

Culture

London theaters light up in sync

LONDON

Fiery performances make familiar female characters feel brand new again

BY BEN BRANTLEY

The schoolteacher's choice of color is a promise and a warning. Portrayed with a vitality that sears and illuminates by a truly incandescent Lia Williams, the title character of the Donmar Warehouse production of "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" is first seen amid a world of subdued grays in an alarmingly red dress.

That isn't the only reason that Miss Brodie's students — or the audience for David Harrower's new adaptation of Muriel Spark's immortal 1961 novel — can't take their eyes off her. There's her flame-colored hair, as well, and those too-wide-open eyes that seem to be both devouring and dismissing everything around her.

You may come to regard her as dangerous, ridiculous or simply pathetic. But there's no denying Miss Brodie's incendiary presence, in a play that implicitly poses the haunting question of what happens to such intensity when it's deprived of an outlet.

Or, as is asked about another woman, who is effortlessly dominating the much bigger stage of the Aldwych Theater in the same neighborhood, "How do you hold fire?" The subject in that instance is Anna Mae Bullock, who goes by the professional name of Tina Turner.

Three powerful productions, each one infused with radiant empathy for its beleaguered heroine.

Miss Brodie the Scottish schoolteacher and Ms. Turner the great American singer — who is played to the long-legged hilt by Adrienne Warren in the hit bio-musical "Tina" — would seem to have little in common. But seeing these two knockout performances back to back, as I did, gets you thinking about the penalties exacted from women for possessing uncommon potential in a man's world.

To make a theatergoer's triptych of the topic, I also met the more wanly luminous figure whose light is being extinguished nightly at the Almeida Theater across town, in Islington. There, a character called Young Woman is introduced to us in a crowded subway car, where she wouldn't stand out except for the orange gloves she has on.

Those brightly sheathed hands become fatal instruments of destruction, the pride and ruin of the reluctant wife played by Emily Berrington in an unsettling revival of "Machinal." That's Sophie Treadwell's pioneer work of expressionism from 1928, an anatomy of a murder committed by a woman smothered by marriage and motherhood.

Young Woman's feverish rallying cry, spoken only to herself: "I've submitted to enough — I won't submit to any more." The F-word — feminism, whose fourth-wave manifestation remains a subject of much discussion on opinion pages here — is never spoken. But it whispers between the lines of "Machinal," "Tina" and "Jean Brodie."

As it happens, these three strangely kindred productions are all directed by women: Polly Findlay ("Jean Brodie"), Phyllida Lloyd ("Tina") and Natalie Abrahami ("Machinal"). And each show is infused with a radiant empathy for its beleaguered heroine that approaches religious dimensions.

Seen in those terms, "Tina" — which has a book by the American playwright Katori Hall, with Frank Ketelaar and Kees Prins — is an act of canonization

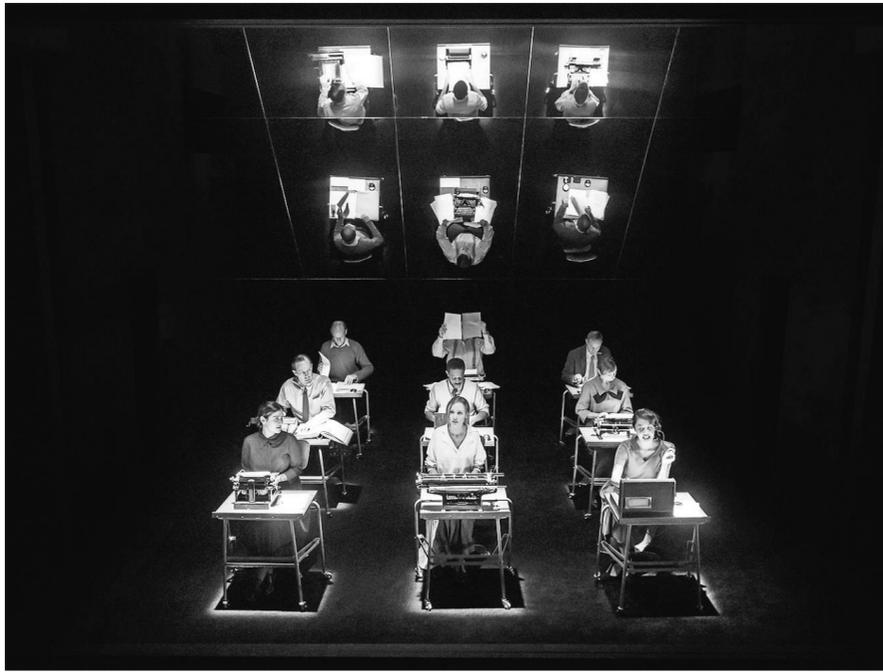


JOHAN PERSSON



MANUEL HARLAN

Clockwise from above: Lia Williams as a charismatic schoolteacher and the title character in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie"; Adrienne Warren as Tina Turner in "Tina"; "Machinal" at the Almeida Theater; Emily Berrington as the murderous Young Woman in "Machinal."



