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A Novel ‘Gatsby’: Stamina Required

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — What happens between a novel and a consenting reader is usually a deeply personal activity, occurring behind the closed doors of individual minds. It is arguably more intimate and subjective than sex. And if someone asked you, “Want to watch me read a book for the next six or seven hours?” you would probably — and wisely — decline.

Yet this is the invitation being extended by Elevator Repair Service’s “Gatz,” at the American Repertory Theater here through Sunday. And to turn down the offer would be to miss one of the most exciting and improbable accomplishments in theater in recent years.

“Gatz” is a word-for-word presentation of the entire text of “The Great Gatsby,” [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)’s 1925 novel and a work that has never been successfully translated to the screen. Occupying roughly six hours of performance time (not counting two intermissions and a dinner break), “Gatz” has no period sets or costumes, and no full-fledged interpretations of any of the book’s characters. You could even say that although the show has a terrific 13-member ensemble, there is only one real character in “Gatz.” That’s you, dear reader.

Set in a shabby business office of indeterminate professional purpose, this remarkable play follows the seduction of one man (Scott Shepherd) by one novel. And it’s as thorough an evocation as any work of art I’ve encountered of how a book can so take over your life that you start to see everything through its sensibility.

“Gatz” was one of three productions I caught here last weekend (all presented by the American Repertory Theater) that are trying to redefine the relationship between plays and audiences, erasing distance and blurring genres. In the nearby town of Brookline, a four-story school building has been taken over by the British troupe Punchdrunk for “Sleep No More,” a site-specific rendering of [Shakespeare](#)’s “Macbeth” as a fever dream summoned by [Alfred Hitchcock](#).

And at the Oberon, American Repertory Theater’s new space in Cambridge, the plot of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is cast as a Studio 54-style night at the disco, with the audience as hustle-dancing extras, in “The Donkey Show.” Previously a long-running downtown hit in New York, where it opened in 1999, “The Donkey Show” is directed by its original creators, Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner.

Ms. Paulus, who has staged the current Broadway revival of “Hair,” is also the new artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, and she has said that a large part of her mandate is to attract people who might not otherwise go to the theater. In this light, you might say that “Gatz” is for the reader, “The Donkey Show” for the reveler and “Sleep No More” for the children of a fragmented media culture, weaned on video games and quick bites of downloaded entertainment.

“Gatz” is the least literally interactive. Directed by John Collins and first produced in Brussels in 2006 (with a New York run expected this fall), it does not seek to destroy physically the wall between audience and actors, as “Sleep” and “Donkey” do. Yet for me “Gatz” was the most transporting, traveling to an ineffable place that theater is not expected to inhabit: the corridor between written words and a reader’s perception of them.

The road to Fitzgerald’s poetically imagined fictional universe begins in the land of the flatly prosaic. Louisa Thompson’s ingeniously dismal, realistic set creates an urban work space where nothing looks clean and everything — including the office’s one computer — appears to be secondhand. It is here that one of the employees (Mr. Shepherd) discovers a battered paperback copy of “The Great Gatsby.”

He begins to read it aloud to himself, with no particular flair or ardor. Other people drift in and out, delivering mail and picking up the phone (though you can never make out what they say) or just goofing off, as Mr. Shepherd continues to read. And little by little, his fellow office workers become the characters described by Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator. That includes Nick’s mysterious, party-giving Long Island neighbor, Jay Gatsby, and Daisy Buchanan, the girl with the voice of money.

A couple of years ago I had seen and much admired Elevator Repair Service’s “Sound and the Fury (April Seventh, 1928),” which brought the complete text of a chapter of that Faulkner novel to theatrical life. That was a piece for connoisseurs of experimental theater and experimental fictional narrative.

“Gatz” is much more accessible (as is Fitzgerald’s novel, compared with Faulkner’s). But it is also richer and more subtle in its ultimate achievement. Throughout the show, the relationship between what is read and its context keeps shifting, with the real world finally giving way entirely to the fictive one. This is achieved partly through the sound design of Ben Williams, wherein traffic noises melt into the sounds of chirping crickets or jazz orchestras, and Mark Barton’s superb transformative lighting.

But the most astonishing metamorphosis is that undergone by the cast, whose interpretations of Fitzgerald’s creations go from quotation-mark-framed stiffness or jokiness into a style that is compellingly sincere without ever being purely naturalistic. Mr. Shepherd, in a performance of symphonic calibration, progresses from detached curiosity to intense engagement to an emotional fluency that allows him to discard the book altogether and recite from memory.

By the end, he has become Nick Carraway. So have you. And as can happen when you’re caught up in a book, you’re surprised to discover that so many hours have passed, and that you’re still inside your own body, a bit stiffened from sitting for so long.

“Sleep No More” warps your sense of time in a different way. Conceived and staged by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, this production seems less to occupy than to haunt the shadowy, meticulously furnished rooms and hallways in which it occurs. Designed by Mr. Barrett and choreographed by Ms. Doyle, “Sleep No More” allows its audience to wander at will into the spaces in which the tragedy of “Macbeth” (or a 1930s country-house variation, mixed with elements of Hitchcock’s film “Rebecca”) is acted out in wordless dance and tableaux.

For the occasion, the Old Lincoln School in Brookline has been turned into the most seriously chic spook house you’ll ever set foot in. The audience members don white Venetian-style masks and pledge silence before choosing to follow one of the central characters on his or her doomed path. (You can change course whenever you

wish and you are advised to wear running shoes.) There is much [Matthew Bourne](#)-style danced erotic wrestling and the occasional pansexual orgy, while the music of Hitchcock's composer of choice, [Bernard Herrmann](#), fills the air.

It's all quite ravishing to look at, though the thrill factor wears off after the first of the three hours you're allowed to participate in this movable, homicidal feast. "Sleep No More" offers little insight into "Macbeth." But in turning its audiences into flocks of anonymous voyeurs, racing after a cast of beautiful killers in sumptuous settings, it definitely conjures up and comments on the guilty but pleasurable feelings of complicity evoked by Hitchcock films.

"The Donkey Show," which retells the story of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" via songs of the disco era, isn't the sassy, surprising lark it was when I saw it in New York in 1999. But it's been a huge success for the American Repertory Theater, and people continue to line up for it. And dress up, too, in bell bottoms and Spandex. At the late-night performance I attended, there was one man — who wore an Afro wig and resembled Disco Stu from "The Simpsons" — who was said to have seen the show 30 times.

"Sleep No More" also has its repeat attendees, including cultists who dress like the show's chic witches. I didn't see anyone in flapper dresses or pink suits at "Gatz." Of course, theme attire and running shoes are not required for journeys of the mind.

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