

Pawn may be disenfranchised but he is neither humbled nor disinterested. Some honesty is displayed, to what end is unknown. Some dishonesty is revealed, outcome unclear. Dirty laundry is aired, outcome most certain. Chains are rattled, hammers have fallen, polls have been rocked. Oh, the turmoil!

Whilst your intrepid travelers have been blithely gallivanting about London, do not for a moment think that they have been ignorant of the goings on in politics. All about us a scandal has been brewing, and that brew has now burst the bottle and sprayed its frothy mush all over the Zeitgeist. That is the MP Expenses scandal; it doesn't look as though it is getting much coverage across the pond, but it is all the rage on every front page over here. Here is the story in a nutshell:

British Members of Parliament (MPs) are allowed to claim a variety of expenses, such as second homes in or around London (so as to attend Parliament), service workers, meals, etc. Each member is limited to about £25,000/year. The system was first engineered back in the 1980s when the typical MP earned a relative pittance for their service, up against comparable professions, such as bankers, solicitors or barristers. Recompense has since increased, but the expenses system remains.

Gordon Brown, the current Prime Minister, has been trying to change the system for years, but these efforts have been successively rebuffed by the House of Commons (the UK equivalent to the House of Representatives), year after year. When word started to get out about some potential abuses, the government responded by preparing an audit, and announced that it would be releasing the details in July, well after the British county and European Union (EU) elections coming up in late May.

Well, best made plans... The Telegraph, a decidedly Tory rag, performed some exceptional investigative journalism, and dug up all the facts on who claimed what, when and why. [I believe the muckraking consisted of paying someone £300,000 for the expenses reports – an offer the more principled papers here refused. – X] They then put these facts into the partisan journalism blender and released an overly sensationalised account which focused almost entirely on Labour MPs (only mentioned one Tory) and containing many flat out distortions, conflations and errors.

No matter that, the chum was in the water, and in no time at all every paper in the country had picked up and repeated the Telegraph's claims, right or wrong, and in a matter of days Labour numbers dropped 14 points in some polls (23 in others) and with elections looming the Tories now stand at 48%, Labour 27%, Liberal Dems 18%.

Having done its dirty deed, the Telegraph is now reportedly going to start releasing the results of their investigation vis-a-vis the Tory MPs. You can fully expect that they will do so in such a manner as to selectively pick off some perceived weak members, and reorder the party to their liking.

This is redolent of nothing so much as the House Franking scandal which rocked the US House of Representatives back in 1992. That led to the downfall of Dan Rostenkowski, then the Democratic chair of the House Ways and Means committee, the most powerful seat in the house, by many measures. If that is any guide, we can fully expect that Chancellor of the Exchequer Darling and PM Brown will be jobless in short order. The Telegraph, of course, will live to slander another day.

Well, enough of scandal, how about some demons. Tonight took us to the Vaudeville Theatre for *Duet for One*. Here is X for that review:

Juliet Stevenson has long been a favourite of mine (since the lovely film "Truly Madly Deeply" with Alan Rickman), so on that basis alone I was interested in this show. I did not know that it was about a brilliant, successful violinist who (pressured by her husband) is seeing a psychiatrist after developing MS and becoming unable to play music. The story was inspired by the story of Jacqueline Du Pre. The play is profoundly moving, well written and brilliantly

acted. Stevenson, in a motorized wheelchair for the most part, is riveting as she talks through her rage and suicidal thoughts about having MS in the prime of life. The set, the subtle details of Stephanie's deteriorating condition, the music and lighting are perfect. It's physically hard to take your eyes off her to look at her doctor (Henry Goodman), but when you do, his reactions to her words and actions are perfectly in tune. There were several people in the audience who appeared to have MS, and, judging from the audible sobs of the woman next to me, must have friends with the disease. I thought of my dear NR and BB with love.



To expand a bit on X's able hand, I would add this: During interval we discussed how strong of a performance Goodman turned in. In a two-hander like this, where the lead is *so strong* it can be hard for the second to really do much more than show up. Goodman does way more than this. He never just shows up, he is present and inhabits the stage every bit as much as Stevenson does. Given few lines in the first act, he has to rely instead upon gesture, body language, movement – all subtle, but all pitch perfect.

As has so often been the case on this trip, however, we were blown away by the tectonic shifts which occurred in the second act. Goodman, as Dr. Alfred Feldman, at one point launches into what must have been a 10 minute soliloquy about life and suicide and psychiatry. It takes one's breath away, it does. It takes Stevenson's breath away, as well, and for a short while the tide is turned on stage and in the audience's hearts. That Stevenson comes back in the very next scene and steals the show back for herself is just one more example of the emotional whiplash to which we are subjected.

Testament to the high state of London theatre arts is the fantastic lighting, scenography, soundscapes, etc. to which we have been treated this past week. Tonight was no exception. The set, by Lez Brotherston, is a near-perfect rendition of a doctor's office. Comfortable yet not too inviting. Jason Taylor's lighting and John Leonard's sound do exactly what they are supposed to do, not get noticed. The subtlety of both is the most exquisite expression of theatrical art one can achieve. Taylor's lighting is a masterpiece of naturalism rarely seen in today's over-sensationalised shows. Well done!

If there is one bone to pick with the production, well I will pick it. The set decoration, while complete, was perhaps a little too much so. The bookcases were full, edge to edge. The CD shelves were full, edge to edge. The same with cassettes and LPs. I can believe that the good doctor is a collector and aficionado of music, I cannot believe that he has this custom built shelving system and has only got space for maybe 2 CDs out of 12 entire shelves. Good thing

that they don't make cassette tapes any more, 'cause there is no room for any more of those, either.

A small point, I know, but I noticed it, so I am willing to guess that others did as well. Barely a blip of a blemish on what is otherwise as perfect a production as one could hope to see.

One last point. In England one typically must pay for a programme for the West End theatre. Â£2 or Â£3 will get you the typical cast listings, bios, etc., as well as general theatre news, and such. Not so tonight. We gladly paid the Â£3 for the evening's programme, only to find that it was nearly a book, replete with extensive details on MS, causes and treatments, the music used and referred to in the performance, as well as the usual interviews and such. It is quite the reference.

Ta!