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West End Girl:

Fanny Burney on Shaftesbury Avenue

(Keynote Address, Montreal Meeting, 2003)

IAN KELLY

Burneyites all—it's a great pleasure to be here. You may know that I have started a campaign—first in London, that I am hoping to spread to North America today, to reintroduce the exclamation "Huzzah" into 21st century English. As in Charles Burney Jr's excited exclamation to his sister Frances on hearing that the manager of Covent Garden in 1799 loved her play. "Huzzah!" Well "Huzzah!" to us all, and welcome! Here we all are "huzzah" in gorgeous Montreal gathered to consider, from various angles, the drama of Frances/Fanny Burney, in her works, life and stagecraft. And I must say it is both a pleasure and an honour to be here—a man of the theatre myself and a bit of a writer to help salute a heroine of mine who was a quite a bit of a writer, and a bit of a theatrical personage herself—"huzzah!"

The great Georgian actor David Garrick, from whose personal box at the theatre the young Frances Burney first fell in love with the stage, thought he would be forgotten. Or rather he

seems to have believed that despite his best efforts as an actor, playwright, theatre manager and serial sitter for busts, portraits and memorabilia, the essence of his art would die with him:

> The painter dead, yet still he claims the eye
> His lifework and his art can never die
>
> Yet he who struts his hour upon the stage
> His art will not survive him half an age
> And art and artist share their common grave

Or as Sheridan put it after Garricks death:

> The Actor shrinks from Time's Award
> Feeble tradition is his memories guard

I had cause to follow on this sombre note (don't worry I'll get on to comedy later) at the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden last month, where, indeed, Garrick's garish waistcoat is on show along with some pretty hideous Penny-Plain-Tuppence-Coloured Garrick mementos that seem a tawdry legacy for so great an actor, because I discovered there that the video recording of the West End production of *A Busy Day*, Burney's premiere in the West End, has been lost.

Well, perhaps a temporary blessing. They may yet recover it, as archives often do, and as an actor I am dubious about the merits of recording in one medium an event designed, lit and acted for another. But the evanescence of theatre was pressed home. For most of us who know and love Burney's prose, her world lives in our minds eye. For those growing number who, like me, first came to know her through her drama, that other life which was her art in the space of theatre, is returning now to the imagination, as it remained always for her.

But let me start at the beginning, and leap through the years at some speed, as I know many of you know elements of this story already.

It is ten years this month since rehearsals began in a Bristol pub on the first ever production of Burney's 1800 comedy *A Busy Day*. Show of Strength is a small though nationally respected fringe company, then based in a pub theatre, putting on new plays, which, in a sense, *A Busy Day* was. Set in the parks, gaming clubs and ballrooms of Regency London, *A Busy Day* was not Burney's first play, nor in a sense is it her most academically interesting, but I would argue, as Alan Coveney who first championed it did, that it is currently her most commercial and accessible. The venal world of newly rich Cits and money grabbing aristocrats, the wide social range from footmen to baronets, the knowing, worldly yet even-handedly warm-hearted comedy and the sheer wit of it looked like it would translate well to the modern stage. And it did.

Show of Strength received a grant from a TV company that allowed them to mount a fourteen hand period comedy—an expensive business, for all the actors were not paid. In the late autumn of 1993 Burney's *A Busy Day* was performed for the first time, using the Tara Goshol Wallace's script little altered from the Burney original in the Berg Collection of The New York Public Library. Unlike the staging Burney must have envisaged, this first production, in which I played Frank Cleveland, was staged entirely in the round.

To backtrack a moment, I feel I should say a word of two about the play, as I know many of you will not know it either from reading or seeing it. In 1800 or 1801, in love, and finally free of both her fathers' literary prejudices and the Royal Household, but hard pressed for ready cash as the chief supporter or her husband and baby son, Burney wrote *A Busy Day*. Circumstances conspired against her stage ambitions as they had with her previous plays. She journeyed to France with the manuscript, to join her husband, and a renewal in hostilities in the Napoleonic Wars prevented her return to

England for a further decade, losing Burney her valuable contacts in the theatre. As a result *A Busy Day* was never submitted either for the Covent Garden company for which it was written—including the celebrated actors William Lewis, Eliza Pope and Mrs Jordan herself, or for Sheridan who had once stated he would mount anything of hers at Drury Lane.

I once tried to locate the Joigny property, south of Paris, where Burney and d'Arblay lived, and where *A Busy Day* was written. Strange to relate that this urbane, metropolitan comedy that all takes places within one square mile of the London's fashionable West End, was written in rural France, and according to the old soldier who recognised the name d'Arblay and drove me some ten miles out into the French outback, in a tiny tumbled down manoir, Le Manoir Piochard-D'Arblay—now largely ruined. But I digress.

