

++

the great gatsby

Flappers, financiers
and American
dreams

As the hit parade of stage and screen adaptations begins, Douglas Kennedy explains why we're still obsessed with F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jazz Age classic

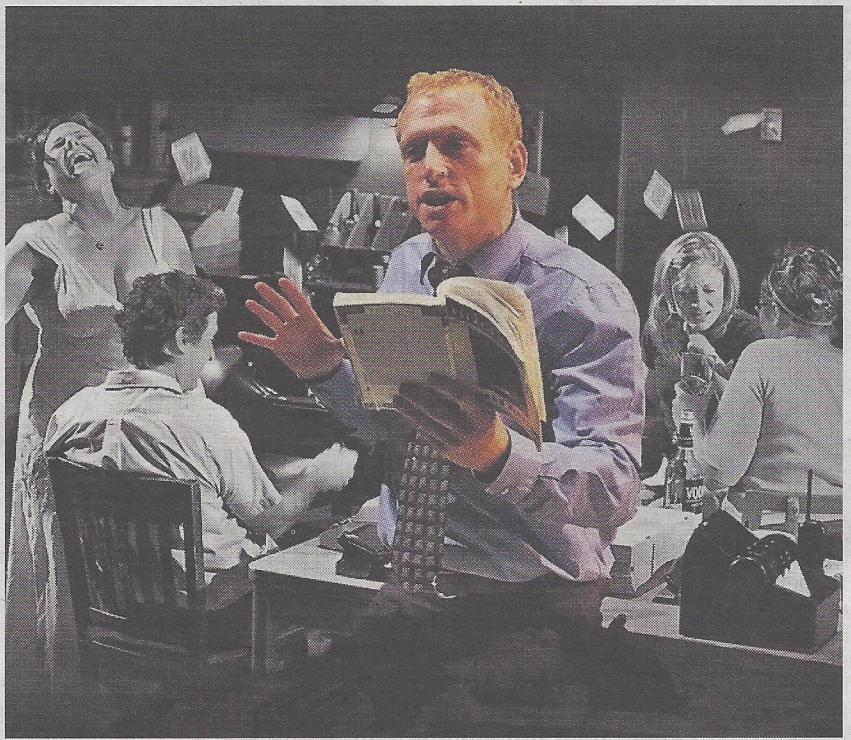
A man walks into an office, about to begin his day's work. Judging from the papers and files everywhere, the elderly computers on the desks, the fluorescent tube lighting, the general ambience of drab quotidian realities, this is the sort of workplace that invites instant ennui. And the gent in question — his suit and general deportment as non-descript as the office in which he spends his nine-to-five life — has the demeanour of someone who has adopted a "going through the motions" mentality when it comes to the dreary realities of his working day. As do his fellow internees in this office — all of whom look like they would prefer to be anywhere but here.

Then, out of nowhere, a small surprise enters the gent's life. Rifling through a box he finds a book. A novel, in fact. This bemuses him. But he's also intrigued, as this is clearly not the sort of office where novels pop out of nowhere. Opening the novel to its first page, he begins to read — in a voice that is just this side of toneless: "In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticising any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in the world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

His curiosity kindled, he continues to read on. Soon his workmates are dropping by his desk, drawn into his ever-involved declamation of the novel. Then, almost as if by osmosis, they begin to take on the principal roles in the novel's narrative. An accidental reading of a discovered book becomes a play — and one which lasts the entire eight-hour working day, with two coffee breaks (better known as intervals) and the requisite time out for a meal.

And during the course of those eight hours spent in this very drab office, an entire parallel universe comes to life. It's a 1920s American world; that post-First World War era when hedonism and bathtub gin and unapologetic displays of conspicuous consumption were the social norms; when the nation was in thrall to the surface pleasures of a boom economy; when, lurking behind the gilded, Jazz Age veneer, the great existential dilemmas of American life seemed only to be augmented



ACT OF ENDURANCE Scott Shepherd narrates for eight hours in the stage show, *Gatz*

ed by gimcrack celebrity and displays of plutocratic power.

Of course, the novel that is being read on stage is one of the central works of the 20th-century literary canon: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. And this eight-hour theatrical rendering of the book — *Gatz* — not only encompasses every word of the original text, but is also, quite simply, one of the more extraordinary theatrical experiences I have encountered in a lifetime of serious theatre-going. Yes, its epic Wagnerian length does require commitment and fortitude from the spectator. But give yourself over to the event — as I did when I first saw the performance at New York's Public Theatre in April — and its rewards are manifold, especially in the seamless manner by which that drab office worker gradually becomes the living embodiment of the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, and you, the spectator of this

Fitzgerald promised, 'I shall write a novel better than any ever written in America'

rendition, find yourself so pulled into the lyrical wonder of Fitzgerald's prose.

