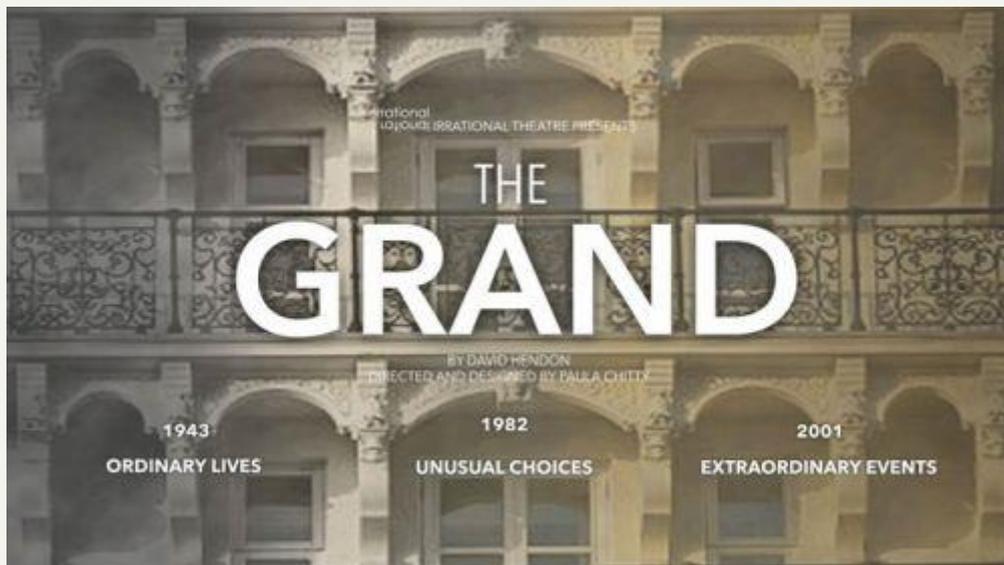


# Cultural Capital

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## The Grand – King's Head Theatre

By Maryam Philpott



With so much focus on the return of the West End and, in recent weeks, the opening of big shows including *Cinderella*, *Frozen* and *Back to the Future* as well as the arrival of Hollywood stars in shows like *Macbeth* at the Almeida, the development of new work at fringe venues shouldn't be overlooked. The King's Head Theatre in Islington has a reopening programme focused on new work including a play by David Hendon which arrives in London for the first time, directed by Paula Chitty. *The Grand* is a hidden gem offering just four performances set in the same hotel room across three war torn decades.

This intriguing structural device is an opportunity to explore not just the changing nature of warfare across the twentieth and twenty-first century but the consistency of human relationships, fears and desires even with the world crashing around you. Set in 1943, 1982 and 2001, *The Grand* is based on real events, and while the hotel setting in Brighton is most obviously associated with the second decade, the decision to focus the play in a fixed location proves to be a smart and interesting choice.

It is a decision that orientates three seemingly disconnected stories around the notion that, while there will always be wars and militaristic ideologies, around them ordinary lives take place, shaped and ultimately defined by the impact of conflict on the physical and mental wellbeing of people who continue to exist in spite of their challenging contexts. Each era, then, offers a single scenario through which the human experience of prolonged warfare is viewed in one room on 11 September in three very different decades.

**1943**

Hendon sets his first scene in the middle of the Second World War as a young housewife checks-in to the hotel for a dirty weekend with her American airman lover for their first time together. Edith and Frank's duologue is filled with the confusion and drama of life on the Home Front with subtle hints about the confines of rationing and references to the Blitz. However it more explicitly examines the effect of evacuation on a young mother missing her children and soldier husband, who suddenly has time on her hands when she is left in London without them.

Hendon writes Edith with a particular sensitivity, capturing the excitement and attraction to Frank, flattered by his feeling for her and, to a degree, his New York exoticism that on several levels proves an escape from her very British outlook. This is combined with an underlying guilt, even an innocence about men and extra-marital relationships that fuels much of the division between them. A character torn by an innate duty to her family and even to a particular way of life, this focus on Edith's maternal and marital duty underscores her sexual shyness and feelings of guilt that builds the tension between them.

Frank, by contrast, treads a more familiar path as a visitor to Britain, fighting a war that he has no personal connection to. Hendon uses this character to contrast the domestic experience of the UK and US, the freedom and more relaxed attitudes of the latter that contrast so well with the more stultifying rules and gossipy small-mindedness that shape Edith's outlook. Despite a tendency to complain about his desire for a relationship over the more immediate satisfaction his friends sought, Hendon gives Frank greater depth as the story unfolds, a dreamer, even a risk-taker able to see beyond the here and now to some other kind of existence.

And although this is a cataclysmic event in the life of Edith and Frank, Hendon situates what is in reality a very ordinary romance, the like of which *The Grand Hotel* must see have seen replicated across its rooms on a daily basis during the brewing pressure of a conflict that all couples knew could not last forever. What this means for them adds an unforeseen dynamic to their weekend, distilling every feeling they have for one another and the future in one room at this defining time. And Hendon builds a tender, believably complicated love story in a traditional wartime setting that is recognisable in the moral and physical restrictions it imposed on its citizens, while, most importantly establishing a locked room tension that extends throughout the play.