The plot, as explained in the subtitle, *A Return from India*, involves a young heiress, Eliza Watts, back to London for the first time since her adoption in infancy. In this, she is the direct parallel to *Evelina*, another ingénue in London. Like *Evelina* she turns out to have ghastly relatives. With her is her aristocratic fiancé Cleveland. They cannot declare their love until they have spoken to their families. Eliza is meeting hers for the first time, and they turn out to be more grotesquely vulgar than anything Lizzie Bennet could have worried about in *Pride and Prejudice*. And Cleveland, in the style of Mr Darcy, cannot quite bring himself to say enough in any of the myriad confusions that ensue: Eliza fears he is betrothed already to the extravagantly vain Miss Percival, Miss Percival has convinced herself in Cleveland's absence in India that they are secretly engaged themselves, and meanwhile Cleveland's younger brother happens across Eliza and thinks he has found in her an answer to his gambling debts. Throw in to the equation an aristocratic aunt of hyperbolic snobbery, Eliza's man-hungry sister, and a letter from Frank's illiterate chum Lord John declaring Mr Cleveland's undying love for Miss Watts without saying which Mr Cleveland or which Miss Watts...and you see there was plenty of room for comedy. But the confusions are only a small part of the genius of the play.

What became apparent at that first read-through ten years ago, and has since had the endorsement of local and national theatre critics: *A Busy Day* was an extraordinary find. Kate Chisholm's assertion that Burney, had she been produced, might have been the 'Female Sheridan' and theatre critic Jane Edwards that 'had *A Busy Day* been produced Burney would have been a greater name in the cannon than Aphra Behn,' was apparent from first rehearsals. *A Busy Day* displays not only the comic brilliance of Burney's novels (and indeed has striking parallels with the comic aspects of Burney's immensely popular *Evelina*), it also has strong sense of theatrical precedent. Sheridan and Vanbrugh have been most often cited, but given a slightly feminised twist, and an even-handed satirical edge as London's West End faced a new century. As the titled suggested, with its casual reference to the Aristotelian unities, Burney was set on taking a decorous convention, and turning it to fun. What could be more emblematic of this fascinating age, or, indeed, of the gently subversive voice of Burney. She knew all about polite society, but also about bad behaviour in all classes, and the greed as well as the sexual politics that lay behind it. As Auden wrote in a slightly different context:

> You could not shock her more than she shocks me
> Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass
> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
> An English lady of the middle-class
> Describe the amorous effects of brass
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society

And she knew what her audience wanted; she knew the theatre well, and was happy to play to the footmen in the gallery as well as the aristocracy in their boxes. For us now, I came to argue, her comedy provides a uniquely-placed urbane voice, poised between Sheridan and Wilde as it plays today, addressing very familiar themes to those of the wit she inspired, Jane Austen, at another time of radical change in London, in the economy and for women. As Joyce

Hemlow observed with poignancy, *A Busy Day* is the play that long ago Dr Johnson and Sheridan had known Fanny Burney could write.

What was not clear, in rehearsals, was quite how uproariously funny it could be. This shocked us when first it opened. It takes an audience, sometimes, to tell you what's what. The moment in Act 4 where Miss Percival turns on Cleveland once she realises he is not in love with her, and Frank immediately switches allegiance in the hope of winning her—not just for her money, but because she is "the very type and counterpart of my own" was a moment when the audience is ahead of the actors and laugh, to the point of stopping the action of the play, as soon as Frank protests "Don't be offended with us all dear Madam, Distinguish the innocent from the guilty."

But let me dive straight in to some earlier examples from the play, and the text in performance. In the Bristol production, which later transferred to the King's Head in London, a traditional West End tryout venue, we played in small spaces, and originally completely in the round. This leant an intimacy to some scenes that was difficult to recreate in the later, more lavish production. Two scenes from the First Act therefore played very differently. For the first example, the first meeting on stage of the two lovers. Eliza, newly returned from India, an heiress who has never met her family, and Cleveland, her secret fiancé. The stakes are quite high for both of them in terms of the impending introduction to her family—his intended in-laws—but also as Cleveland is desperate to get Eliza away from the house in which she has taken refuge after a carriage accident: unbeknownst to her, a notorious gambling den. Her honour and her reputation in the new city are at stake. The situation is fraught, and there is little time, but what Burney writes for her characters is in the tradition of late eighteenth-century romance: grandiloquent and slow moving:

> Generous noble Eliza [spouts Cleveland] from you springs all of honour this connection can boast, for what is honour if its source is not virtue? How do I now bless the parsimonious reserve of my uncle, which compelled

> by Indian expedition. Without it I had never known my Eliza!

