

# Peter Hall: As He Likes It

*After a turbulent 15 years at Britain's National Theater, this famed director heads into the world of the West End and Broadway*

**by Gerard Raymond**

"My God I'm fortunate. Most men don't reach their ambitions until their fifties. I reached mine in my thirties."  
Peter Hall Diary entry, 1978

**S**ir Peter Hall has always made theatrical news: at the very beginning of his professional career as the 24-year-old director of the Arts Theater in London in 1954; at age 29, when he created the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), which he ran for 13 years; when he took over the stewardship of the National Theater in 1973 and throughout the 15 years that followed. He retired last month as director of the National and leaves the subsidized theater world to form his own Peter Hall Company, which aims to produce plays for both the West End and Broadway. And once again he is the talk of the theater world.

Jack Tinker of the *London Daily Mail*, a critic who has not always been sympathetic to Hall during his years at the National, had this to say a few months ago: "Only someone in desperate need of a job would deny that this mandarin impresario is a highly combative, politically motivated high flyer who can combine the charm of a pussycat with the teeth

of a tiger to get his way. Yet Sir Peter's 15-year reign at the National Theater must be judged as one of the great unsung miracles of modern theater. The task he faced was herculean. The National needed a man who could somehow make it viable artistically, economically, and administratively. In short, it required the talents of a visionary theatrical entrepreneur, the political savvy of a tough captain of industry, and the sensitivity of a true man of the arts."

"Well, I certainly haven't achieved everything that I set out to do at the National," said Hall in a recent interview with *TheaterWeek*, "but I'm very pleased to have made the place a permanent part of the cultural landscape and made it very successful with the public. It's a thriving place and I think that's the thing that I am most pleased about, because new buildings take a little bit of launching. I think the audience took to it from the very beginning. It took the actors two or three years to feel at home. Theaters are dirty places and new theaters need to get dirty and dusty and grub-

menal. I learned a lot about coping with show business from him. What impressed me working with him was his concentration, yet he had the ability to leave his character on the set. I've always been able to do that, but not to his degree.

"I can still hear him telling me, 'Remember Nellie Nuisance, it's just a job. And you have to switch on and switch off. If you don't, you get tired.' It's so true, but easier said than done, mind you. He called me Nellie Nuisance because I was flying back and forth to England every couple of weeks from Budapest and Vienna, and he'd say, 'My! Aren't you the busy one!' I'd go to say good-bye and he'd razz me, 'Oh my God, she's leaving us again!' But he didn't mind in the least my coming back laden with all the English papers he requested."

What made her want to go into theater? "I honestly don't know. It was a desire that's always been there. It must have been in the blood. Mother was a comedienne in Ireland and, I'm told, was wonderful. But I never knew this until I was 21. She said she didn't want to influence me. I was terrible in school. Hated exams. But I loved to get into the shows. I could learn a script like that, but I was a goner when it came to studying."

Later she trained as a dancer, "but it was theater that kept nodding toward me. My first professional experience in Ireland was repertory when I was 18. I was sweeping up the floor with one foot and washing the milk bottles after tea with the other. I was very interested in stage management. In this farce called *Let's Get a Divorce!*, I had to double in a walk-on as a parlor maid. The butler had to chase me across the stage and we had to jump over a chaise longue and go 'Oooooo!' Then he dived on top of me and went 'Oooooo!' Well, opening night—it being my first professional appearance—I was a bundle of nerves. I was on book [giving cues] and then running onstage as the maid.

"Everything was going along without a hitch. Then the butler trod on my dress and I went, head over heels, into the pit. And that, dear audience, was my introduction to show business! 'Oooooo!' What a debut!" □