As such, *Gatz* is both a great testament to the extraordinary transporting powers of literature (you are literally turning the page throughout its eight-hour duration), and a celebration of the narrative and thematic force of Fitzgerald's tale — in which materialistic preoccupations speak volumes about the haunting solitariness at the centre of American life.

Intriguingly, we are currently being

quasi-bombarded with re-examinations of this benchmark American novel. A somewhat freer stage adaptation has just finished its run at Wilton's Music Hall in London. *Gatsby*, the musical (no doubt with an exclamation point after the gent's name), is due to follow shortly. It will also be the basis of a ballet (watch out for a pas-de-deux Charleston). And later this year, that master of cinematic hyper-visuality, Baz Luhrmann, will have a new screen version out, replete with Leonardo Di Caprio as *Gatsby* and all that flapper fashion hitting us in 3-D.

Why this sudden hit parade of *Gatsbys*? The prosaic answer is that the novel's copyright expired last year. Luhrmann, whose project was in development before the rights went public, identifies a more profound contemporary resonance: "If you wanted to show a mirror to people that says, 'You've been drunk on money', they're not going to want to see it. But if you reflected that mirror on another time they'd be willing to. People will need an explanation of where we are and where we've been, and *The Great Gatsby* can provide that explanation."

Then again, the novel's ongoing contemporary import is also linked to the way it looks at that dangerous *Totentanz* that is always acted out when money and romantic desire become entangled, not to mention the ruthlessness of a culture rooted in the need for possession. As the author himself noted before his death from a heart attack at the age of 44: "There are no second acts in American lives."

Indeed, like all major writers, Fitzgerald was a novelist who reflected the contradictions and anxieties of the era he inhabited, yet one who also fell victim to what the United States' first great Aristotelian

philosopher, William James, deemed “the bitch-goddess Success”. He was a son of the Upper Midwest — born in 1896 to a wildly unsuccessful businessman and a mother he later described as always being “half-insane with pathological nervous worry” in the ever-frostbitten Minnesota city of St Paul. From an early age he decided he was destined for a greatness outside of the mainstream commercial life in which his father so foundered. Although publishing stories by the time he was attending the elite St Paul Academy (very New World Etonian in its socio-academic orientations), he was already seen at this nascent juncture of his life to be gifted when it came to things literary and bon vivant, yet profoundly middling in the more practical realm of classwork and exams. This contradictory double act plagued him during his years at Princeton. While there, he was a literary star who was ever on the verge of dropping out (which he finally did). His entire life was one in which his immense talents were infested by even more immense self-doubts and a notable ability when it came to self-sabotage.

A few years after Princeton — as America was embracing the start of a decade of newfound, wild prosperity — Fitzgerald found himself, at the age of 24, the most celebrated young writer in America. The year was 1920. This highly photogenic and style-conscious author — now married to the ultimate of Southern belles, Zelda Sayre, a woman whose beauty was counter-weighted by the sort of ever-augmenting psychodramas of which Fitzgerald’s mother was such a specialist — had published a first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which his publishers, Scribners, marketed under the slogan (dreamed up by Fitzgerald himself): “A novel about flappers, written for philosophers.” The initial modest 3,000 print run sold out in three days. F. Scott Fitzgerald woke up to find himself famous.

But as Emily Dickinson noted in the previous American century:

Fame is a bee.
It has a song —
It has a sting —
Ah, too, it has a wing.

By the time Fitzgerald’s second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, was published in 1922, his marriage was already in highly troubled waters, his inability to manage money was heightened by his spendthrift ways, and he was shaken by the critical coolness to this more naturalistic tale of an American patrician’s decline and fall. Commercially, the novel did not achieve the great sales of his debut. A third book, *The Vegetable*, was a disaster. By 1923, the now 29-year-old novelist found himself in debt and a serious alcoholic. Returning to

Europe — needing to churn out stories and hack pieces for “the slicks” (the glossy magazines) — he wrote to his editor Maxwell Perkins (who, in his championing of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe, became the great bridesmaid to several key novels in the American canon): “Well, I shall write a novel better than any novel ever written in America and become par-excellence the best second-rater in the world.”

Certainly Perkins immediately saw the brilliance of the novel that Fitzgerald delivered to him in the autumn of 1924, and which had such working titles as *Trimalchio*, *Gold-Hatted Gatsby*, and *Under the Red, White and Blue* (posterity thanks Perkins for forcing the author to stick to *The Great Gatsby*). It was a slim novel, a mere 50,000 words. As publication approached in April 1925, Fitzgerald was beleaguered by his financial insecurity. Although the novel garnered excellent reviews and letters of admiration from Willa Cather, Edith Wharton and T. S. Eliot, its sales were poor. Whatever his mammoth self-doubts, Fitzgerald nevertheless knew his novel was something of an achievement: “*Gatsby* was far from perfect in many ways,” he wrote a friend after its publication, “but all in all it contains such prose as has never been written in America before.”