Cleveland is diverted by more than a grand manner. He also has a good deal of plot to deliver at this opening moment in the play:

> When I left you as you so rigidly commanded at Portsmouth, a thousand nameless fears prevented my proceeding, and I loitered, that, at least at every change of horses I might gather news of your safety. But when I found at Guildford that you had continued your journey without the Browns I ordered my driver to pursue your chaise till it stopt. Nevertheless, when I got sight of it, you were already in the House.

Burney, in fairness, has cannily inserted a meddlesome, gossipy (not to say sexually-knowing maid) Deborah very much in the tradition of comedy lady's maids who performs the function of interrupting the lovers she ought to be chaperoning to increase the sense of pace and danger. She disappears from the narrative, sadly, thereafter.

In the round, this scene delivered a moment of calm—and indeed of romance—in the midst of the chaos of the opening. In the West End production, despite the finest of acting in thankless roles, this scene was repeatedly cut or changed, with the imperative of delivering clearer information, in simpler language, and communicating the urgency of the moment with the greater physical movement allowed by a vast set. Cleveland's full length silk riding cloak sweeping in and out of the gaming house doors, and a kiss which was not strictly speaking historically accurate in stage terms, went some way to delivering the essence of some of the lost lines, so that Cleveland's speech, denuded of information which would never prove useful, read in the West End:

> When I left you as you commanded, a thousand nameless fears prevented my leaving you, and I followed to St James's—but imagine my horror to see your coach

> overturned—and to find that you were come into this house.

The omission of Guildford, The Browns, the details of the change of horses as well as the original Georgian syntax, all were casualties in the onrush of the drama, to the main point which remained Eliza's predicament in *this* house.

Another example from the same section of the play. Unknown to Cleveland, his ne'er-do-well younger brother, Frank, has been gambling in the same club, and meets Eliza who is to his mind either a lady of the night, or the rich ingénue she indeed is, but in any event in Frank's mind, ripe for the picking. This scene, and the exchanges between Frank and his gaming partner Lord John Dervis, can be played various ways, and Burney does not make it clear in the dialogue quite what was intended. Moreover the intimacy of the space tended to effect the reading of the scene. Perhaps it is truly threatening: a molestation if you will and an assertion of male dominance in the context of a gaming house. This paints Eliza sympathetically, but weakly. Certainly there is sexual intent in Frank's approach, but it is not necessarily so dark. It can be a little playful, especially if the comedy of misunderstanding is played. In other words, the knowledge on the part of the audience, not the character, of the truth of the situation is that Eliza is neither a tart, nor a likely easy picking for Frank, so that *Frank* is actually in the weaker position in stage terms. In the round, audiences took this scene quite lightly. The physical invasion of the shared space by the chaos of various arrivals; Eliza and her maid, Cleveland coming and going, and then the gaming boys Frank and Lord John stumbling across an unchaperoned lady in a side chamber, all conspired to inveigle the audience in a sort of complicity with *all* the characters. We felt, in the round, less judged.

> Frank: What a pretty young thing my lord!
>
> Lord John: Consumed pretty!
>
> Eliza: What a cruel mistake—I thought,—I expected...

> Frank: No excuses my dear—An adventure may save me from a hanging or a drowning!...Oh my dear Lord John if you knew the diabolical run of ill luck I have had—not been in bed all night!
>
> Lord John: Oh the plague.
>
> Eliza: Gentlemen—I hope, I beg—this apartment—
>
> Frank: She is immensely handsome!
>
> Lord John: Devilish handsome.
>
> Eliza: If you will not relinquish my room, suffer me at least to pass to some other.
>
> Frank: Any other you please—whither shall I conduct you?

This exchange was generally greeted with laughter in the round. I don't think ever on a proscenium stage. This might seem strange, when the proximity in small theatres can increase tension, yet the shared space does not allow the audience to think they need take upon themselves value judgements on character in quite the same way. On one wet matinee in the West End, Lord John and I were even booed as if pantomime villains. I didn't mind the direct response. Indeed it might be rather eighteenth-century, but I am not convinced it was quite what Burney intended. Moreover, though my characterisation of Frank probably stayed unimaginatively similar through all the manifestations of *A Busy Day*, the actors playing Lord John changed, and their choices naturally also effected the meaning of the scene. If Frank and Lord John are complicit in some game, almost for each others amusement, then Eliza is potentially less threatened, and maintains the moral high ground. The line "if you knew the diabolic run of ill luck I've had—not been in bed all night" is a case in point. It is an early clue, in my mind, to Frank's character, and the joy of playing him: he is out to impress, and is constantly judging his audience, that is, the other characters on stage.

