

BLUEBIRDS OF UNHAPPINESS

The haunted houses of Proust and O'Neill.

BY JOHN LAHR

When Marcel Proust died, in 1922, at the age of fifty-one, only the first four installments of his seven-volume masterpiece, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, had been published. Like the narrator of his autobiographical novel, Proust had notoriously low self-esteem. "If only I could value myself more! Alas! It is impossible," he once said. His father and his younger brother were distinguished doctors who lived lives of social usefulness and robust heterosexuality; the cosseted, sickly Proust chose instead the avant-garde of suffering. Everything about his life—breathing, eating, sleeping, travelling, even sex—was problematic; his eyes, ears, stomach, skin, and psyche were so delicate and so easily irritated that he could only intermittently partake of the privileged world that was his inheritance. He was a connoisseur of collapse, a homosexual outsider who made a myth of retreat. Even his late success brought him little solace; he compared himself to a man too enervated by fever to enjoy a perfect soufflé.

In recent years, however, with the rise of the sound bite and the soap opera, Proust's work, which abounds in hearsay and melodrama, has made something of a comeback. Alain de Botton's 1997 "How Proust Can Change Your Life" turned the loquacious *maitre* into a kind of best-selling self-help guru, and now Harold Pinter's austere screenplay adaptation of *À la Recherche*, commissioned by Joseph Losey in 1972 but never filmed, has made Proust a star of the London stage, in an elegant production directed by Di Trevis at the Royal National's Cottesloe Theatre. The production's program quotes Kierkegaard's line "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." And the act of imaginative retrieval is the trajectory both of the play and of Proust's life—his way of redeeming an otherwise overwhelming sense of loss.

Here, bundled in overcoats in the summer for fear of catching a cold and occasionally stricken by asthmatic coughing fits, Proust's fictional surrogate, Marcel (the sympathetic and subtle Sebastian Harcombe), is forever on the periphery of events, peering from behind chairs, behind heads, behind windows—almost incidental to the scrum of high and low life that swirls around him, and sometimes only vaguely remembered by the members of the polite society he keeps. By staging Marcel from these refracted angles, Trevis pinpoints the essence of the writer and his style: Proust is a master of the obstructed view.

"Infirmity alone makes us take notice and learn, and enables us to analyze processes which we would otherwise know nothing about," Proust said, and the play links his enforced physical separation from life to his unique way of perceiving it. He listens. He scrutinizes. He overhears. He embellishes. He collects. Then he translates these minutely observed scraps into a fine literary filigree that both kills Time and captures it. The production manages to evoke the authentic whiff of wonder that is the by-product of Proust's attention to detail. The viewer, like Marcel, becomes a kind of detective, whose job it is to piece together a coherent narrative from a hodgepodge of contradictory evidence—tidbits of gossip, eavesdropping, sounds, smells, observation, and lies. It is not experience but the understanding of experience that counts for Proust and is so pertinent in our own analytic age.

This progress from mystery to clarity is a work of prestidigitation that Trevis's production performs before our eyes. By the start of the first act, the audience has had time to observe Alison Chitty's cunning backdrop: a yellow patch on a field of two-tone grays. ("Patch of yellow wall" are the first words of Pinter's screenplay.) In front of it, on the raked wooden stage, are a piano, a vase filled

with flowers, some books, and a painting. As the play unfolds, these neutral props take on a series of charged narrative meanings, none of which are more sensational than those associated with the yellow patch. What looks at first like an abstract daub becomes by degrees a window, then a source of light, and by the end of the play something gorgeously precise: not a patch at all but the sunlit detail of a rooftop in Vermeer's "View of Delft"—a painting whose penetrating light features in Proust's story and serves as a metaphor for his artistic ambition. In the play's final beats—as the evening's epiphany and as a spectacular correlative for Proust's act of imaginative re-creation—"View of Delft" scrolls up as the stage backdrop: a beautiful, beehemoth, fully realized landscape. The play ends with Marcel delivering one last verbal "Proustian moment":

Before my eyes, flashed Venice, a canal, a gondola. The sensation I had once felt on two uneven slabs in the Baptistery of St. Mark's came back to me and I saw again the azure-blue fresco and I remembered that when the waiter inadvertently knocked a spoon against a plate it reminded me of a line of trees seen from a railway carriage.

