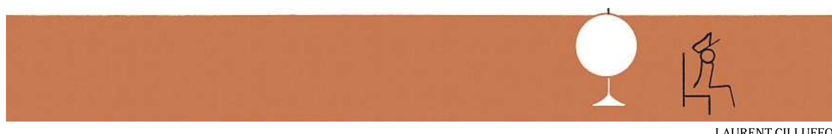
BY THE NUMBERS INTERNATIONAL CULTURE



LAURENT CILLUFFO

The destruction of Syria's cultural patrimony

The United Nations estimates that at least 191,000 people have been killed and millions displaced as a result of the civil war in Syria.

Those human costs have eclipsed the irreparable harm done to the country's cultural patrimony during almost four years of conflict. Five of Syria's six Unesco World Heritage sites have sustained damage, according to a recent satellite analysis by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

This month, Unesco convened a meeting at its headquarters in Paris to see what could be done to safeguard these sites from further harm. Part of the challenge, said Giovanni Boccardi, Unesco's head of emergency preparedness, is convincing the international aid community that cultural heritage also deserves urgent protection.

''There is a very close link between attacks on people that are being waged and the cultural dimension,'' he said, recalling how Iraq's civil uprising in 2006 was sparked by the destruction of the dome atop the 10th-century Al-Askari Shiite shrine in Samarra. ''The intentional obliteration of any trace of cultural heritage — be it tangible or intangible — is part of a strategy of war. This issue should not be considered as a luxury, a concern for an elite of antiquarians.''

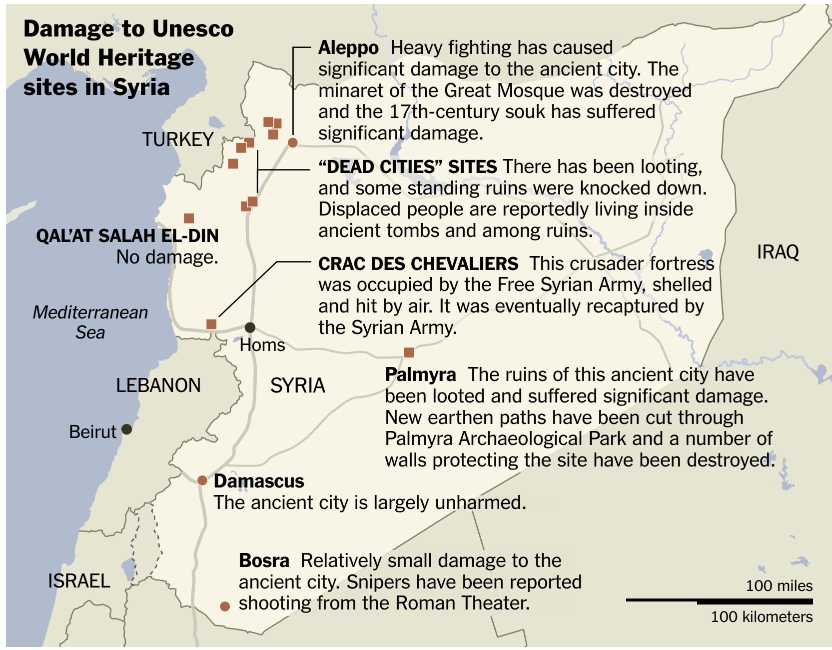
One of the hardest hit heritage sites has been the ancient walled city of Aleppo. In 2012, its famous 17th-century souk — often described as the world's largest covered market — was severely damaged by fire.

Last year, a 10th-century minaret of the nearby Umayyad Mosque crumbled after being hit by shellfire. ''The picture is really bleak,'' Mr. Boccardi said in a phone interview. ''We've been told about damage to important buildings in Aleppo as recently as this week.''

Fighting has damaged other heritage sites, including the crusader fortress Crac des Chevaliers and the ancient ruins of Palmyra, an important archeological site. In the north of the country, displaced people have reportedly sought shelter inside the so-called Dead Cities, a string of well-preserved Roman and Byzantine settlements that had been abandoned for more than a millennium.

