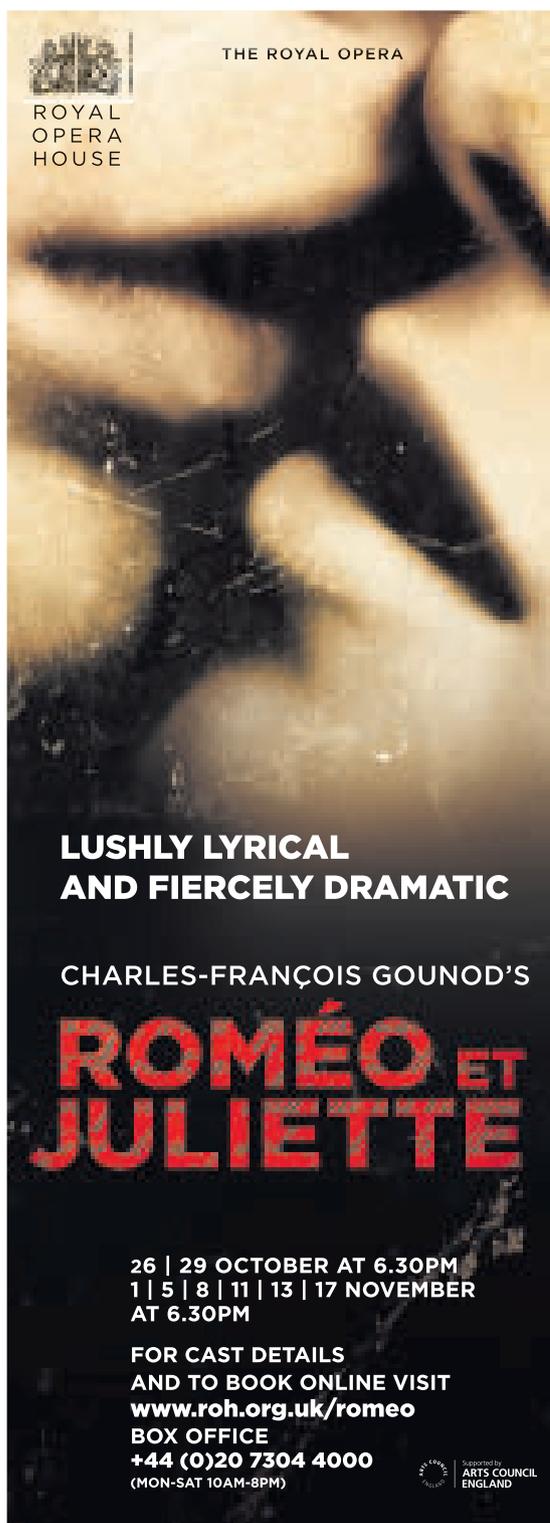


times2arts

Gatz: your first stop for autumn in New York

A six-hour, word-for-word production of *The Great Gatsby* might seem daunting, but it keeps **Tim Teeman** glued to his seat



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Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-1968 It wasn't all about Warhol, as this exhibition featuring the likes of Martha Rosler and Niki de Saint Phalle reveals. Oct 15-Jan 9, Brooklyn Museum (brooklyn-museum.org)

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown Musical based on Pedro Almodóvar's 1988 film, starring Justin Guarini. Opens Nov 4, Belasco Theatre (lct.org)

Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark Reeve Carney takes on the title role and Bono the songs in the much-anticipated musical. Opens Dec 21, Foxwoods Theatre (spidermanon-broadway.com)



Scott Shepherd, centre, and the cast of *Gatz* at the Public Theatre, New York; below, Robert Redford in the 1974 film

A six-hour, word-for-word stage adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* might sound like a challenge for even the most dedicated, off-piste theatregoer. Yet *Gatz*, a recital and dramatisation by the experimental Elevator Repair Service company at the Public Theatre in New York, is so seductively brilliant that by the end you may be on your feet shouting not only "Bravo" but "Come on, guys, let's do *Anna Karenina* and really make a night of it." *The New York Times* called it "one of the most exciting and improbable accomplishments in theatre in recent years".

The bravest thing about *Gatz* is that it strips away the gauzy "celebration of the Jazz Age" soubriquet traditionally attached to F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel. *Gatz* is an ingenious marriage of reading and performance. Scott Shepherd plays Nick Carraway, the book's narrator, as well as Nick as a character and an office worker some time near the present day reading the book aloud to workmates. His is a stunning performance — Nick goes from languid to disillusioned, bewitched to brittle — and, moreover, Shepherd has memorised the whole book. "I guess I've always wanted to do something that makes people go: 'Wow, nobody else could do that!'" Shepherd says. "But I'll settle for 'Wow, who else would ever do that?' I don't think I really gave the endurance issue in *Gatz* much consideration until we finished the first performance and I realised how exhausted I was."

