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A Rose in a Garden of Weeds?

The Unlikely Success of *The Duckworth Lewis Method*

Christoph Reinfandt

Ein Konzeptalbum zum Thema Cricket? How very British! In seiner Kolumne ergründet Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) das Geheimnis, das dem Erfolg des ungewöhnlichen Projekt von Thomas Walsh und Neil Hannon zu Grunde liegt.

Why oh why oh why? This question from Irish songwriter Thomas Walsh's song "A Rose in a Garden of Weeds" (on his group Pugwash's 2005 album *Jollity*) may have occurred to many a reviewer when it became known in 2009 that Walsh was joining forces with Irish songwriter Neil Hannon (of Divine Comedy fame) to record a concept album about, of all things, cricket. How likely is it that it takes two Irishmen to come up with the first record ever made about that most English of sports, adopting the names of two English statisticians (!) – Frank Duckworth and Tony Lewis devised the mathematical formula known as the Duckworth-Lewis method that is used to "calculate

the target score of the team batting second in a limited overs match interrupted by weather or other circumstances"¹ – and turning them into steam punk stage personae in the process?

How likely is it that they are successful with this strategy? Given the English propensity for eccentricity there may be an opening, but beyond that? Well, the chances were not so bad after all, given that Walsh and Hannon do not only love cricket (in the Ireland of their childhoods a 'love that dare not speak its name'), but also the song writing craft of a distinctly English tradition, from Gilbert and Sullivan, music hall and Noel Coward to the likes of the Beatles, the Kinks,

Jeff Lynne's Electric Light Orchestra and XTC. It is after all the combination of these two loves that makes *The Duckworth Lewis Method* more than a mere novelty act: their excellent pop songs can be appreciated even without any familiarity with cricket lore and terminology (though checking it out enhances the fun), and the twists and turns of the game frequently amount to a fully-fledged metaphor for the lives we lead.²

First Innings

The self-titled first outing of *The Duckworth Lewis Method* sported Monty Python-inspired cover art and opens, aptly enough, with a little ELOesque overture, entitled "The Coin Toss" in emulation of the stages of a cricket match that will structure the whole album. This mini drama also serves to establish the characters of Duckworth and Lewis:

DUCKWORTH: "Hello!"

LEWIS: "Good morning!"

D&L: "We're tossing a coin to begin."

L: "Duckworth go ahead."

D: "No Lewis, after you. May the best man win."

L: "And may the best Duckworth lose... let's begin."

D: "It's heads! You called it."

L: "I think I'll go in for a bat? And that's that."³



Lewis (Hannon) and Duckworth (Walsh) on stage, Lord's cricket ground, London, July 8, 2013.

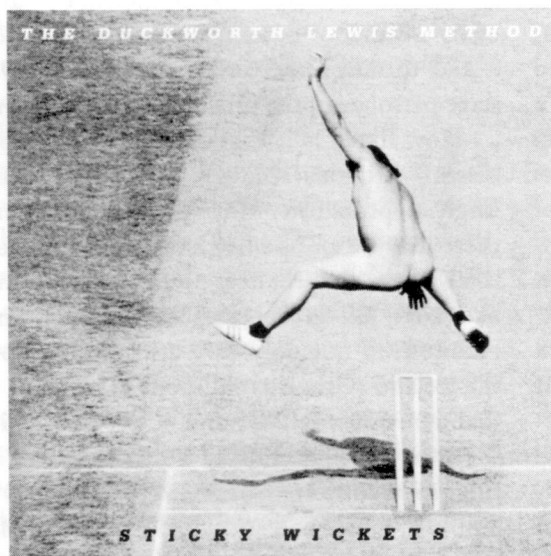
Oscillating between a nostalgic enactment of Victorian gentlemen's civility on the one hand and the mischievous



frivolity of the underlying ruthlessness on Lewis's part which even becomes self-reflexive at the song's end on the other, the opening dialogue establishes the tone for the rest of the record.