JOHAN PERSSON



MANUEL HARLAN

for its sorely tried but ultimately transcendent star. "Machinal" is a grim, modernist-medieval chronicle of an everywoman's martyrdom.

"Jean Brodie" — based on a work by a writer for whom mysticism always glimmered from the shadows — locates

something almost divine, and equally diabolical, in its thwarted protagonist's frustrations. It is by far the most subtle and psychologically engaging of the three.

Ms. Findlay's production also provides the occasion for Ms. Williams, a

star of the London stage, to scale new heights with a definitive rendering of an oft-interpreted character. (Ms. Williams may be best known to international audiences for playing Wallis Simpson in the Netflix series "The Crown.") And no,

I am not forgetting Maggie Smith's Os-

car-winning turn in the 1969 film version.

Ms. Smith injected the role with the winning, withering archness that was fast becoming her stylized signature. (See: "Downton Abbey," nearly 50 years later.) Ms. Williams matches Ms. Smith in amusing affectations. But she also lets us see, with increasing clarity, the uneasy provincial behind the sophisticated artifice.

Our growing awareness of Miss Brodie's unsatisfied hunger to live larger than she does parallels the gradual disenchantment of her once enraptured coterie of pet pupils. It's not just that she becomes older; more startling, it's as if we — like her former students — grow out of the infatuation with which we first perceived her.

Miss Brodie is as dangerous a force as ever in the lives of the girls she calls "the crème de la crème." After all, she unforgivably tries to engineer a love affair be-

tween the prettiest of her disciples and a roué artist, and unwittingly sends an attention-starved pupil to her death in the Spanish Civil War.

But for once, this character evokes something like the pity and terror of classical tragedy. There's a painful new awareness of Jean's avidly trying to live through others. Watch her ravenous eyes as she reads a map that traces someone else's travels, or her shifting profile as she mirrors the girl posing for the painter.

At the end, a now cancer-riddled Miss Brodie accuses the canniest of her former girls (Rona Morrison, excellent) of killing her. It's an absurd and melodramatic declaration, but you know what she means. What fed and sustained Miss Brodie was the sunlight of the adoring gaze. Deprived of it, she shrinks and withers.

There's no shrinking — and definitely no withering — by the title character of "Tina." The book by the gifted Ms. Hall (an Olivier award winner for "The Mountaintop") for this handsomely produced musical is disappointingly formulaic, the usual inspirational showcase for a series of chart-topping hits.

Poverty, a sexist and racist recording industry and a terrifyingly abusive relationship — with her husband and mentor, Ike Turner (Kobna Holdbrook-Smith, a perceptive study in anger) — only make the show's titanic heroine bigger and stronger. What hoists the show several niches above the standard jukebox biography is Ms. Warren's performance, which finds the gritty sand in Ms. Turner's pearlescent presence.

A Tony nominee for "Shuffle Along," the smashing Ms. Warren replicates the signature physical and vocal inflections. More important, she suggests that what we hear when Tina sings is shaped by a confluence of circumstance and character; every note vibrates as a wrestling match between a woman and her demons.

In the first act, after Ike proposes marriage to Tina, she (anachronistically) sings "Better Be Good to Me" — her hit single from the mid-1980s — as an internal monologue. Ms. Warren's delivery is rooted in a defiant sense of self-worth that would make us feel in our guts, even if we didn't already know the story, that Ike doesn't stand in a chance in the battle of wills ahead.

Triumph of any kind is never in the cards for the heroine of "Machinal." Her unhappy road from joyless servitude as a stenographer to a loveless marriage to death in the electric chair is paved by a steamroller society that flattens its female inhabitants. As designed by the great Miriam Buether, the set for "Machinal" gradually and surreally shifts from the early 1920s to the present, suggesting that even as times change, a woman's lot remains much the same.

Theatergoers hoping for more heartening news might want to check out the rousing, brisk production of "Hamlet" at the open-air Shakespeare's Globe theater. There, the company's adventurous new artistic director, Michelle Terry, is starring as the Prince of Denmark in a gender-blind production directed by the (female) team of Federay Holmes and Elle White.