## **1982**

Act Two is a very different proposition almost forty years on in a vastly changed political climate. Here two members of the IRA are arming a bomb two weeks before the Conservative Party conference – but this is two years before the infamous Brighton bomb. Hendon, then, is building another kind of expectation into this section of the play, knowing that whatever happens in this room, the plan will be aborted or delayed. This scenario adopts the style of a thriller, initially another two-hander, that identifies a new form of combat and a more esoteric concept of warfare that replaces armies and invasion with guerrilla-style targeted attacks on choice locations.

To build tension in this part of the play Hendon uses the concept of betrayal within the organisation and a mole hunt that comes to a head in this hotel room either side of a brief interval. Hendon reaches back to Act One for the romance concept to add an additional flavour to

the interaction between agents Paula and Gerard but uses it instead to expose their vulnerabilities, as a tool to disarm a potential traitor in a place where political and nationalist motivations have merged. Unlike the opening scenario, here there is no separation between the personal and a conflict they cannot control happening outside, this time the struggle is more overtly in the room with the characters and ultimately its outcomes will be determined by them.

It is a more ferocious proposition than the emotional confusion of 1943, and with the introduction of a third team member – Mairead – it becomes a high-stakes drama that results in a number of shocks. Possibly the most disconnected of the three Acts, there is a growing apprehension here created by Chitty's direction and underscored by the decision to cut to an abrupt interval at a cliffhanger moment. The intriguing storytelling does indeed demonstrate the vast life of a single hotel room but it is a tad melodramatic in its focus on the explosive consequences of the treachery plot rather than the external context driving this scenario and the characters. In a future iteration that velocity could be pulled back a touch to expand on individual motivations, but Hendon recreates the era and its simmering anxiety really well.

## **2001**

A very different prospect again, the final part of the play set on the day the Twin Towers fell takes the play in yet another direction. It has much to say about the culture of the early 2000s and the cult of celebrity that filtered through society changing the way the media reported and commented on the personal lives of famous people. This section is more of a social comedy initially, a high-profile singer waking in a hotel room with his secret and cynical girlfriend as well as a drunk fan picked-up at a Brighton concert the previous evening.

The humour here comes from the hungover state of the characters, the piecing together of the night before and Adam's reflections on the fame that is at once a burden and a lifestyle of partying and entitled casual encounters that he is not prepared to relinquish. In this 2001 setting, Hendon reflects on the shock of 9/11 and the knowledge for ordinary people that something significant changed in an instant, picking up the terrorism threads from 1982 but understanding the global shift in perspective that this act of warfare created.

Wrapping that in a human drama about media exploitation, the very different values and morals of the twenty-first century and the characters experiencing a defining historical moment together is neatly done. Arguably, the conclusion of this piece which connects too tidily to the 1940s couple is unnecessary in a play that focuses on the life of the room, yet Hendon succeeds in recognisably recreating an era in which war and ideology were inextricably bound and, in this less predictable and intangible form, had direct consequences for ordinary people.

## **Staging 60 Years of Society and Conflict**

Taken together these three Acts exist at points of change in the nature of combat and in the lives of these characters, a moment where the world shifted slightly and new forms of existence were being forged. For Edith and Frank, Gerard, Paula and Mairead, Adam, Gena and Lara, the consequences of their few hours in The Grand Hotel prove lifechanging, emerging into a different

emotional, social and political world. And Hendon charts well the changing nature of social interaction across these decades, how people behaved and the extent to which the outside world intrudes on and drives their conduct. Equally, it captures a consistent feeling of danger which in 1943, 1982 and 2001 came from quite different but related sources.

Chitty stages *The Grand* in a simple hotel set, using a central bed, desk and off-stage bathroom which is integral to the action in all three periods as a place of refuge and composure, the site of the proposed incendiary device and a functional space where a drunken Lara can vomit. Some slightly overlong scene-changes update the features of the set, substituting telephones (external calls a feature of the unfolding drama in each section) and other props for era-appropriate versions. But the consistency of the location draws the strands of the play together, emphasising the value of this single setting on the same September day and its many many stories.

*The Grand* also uses a cast of just three to replicate its character types throughout the decades. Eloise Jones is particularly strong as Edith, a sweet and mild women in circumstances that entirely befuddle her, with a very 1940s ability to subdue her true desires for decency and respectability that Jones expands into a complex inner life. Her more manipulative Paula and Lara make an excellent contrast as powerful female characters using their scenarios for their own quite different purposes. Thomas Deller is strongest as musician Adam in the 2001 section, conveying his arrogance and self-absorption while maintaining some empathy for him, while Emily O'Mahony has most to work with as the calculating and powerful Mairead.

The ways in which Hendon explores echoes of memory through the years is really interesting, looking at how societies are shaped by the changing nature of warfare, community values and morality as well as the consistency of love, identity and a need to be seen which connects the characters and settings together. Most of all, the life of a single hotel room gives *The Grand* a strong platform to build upon, and, with a little refining, this promising concept-driven play has a much longer life ahead.

*The Grand* was performed at the King's Head Theatre on 14-18 September by Irrational Theatre. Follow this blog on Twitter [@culturalcap1](#) or Facebook [Cultural Capital Theatre Blog](#)