What is more, *The Duckworth Lewis Method* is by no means resigned to a purely English outlook. In fact, the very second track embraces a global and (post-) colonial view which seems to be inspired by the works of the Afro-Trinidadian writer C.L.R. James, most notably his seminal, proto-postcolonial and semi-autobiographical study of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). Coincidentally, it also chimes in with the BBC Two four-part TV documentary *Empire of Cricket* first broadcast in June 2009. The song places cricket squarely at the centre of "The Age of Revolution". Revolving around an irresistible two-bar sample from a 1928 Bix Beiderbecke and His Gang recording entitled "Rhythm King", it traces the historical development from the time when "Princes and lawyers played with the English elite [and] / Years of repression started a noise from the street" to the current emancipation of the former colonies and the players: "Always denied entry by the English gentry / Now we're driving Bentley's playing 20/20."⁴ This postcolonial angle is actually taken up again in the second (digital) single culled from the album besides "The Age of Revolution", which comes as the eighth song of the album after a rather pointless but functionally apt instrumental intermission ("Rain Stops Play"): "Meeting Mr Miandad" creates a strange fusion of cricket and the late-1960s hippie/rock 'n' roll revolution. Duckworth and Lewis set out for Pakistan in a "VW

camper van" in an attempt to reach "our historical phantasmagorical destiny", as the chorus puts it, while the verses tell the story of Lewis getting Duckie on the bus for the trip through a harmonious world ("Everywhere we go people know us. / When we lose our way people show us. / When we break down people tow us / and send us on our way with a smile and a little wave... / HEY HEY HEY!!"). The actual meeting with the eponymous Mr Miandad, one of the most famous batsmen that Pakistan ever produced, is depicted as a rock 'n' roll union ("It's gonna take a while but we get there, / Mr. Miandad will be met there. / We'll shake him by the hand and he'll say / 'Wait there, while I get my guitar I'm a



rock 'n' roll star like you'. / WHO HOO HOO."), and in its fade-out the song aptly mutates into a generic informal

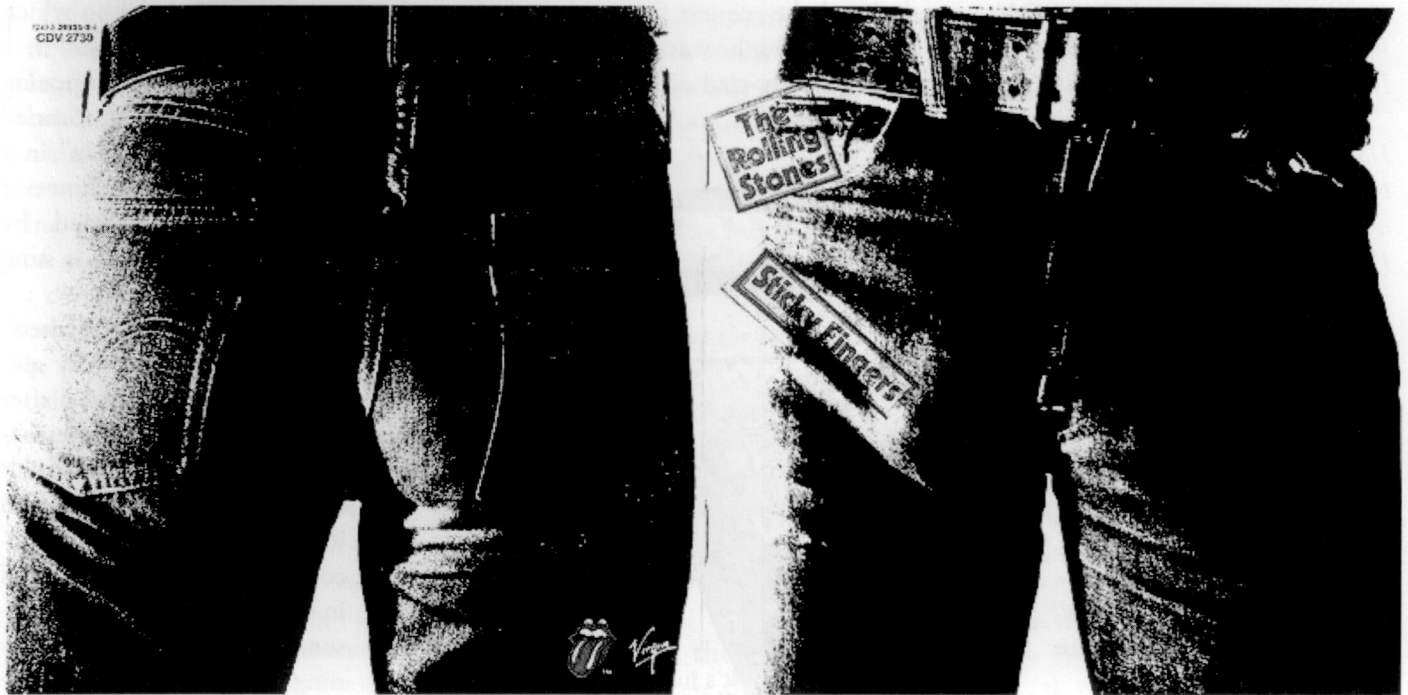
sing- and clap-along accompanied by acoustic guitars.

