



SNAPSHOT

'Puddle' (1952) by MC Escher

MC Escher is best known for his mind-bending fictional interiors. But the natural world also inspired the Dutch artist. The idea for "Puddle" (1952), a woodcut showing trees and a full Moon mirrored in a shallow indent of water, came to him while roaming the woods near his home in Baarn, in the Netherlands.

An exhibition at the Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York pairs a selection of Escher's prints with images by the Hungarian-born photographer André Kertész. Though their media differs, both artists used a modernist approach to challenge formal conventions. Escher's intricate engravings,

lithographs and mezzotints take the form of visual puzzles, while Kertész's whimsical photographs appear as abstracted city views and distorted nudes and still lifes. A Kertész "Puddle" (1967) captures a reflection of the Empire State Building.

Escher noted the French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's observation that "une mare en relation avec la lune révèle des parentés cachées" – a puddle set in relation to the Moon reveals hidden connections – and he was clearly fascinated by the symbolism of the image.

Phoebe Evans
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, to March 21

The treacherous business of screen-to-stage

Rebecca Watson

Trending

Did the world run out of ideas? When I saw the announcement that a stage show of *The Traitors* was in the works, my head fell into my hands. What next? *Love Island: the Musical?* OK, scratch that – that's genuinely a good idea, but only because it'd almost certainly be parody. *The Traitors On Stage* is more like imagining a dramatised *Countdown*.

In a time of endless sequels and remakes, the increase in screen-to-stage adaptations is yet another example of how audiences are patronised. We can't even finish a TV series without needing a spin-off to wean us off. Every idea that triumphs now has to live a thousand lives.

"Taking *The Traitors* from screen to stage is a hugely exciting next step for this much-loved brand," commented the chief executive of Studio Lambert, skipping his way to the bank so giddily that he forgot to conceal the fact that the whole thing is a brand exercise.

Some will love the theatre adaptation, of course, or at least receive a dull buzz from being vaguely reminded of something they liked. But the cynicism leaves me grinding my teeth. Culture's job seems increasingly to be about *déjà-vu* comfort rather than originality. Is it not time to let the cultural event end gracefully, rather than dressing up the corpse and trying to make it dance?

art form will suit the story and the work. In a good adaptation, the work initiates something that only that art form can make happen. Theatre inevitably brings a liveness, a community, which can be used to extraordinary effect.

But more and more, the space is being used for projects that already have a mass audience. When it comes to *The Traitors* . . . *Stranger Things* . . . *The Devil Wears Prada* . . . *Back to the Future* . . . *Paranormal Activity* – dare I mention *Harry Potter* too? – it is just another facet of the fandom expansion pack (*The Traitors On Stage* joins *The Traitors* live experience, book, and card and board games). It brings to mind a playwright who last year described the theatre landscape to me as "Yogi Bear

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On Ice", referring to the propensity of "adaptations of things people like better on TV".

I'm biased, of course. I vividly remember as a kid watching a stage adaptation of *Bananas in Pyjamas* and experiencing what can only be diagnosed as existential boredom. This was *nothing* like the TV show, and how long was it going to go on for?

Maybe that was my origin story as a critic. At least the production was a strategy to (try to) entertain kids for a couple of hours: a venture I wholeheartedly support, and for which I know many parents are indebted. But adults are not children. This should be too obvious to state, but take a moment to contemplate the assault of escape rooms, novelty and babyfied sport experiences, adult ball pits and soft-play zones

... and you might start to doubt.

Really, it's the business owners and commissioners who treat us like kids and, inevitably, the explanation relates to money. UK theatre is rife with revivals of classic plays, screen-to-stagers or safe state-of-the-nation pieces that have general audience appeal by dramatising, say, the England football team.

The number of new plays post-pandemic has reduced by nearly a third. Dwindling funding and the financial consequences of the pandemic has led to safe commissioning and little space or support for new and bold writing. Musicals are now 40 per cent of London theatre. Hollywood casting – once a newsworthy choice – is commonplace: the career of the playwright and the theatre actor has changed shape entirely.