This line, ostensibly addressed to Lord John, is largely for the benefit of Eliza: a double entendre perhaps, and certainly a joke for her and the audience. Lord John rejoinder "O the plague" makes it clear he is too stupid to quite understand what is going on. If you play it exclusively to Lord John, it is not funny. If you play it to Eliza, and if you are cheeky and add a wink, it is. For the supposedly prim Frances Burney, it is an exchange between a man and a woman of profoundly sexual intimacy, into which the woman is invited: Frank is more puzzled than annoyed by her response "What the Devil she ask us in for then?" The trick seemed to be to maintain conflict sufficient for drama whilst eliciting a sort of affection for all the characters and classes involved. Such is the style of Burney's comedy in the novels, equally so in the theatre; indeed, one could argue the plays are even more democratic, more even handed, more knowingly playing to the upper galleries.

So, against perhaps the expectations of those who knew eighteenth-century drama, let alone the works of Burney, *A Busy Day* ten years ago came to work rather well in a very small space, and a round one. In fact, better than that, we found from the opening night, that we had something of a hit. Bristol is not a huge city, and word got round, and every single performance of the month-long run sold out, which added three important dimensions to the nature of comedy: a full house, an expectant house, and in this particular case, a happily crowded house. It also incidentally, allowed the production to pay its actors—always a nice thing—but also part of the process that allowed us as actors to feel we had invested in it, and seen dividends; that it was ours, to take on in the hope of a London production, which we pulled off some six months later. All this added to the excitement for everyone, but also, as intended by the designer, the crowded success of the space leant a sense of the physical spaces in which Georgian comedy was first played: rambunctious, very human, somehow more sympathetic, if less comfortable, than the theatres of today. To all those who seemed surprised that the lavish, elegant piece it became had started out in a tiny theatre in the round, I can only say, as an actor: it worked. It is also, by the way, a complete lie, as Tyrone Guthrie suggested, that asides cannot be played in the round. They can. In fact their

acknowledgement of the shared space works best in my mind, nowadays, in the round, where the audience can never escape a knowledge of itself. This of course was very much in the spirit of a Georgian theatre, if not the architectural practice.

In the theatre today, the dimming of lights signals a beginning and end: the play is about to start, and the audience is about to disappear. Each watches the play as an individual, as we are used to in the cinema, cocooned in darkness. In the theatre that Burney knew, this was not the case. When the prompters bell had rung three times at Drury Lane, and the orchestra struck up, the green baize curtain rose revealing the stage set behind the proscenium lit up by footlights. But the hundreds of candles that illuminated the audience were not put out. Indeed, Burney's contemporaries in the stalls had to endure candle wax dripping on them, and/or the bustle of candle trimmers and snuffers. The public—the audience—was intensely aware of itself. It was more a crowd at a sports match, or more, indeed, like the audiences in the round today. In comedy this makes a huge difference. So for all I am proud, and I hope Fanny Burney would be too, that *A Busy Day* finally premiered in the West End a little while ago in a completely different production, with one of the most expensive and lavish sets ever designed for a comedy premiere, I am proudest of the achievement of making her lines rock an audience to laughter in the context of a crowded, and I might add slightly smelly, upper room in a pub. It was, in a sense, a closer approximation of the audience *A Busy Day* should have faced in 1800.

The excitement generated then, much more than the glowing reviews, was what spurred on the production "off West End" in 1994 and then the long slow slog to find a commercial backer for a full scale production. It took six years. There were many almost-rans along the way. I have written about this in the Burney Journal, which helped refine some of the 'why' of why the other co-producers and myself remained determined. I couldn't put my hand on my heart and say it was because we had found a flawless gem—there are problems with *A Busy Day* in performance, some of which,

in a sense, we never solved. Alan Coveney, the first director, writes in his notes to the published play that he often wished he could have asked Burney for rewrites. This is no criticism. Sheridan worked compulsively with his companies after the first performances to perfect his texts. The comedy author always does. Indeed, I think it might be fair to judge Burney's slight overwriting in her plays as an attempts to pre-empt the hoped-for editing work to come. She was expecting professional editing for the purposes of performance. I couldn't tell you either that *Busy Day* warranted a production—not one costing over quarter of million pounds—by virtue of the importance of Frances Burney in English literature. Others have argued so, in terms of the importation of theatrical tropes and tricks into the English novel. It may well be true, but is not sufficient call on an audience's indulgence—or a backer's. I could admit, and frequently did, that I was obdurate personally because I had found a part I did not want anyone else to play. But in the end I have to say, it was because I had found an actor's—and maybe more precisely an actress's—comedy that deserved a further life, and I felt, a more professional one. For a number of reasons, not least the differing space, I am not sure any subsequent productions caught quite the same magic as the first. Bu that may be nostalgia.