The list of destruction goes on and on. ''We've heard reports of an ancient synagogue destroyed, of museums looted in the north, of the extensive pillaging of lesser-known archeological sites,'' said Mr. Boccardi, singling out a Roman settlement, Apamea, that is now riddled with holes dug by treasure hunters who reportedly stripped mosaics from the walls and floors. ''The site is today completely unrecognizable.''

Mr. Boccardi said that among the initiatives put forward at the meeting in Paris was the idea of getting antagonists in the conflict to somehow agree on ''protected cultural zones'' around certain sites, like the damaged Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo. ''At the end of the day most of the parties recognize that certain places have a common value that is important to protect,'' he said. ''It could sort of plant the seeds of a possible reconciliation process in the future.'' STEPHEN HEYMAN



Sources: Unesco, American Association for the Advancement of Science

Unruly painters of Rome's underbelly

BACCHUS, FROM PAGE 11

dalen was often depicted in religious images. This irreverence was typical of the group. On one occasion a party of them infiltrated a religious procession, carrying an image of their pagan deity Bacchus. Indeed, it is surprising the extent to which these pranks were tolerated by the Vatican, their sacrilegious dawn parade to the ''Tomb of Bacchus'' at Santa Costanza not banned until 1720.

Drawing inspiration from Caravaggio's ''Card Sharps'' and ''The Fortune Teller,'' a number of paintings in subsequent sections of the show, including Pietro Paolini's ''Card Sharps'' and Simon Vouet's ''Fortune Teller'' — in which a pretty young gypsy woman distracts a young man by reading his palm while an old hag picks his pocket — could be interpreted as warnings to the inexperienced and naive.

But other tavern scenes — Bartolomeo's ''Gathering of Drinkers'' and de Boulogne's ''Concert With Bas-Relief,'' with ancient decorated blocks of masonry featuring as improvised tables in both — are more ambiguous evocations of lowlife culture.

Suffused with a melancholy of more universal significance, such scenes are suggestive of the transience of all forms of human existence. The central focus of Valentin's vibrantly atmospheric painting is a pale, tousle-haired child, resting his weary head on his hand, who stares vacantly into space in a suspended moment of silence as two musicians prepare to strike up.

Life was precarious for even the most talented of these painters and many were chronically in debt. A rich source of information on their lives, contemporary court records bear witness to their frequent appearances before magistrates on various charges. When the sculptor David de Lariche died of his wounds after a violent incident, his roommate de Boulogne had to sell his friend's few remaining clothes to pay for his burial.

Despite being rewarded with substantial sums for their work, both Guido Reni, who was addicted to gambling, and de Boulogne ended up in paupers' graves. Giovanni Baglione, Lorrain and Manfredi all fathered illegitimate children, and Giovanni Lanfranco, Nicolas Poussin and van Laer were to die of syphilis. These artists spent their everyday lives in close proximity to the poor, the marginalized and the criminal, rubbing shoulders with them in cheap lodging-houses, taverns, dark drinking dives, gambling dens and prisons. This not only gave them an intimate knowledge of Rome's underworld but, evidently, fostered in them a sense of fellow feeling, even respect, for its inhabitants.

As a result, some began to paint portraits of the poor with a depth of observation and sympathy that was unprecedented. A series of such striking images here include Jusepe de Ribera's ''Beggar,'' the full-length ''Beggar With a Cittern'' by an anonymous follower of Ribera, Michael Sweerts's ''Old Man and a Boy'' and ''Pilgrim Resting,'' and Vouet's tour de force, ''Gypsy With a Baby'' — a moving and thought-provoking study of a Romany Madonna and Child that would not look out of place above an altar in a church.

The Baroque Underworld: Vice and Destitution in Rome. Villa Medici, Rome. Through Jan. 18. Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris. Feb. 24 through May 24.

RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

A scene from ''Behind the Beautiful Forevers,'' an adaptation of Katherine Boo's nonfiction book at the National Theater in London.

On the edge in Mumbai slum

LONDON

Adaptation of best seller takes London viewers into dark heart of poverty

BY CHARLES ISHERWOOD

''Sir, I work in plastics,'' the man before the judge says, his voice hesitant with humility.