The show doesn't make a big deal of girls playing boys and vice versa. (Ophelia, embodied by the lissome Shubham Saraf, has hair on her chest.) Ms. Terry's performance in the title role is enjoyably blustery, intemperate and self-deluding in the play's first four acts.

I didn't even think about the character's gender until near the end, when Hamlet returns to Denmark as, well, a new man — a calmer, more centered individual with a firm sense of purpose (and a ponytail) and a long view of life.

After four acts of brooding vacillation, he is finally able to accomplish what he must. Sometimes, evidently, what a raging tragic hero really needs is to get in touch with his feminine side.

Cops, gangsters and castes

TELEVISION REVIEW

With "Sacred Games," Netflix kicks off an energetic push into India

BY MIKE HALE

Sartaj Singh, the hero of the new Netflix series "Sacred Games," is a familiar figure in the landscape of hard-boiled fiction: the hapless honest cop whose integrity has cost him promotions, the respect of his crooked colleagues and the devotion of his wife. Because he works in Mumbai, his stalled career also means there's no running water in his apartment.

"Sacred Games," adapted from Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel, opens the latest front in Netflix's international campaign. India offers both a vast pool of potential subscribers and an entertainment industry with global appeal. An array of future Indian projects has been publicized, but for starters Netflix has chosen a production from the same genre as a previous

success, the American-Colombian "Narcos." A gangster saga with a history lesson is apparently the best algorithm for cross-cultural success.

"Sacred Games" doesn't feel generic, though. Energetic and entertaining, if not entirely satisfying (four of eight episodes were available for review), it toggles between stylized melodrama and loose-limbed satire — hewing, perhaps a little too closely, to the structure of Mr. Chandra's sprawling novel.

The series begins with a bang, as Singh (Saif Ali Khan) is contacted by an anonymous caller who sits before a bank of computer monitors like the Wizard of Oz, distorting his voice and masking his location. The caller turns out to be Gaitonde (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a notorious Mumbai criminal who's been missing for years and thought dead.

He teases Singh with the information that he knew his father, another honest cop (or so the son thinks), and warns him of a dire but unspecified event that will strike Mumbai in 25 days. That sets the clock ticking on the story's mystery plot, but it's really a hook to get Singh — and us — to listen



Saif Ali Khan plays Sartaj Singh, an honest Mumbai police officer, in "Sacred Games." NETFLIX

to Gaitonde's story, an epic that combines his own rise as a gangster with a social and political history of India, and a critique of the country's religious, caste and economic divides.

The novel alternates chapters be-

tween Singh's present-day struggle to decipher Gaitonde's message and Gaitonde's narration of his criminal career, and the series does a similar dance, moving with reasonable fluidity between its two modes. The flashbacks

play out in a mock-heroic style with tinges of magic realism — a leopard emerging from the forest at an opportune moment, a gang boss punishing his enemies in a particularly crushing manner.

The contemporary scenes, meanwhile, go for low comedy and topical satire, as Singh (the rare Sikh cop on the Mumbai force) dodges his uniformly corrupt superiors. He has the help of an ambitious agent from the intelligence services (Radhika Apte, like Mr. Khan and Mr. Siddiqui an established Indian film star) and his own, much less ambitious sergeant Jitendra Joshi, whose abilities are far outpaced by his appetites. A subplot involving a theatrical agent who doubles as a pimp for victimized Bollywood actresses echoes several real-life Indian prostitution scandals.

Originally developed for television by a pilot by the Hollywood-based Northern Irish writer Kerry Williamson (who is credited as an executive producer), "Sacred Games" comes to the screen as an Indian production, directed by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane and written by Varun Grover, Vasant Nath and

Smita Singh. (It can be watched in its original Hindi, with or without subtitles, or with English, Spanish or Portuguese dubbing.)

While the series is a fair approximation of the kind of multigenerational, lightly fantastical Asian, African or South American novel that routinely lands on American best-seller lists, its picaresque, expansive storytelling and literary flavor are not what American audiences are used to in a crime series. But there are reference points. The combination of dark humor and operatic violence may call to mind "Fargo"; the slightly hyperbolic characterizations and stylized dialogue are akin to those in "Luke Cage."

Replicating the constant juggle of styles and voices in "Sacred Games," a feat stretched out over more than 900 pages in Mr. Chandra's novel, is a major challenge on screen — despite its verve and visual inventiveness, the series feels muddled and a little wearying at times. (And a lot of cultural and historical references will go over the head of non-Indian viewers.)

But as Gaitonde says, his story is like a scorpion — once it stings you, you're done for.