What was certainly gained, in late 1999, was a design team of outstanding talent, and a determination to recreate Burney's world visually to an unparalleled stylishness. Ruari Murchisons designs for both set and costume tended to dominate some reviews of the West End production in ways that the writer may or may not have wished. "[T]hey are exceptionally attractive, their elegance one the show's main assets." "Perhaps the most beautiful-looking play in the West End," "a visual feast," "a kaleidescope of West End locations, grand palladian sets and showy Georgian facades." Well. Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones famously came to blows over the priority of text or visuals in the theatre, and though the British tradition has subsequently proved literary, I think Burney would approve of the *Busy Day* production decisions that attempted to be faithful to a very decorous age. Miss Percival, supposedly the wealthiest heiress in London, sported a dress made of embroidered and beaded Indian silk that came in at £150 a metre. These things I

leaned as a producer seeing accounts. These things one tried to forget when treading on the same dress on stage with the disregard of an aristocrat ne'er-do-well who should not know the price of fabric.

I wish I could show you more of what was created. The sets and even the model of it remain in storage, lost in a no-mans-land of disputed theatrical rights ownership. I would love to show you the hand-painted stage gauze that recreated Canaletto's view of the Thames as Burney would have known it—70 feet by 30, it was the first thing the audience saw. I remember still the first night when the audience applauded the lights coming up on the final act which opens to reveal Miss Percival's ballroom disappearing into infinity like the corridor in Alice in Wonderland, with doors of decreasing size through which Eliza's overweight and overdressed relatives would squish.

The design, rightly, effected the playing of several scenes. The opening of the play was altered at the last minute. It was felt by the Money—as the producer with the financial interest in the show is often known, as any of you will be aware who saw *Shakespeare in Love*—that a change in the opening was desirable. It was felt that Burney's original opening in a side-chamber of a gaming room, designed to look dark, threatening, masculine and small, would be a disappointment to anyone in the stalls who had paid £37.50 for a ticket. A pre-set sort of ballet was created, not really so very anachronistic, depicting Cleveland and Eliza's arrival in the teeming city, and a reveal of Canalettos view of St.Paul's that was only visible for 20 seconds but cost several hundred pounds. This all took place behind the translucent painted gauze which was then raised, dry ice spread out into the audience, and the walls and windows of the gaming house literally descended upon Eliza and her maid Deborah from 50 feet above in the fly tower, and moved in from the sides at the same time, like a cage. The scale of the production was thereby asserted by this opening, though the sequence was largely despised by the cast who were forced early from their dressing rooms for what some felt was unnecessary explication. Whenever

lines were cut—an almost daily occurrence through the pressured preview nights in the West End—this would be mentioned, bitterly, as the first thing that should go! Personally, I quite liked it: I'm a Canaletto fan, and once Kathleen Turner in The Graduate next door started stealing our audiences, there was a nightly threat, or promise, from Stephanie Beacham that she too would appear naked in this sequence to prove that Burney, too, could be top box office. She never did.

More specifically, the vastness of the stage in the third and fifth acts solved many problems that on the fringe had felt insurmountable. In these acts—set in Kensington Gardens and a Piccadilly Ballroom respectively—Burney's skill as a West End, grand-scale, dramatist was on show. As Sarah Siddons once said of Drury Lane, the gestures simply need to be bigger, and it takes longer to cross the stage!

With Show of Strength in Bristol and at the King's Head, it seemed that Burney had insufficient grasp of how to move characters on and off stage for the purposes of delivering information, or mainly, this being comedy, the purposes of *not* hearing that which would clear up a misunderstanding. Thus in Kensington Gardens, Eliza on the fringe was forced to try not to hear the evidence that Cleveland is not in love with Miss Percival, even though she was two feet away, and Miss Percival had to back into Cleveland "nay but then whose arm is it that is supporting me" when she patently wouldn't. In the West End, the flats were all pulled out to allow a clear view some fifty feet to the back of the steeply raked stage, and there was time, for instance, for the footman to advance towards the Wattses, Eliza's family, whilst his gait and manner are admired by the man-hungry Peggy Watts. It has the slow-build situation comedy of the entrance of Jack Worthing in mourning clothes in Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*; it requires, quite simply, a big stage, as Burney originally intended.

