

Prospect recommends

SIX THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

THEATRE

Season's Greetings

Alan Ayckbourn, dir Marianne Elliott, National Theatre, 1st December-4th January, Tel: 020 7452 3000

Tis the season to be jolly, or perhaps not with Alan Ayckbourn's 1980 classic comedy of a typical English Christmas. The play offers family misery, marriage on the rocks, too much booze and joyless merry-making, and a few specials on the cast list: Mark Gatiss, Catherine Tate, Jenna Russell and David Troughton. Director Marianne Elliott should add to her National reputation (*War Horse, Saint Joan, Women Beware Women*) if she holds the ring and discourages excessive "comedy" playing.

The best of Ayckbourn is the stuff of Greek tragedy glimpsed from the nooks and crannies of purpose-built family units. The playwright used to be knocked as suburban west end fare, but he's more likely, these days, to prompt comparisons with Ibsen (secrets rotting away in domestic, middle-class mantraps) or even Chekhov; the latter, perhaps, in the scene where a lonely spinster, preparing to transport a ludicrous writer from the private fray, sees a silent night yawn menacingly before her.

Santa runs a gauntlet, a self-styled fascist shoots a looter, the doctor presses on with his puppet show and copulation thrives illicitly under the tree. The NT promises not just a Christmas cracker, but a major revival.

Michael Coveney is chief theatre critic of Whatsonstage.com

ART

*Norman Rockwell's America
Dukwich Picture Gallery, 15th
December-27th March*

This exhibition has toured to almost every state in America, but it is the first time Norman Rockwell's original work has appeared in this country. It is hard to think of a better-loved illustrator of American life, and yet it is only recently that the critically hardheaded have begun to acknowledge the truthfulness in the sweetness of



Bridge Game by Norman Rockwell: a new show will be his first exhibition in Britain

Rockwell's recreations. In 1916, aged 22, he painted his first cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Over the next 47 years, his illustrations for the magazine—mischievous boys, star-struck girls, pious churchgoers, loving families, movie stars, soldiers, politicians—became a tableau of the nation. An ace technician, Rockwell cast his characters and dressed his sets with directorial finesse before making dozens of sketches. Chronicling white America through depression, war and postwar prosperity, in the 1960s he lent his skills to the civil rights cause. Twenty-one years after his death in 1978, *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl laid down the critical gauntlet: "Rockwell's terrific. It has become too tedious to pretend he isn't." As Rockwell's reputation continues to rise—Steven Spielberg and George Lucas are big collectors—this show brings us all his *Post* covers and other magazine, book and ad illustrations, for a Christmas glimpse into a lost Arcadia.

Emma Crichton-Miller is an arts writer

Mark Twain's autobiography is characteristically inventive

FILM

Catfish

On general release from 17th December

While *The Social Network* has delivered a significant hit from such unlikely topics as computer programming, business ethics and legal process, David Fincher's film barely touches on the actual experience of using Facebook. For that, we may turn to controversial documentary *Catfish*, a snapshot of human interaction and deception in today's socially networked age.

In their shared New York workspace, directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman turn their cameras on the latter's brother, Nev, a photographer. What hooks their interest is his growing online relationship with the female members of one Michigan family: mother Angela, elder daughter Megan, and eight-year-old Abby, an artistic prodigy who sends him paintings copied from his photos. With 19-year-old Megan, the relationship turns from Facebook flirtation to libidinous SMS exchange.

The fact that *Catfish* is receiving a theatrical release is a clue there's more to this story than in your standard fly-on-the-wall doc. It's no accident that it became the most talked-about documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival, with Joost, Schulman and Schulman earning equal amounts of acclaim and censure. *Catfish* certainly makes for uncomfortable viewing, but as a cautionary tale of the addictive nature of constructed fantasies—a virtual Second Life dragged messily into the real world—it presently has no peer.

Charles Gant is film editor of Heat magazine

LITERATURE

*Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume One
University of California
Press, £24.95*

Having fretted for years about how to write his autobiography, Mark Twain came up with his characteristically inven-

