



[Travelling Light](#) by National Theatre

Screened at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) February 2012

With [The Artist](#) and Martin Scorsese's 'Hugo' film seems to be looking back to its roots, and in Nicholas Wright's play **Travelling Light** we see the people who made Hollywood. These are the eastern European immigrants who brought their story telling skills to the new medium and, perhaps more than anyone else, created the American identity. Men like Louis B Mayer who chose 4th of July for his birthday and established the Hardy family as the American archetype.

These were the travelling showmen who used the new technology to dazzle the peasants of the Jewish shtetls. Then as persecution and poverty forced them west these magicians took the Yiddish culture to Hollywood. Wright argues that the basis for cinema were the Yiddish folk tales which were adapted for the new medium, together with the Jewish variety acts this formed the basis of an American culture.

The play follows Motl Medl a Hollywood director who looks back on his life in an east European

village at the beginning of the 20th century. Inspired by a desire to document the world around him he discovers and develops the vocabulary of film-making. He also encounters the pressures that face every film-maker and the arguments over money with his backer Bindel. He then realises that film cannot only document everyday life but create new stories.

His glamorous assistant and lover becomes his star thanks to the radiance of her face on film, while rows develop between the driven Motl and the domineering Bindel about money, mistresses and artistic integrity, the familiar battle lines of the movie business.

The play is inventive and charming - capturing the magic of 'The Artist'. Director Nicholas Hytner's immensely skilful production uses antique looking video and we see Motl's films develop from scenes of peasant life to melodramas. The sets by Bob Crowley beautifully echo the work of Chagall.

The cast is led by Anthony Sher as the Jewish patriarch and the centre of the play, his portrayal sometimes edges towards caricature – and it is sometimes reminiscent of 'Fiddler on the Roof'. Damien Molony plays the director protagonist but he is somewhat cold and his romance with leading lady Lauren O'Neil lacks passion.

As in the two current films 'The Artist' and 'Hugo' Wright tries to capture the magic of film and how the film maker can transform the mundane into art. We are so used to filmed images it is almost impossible to recapture the wonder of early audiences who could be transported to

another world. Ironically this is a task which theatre cannot fulfill; only in film can we see this magic.

I would argue that 'The Artist', in exploring the early days of cinema more effectively conveys the transformative power of the medium.