Other tracks on the album are more generic and combine cricket-specific vocabulary with usual pop lyrics fare of sexual innuendo and unrequited love (e.g. "The Sweet Spot" of a bat with which a ball is to be hit with exact timing for spectacular results and a similar spot in human anatomy in the rocking song of that title, or "The Nightwatchman" who as a non-batsman replaces a proper batsman at the end of a day's play in order to save the proper batsman for the next day, but who may also just be lonely lover in a sumptuous and very Divine Comedy-like torch song). The protagonists' Irish childhoods are lovingly evoked in the barnyard baroque, harpsichord and all, of "Flatten the Hay" with the, in spite of all innocence, somewhat menacing atmosphere surrounding the "gentleman's game" in that particular setting (the weather does not seem to be the only threatening thing here). "Gentlemen and Players", "Mason on the Boundary" and the rollicking "Test Match Special", on the other hand, more generally evoke the atmosphere and significance of the game for players and audiences on location and through the media before the album comes to an end with the ELO-inspired "The End of the Over", which lyrics-wise contains a lot of counting to six and the following concrete

poetry-like block of words before its final pronouncement that "Duckworth and Lewis are out...":



'Zombie photography'



Sticky Fingers (1971)

*The end of the over the over is ended
the end of the end of the over is over
the end of the end of the over is ended
The end of the over the over is ended
the end of the end of the over is over
the end of the end of the over my friend.*

*I knew that I had little cause to fear their
young leg spinner.
He loosened up his shoulders and with no
run up at all,
He rolled his right arm over and he let go
of the ball... it was*

*Jiggery pokery who was this nobody making
me look a buffoon...
Like a blithering old buffoon.*

*At first the ball looked straight enough I
had it in me sights,
But such was its rotation that it swerved
out to the right.
I thought "Well, that's a leg break, that's
easily defended."*

*So I stuck my left leg out and
jammed my bat against it.*

*But the ball it span obscenely
and out of the rough it
jumped,
Veered across my bat and pad
clipping my off stump.
It took a while to hit me, I
momentarily lingered,
But then I saw old Dickie
Bird slowly raise his finger...
it was*

CHORUS:
*Jiggery pokery trickery jokery
how did he open me up?
Robbery muggery Aussie
skullduggery out for a bug-
gering duck.*

*What a delivery? I might
as well have been holding a*

*child's balloon
Jiggery pokery who was this nobody
making me look a buffoon,
Like an accident prone BABOON,*

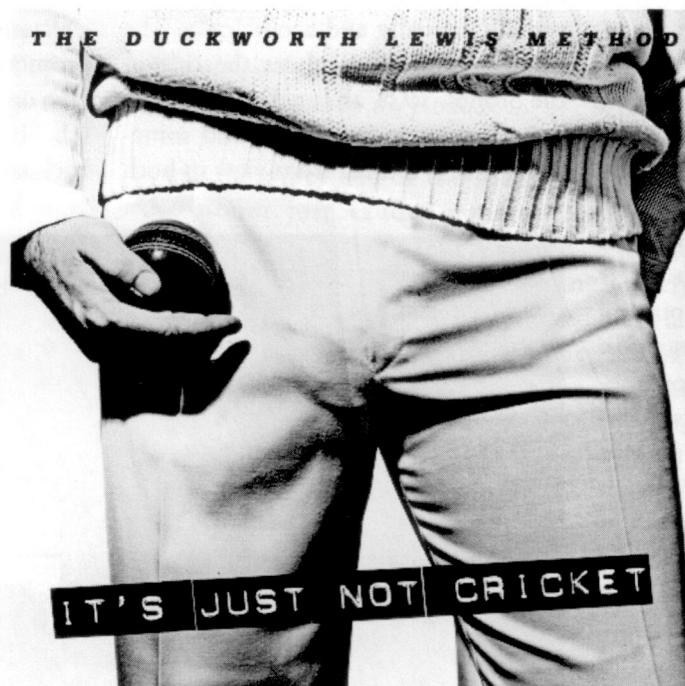
Perhaps the most sophisticated piece of the album – and certainly one beloved by audiences who by 2013 tend to sing along unfazed by the complexity of the words⁵ – is a music hall-inspired song called “Jiggery Pokery” about the famous “Ball of the Century” spun by Australian spinner Shane Warne in 1993 against the hapless English batsman Mike Gatting. The event is strikingly captured as experienced by the latter, and the verbal pyrotechnics on this song merit quoting it in full to give the flavour of the story:

'Twas the first test of the Ashes series 1993.

Australia had only managed 289 and we

*Felt all was going to plan that first innings at Old Trafford,
Then Merv Hughes and his handlebar moustache dismissed poor 'Athers'.*

I took the crease to great applause and focussed on me dinner.



“It’s Just Not Cricket”

*Robbery muggery Aussie skullduggery out
for a bugging duck.
What a delivery I might as well have
been holding a contra bassoon.*

*child's balloon
Jiggery pokery who was this nobody
making me look a buffoon,
Like an accident prone BABOON,*

BABOON, BABOON, BABOON,
BABOON, BABOON, BABOON,
BABOON, BABOON, BABOON...

How such a ball could be
bowled I don't know, but if you
asked me
If it had been a cheese roll it
would never have got past me...
it was

CHORUS:

Jiggery pokery trickery jokery
how did he open me up?
Robbery muggery Aussie skull-
duggery what in the buggery

What a delivery I might as well
have been holding a cob of corn.
Jiggery pokery who was this
nobody making me look so for-
lorn...

I HATE SHANE WARNE...!

And while the humorous side of this tragedy can be seen by anyone (except, perhaps, Mike Gatting, who according to Hannon “refuses to admit that this song exists”⁶), the in-jokes can all be looked up on the Internet these days.

Second Innings

After playing at various cricket events, gaining access to cricket circles and receiving largely positive reviews in the wake of *The Duckworth Lewis Method*, Hannon and Walsh put the project on hold to dedicate themselves to their ‘real’ careers, with Hannon putting out The Divine Comedy’s *Bang Goes the Knighthood* and embarking on a series of solo concerts in 2010 (as documented on *Live at Sommerset House* in 2011) and Walsh reforming Pugwash for *The Olympus Sound* (released in 2011 in Ireland and in 2012 in the UK and Europe). Hoping to follow up on the success of their debut, however, Duckworth and Lewis returned in time for the 2013 cricket season with their second album, *Sticky Wickets*, this time going for a 1975 photograph of famous first British sporting stalker Michael Angelow (seriously!) on the cover and setting out to find him (he

declined the request for a repeat performance after he was dragged from 38 years of fully-clad anonymity by the *Independent*).⁷



“It’s Just Not Cricket”

In the booklet, Duckworth and Lewis self-deprecatingly indicate a state of zombification for themselves, but the album does not sound ossified at all.⁸

It begins by simultaneously evoking and spoofing the Rolling Stones verbally, visually and acoustically: The title *Sticky Wickets* echoes the title of the Stones’ 1971 album *Sticky Fingers*, the cover art is centred around something that is hidden from view in both

instances, and the guitar riff on which the title song is based seems to be a merger of “Brown Sugar” (the opening track on *Sticky Fingers*) and the Stones’ 1981 hit “Start Me Up” in a reference which is however thoroughly undermined by the fact that the song is sung in falsetto throughout.