The space for risk now is hard to spot with the naked eye. It is easy to see the pandemic as a point in time we have moved on from – "things will never be the same again" replaced by collective amnesia. But maybe we should spend more time contemplating the ways in which we still live in its shadow.

If the climate was different, I would usher all of theatre in – taste is broad after all, and I'm not here to tell you what to enjoy. But artistic directors need to trust that the audience is out there. The trouble is, risk tends to take place when there's a safety net. That can be money, but it can also be philosophy: the playwright Sarah Kane, whom I wrote about last year, had her groundbreaking debut play *Blasted* staged at the Royal Court in 1995, partly because the theatre employs the principle of "the right to fail". They had no idea the effect Kane was about to stir up – they simply made space for the coin toss.

Rebecca Watson is a commissioning editor and writer for FT Weekend and author of the novels 'I Will Crash' and 'little scratch'



Mandelson and the two elites

Janan Ganesh

Citizen of nowhere



No writer can contain the scandal in an elegant sentence. The subclauses pile up. Soon after the financial crash, as a UK minister of state, Peter Mandelson forwarded sensitive emails to Jeffrey Epstein, who even at the time was a convicted child sex offender, and had previously given cash to Mandelson, who later "lied" about the relationship, according to the current prime minister, to get appointed ambassador to Washington. "Britain's worst political scandal since at least the Profumo affair", might be easier.

What, besides disgust, should the public take from it? For one thing, a better understanding of the elite(s).

Let's start with the rich. Most people do not find money – or the main ways of making money, such as banking – intrinsically interesting. This might be less true in societies that are new to wealth. But it holds in the established western cities. There, the self-made often discover too late that all their work and risk-taking has brought them less social status than expected. A minor magazine editor outranks them at a party. A hand-to-mouth actor is more welcome at Soho House. A bureaucrat can affect their business.

Most rich people don't mind. Even those who do tend to react maturely, perhaps sponsoring the arts for some reflected glory or buying a media outlet. But some will cross the line in seeking to be near the beau monde.

Which consists of whom? Artists, intellectuals, politicians, even the occasional journalist: the public rather than private 1 per cent. Their value in

social settings is high. Their income might not be. It is hard to get rich doing something fun. Again, most of them just shrug this off as the tax on having a cool job. Even those who really mind will often find a clean solution, such as the classic private-public intermarriage, where one spouse provides the wealth and the other the social clout. (George Washington's marriage to a Virginia plantation-owner is a template from the annals of hypergamy.) A few, however, will do improper things for the rich to get some of their

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crumbs. It is just too jarring for them to be the star of a dinner party and then fly economy.

What the public sees as a monolith called "the elite" is really two different tribes, and so much corruption stems from the gap between them. Their desires are not just distinct but fatally interlocking. The private elite can scratch the public elite's itch to live beyond their means. In return, the public elite can relieve some of the boredom and anonymity of business. Even without privileged information to offer, Mandelson was beguiling to the rich because he came from the world of ideas and events, not their world of facts and numbers. Their appeal to him scarcely needs spelling out.

Nowhere is the intra-elite split more obvious than in Davos. Often misunderstood as a place of homogenous privilege, it showcases the private-public difference. Journalists do fireside chats with tycoons and then retire to very different hotels. Celebrity academics peddle their books to half-comprehending executives. Famous campaigners seek donations for their favoured humanitarian causes. Both sides need each other. The rich get a sort of vicarious respectability out of it. For the public 1 per cent, it might be their first time in a Swiss ski chalet.

Mandelson, who adored the game of public life while chafing at its relative penury, tried to bridge the two elites. It turns out that some gulfs are unbridgeable. Part of growing up is choosing.

He is often celebrated as a political strategist, but this has to be put into perspective. The only electoral advice that matters is "pitch to the floating voter" and "choose a good leader". Even those amount to the same thing, as a good leader will by definition prioritise the floating voter. If Mandelson had a real sixth sense for something, it was human insecurities. He understood that people who make huge fortunes do not quite feel themselves to be on top of the world. There always seems to them to be another room where the real party is going on.

His legacy will be that people will say of the establishment, louder than ever, "They are all the same", when the problem is precisely that they aren't.

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