Fitzgerald got it wrong when calling *Gatsby* imperfect. The novel stands as a near-perfect masterpiece of time, place and larger socio-philosophic concerns.

Its narrator, Nick Carraway, is a midwesterner; a Yale graduate who has drifted into Wall Street and life in a cottage on Long Island; a cottage in the shadow of the estate of a shadowy tycoon, Jay Gatsby. Carraway is the ultimate insider/outsider, a narrator who can engage only so much with the mess of life and, as such, has cast himself perfectly in the role of the involved observer. As he notes: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”

It is this self-designed “within/without” status that makes Carraway the perfect guide through the story of Jay Gatsby — a man who is the ultimate testament to the American love affair with personal reinvention, and who has built a fortune from shady means. Is he a bootlegger, a high-end gangster, and does his real name, *Gatz*, connote an ethnicity secretly repellant to the White Anglo Saxon Protestants who happily sup at his table and attend his lavish soirees?

Carraway has a Yale friend, Tom Buchanan, a businessman of sorts. He is the perfect embodiment of all-American anti-intellectualism, with the requisite entitlement complex that makes him believe everyone, in his way, deserves to be mowed down. He has a beautiful wife, Daisy, whom he emotionally ignores, but nonetheless considers a prized possession. His mistress is a Princess Not So Bright, the wife of the garage mechanic who fixes his car. And his wife has a history with the

**In today’s era
of financial
chicanery, the
novel remains
a defining
statement
on affluence
and love**



**The author
F. Scott Fitzgerald, with
his wife, Zelda, c 1920**

cryptic Gatsby; a history that begins to engulf the novel's major players

Indeed, Gatsby's friendship with Carraway is based, in part, on his neighbour's neutral non-judgmental detachment, and his disinterest in material plenty. Nick learns of Gatsby's ongoing love for Daisy, and his need to win her. But is this love based on genuine passionate engagement, or on the desire to possess? And this chimerical romance, which eventually wreaks destruction and death, raises a larger primordial issue: is so much of American life about the pursuit of illusions in a culture where money is the way we keep score?

On which note... echoes of *Gatsby* reverberate everywhere within the financial inner ear of modern life. Many a lazy journalist found, in Bernie Madoff's role as an illusionist of wealth, a reworking of the Gatsby myth. But then, in one of those "sometimes life really is just a little too close to art" moments, one of Madoff's more high-profile victims, Bert Brodsky, owned the Long Island mansion believed to have been the inspiration for Gatsby's grand house. Brodsky's manse, like Gatsby's, ended up empty and neglected (it was demolished last year). And a prominent American economist recently devised a newfangled way of examining the lessening social mobility and rising monetary inequality in contemporary life. What did he call it? "*The Great Gatsby Curve*".

Then again, money is at the very heart of the Gatsby story. The very American need to accumulate — and, as such, make your imprint on a society that so venerates the trappings of wealth — is counterpointed in the novel by the way in which American society sidesteps the notion of tragedy or personal sadness. Most tellingly, *Gatsby* casts a melancholic eye on the way loneli-

ness underscores so much in a society that is so beholden to the tenets of Social Darwinism. As such, part of the novel's genius is its ability to regard the American obsession with surface (Fitzgerald's recounting of Gatsby's wardrobe and the excesses of his soirees are among the most masterful passages of social nuance in 20th century literature) and the way accumulation remains a pursuit devoid of consideration.

The Great Gatsby can also be approached as a great lyrical romance, the mellifluousness of Fitzgerald's astonishing prose augmented by his pellucid analysis of the tragic inevitability of American life.

Read today — in an era when the specious nature of celebrity and material acquisitiveness are celebrated; when the gulf between the new plutocracy and the rest of us mere mortals is beyond vast; when financial chicanery and the purchase of status are so much part of the contemporary lingua franca — the novel remains a defining statement about the complex illusory interplay between affluence and love in modern life.

Coming away from that astonishing eight-hour reading/enactment of *The Great Gatsby* onstage, I went right back to the novel itself as soon as I was home, marvelling yet again at Fitzgerald's luxuriant language and the crystalline vision that so defined his world-view. Fitzgerald achieved true epic grandeur with *The Great Gatsby*. And the novel's central theme still resonates and disturbs: the longing we all have for a place in a profoundly material world that is indifferent to us all.

Gatz is at the Noël Coward Theatre, London WC2 (0844 482 5141) from Friday to July 15. *The Great Gatsby* film is due out in December. *The Moment* by Douglas Kennedy is published by Arrow

