

PROSCENIUM

Otherwise Engaged

By Simon Gray

Otherwise Engaged

Wednesday 26th to Saturday 29th April 2017
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Otherwise Engaged

Simon Gray

The Cast

Simon Hench.....Luke Buffini
DaveStephen Koranteng
Stephen Hench.....Ben Morris
Jeff Golding.....James Stephen
Davina Saunders.....Madeleine Clifford-Roper
Wood.....Paul Davis
BethZena Wigram

Directed by.....Jevan Morris
Stage Manager.....Shirley Wootten
Set ConstructionRichard Kessel
DesignSimon J. Raver
Lighting and SoundSimon J. Raver

Setting – The living-room of the Henchs’ house
in Islington. Present day.

Act One – A morning in summer

Act Two – The same. Immediately following.

There will be an interval of 15 minutes between Acts 1 and 2

Play History

The play previewed at the Oxford Playhouse and the Richmond Theatre, and then opened at the Queen's Theatre in London on 10 July 1975, with Alan Bates as the star and Harold Pinter as director, produced by Michael Codron. Ian Charleson co-starred as Dave, a Glasgow lout. *Otherwise Engaged* won the 1975 Evening Standard Award for Best Play. Michael Gambon took over from Bates in 1976, "playing it for a year, eight times a week."

The play also had a successful run on Broadway, opening in February 1977 with Tom Courtenay as Simon and Carolyn Lagerfelt as Beth. It won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play.

The play was revived at the Criterion Theatre in 2005 in a production starring Richard E. Grant and Anthony Head, directed by Simon Curtis, produced by Mark Rubinstein, Sonia Friedman, Jeremy Meadow and Lee Menzies.

Simon Gray

Simon Gray was born at Hayling Island, Hampshire, in 1936; his father, James, was a Scots GP turned pathologist, his mother, Barbara, nee Holliday, a former Olympic athlete. At the age of three, Simon Gray was evacuated to Canada with his elder brother Nigel to escape the war. They stayed with their paternal grandparents and aunt for five years, coming home just before the war ended.

He was educated at Portsmouth Grammar and Westminster Schools, and moved back to Canada at 17 to attend Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Trinity College, Cambridge followed, before he was appointed lecturer in English at Queen Mary College, University of London. His first novel, *Colmain*, written while he was at Cambridge, was published by Faber & Faber in 1963. Adapting his short story, *The Caramel Crisis*, for television kicked off a new career as a dramatist.

Other television plays followed, for the BBC's Wednesday Play and Play for Today, frequently in collaboration with the producer Kenith Trodd.

He began to write for the live stage when his play *Wise Child* was considered too shocking for television. It starred Simon Ward and Alec Guinness and was produced by Michael Codron at Wyndham's Theatre in 1967.

His 1971 play *Butley*, also produced by Michael Codron, began a long creative partnership with Harold Pinter as director (of both the play and the film versions) and continued the partnership with the actor Alan Bates, begun with Gray's 1967 television play *Death of a Teddy Bear*. Bates starred in 11 of Gray's works, while Pinter directed 10 separate productions of Gray's works for stage, film, and television, beginning with *Butley*. Their final collaboration was a stage production of *The Old Masters*, starring

Peter Bowles and Edward Fox, in 2004.

Robert McCrum, an editor at Faber, suggested in 1984 that Gray kept a diary when he was working with Harold Pinter on *The Common Pursuit*, staged at the Lyric, Hammersmith. This was the first of eight volumes of diaries. In 2003 Ian Jack, then editor of *Granta*, asked what Gray had done in his holidays. The result was the acclaimed trilogy, *The Smoking Diaries*, which brought him a new and appreciative audience.

His last diary, *Coda*, was published posthumously in November 2008. With fellow playwright Hugh Whitmore, Gray had adapted his diaries for the stage. *The Last Cigarette*, starring Felicity Kendal, Nicholas Le Prevost and Jasper Britton and directed by Richard Eyre, was staged in 2009.

In March 2009, Harry Burton marshalled a constellation of British acting talent to pay tribute to Gray in *Simon Gray: A Celebration* at the Comedy Theatre, in London.

Gray married Beryl in 1965, and they had two children, Ben and Lucy. The marriage was dissolved. In 1997 Gray married Victoria. He was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2004 for services to drama and literature. He died on 7th August 2008 at the age of 71.

Others on Simon Gray

“Gray is in full possession of that Chekhovian Territory where the tragedies and absurdities of life become one and the same.”

Frank Rich, New York Times.

“Few writers have had a keener sense of the oddity or the fragility of what passes for normal life, or a sharper eye and ear for the way people respond when they realise how easily their worlds might fall apart.”

The Times

Others on Otherwise Engaged

“In a wickedly humorous comedy, *Otherwise Engaged*, author Simon Gray recognizes over-communication as the roughage in today’s silken urbanity... Its literacy and humour aside, the pleasure here, as with any fine comedy, lies in its truth of recognition.”

Richard L. Coe, Washington Post, January 5th 1977

“*Otherwise Engaged* ... is a perceptive, funny and immensely entertaining play that becomes, almost imperceptibly, a corrosive portrait of a man who doesn’t so much live his life as come to an accommodation with it.”

Allan Walloch, Newsday, February 3rd 1977

“In *Otherwise Engaged* Alan Bates inhabited the other side of the coin. Simon Hench sees his obligation as one of self-protection. He will not allow himself to be known. His defensive mechanisms are almost perfect (almost but not quite). His lethal wit is of another kind to Butley’s. He trips people up and lays them bare with a consummate delicacy, out of apparent compassion for them, as it were. The play is quite beautifully shaped.”

