants, animals, minerals, and example of the arts and industries of the world’s cultures. While the museum collection itself is an undrawn map of all the places from which the materials have come, the floor plan, which determines where people walk, also delineates conceptual paths through what becomes a virtual space of travel.”

#UKinMay assignment 1:

- Take, caption, and post an image that captures your spectatorship of the V&A’s performance of national culture.

The National Theatre

“ Do the English people want a national theatre? Of course they do not. They never want anything. They got the British Museum, the National Gallery, and Westminster Abbey, but they never wanted them. But once these things stood as mysterious phenomena that had come to them, they were quite proud of them, and felt that the place would be incomplete without them.

– George Bernard Shaw

The idea for a national theatre pre-dated its eventual founding in 1962 with Sir Laurence Olivier as the first artistic director. It ran in the Old Vic before the completion of the National Theatre complex in 1976. The architecture has been skewered by critics as the worst sort of concrete Brutalism, but walk inside and you can see that the institution is beloved by Londoners. Although the National Theatre is housed on this site, the company creates productions that tour widely, reaching British citizens well beyond the capital city. Even before the pandemic, their National Theatre at Home productions also made performances accessible via streaming, so they were well positioned to keep many of their workers employed during the Covid crisis.





My advice: arrive in plenty of time to explore. There are three performance spaces here: The Olivier (a thrust stage); The Lyttelton (a proscenium), and the Dorfman (flexible stage) Like the best public libraries, the National Theatre is a pleasant place to be. Take advantage of the free wifi and plenty of places to sit and read, check email, etc. There's also a bookstore in the lobby with one of the best selection of plays in London. There are lots of restaurants, some more affordable than others, bars, and a coffee shop. A lot of effort has been put into this theatre welcoming British citizens and visitors, helping them feel like they belong in this place.

If it is a nice day, join Londoners outside along the riverwalk. There's an outdoor bar and lots of seating, and typically you'll find a wide variety of food offered by food trucks and other vendors. Many locals, even if they aren't attending a performance, will meet friends in this location for post-work drinks.

If it's busy, feel free to ask people to join them at tables that have empty chairs; I regularly strike up conversations with people here because it's a public arts space and people welcome discussions about theatre and are interested in chatting. If you don't feel comfortable chatting, just observe and make note of the people you see gathered. You won't find this same sort of space in New York, the U.S. theatre capitol, where audiences enter theatre by lines and are rushed out as soon as a performance ends.

We'll be seeing *Underdog: The Other Other Brontë* at the Dorfman, a modern playful take on the Brontë sisters by playwright Sarah Gordon. The three sisters—Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—were poets and novelists. Charlotte wrote *Jane Eyre*; Emily wrote *Wuthering Heights*; and Anne wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (the one you haven't heard of, so, yes, she is the other other Brontë). Afterwards, we'll likely discuss the hyper-British-ness of a performance produced by a national theatre engages with nationally renowned literary figures.



#UKinMay assignment 2:

- Take, caption, and post an image (or more) that captures your impression of public or citizen spectatorship at the National Theatre complex.