While “Sticky Wickets” (the song) is not yet very specific in its cricket focus – after all, ‘sticky wicket’ is an established metaphor for difficult circumstances which has shed its cricket origins – things become increasingly grounded in cricket lore and cricket personalities afterwards, beginning with a jaunty serenade largely based on quotes by cricketer David “Bumble” Lloyd about Pakistani Captain Shahid Afridi (“Boom Boom Afridi”), and Lloyd actually

turned up to record some spoken word parts for the track. Similarly, legendary cricket commentator Henry Blofeld is heard in spoken word passages on “It’s Just not Cricket”, a nostalgic rejection of corrupting influences of all kinds (inauthentic entertainment, commercialization, baseball) also released as a promotional single with another visual take on the Stones’ *Sticky Fingers* cover (cf. “It’s Just Not Cricket” front and back cover).



The Duckworth Lewis Method live at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, November 27, 2013.

This theme is then developed from a different angle in the interior monologue of "The Umpire" who feels left behind by the times ("There was a time when we were held high, but now they've got technology / Replaying every scene to prove that we are of no further use / And sport is just a computer game"), and this sense of being side-lined is picked up again in "Third Man", the second single culled from the album, which adopts the perspective of a player who finds himself persistently in the most useless position a cricket player can find himself in. Here, Daniel 'Harry Potter' Radcliffe puts in a guest appearance to recite a poem which obliquely addresses the escapist dimension of the game over the Harry Lime-theme from Orson Welles's famous film ("In the shadow of the doorway she is standing like a lost child / An old woman is screaming, the crowd's becoming hostile / My thoughts have been diluted like a 2/6 novella / Am I in a field in England or in the dark streets of Vienna?"). On the other hand, "Out in the Middle" highlights the authentic dimension of the game in which you have to prove yourself without any help from the outside once you're on the field ("And you can pray to any deity you like / I'm sure he's got a lot of better things to do with his time").

There are more guest appearances on the album, with actor and comedian Matt Berry reciting the scores of various famous players in descending order at the end of the swinging "Mystery Man", which enumerates all techniques available to spinners in its lyrics, and a whole cast of critic luminaries taking turns articulating the words "Nudging and Nurdling" in the delightfully childish closing track, which refers to the rather aimless passages of endless cricket matches that do not exist any longer in shorter variants like 20/20, as Hannon laments in interviews. But the climax surely comes with Stephen Fry reciting the following poem by Neil Hannon on "Judd's Paradox", which takes its cue from the film *Another Country*:⁹

*Sweet is the sound as leather bound the
well timed willow strikes
Mild the applause that cheers the course
of the bat and the ball alike
Soft is the ground where can be found a
young man sound asleep
And old is the game that shares its name
with the insect at his feet*

*The bourgeoisie bat the proletariat toil
in the field all day
I should be incensed by what it represents
and yet it's a damn good game
And although I hope that the peasants
revolt and cast off the yoke of oppression
Perhaps Europe's millions can storm the
pavilions after the afternoon session*

The chorus then spells out the tension between the allure of the game and its colonial origins in full clarity, developing a more sophisticated angle on the theme prominently introduced in "The Age of Revolution" from the first album:

*How could he know the lengths to which
they'd go
To claim his soul for England and the
Queen
How could it be colonial brains conceived
That glorious game
It always seems to be the paradox ...*

At the other end of the spectrum the album just exudes nonsensical good fun: Who needs an instrumental waltz entitled "Chin Music" in reference to a cricket bowling strategy aiming at a batsman's throat or chin? Who would have thought that technical definitions like "The line of a delivery is the direction of its trajectory / Measured in the horizontal axis" or "The length of a delivery is how far down the pitch / Towards the batsman the ball bounces" would lend themselves to be recast as song lyrics for the verses of a 1980s synth pop track ("Line and Length"), only to be met with a chorus of "Check your line and length (shoulda, woulda, coulda ...)" and a bridge in which a female voice suggests that you "Gotta get the ball where it ought

to be in the corridor of uncertainty". And who would have expected a music hall drinking song like "The Laughing Cavaliers" to end up on a 2013 pop record?