The judge gives him a quick appraisal. ''Plastics? I suppose that means plastic bottles and bags,'' he says dismissively. ''You collect them, yes? Why not say so?'' The judge's amused scorn makes it obvious that he considers the man himself to be something akin to human refuse.

THEATER REVIEW

Thus are people brutally divided into classes — like the sorted recyclables that many of the characters subsist by collecting — in the harsh human economy of Mumbai depicted in ''Behind the Beautiful Forevers,'' David Hare's vivid stage adaptation of the best-selling book by Katherine Boo, making its premiere at the National Theater here.

Set primarily in a slum called Annawadi, hard by the airport, where hundreds of people live in squalor near a fetid lake of sewage, the play explores with empathy but unblinking honesty the desperate lives of the Indian underclasses. They have remained impoverished even as the country's economic boom has minted new millionaires and billionaires, and transformed Mumbai into a major hub of global business. High walls separate the slums of Annawadi from the gleaming new hotels circling the airport.

The production, directed with an evocative sense of place by Rufus Norris, the incoming artistic director of the National Theater (his first season of programming will begin in the spring), closely follows the letter and the spirit of Ms. Boo's superb account, which won a National Book Award in the United States.

She used a gruesome death, and the family brought to trial for causing it, as a focal point for an intimately researched study of the toxins of Indian culture: the endemic corruption that trickles down to the poor from above, even as precious little economic opportunity does; the dire living conditions that make morality a luxury few can afford; and the prejudice against the Muslim minority evinced by Hindus of even the lower classes.

Mr. Hare has done a creditable job of capturing Ms. Boo's panoramic exploration of a culture too few in the West have ever examined. For those who have not read the book, in particular, this trauma-stuffed and well-acted evening may come as a revelation, as we watch people ground down under the pressures of poverty.

The primary strand of the story follows the descending fortunes of the Husain family. The elder son, Abdul, played by the excellent Shane Zaza, is the primary breadwinner. He sorts the trash collected by ''pickers'' like his friend Sunil (the charming Hiran Abeysekera). Picking is less prestigious and profitable than sorting, so the Husain family — Abdul's mother, Zehrunisa (Meera Syal); his sister, Kehkashan (Anjli Mohindra); father, Karam (Vincent Ebrahim); and brother, Mirchi (Ronak Patani) — lives comparatively well.

In the opening moments, we watch as Abdul's hands flicker like a magician's over a pile of airport trash. Paul Arditti's sound design and the video by Jack Henry James regularly startle us with the whoosh of a jetliner descending, symbolic of the larger world that the play's characters know only from the detritus the passengers toss in trash cans. Seen at a distance on Katrina Lindsay's complex set, screens at the back of the stage advertise the latest lush Bollywood movie or luxury beauty product.

The relative prosperity of the Husains indirectly causes the calamity that befalls them. While renovating a wall of their small house — a mere shanty, but deluxe compared with some — they squabble with their neighbor, the one-legged Fatima (Thusitha Jayasundera). Hysterical with envy and the shame of her own life, Fatima avenges herself upon the Husains by committing a gruesome act of self-destruction. Although there are witnesses who know Fatima is to blame for her injuries, their jealousy of the Husains and the absurdity of the Indian justice system conspire to put most of the family in jail. Their business collapses as bribe after bribe is demanded by everyone involved.

As some reviews of the book noted, Charles Dickens has nothing on Ms. Boo in depicting the harsh life of the underclasses and the gut-churning ugliness of a legal system indifferent to the powerless. Given the need to economically dramatize events, Mr. Hare, who has written several fine documentary plays (''Via Dolorosa,'' ''The Permanent Way''), deserves credit for his unsentimental depiction of the characters, most of whom must sacrifice not just their ideals, but also their solidarity with fellow slum-dwellers to survive.

Still, inevitably the play makes shortcuts, as when Fatima, being attended by doctors in the hospital, exults, ''At last I count, I count for something.'' Lucid though Mr. Hare's adaptation is, the multiple strands of the plot make it impossible for him to do justice to the complexity of the book's characters.