The fifth act takes place in Miss Percival's ballroom. The "strawberry cream with a heart of pure bile" as one critic describes her, takes her revenge in this act on Cleveland, whom she feels has

rejected her, abetted by Frank who hopes by now to Miss Percival himself. She takes her revenge by inviting Eliza's entire extended family to a soiree along with Cleveland's snobbish aunt and caustic uncle for the purposes of humiliating Cleveland and his fiancée. It has been written of, by Paula Byrne amongst other academics, as the most interesting scene in the play; the social-comedy dynamic of, say *Pride and Prejudice*, played out in one scene written for the theatre. But for us as actors, it was a scene fraught with problems. Firstly, all the characters in the drama are required on stage in differing combinations: Lady Wilhemina with the revolutionary Joel Tibbs; Peggy Watts suddenly convinced by Miss Percival that Cleveland is in love with *her*; Frank and Miss Percival to help explain how the characters are being engineered into place. Meanwhile the audience can sense the end is in sight—the comic arc is near completion—so it is difficult to maintain the energy to the end, which is a common problem in stage comedy. I suspect this all felt very different in Burney's day, because of the expectation of much longer comedies (*A Busy Day* has never been performed in its entirety, but would probably run with intervals to well over 3.5 hours), and because of the nature of the comic payoff at this stage. As some modern comedian once said, "it's about the economy stupid." And it's about class.

Let me take you to Drury Lane in 1800. The audience gathered at some time between 4.45 and 5.45, depending on the length of daylight, and anything up to 2,300 people took some getting into the mass of boxes, private entrances, and past the ticket men. Once inside, the crowd separated itself into a sort of model of society as it then was. You may recognise this scene from *Evelina*. It had an important parallel in *A Busy Day*. The gentry paid five shillings and went to their boxes—some with private entrances. The middle classes paid three shillings for a place in one of the nine or ten rows of backless benches that made up the pit. Tradesmen and artisans paid two for the lower gallery, labourers and servants one for the upper. Except for those in the boxes, all had to push towards the right corridor, pay these prices, get a metal token and return to hand it over at the doorway leading to their seat. Everyone knew the

drill: each week from a London population of Burney contemporaries of 750,000, 1,2000 went to the theatre. It was, for the first time since Shakespeare perhaps, a truly classless pursuit. And yet class delineated the seating plan. And dictated the nature of the laughter.

Neither was it a uniform experience throughout the evening: about two thirds of the way through the main piece, all unsold tickets were knocked down to half price, so there was another noisy influx of people. Aristocrats who had finished dinner elsewhere would also arrive at this time, and take their places for the final acts. It is possible that the sudden onrush of asides in the final two acts of *A Busy Day* (there are hardly any in the first two) are a result of this. At the Bristol Old Vic, a 1766 theatre known to Burney, where *A Busy Day* played before its West End transfer, there are still boxes immediately by the stage. Box Office sells them last—but they proved perfect for the delivery of an aside, as in:

> Idea, madam? He was the first confident of my budding wishes and of your full blown victory—(I don't know how I shall get by much longer).

More vitally, though, this original audience for which Burney wrote explains the last act, which came near to defeating each successive production of *A Busy Day*. As I have said, the odds are stacked against the last act of a comedy, and this one is all about class and discomfort. Something, oddly, the British audience is now a little uncomfortable discussing. Is Lady Wilhemina—the Lady Bracknell figure played by Stephanie Beacham—a gargoyle or a put-upon wife who only survives through snobbery? Is Joel Tibbs, Eliza's scruffy, loud mouthed uncle modelled on Cobbett it is argued, a proto-revolutionary or insensitive to his niece's pain? It is all, of course, meant to be great fun, but in the smaller venues and the first productions, this scene was generally judged the problem that needed solving—partly because of space considerations, partly because of the nature of the comedy, rather broad and class based, after the dazzling wit of the fourth act. It was for these reasons too that this act, some 700 lines in the original was cut to 300 by the end

of the West End run, or, from a notional 45 minutes to more like 20. There is a lot of plot to tie up and problems to be solved, but the class-clash comedy, seemingly, would not sustain it. It became known as the "problem act" in rehearsals, for all audiences tended to say they enjoyed it, especially the shorter it became. At one stage before the West End production there was even a suggestion of a radical shift from Burney's intentions by staging the third act in a theatre, in Miss Percival boxes rather than her ballroom, to underline the class points of original intentions—a scene, in effect, out of *Evelina*, or *The Critic*. But in the end it was decided this might create as many problems as it solved: gluing characters to small boxes rather than giving them full rein in a vast space.