He reads at the beginning in a nameless office, with lights illuminating passageways and other small workspaces. The mysterious office is based on a space that the actors rehearsed in — "one of those places with stacks of paper and boxes, old computers and bric-a-brac," says the director, John Collins. "You never fully know what the office is or who the characters in it are. By the end of the play, though, everyone from the book and the office has undergone some kind of transformation." The other actors double up (as *Gatsby* and an office colleague, for example, and a janitor and Tom Buchanan).

The play starts slowly, but soon action — a fantastically

frenetic, chaotic party scene, chilling confrontations — intersects with Carraway's narration. We switch backwards and forwards between events in the novel, and events around the reading of the novel: characters, events, eras in history and fictional universes mingle as *Gatsby*'s real identity unspools.

The show is a sell-out and its run has been extended into late November. Its success is the pay-off to a tortured progression to the stage, in New York at least — it has toured the country — because of disputes with Fitzgerald's estate, which had licensed it to a different Broadway production. Collins said the company first had the idea to do it in 1999, when he was 29 and a first-time reader of the book. "People always laugh and said they read it when they were much younger," he says, "but I'm glad I read it at that age — I appreciated its genius and subtlety more."

Adapting it proved trickier. First, the company stripped all of the narration out and did it as an action-based piece. "But Carraway's narration is central to the novel, and as much as it is about *Gatsby*, it's also about Nick and his coming of age," says Collins, who called it *Gatz*, rather than *The Great Gatsby*, because it was emphatically not a dramatisation of the book and as a way of referring "to the malleability of identities on stage and the more tragic and mundane truth of who *Gatsby* was behind that character. *Gatsby* is remembered as glamorous and charismatic (think of the 1974 movie, starring Robert Redford), never as a criminal who came from humble beginnings."

The most significant accomplishment is Shepherd's: in character as Nick and as the office worker, he uses the book to read from as a prop and shades it with all the right emotional colouring. "I saw Mark Rylance's *Tempest* at the Globe Theatre a few years ago," Shepherd says. "It starts with Rylance alone on stage with a chessboard. He does the first scene, the shipwreck scene, like a kid playing with toys. Making wave crashing sounds and swinging the chessboard around like a ship tossed on the sea, doing funny voices for the

"I would not have predicted that I could read the book upward of a thousand times and still love it"

chessmen. It was one of the best Shakespeare scenes I'd ever seen. That's the sort of thing I try to do with the miscellaneous characters I do in *Gatz*. That spirit of pretending, like children do."

Why bother using the book at all? Surely Shepherd could play Carraway without it. "But the play is about the act of reading," Collins insists — and he is right: as the hours roll on, Fitzgerald's words grow ever more intoxicating and involving under Shepherd's stewardship.

The actor says that there are only a few parts of the book that he doesn't know: for example when another character becomes the authorial voice. Apart from that, he says, "the usual test is to offer me three words from anywhere in the book and see if I can continue from there. It is called *Stump the Freak*, and the freak is rarely stumped."

The lighting and staging are just as ingenious, deploying devices such as harsher light for the modern day, reflected light for the dreamy nights at *Gatsby*'s West Egg mansion and speakers pointing away from the audience for action happening offstage. Commendably the use of the green light (at the end of *Gatsby*'s lover Daisy's dock), the central motif of the novel, is present but not overplayed.

Collins knows that *Gatz* involves a big commitment of time on the part of an audience — a fair few left before the end on the night of the first performance last Sunday — and Collins jokes that "the scariest part of the show" is the first half hour in which nothing happens except Carraway's narration. The audience may think it is in for a very dry evening, "which makes it all the sweeter when things start firing off," Collins says. For those who do stay for the entire eight-hour stretch — including intermissions and a dinner break — a genuinely transformative understanding of Fitzgerald's work awaits.

Shepherd remembers reading the novel at school, but what he'd forgotten was its "essentially pessimistic conclusion, about how your dreams destroy you. Of course *Gatz* has enriched my understanding of the novel infinitely. It's an incredible, sustained, exuberant performance of brilliant sentence to sentence writing. I think I noticed that when I read it in high school, but I don't think I would have predicted that I could read it upward of a thousand times and still love it."

An unexpected stamp of approval came from Eleanor Lanahan, one of Fitzgerald's grandchildren, who came to see it in Boston. "It is the best staging of *Gatsby* I have ever seen," she wrote to Collins. "Scott was served royally word for word."

***Gatz* is at the Public Theatre, New York, to Nov 28 (publictheatre.org; 001 212-967 7555)**