"It was time to begin," he concludes. What he was beginning was the writing, and the writing is what embraces Time, apes it, and, in Proust's case, overshadows the doom that comes with it. "To be honest, I've wasted my life," Marcel confesses, at one point. His book proves him wrong.

"One can of course reduce everything," Proust said. That includes this monumental book. When you take away Proust's asides, his descriptions, his atmospheric, his verbosity, which lend the book its particularly poignant undercurrents of leisure and loneliness, what's left is Proustian but not Proust. It is easy to admire Pinter's adaptation but hard, at times, to feel for its characters. The achievement here is in the presentation, not the penetration. Much of the play is spent pondering the possible lesbian inclinations of various characters: Swann (Duncan Bell) challenges Odette (the alluring Fritha Goodey), and Marcel, who is heterosexual in the novel, tries to get Albertine (the appealingly mercurial Indira Varma) to admit that she's a shirt-lifter—a fact that he confirms after her

death. But all these sexual scenes, including the sadomasochistic spectacle that Charlus makes of himself at a brothel, are notional and strangely unevocative. Still, Proust's satire of high society plays into Pinter's strong suit; he has great fun with the oafish social hubbub, especially the gauche climber Mme. Verdurin (the beaky, hilarious Janine Duvitski) and the well-orchestrated tedious badinage of the rich at play. Charlus (the excellent David Rintoul), Proust's great high-camp creation, who moves in the course of the novel from assertive masculinity to abject effeminacy—from palaces to gutters—is the perfect fodder for Pinter's gift for bombast. When Mme. Verdurin explains to Charlus that she has seated a baron next to an honored guest instead of him, be-

cause he is merely a marquis, Charlus replies, "Pardon me. I am also Duc de Brabant, Damoiseau de Montargis, Prince d'Oleron, de Carency, de Viareggio, and des Dunes. However, please do not distress yourself. It is not of the slightest importance, here." Trevis has a painterly eye for groupings and choreographs Proust's dance of time with her own dances, which throw off a lyricism and a sense of longing that resonate well with the book and make the evening, for all its limitations, a beautiful and provocative one.

"Griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some of their power to injure our heart," Proust said, and this may account for his curious optimism. What accounts for the pes-

simism in Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical masterpiece, "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (at London's Lyric Theatre), is the inability of "the four haunted Tyrones"—as O'Neill characterized his family—to transmute memory into some larger consoling idea and keep it out of their present. The play concentrates on the night, in 1912, that the Tyrones' young writer-son is diagnosed with tuberculosis, and his mother, Mary, lapses back into a morphine addiction that is a vestige of her hard life on the road with her tightfisted actor-manager husband. These hapless characters don't need to search for the past. It has been preserved in the family's punishing litanies of recrimination and regret. In the play's stunning last lines, the past seeps even into Mary's drugged present: "Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time."

In Robin Phillips's grossly overpraised production, the power of this final speech is undercut by typically clumsy direction. Jessica Lange is allowed to deliver Mary's lines while slumped to her knees, and she pauses amateurishly before delivering the last sentence. Still, although her quavering voice and birdlike mannerisms often display the influence of Katharine Hepburn's performance in the movie version, Lange seems to understand Mary's emotional fragility and harrowing isolation, and she turns in a competent performance that dominates the lopsided production. Phillips's shallow staging is unable to bring the gravity of O'Neill's male characters into play. The men are woefully miscast; none of them—Charles Dance as the curiously patrician James Tyrone, Paul Rudd as Jamie, and Paul Nicholls as Edmund—have a hint of torment or exhaustion in their souls, and they cannot even approach the edgy sense of desperation and tragedy that the script so brilliantly dissects. It's like bantamweights going up against heavyweights: they can throw the punches, but they have no clout. The fog that envelops the Tyrones' waterfront home and is the metaphor for their ill-fated, ghostly lives also becomes a metaphor for the blinkered production, in which everyone, with the possible exception of Lange, seems to have lost his way. ♦



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