What astonished us in rehearsals—and seem to astonish critics to the point of incredulity—was the lack of cutting, editing or rewriting that was necessary. Indeed, apart from the last act, very little was changed. A reviewer for *The Financial Times* of the original fringe production wrote "I suspect such astonishingly Wildean remarks as 'One has no chance with a young girl till her family are all against one' owe more to the adaptor than to Burney." In fact this line is utterly unaltered from Burney's original, predating Wilde by nearly a century, as was most of the scene form which it comes, until the West End put unbearable pressures on all scenes to lose anything that might slow things down and a few lines were filleted out

"This most engaging cast"—I liked this review—"feasts on the lines as if in love with every word they speak. As is the audience [...] a tale of match-making, intrigue and true love with polysyllabic patter worthy of Arthur Sullivan." Well that polysyllabic patter had its own rewards and challenges: one truism we learned was that is was fearsomely difficult to cut Burney mid-line.

Googie Withers, a movie star from the 40s and 50's with a lifetimes experience of high comedy, who initially played Lady Wilhemina for the West End, used to say Burney wrote stage dialogue worthy of Wilde—by which I think she meant the lines, if

you trust them, deliver the sense and the joke more easily than their length would suggest. Burney of course was famous for her ear for dialogue. It was commented on from *Evelina* onwards, and was the reason, it seemed, that Sheridan was willing to commission her sight unseen. She picks up the cadences of everyday speech in dialogue; indeed her characters are constantly interrupting each other, but is also willing to play elaborate rhetorical tricks for the enjoyment of all.

When Frank first greets the brother he has not seen in years, he does so with a baroque compliment, explication of his own situation, and joke, all rolled into one. It was instructive of Burney's style:

> Brother, most heartily welcome back to England! Fair wind, fair fortune and a fair lady have wafted you home most profitably. I congratulate you with all my heard, and that without spite or envy, though a more pitiable contrast to such enjoyments never yet was offered by living wight than by your most obsequious servant

In the original, this is one sentence, which is quite a big breath on stage, especially when you have just run on. It was instructive, however, in the structure of an elegant joke. The audience know Frank is not exactly a pitiable contrast, but to the extent that he is, it is because he feels himself destined to marry, but the same woman. "[L]iving wight" as in man, w-i-g-h-t not white, but was asked to drop to "living soul" for fear of being misunderstood in these politically correct times, but certainly it helps if there is no trip up in understanding before the final bow. It came to work best, I realised, if delivered in its entirety—forcing the audience to hold the thought all the way through.

In a comedy, you get to know the changing animal that is the audience by certain key moments in the play—if they laugh at this in Act 1, they'll laugh at that in Act 3. If they don't laugh at this in Act 2, we might as well go home. For me, this greeting to Cleveland would teach me nightly how comfortable the audience felt with the

language. If there was a small laugh—its not a belly laugh line—then they were listening, they were comfortable and would enjoy the rest of the scene. If not, our work would be harder and we would have to power through to Burney's underlining of the same gag later in the scene. "I have been so inhumanely hard run" says Frank "that I am compelled, at length, to submit to the most horrid of sacrifices…tis violent measure you'll never believe it...I must marry!"

By Act 5, for all its structural problems, Burney is utterly at home with her characters and their vernacular. Enough indeed to risk a sort of monologue of self-interruption, which, despite its irrelevance to the plot and length, was never cut at all as it perfectly encapsulated both character, class issues and the urgent feel the last act needed. Miss Percival and her footman:

> -Who's that
>
> -Lord John Dervis Ma'am
>
> -What did you let him in for
>
> -Ma'am he
>
> -Don't answer, I can't bear to be answered Go—stop. If Frank Cleveland calls again I'll see him. Nobody else. Go. Yes. Stay—I expect the Tylney tribe—you must let them in—nobody else. Go. Stop. If any queer looking bodies come, you must not send them away. I don't their names. Nobody else. Go now. Stay a minute. I have something to say. No. I've forgotten it. Go can't you.

It is also a fine example of Burney's stagecraft—for what is not in the text. On stage the movement and the focus of action are all the footman's: he is coming and going, he is being commanded, he is reacting to all of this, much of it generously played by Sara Crowe upstage on a steep rake with the footman centre stage, I think

probably where Burney intended. The class comedy of the play, and the inversion of the principle that good manners are the property of one class or restricted to one spot, is played out physically as well as much as in the text. Which was why at one stage we had a curtain call in reverse order of the social class of the characters—with the footman who has dominated several scenes in various guises, opening doors for everyone, bow and then taking the final curtain himself. I found in the West End, sadly, there are contractual obligations to allow above-title names to take the last call as a mark of theatrical status. So much for Burney the quiet revolutionary; the *ancien regime* of the West End won on that one.