Mr. Norris's visceral direction drives the production forward and mostly clarifies the story lines. The excellent cast illuminates the pressures that drive their characters either upward or downward, mostly the latter. But in the figures of the younger generation like Abdul, Sunil and Manju (Anjana Vasan), the well-schooled daughter of the local ''fixer,'' ''Behind the Beautiful Forevers'' suggests that the sweet aroma of hope may be discerned even amid the stench of Annawadi.

In time, and with the attention that Ms. Boo's book and Mr. Hare's play may help bring to it, the privation so vividly enacted before us may gradually ease, allowing future generations to take a few hesitant steps up India's perilously steep economic ladder.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers. Directed by Rufus Norris. *National Theater.*

PEOPLE

The 1968 ***ROMAN POLANSKI*** thriller ''Rosemary's Baby'' and ***JOEL*** and ***ETHAN COEN***'s 1998 shaggy-dog comedy noir ''The Big Lebowski'' are two of the 25 movies that have been added this year to the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress in Washington, along with ***STEVEN SPIELBERG***'s ''Saving Private Ryan,'' ***HOWARD HAWKS***'s ''Rio Bravo'' and ***ARTHUR PENN***'s ''Little Big Man.'' Some of the other movies are ''House of Wax,'' the 3-D horror film starring ***VINCENT PRICE***; the fantasy ''Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory,'' with ***GENE WILDER***; and ''The Power and the Glory,'' which was the first produced screenplay of ***PRESTON STURGES***.

ROMAN POLANSKI, STEVEN SPIELBERG

''Beowulf,'' the epic poem filled with warfare and fantastical creatures, will get the ''Game of Thrones'' treatment. The British network ITV is producing a 13-part adaptation, with filming slated to begin in April. The project continues ITV's interest in fantasy programming: The studio is also producing ''The Frankenstein Chronicles,'' starring ***SEAN BEAN***, and ''Jekyll and Hyde.'' An executive producer, ***TIM HAINES***, said ''Beowulf'' will include large-scale battles and will create a world before modernization. Plans for an American release were not announced.

PHOTOGRAPHS: REUTERS, AP

Never forget: Dystopian future with a suppressed past

J. By Howard Jacobson. *342 pages. Hogarth. $25.*

BY MATTHEW SPECKTOR

Howard Jacobson's ''J'' opens with a parable, or, as the book terms it, an ''argument.'' A wolf and a tarantula are comparing modes of taking down prey, with the wolf's rapacious efficiency pitted against the spider's patience. As is the way with such tales, the wolf is undone by his own skill, polishing off all his quarry until he's forced to eat his family and finally himself. ''Moral: Always leave a little on your plate.''

BOOK REVIEW

This story, which I'd never encountered in Jewish literature or any other, stands in mysterious relation, at first, to the meat of the novel itself. ''J'' is a Holocaust story of sorts — ''of sorts'' because it is set in a dystopian future, and the calamity in this case is a bit of suppressed early-21st-century history that is referred to, when it is referred to at all, with the Celan-esque phrase ''what happened, if it happened.''

The book turns on omission, and so the particulars of this monstrous occurrence are glimpsed only in pieces — ice cream trucks repurposed as objects of menace, for example, threatening the outsiders known as ''aphids'' — but it's clear what Mr. Jacobson has in mind, which is infinitely more pointed and more fungible than simple allegory. This novel's dystopia is not that of Cormac McCarthy's ''The Road'' or José Saramago's ''Blindness,'' if only because a very specific history shadows its every move. The effect is surprisingly subtle and, at least at first, disorientingly gentle.

Kevern Cohen is a woodworker, tenant of a small cottage in the village of Port Reuben, whose cliffs overlook a ''sea that no one but a few local fishermen sailed on, because there was nowhere you could get to on it — a sea that lapped no other shore.'' One afternoon as he strolls through the local market, a stranger points him toward a young lady named Ailinn Solomons: ''Fine-looking girl, that one.'' And with this seemingly random nudge from the cosmos, the two fall in love. They commence a relationship that is fundamentally tender despite unfolding in a world where Kevern has to explain, for example, the music of Fats Waller. (Jazz, like other arts that allow improvisation or reflect violence, is not banned, it is ''simply not played.'')