Harold Pinter

from his introduction published in Simon Gray: Plays 1 (Faber, 2010)

Wagner

Wilhelm Richard Wagner (22 May 1813 – 13 February 1883) was a German composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor who is primarily known for his operas (or, as some of his later works were later known, "music dramas"). Unlike most opera composers, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music for each of his stage works. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer of works in the romantic vein of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner revolutionised opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"), by which he sought to synthesise the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, with music subsidiary to drama. He described this vision in a series of essays published between 1849 and 1852. Wagner realised these ideas most fully in the first half of the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung).

His compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex textures, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs—musical phrases associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. His advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, greatly influenced the development of classical music. His *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes described as marking the start of modern music.

Wagner had his own opera house built, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, which embodied many novel design features. The Ring and Parsifal were premiered here and his most important stage works continue to be performed at the annual Bayreuth Festival, run by his descendants. His thoughts on the relative contributions of music and drama in opera were to change again, and he reintroduced some traditional forms into his last few stage works, including *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg).

Until his final years, Wagner's life was characterised by political exile turbulent love affairs, poverty and repeated flight from his creditors. His controversial writings on music, drama and politics have attracted extensive comment, notably since the late 20th century, where they express antisemitic sentiments. The effect of his ideas can be traced in many of the arts throughout the 20th century; his influence spread beyond composition into conducting, philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre.

Parsifal

Parsifal is an opera in three acts by German composer Richard Wagner. It is loosely based on Parzival by Wolfram von Eschenbach, a 13th-century epic poem of the Arthurian knight Parzival (Percival) and his quest for the Holy Grail (12th century).

Wagner first conceived the work in April 1857 but did not finish it until twenty-five years later. It was Wagner's last completed opera and in composing it he took advantage of the particular acoustics of his Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Parsifal was first produced at the second Bayreuth Festival in 1882. The Bayreuth Festival maintained a monopoly on Parsifal productions until 1903, when the opera was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Wagner's spelling of Parsifal instead of the Parzival he had used up to 1877 is informed by an erroneous etymology of the name Percival deriving it from a supposedly Persian origin, Fal Parsi meaning "pure fool".

Sir Percival & the quest for the Holy Grail

Parzival is a medieval German romance written by the poet Wolfram von Eschenbach in Middle High German. The poem, commonly dated to the first quarter of the 13th century, centres on the Arthurian hero Parzival (Percival in English) and his long quest for the Holy Grail following his initial failure to achieve it.

Parzival meets three elegant knights, decides to seek King Arthur, and continues a spiritual and physical search for the Grail. A long section is devoted to Parzival's friend Gawain and his adventures defending himself from a false murder charge and winning the hand of the maiden Orgeluse. Among the most striking elements of the work are its emphasis on the importance of humility, compassion, sympathy and the quest for spirituality. A major theme in Parzival is love: heroic acts of chivalry are inspired by true love, which is ultimately fulfilled in marriage. Richard Wagner based his famous opera Parsifal, finished in 1882, on Parzival.

Director's Notes

Otherwise Engaged was written as a contemporary piece in the Seventies. We made the decision (well, actually it was me) to set the play in the present day rather than treat it as a period piece – mainly because many of the talented cast were too young to remember the Seventies!

Fortunately, the current resurgence of interest in vinyl records has made it possible to maintain the credibility of the main premise while resetting in the present. Indeed the plot is much easier to follow than that of “Parsifal” – a man tries to listen to a newly purchased record – it as simple as that! It's the characters that are complicated...

To reflect the changes that have occurred in the 40 years since the play was first performed, we have only had to make very minor changes to the script: substituting GCSEs for “O” and “A” levels, Uni for Poly and multiplying a couple of monetary values by a factor of ten to mirror the current cost of living.

Otherwise the *Otherwise Engaged* plot seemed to hold up pretty well in a modern world and most of the situations seemed just as relevant and funny today. This was very gratifying as the text quickly shows Simon Gray to be an excellent wordsmith and one would be loath to make more than minimal changes.

However, the more we worked on it. the more obvious it became that it was written:

- a) By a man
- b) In the Seventies

as we realised just how much culture and attitudes have changed in the interim decades since it was written.

So, dear audience, we hope you enjoy this on two levels:

- As the comedy wot Mr Gray wrote
- As an historic document of our changing times.

Failing that you can always listen to excellent Wagnerian music ... PROVIDED YOU ARE NOT INTERRUPTED!

JEVAN MORRIS

PS: Wagner described Parsifal not as an opera, but as "Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel" ("A Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage"). At Bayreuth a tradition has arisen that there be no applause after the first act of the opera. **This evening's audience is kindly requested not to respect this tradition!**

Performances of the full opera have lasted as long as 4½ hours. Tonight's performance of *Otherwise Engaged* will take less than half that.

Our Next Production

The Odd Couple (Female Version), by Neil Simon

A gender-swapped version of Neil Simon's riotous comedy.

When house-proud homemaker Florence's 14 year marriage breaks down she takes refuge with slobby Olive, whose apartment resembles a garbage tip. Four girlfriends, who visit every Friday night to chat and play Trivial Pursuit, keep the pair under observation and give as good as they get when the conversation turns snippy. An ill-fated dinner party with two single Spanish gentlemen speaking fractured English cranks up the confusion and adds to the fun.

Directed by Alan Bobroff

14th to 27th June 2017

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 250 615

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk