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Gatz

Elevator Repair Service

The Noël Coward Theatre, London

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Gatz provides a unique dialogue between the site of theatre and that of the literary in this durational performance that brings to the stage every word of *The Great Gatsby*, making visible not only the richness of Scott Fitzgerald's prose, its political resonances and confident passion for a vivid aesthetic language, but also the possibility offered by a reconsideration of the place of text onstage.

In this sense, *Gatz* is not only a perfectly-pitched production, but also one that questions the construction of meaning onstage via a flirtation with narrative and temporality. American company Elevator Repair Service constructs a particular performance fabric that puts the novel first, gazing towards its formality, but in a constant process of engulfing transformation that winks at the act of reading itself by constructing complicity with the audience itself.

In the same way that the company engages in a constant process of anticipating the action onstage, mirroring Fitzgerald's own foreshadowing of the Great Depression in his novel, *Gatz* connects a long history of the relationship between capitalism and construction of monetary and cultural progress, from the roaring twenties through to the Cold War and confidently refracted via the present. The history of economic crises and its cultural and social implications is traced within both the dramatic device and the staging itself: *Gatz* is set in a decrepit, all beige and grey office sometime in the mid sixties. It surfaces through the prose of the novel itself, in the way characters are recalled rather than performed, engaged with rather than fully embodied, always present between two narrative worlds and never fully confined to one.

The office serves as the starting point for a reading, the excellent Scott Shepherd our narrative guide, his rich, thick voice never strained by the weight of the words swallowing the space in all its deliberate natural illusion. Bathed in detail, the office serves as transformative site, particularly in the immediate juxtaposition of Shepherd's reading of the novel, perched on a rusty chair, staring at a computer screen. The functional logic and deliberate narrative of the space is, in the beginning, what provides the dramatic tension and playground for the text, but as time passes, as we ease into the words, as the plot begins to thicken and characters emerge through the office workers, the novel takes over, always controlled, yet more embodied, until we're confronted with an almost bare stage; the excess which the novel explores is always contrasted with this changing, functional space, providing a constantly shifting dramaturgical barometer.

What's truly remarkable about *Gatz*—which rather significantly takes its title from Gatsby's original name, revealed by his father, who is the only character portrayed by someone outside the office—is the way it toys with the different meaning-making processes onstage. In the beginning, it flirts with the novel; associations are foreshadowed then mocked, be it a color which appears in the text and in the set, a gesture echoed across those two narrative spaces, or a joke emphasized by Shepherd in his ambiguous performance.

This play with fiction is particularly visible in the way the company uses objects, which move to symbols and then to props, constantly reflecting and destroying the internal logic constructed in the piece. The aesthetics so deliberately staying away from any recollection of the twenties provide the juxtaposition, whilst at the same time it's sound that serves as site of recall, framing scenes, inviting the reader inside a moment and then displacing that focus. Particularly in the early scenes that frame character introductions and literary motifs, there's a constant meandering between the density of the prose and the evocation of such playful aesthetics.

The exploration between stage-time, literary-time and real-time is carefully constructed in such a way that the company can expand and contract moments, flowing by the narrative rhythms of the book, playing between the gaze and the affect. As characters become more heightened, the double-entendre recedes to reveal an almost bare stage in which the action is projected. This creates such palpable drifts and changes recognisable within the act of reading, inflecting elements such as irony and satire in the book, be it the powerful eyes of Dr Eckleberg or the vivid violence of Wilson's wife's accident. By making the action precede the text, the performance never falls for the descriptive, and by the time this inhabits the stage, the vocabulary has changed dramatically. If silences are key to allow the literary to rest onstage, then the second half of the show engages somewhat differently, almost conventionally with the text, yet it's entirely reliant on the previous dramatic play.

Shepherd is our internal narrative voice, our presence onstage, whereas the other characters exist in a theatrical haze around him, fragmented and distorted, sometimes recalling the novel but never fully inhabiting it, from the brilliantly pedantic Daisy (Lucy Tailor) to the energetic and mysterious Jordan (Susie Sokol). It's Gatsby himself (Jim Fletcher) whose strong presence and distant friendliness expand and contract throughout the performance, displacing the popular cinematic iconography of the character.

Elevator Repair Service (ERS) is part of a generation of ensemble theatre companies seeking to explore the processes of meaning-construction within performance, and the deconstructive potential of theatre. Influenced by the influential Wooster Group (returning to London in collaboration with RSC) and Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, contemporary to Goat Island and Forced Entertainment, ERS have appropriated the displacement of theatrical catharsis in favour of a more playful engagement with the in-between and ambiguous, searching for ways to dislocate the formal logic of action onstage (a really interesting analysis of their work can be found in Sara Jane Bailes' book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*).

Gatz makes visible the company's recent engagement with the literary, moving confidently from the playful to the embodied, toying with the experience of reading and looking and reflecting on ways to construct the political onstage.

Reviewer: [Diana Damian](#)