When Kevern teases Ailinn about her big feet, or when we meet the village barber with the ungainly name of Densdell Kroplik, the mood is so nearly whimsical we're tempted to imagine hobbits. Everything is almost peaceful, except that it isn't at all. The first thing Kevern notices about Ailinn is her bruised eye, just as the essence of his friendship with that barber is the fear he will get his throat slit during a shave.

Kevern doesn't know much about his own history, as no one knows much — ''The past exists in order that we forget it'' — but he feels himself an outsider, at odds with the ''old ways.'' And Ailinn is an outsider, having recently arrived in Port Reuben from up north.

The linear plot of ''J'' is rather simple: Ailinn and Kevern meet, court and begin to suspect their relationship is less accidental than it seems. There are mysterious clickings on Ailinn's ''utility phone'' that suggest someone might be listening in, and after a brief, beautifully rendered weekend away in Necropolis, they discover that someone has broken into Kevern's cottage. Kevern is questioned, repeatedly, by an Inspector Gutkind (an

DANIEL BLACKBALL

obsessive little figure who lives alone with his cat in an inland village called St. Eber, over his possible involvement in the murder of a woman he once kissed in a bar, but this is a red herring. He is being watched, too, by one of his art school colleagues, Professor Zermansky, who also keeps an eye on Gutkind. But all of this Dostoyevskian hovering turns out to be in the service of something less persecutory, perhaps, than we would think.

Yet so much of the book's complexity, pleasure and occasional difficulty stems from its sequence of omissions and its nonchronological presentation. Early on, we are introduced to one Esme Nussbaum, employee of a corporation called Ofnow, ''nonstatutory monitor of the Public Mood,'' whose assertion that violence persists in certain corners of the country earns her a trip to the hospital. (This is some 20 years before Kevern and Ailinn meet.) We are given the epistolary narrative of Ailinn's grandmother, who dismayed her own parents by marrying outside her faith, in a church. Only slowly do these things converge, so we understand the contours of what is actually happening. Even the book's title invokes a suppression: ''J'' is the letter Kevern's father refused to pronounce without placing two fingers across his lips, ''J'' as in ''jazz'' or, the word the book never once uses, ''Jew.''

In other hands, this might seem coy, all these vaporous hints amounting to little more than another bleak, Orwellian dream shot through with flashes of satire. In the latter part of the novel, however, Mr. Jacobson bares his teeth, or rather, holds up the mirror to show us our own bloody fangs. Reflecting on her parents' tortuous marriage, the mysterious Esme considers: ''Some equipoise of hatred had been lost. You don't kill the thing you love, but you don't kill the thing you hate either.'' This equipoise, which Esme is quick to connect to the horrors of what happened, is a fundamental human need. Thinking back on the time she'd spent in the hospital, Esme notes: ''Only when we have a different state to strive against do we have reason to strive at all. And different people the same. I am me because I am not her, or you.''

This rage for identity isn't merely ethnic, and it's inescapable. Suddenly the book's evasion, this world that insists upon anodyne art and relentless apology, seems less dystopic and more recognizable. And the parable that introduces the novel seems less cryptic; neither the wolf nor the tarantula can match our own predation after all.

Mr. Jacobson's earlier novels have been compared with some frequency to Philip Roth's. That's been easier to see in books like ''Kalooki Nights'' and ''The Finkler Question.'' It's harder to see Mr. Roth in the thrilling and enigmatic refractions of ''J,'' whose subtle profundities and warm intelligence are Mr. Jacobson's own. But in its bracing recognition that some conflicts are irresolvable, as is conflict itself, there is something of Mr. Roth, I think. So too in the stoical acceptance (if that's what it is) of the book's brutal conclusion. ''J'' is not a joyful book, by any means, but its insistent vitality offers something more than horror: a vision of the world in which even the unsayable can, almost, be explained.

Matthew Specktor's most recent novel is ''American Dream Machine.'' He is a founding editor of The Los Angeles Review of Books.

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