

The Great Gatsby

By F. Scott Fitzgerald

Adapted for the stage by Leopold Benedict

PRODUCTION NOTES

When I was thirteen, my English teacher asked me about what I might want to read. “Er, dunno...” I replied, “parties... girls?” (having never been to the former, and barely spoken to the latter). The Great Gatsby was thrust into my hands. Re-reading it years later, I remember first having been marked by those sensorial passages about the champagne convoys; the aquaplanes; the coloured lights; the wild parties; and the glittering girls. My first impressions were of course very common to many readers, so much so that ‘Gatsby’ has come to denote glitz and glamour in popular culture today.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel is widely considered the definitive portrait of an era of social change in 1920s New York. Yet it is also a commercial mononym for luxury goods; the name of my hair wax; a theme for high-class, black-tie soirées; and associated with its Hollywood-star incarnations – Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert Redford. Because of these connotations, the novel – like its protagonist – has also become perhaps one of the most frequently misapprehended. Where Jay Gatsby, the moniker, is redolent of jazz, pizzazz, and razzmatazz, James Gatz, the character, has a journey far more Romantic in nature. Nick Carraway’s account of discovering James Gatz on West Egg concerns itself with unravelling his undivided yearning for bygone days with Daisy. In Portuguese, they call this *saudade*; in German, *verlangen*. Having since experienced melancholic longing for a beloved, yet absent someone, it is a book that has become more meaningful to me with age.

After the Great War, James settles in West Egg, hopeful to rekindle his love for Daisy, who lives in the East. He meditates ghoulishly on repeating his past with her, and so he throws extravagant parties to attract her across the Bay; parties through which he passes unknown in his own home. On his unrelenting quest to regain his treasure, he is ultimately unable to be truly present in the frenzy of his own prohibitive age. His warped sense of value dwarfs his capacity for happiness, as he walks blindly into the face of death. Like a star itself, Gatsby’s hopes rise in the East; and die in the West, “borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

When Grantly Marshall asked me whether I would direct The Great Gatsby as a stage production, I asked myself a few questions. How would I undertake the impossibly wonderful task of staging the mind's eye of the novel? How

could I create a world of impossible wealth with limited wealth? How could I draw out the novel's complexities in simple terms?

In truth, I hesitated. The beautiful, literary prose seemed to me almost too delicate to find sharp form in the Theatre's winds of sound. After all, the Theatre favours action and has an unforgiving relationship to adjectives and adverbs; it can never contend with the metaphysical, abstract expression of the Novel. This challenge of reconciliation seemed even greater knowing it would be performed for foreign-language, younger audiences. With a loose plot that time-jumps over a Summer. And the obvious challenge of staging gargantuan, decadent parties with only five actors. The problems were numerous.

I resolved myself to Carraway's own conclusion: to suit the production's needs, I must be "both within and without" the novel itself.

Thus, I have been sparing in including narration. Any direct narration is expressively balanced with theatre's great friends – movement and song. The chapters are trimmed to favour the attention spans of modern life: a dynamic, dramatic through-line replaces the descriptive elegy of Fitzgerald's *fin-de-siècle*-inspired prose. Costume (designed by Ruth Norwood) speaks in place of character descriptions – allowing sequins to distill sequences. ADR voicetracks and music have been produced to create a soundscape redolent of the era. In essence, I have quelled my desire to render justice to the Novel and put my trust in the multiplicities of theatrical expression.

When configuring the *mise-en-scène*, I saw that the book had offered me a wonderful clue: I should construct the "satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." In other words, the audience would venture beyond the bounds of Realism and into country of illusion: they would see the naked theatre at work. I asked Phillippe Gurrey, therefore, to design and forge a set that offers a semiliteral world. A world in which one glimpses structures of a mansion-house, a garage, or an automobile, but never the entirety of its parts. A world in which one does not see everything one hears. An immersive world of puppetry, propplay, and where actors double roles. I can only hope that Fitzgerald himself would approve of an aesthetics of *verfremdungseffekt*, where the audience's part of imaginative construction doffs a cap to the power of the novelistic mind's eye.

I believe that the book deserves its standing in contention for the Great American Novel. Especially in a world where the divide between cities and the countryside is more pronounced; where increased foreign travel cleaves

romance; where traumas of war remain ever present; where the axiom of American liberty falls foul to its often violent expression; where some crave a reasonable world “in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever”; and others are governed by the pillars of passion and emotion beyond reason to make their lives great again. It is, in many ways, timeless.

It is also of its time. I also consider that it would be a missed theatrical opportunity to simply mount the world of one hundred years ago on today's stage. Notably, I have addressed the objectifying descriptions of women, whose stage-action is often conscribed to gossip and whose decisions are linked to men. The wonderful acting company have playfully interrogated this problematic gaze in rehearsals. We have therefore re-gendered characters; experimented with drag; reappropriated men's dialogue; and fashioned more stage action for the actresses. Crucially, both the roles of neglected wife and tearaway mistress are played by the same actress: a doubling that interrogates the novel's sexual conflict from a more holistic angle true to theatre's terms. Though I must concede, I would have hoped to have gone further into the topic of race than I have been able to do with my five-person ensemble. I have at least cut questionably extrinsic sections of the book that address racial politics, but I would love to see another stage production that dynamises these tensions in greater detail.

In sum, while this adaptation, written a century to the month after Fitzgerald's book, conceives of itself in terms true to the fictional world of one-hundred years ago – a world shrouded in a veneer of dreams, through which hidden, heartfelt desires burgeon – it also reflects the world we inhabit today. Like the characters of its piece, to my author, I have been both faithful and unfaithful. I have discovered that that which is spectacular in 'The Great Gatsby' is far greater than the spectacle itself. And that the Theatre has a physics of its own. I hope you enjoy the show.

Leopold Benedict - 10th August 2024

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