Not out

"We don't want to be superstars / 'Cause that's not really what we are / We are nudging and nurdling / And nudging and nurdling / Not budging the whole day through." These lines from the chorus of the closing track of *Sticky Wickets* nicely capture the kind of democratic and potentially anarchic carry-on style of humour (both in the straightforward sense and in its evocation of the low-budget comedies of the *Carry On*-series hugely successful in the U.K. in the 1960s and 70s) characteristic of the vision of cricket presented on the (so far?) two albums by The Duckworth Lewis Method. It is this humour which, in close conjunction with splendid songwriting and musicianship, forecloses the danger of fully falling into the trap of nostalgia. In a loving but tongue-in-cheek pastiche of a whole range of distinctly English musical styles, Duckworth/Walsh and Lewis/Hannon manage to transform their lifelong immersion in the culture of cricket into a highly entertaining and at times both moving and/or sophisticated commentary on life in and after the British Empire. While not a blockbuster mainstream success, both albums sold well enough to astonish their creators, and the intensity of the largely positive responses by critics and audiences on the Internet suggests that today's popular culture provides openings for intelligent entertainment of this kind, especially after the traditional paths of marketing music have given way to less corporatized modes of going public: Both *The Duckworth Lewis Method* and *Sticky Wickets* were published (as CD, vinyl and digital download) by Neil Hannon's own independent record label Divine Comedy Records, but they are readily available through Amazon and iTunes; the band maintains a well-furnished website (www.dlmethod.co.uk) full of quirky humour (as epitomized by the four chapters in the 'Stories' section),

video clips, sound files and lyrics even when the band itself is on hold; it has played all kinds of venues from book stores to record stores like Tower Records Dublin or Rough Trade East in London and from cricket grounds to concert halls like the Shepherd's Bush Empire in London of the Olympia Theatre in Dublin; time and again it has won over audiences with ebullient live versions of sophisticated studio arrangements in combination with continuous stand-up comedy banter between Walsh and Hannon (a number of YouTube clips provide a good impression of the highly interactive collective nature of these events in another instance of the advantages of convergence culture). In fact the worst review to be found on the Internet seems to come from *The Observer* in response to *Sticky Wicket*, and the damning verdict is "It's all a bit silly but fond and well-intentioned".¹⁰ The aggregate review website Metacritic, on the other hand, comes up with a metascore of 65 (out of 100) for *The Duckworth Lewis Method* and 76 for *Sticky Wickets* while the user score awards 8.7 (out of 10) for the latter and 7.2 for the first. With an average Metacritic career score of 70 so far and enthusiastic concert reviews, *The Duckworth Lewis Method* seems

to have established itself for good in spite of its seemingly eccentric cricket culture pretext – a rose in a garden of weeds indeed. As Dublin music critic Justin McDaid wrote in response to the latest Duckworth Lewis Method show so far:

"This gig and all it contains almost... almost... makes us want to appreciate cricket. It's shit though, innit ... we'll just let Duckworth Lewis Method be our guides."¹¹

Notes

1. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duckworth-Lewis_method (March 11, 2014).
2. The game tends to provoke this response in various registers. See, for example, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/19/robert-mc-crum-cricket-books> and <http://www.ribbonfarm.com/2010/09/14/cricket-as-metaphor/> (both accessed March 11, 2014).
3. All lyrics are quoted (with occasional modifications) from the official band website <http://www.dlmethod.co.uk>.
4. 20/20 (also Twenty20 or T20) is the most recent variant of cricket that shortens the matches to make them more media-compatible and thus commercially more viable like other sports.

5. See, for example, "Jiggery Pokery" live at the Empire, Shepherd's Bush on September 21, 2013 under <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7R-sukzPVBI> (accessed March 11, 2014).

6. See the clip mentioned in FN4, 3:44-3:48.

7. Cf. <http://www.dlmethod.co.uk/press/the-independent-where-is-streaker-michael-angelow> and <http://www.dlmethod.co.uk/press/the-independent-we-track-down-britains-first-sporting-streaker> (both accessed March 12, 2014).

8. The booklet can be downloaded under <http://www.dlmethod.co.uk/news/sticky-lyrics> (March 12, 2014).

9. Hannon: "There's a scene where one of the characters and his friend Judd are walking outside a cricket ground discussing the paradox that, as much as they love this beautiful game, cricket also kind of sums up everything that's wrong about colonialism." Cf. <http://www.dlmethod.co.uk/press/the-national-the-musical-world-of-cricket> (March 13, 2014).

10. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jun/30/duckworth-lewis-method-sticky-wickets-review> (March 14, 2014)

11. <http://www.goldenplec.com/duckworth-lewis-method-olympia-theatre-review/> (March 14, 2014).