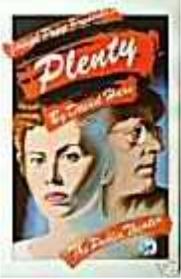


On “Plenty”: The play to read right now



There are certain plays I reread every year, because in some ways, it's the best way to remind yourself how to write.

David Hare has, sadly, become a rarely produced playwright. It's partly because he's not scared of being topical, leaning into the moment and creating something that's so specific it feels out of place even a year or two later.

He's more accessible (and much more emotional) than Stoppard, but Stoppard is more fun to perform, and much more witty, whereas Hare prefers unabashed intensity.

If I had to give you a title to introduce you to Hare, it would be *Skylight*, but it's yet another love story between a younger woman and an older man (on Broadway it was Carey Mulligan and Bill Nighy, which ... eek), and I don't think it gives you the full scope of Hare's abilities.

For that, I would recommend *Plenty*.

And upon my annual re-reading of the play, I found that not only is it Hare at his best, but it's a forty-three year-old play that is so perfectly suited, not to the moment we're in, but the moment I believe we're *about* to be in.

Plenty is the story of Susan Traherne, a former government agent, as she tries to adjust to life post-war, while flashing back to some of the most exciting and traumatic events of her past. The title refers to the promise of England after the war, that there would be "plenty." Those promises fell flat, and those called to serve their country were told they should be glad those days are behind them, even as the rush

from being of service lingers on.

A few weeks ago, I wrote about plays I'd like to see produced once the pandemic is over. *Plenty* could be on that list, but it's also a play you could benefit from reading right now, because it'll take some time to process.

It makes the unusual argument that when exiting a catastrophe, you might find yourself missing the circumstances of the catastrophe, and what it does to the human psyche to feel nostalgic for periods of hardship and danger.

We now have more information about trauma than we did when David Hare wrote *Plenty*. We understand that it's not the conflict we miss, but the feeling of importance people might have as they navigate a significant moment in history, particularly if they assist in the battle for what's right or put themselves in the line of fire.

As I read *Plenty*, Susan called up the image of frontline workers to me. People who give selflessly and who, when all this is over, will most likely be expected to deal with the years-long struggle of having lived through this time without much help, because it's what was expected of them.

There's a joke in a play I love (Bernard Slade's *Same Time, Next Year*) where a woman complains to her lover that her husband misses being in the armed forces. Her lover replies that many men have fond memories of that time in their lives. She then counters by saying that her husband was a prisoner of war.

The idea of longing for a time in your life where you were woefully unhappy, but perhaps, also feeling of use, is a complex one. It's one of those internal struggles that theater so often avoids tackling, because first you have to clear the hurdle of *explaining* the conflict to an audience, then explore the issue, then, most of the time, leave them without an answer.

You have to throw the word "bravery" around, but that's probably as close as writing comes to bravery, and it's what theater has the potential to do so well—better than any other medium. There's something about witnessing a character in crisis while surrounded by people who might be in the midst of that same crisis themselves that lands in a different way.

We are all in the middle of a crisis. We can't wait until we're on the other side of it. And yet, nothing of

this magnitude can be construed as simple.

When prisoners are released, many of them report that in addition to the expected troubles they face, the one that surprises them the most are the times they miss being locked up, because while logically they can understand that life on the outside is better, they had trained themselves to enjoy whatever they could about being imprisoned as a means of staying sane. It's like silver lining survival.

I've had artists confess to me that during this period of time, while others have seen their creativity numb, they've made more work than ever before out of a lack of anything else to do.

Will they be able to keep that up once the pandemic is over and that grind we all hated so much returns — and perhaps even intensifies?

Are there things about this period that we could possibly take in the after-times? Not just the obvious lessons we've learned about savoring life and community, but personal things about ourselves and how we make ourselves feel valuable?

Can we miss how good it felt to be the person we were during a war without missing the war itself?

What I've heard over and over again lately is "*Wait until somebody writes a play about all this,*" but as is so often the case, somebody already did and they didn't even realize that's what they were doing.