We are gathered for a conference looking at Frances Burney, dramatist, with regards to her plays but also her novels and journals. Her living, breathing worth as a dramatist was proved nightly in fringe productions and even in the cutthroat West End. As I began to argue yesterday, there is also a study to be made of how her love and knowledge of, and instincts for the theatre found an outlet in her novels that in turn had a profound effect, via Austen, Dickens, Trollope to name but three, on the course of the English novel; a form increasingly happy with theatrical types, paradigms, structures. *A Busy Day* sat in competition at times in its oft-aborted progress to the professional stage, with the numerous theatre adaptations of Austen novels that seemed to clog the British stage in the 1990's. One critic even pointed out when finally we made it to town that it was refreshing to see a piece about Georgian society that was actually written to be performed. So much of Frances Burney is hidden—obliterated by her own hand or by circumstance: it is part of what intrigues us perhaps. So to go back to her hidden theatre work can be instructive, to unlock to laughter or at least the understanding, to go back to the beginning, to a style and medium that inspired Burney all through her career and which has the power still to inspire an audience. This strikes me as worthy of a "Huzzah!"

To finish, I thought I should shock you by getting you on your feet. Don't panic—not yet. I was meant to be here a month ago to work with the students at Dawson on eighteenth-century stage movement, amongst other issues, but sadly had to fulfil my

obligations to a long-running contract elsewhere. The physicality of the Georgian stage underpins a great deal of what Burney writes, as we found to our delight in the rehearsals for *A Busy Day*. As well as text, necessarily, we looked a good deal at movement. Several of the scenes pose real problems of divided focus that created blocking problems for our directors: to what extent does Mr Watts overhear Franks wooing of his daughter, how can Eliza sit impassively in Hyde Park and not ask Cleveland what is going on with Miss Percival flinging herself into his arms "How strange an adventure." But beyond this, there was the question of stage movement that comes up early in rehearsals for any period piece, but was very important in *A Busy Day*. Lady Wilhemina mistakes Eliza Watts for a young lady of the first class because of her deportment. Peggy Watts, similarly, mistakes Lord John Dervis' valet for a Lord himself, something of a *faux pas*, because of the "easy tumble" of his bow. Moreover, because we were originally built to go straight into the Theatre Royal Haymarket, the only West End theatre still with its original (I think 1820) rake, we were on quite an incline, which effects posture considerably.

Well in the spirit of our West End girl, and to set us off in a more dramatic direction, imaginatively, with Burney, I thought I might take you through some of the exercises that punctuated rehearsals for *A Busy Day*, and warm-ups in the West End. I'm only sorry we don't have wigs and costumes too. So if you could all stand up.

`One of the key texts we looked at was *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour,* F. Nivelon's 1773 guide to deportment and "naturalness" which seems to address both a stage awareness of "presentation" and the same issue for the ignorant coming into society. So first of all for the ladies:

Ladies, it said, should keep the head erect at all times, and if turned, then slightly to the left. An expression should always be tempered with becoming modesty. The lips must be just joined to keep the features regular. The shoulders must fall easily, and be no farther

drawn back than to form the chest full and round, which will preserve the true proportion of the body but if they are too far drawn back, the chest will appear too prominent, which it should not be. The arms must fall easy, not too close to the side and the bend of the elbow, at its due distance, will permit the hands to join, clasp gently, and in feminine supplication, face inwards and to the face. A gesture from a lady should employ only one arm, never higher than the chest, always softly and gently advanced.

Of gentlemen:

The Head must be erect at all times, and if turned, then slightly to the right. Manly boldness in the Face is best, but tempered with becoming modesty. The Lips may be just joined or slightly separated, to keep the features regular. The shoulders will preserve the true proportion of the body if held back but if they are too far drawn back, the chest will appear too prominent, the arms stiff, and the back hollow, which will entirely spoil the true proportion and therefore must be carefully avoided. The arms must fall not too close to the side and the bed of the elbow, at its due distance, will permit the right hand to place itself in the waistcoat easy and genteel, but any rising and falling the hand from that place will make it appear lame and is to be avoided. The hat should be placed under the left arm, and that wrist must be free and strait and the hand support itself above the sword hilt if such there is.

For both sexes the whole body must rest on the right foot, and right knee, as also the back be kept straight, the left leg must be foremost, and only bear its own weight, and both feet must be turned outwards from each other—the left facing down the stage pointing at the footlights.

In forming a gesture, move both elbow and shoulder with grace and ease. Present your face and body towards the front of the stage, raise an arm in supplication, moving the hand into place last, before or during an exclamation.

And in that position, as comfortable as any eighteenth-century actor, let us all raise our imaginary hats, or our hands to no higher than the chest, or in supplication to the audience, and salute our West End Girl:

HUZZAH!