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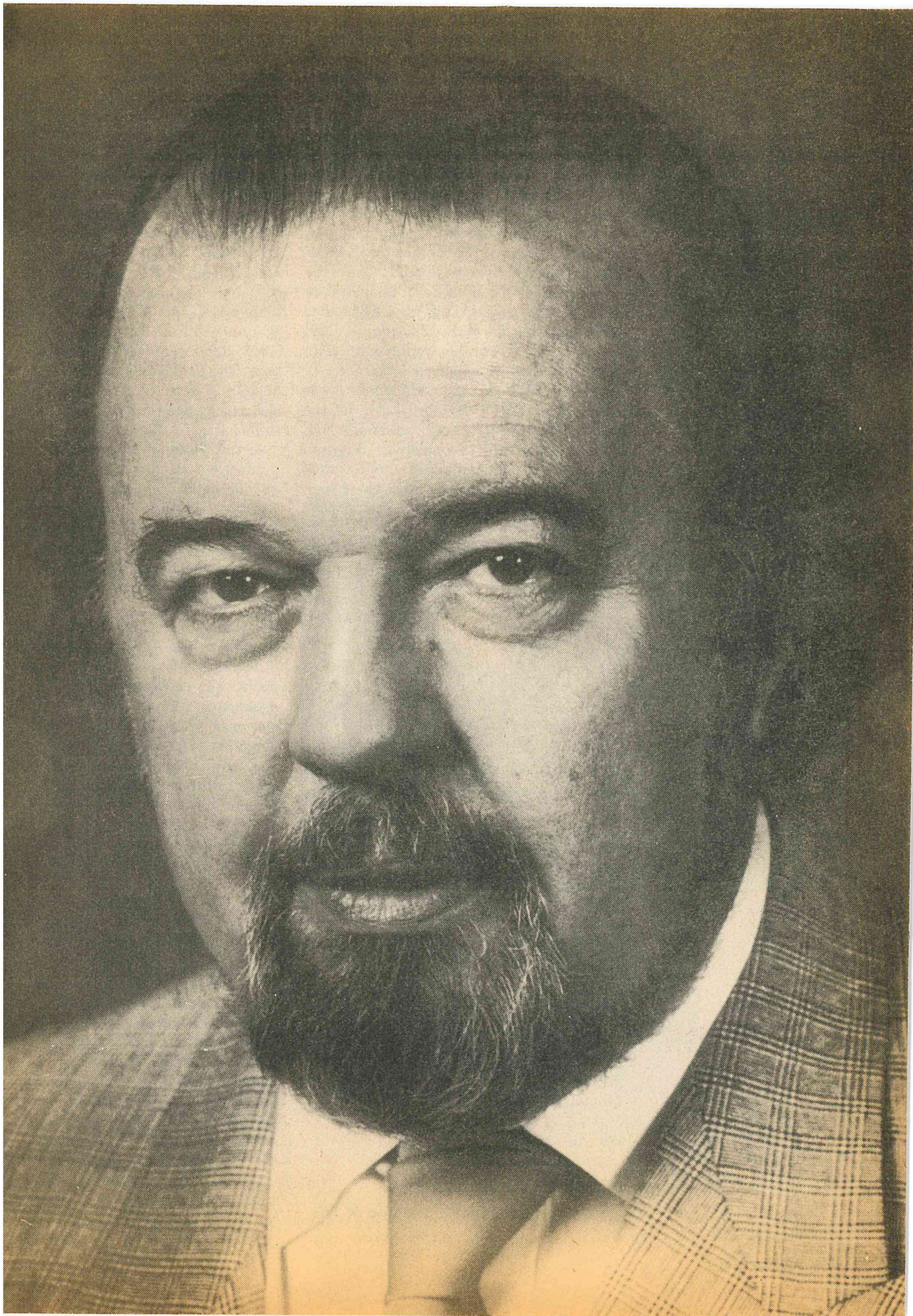


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by before actors really feel at home. I think it's now an established center of the theater in Britain for other people to make use of and develop and I am very proud of that. And I am also proud of the great number of pieces of work done during the years."

Hall's career has been associated with many important premieres and landmark productions. When he was at the Arts Theater, "I was very lucky at 24 to have *Waiting for Godot* land on my desk. Very lucky. I didn't know it was *Waiting for Godot* at the time, or that I liked it!" Panned by most critics, the 1955 production of Beckett's play would have died a sudden death had not its cause been taken up by Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times* and Kenneth Tynan in *The Observer*. The play survived and a modern theater classic was born. That same year Hall

directed *The Lesson*, the first Eugene Ionesco play to be produced in England.

In 1958 he directed the English premiere of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a production that was banned by the Lord Chamberlain (the now-defunct British theater censor) and consequently had to be performed in a club, for members, rather than for the general public. One of the high points of his Royal Shakespeare Company period was the 1963 production of *The Wars of the Roses*. This trilogy, which he adapted with John Barton from Shakespeare's *Henry VI Parts I, II, and III*, and *Richard III*, was described by Bernard Levin (of the *Daily Mail*) as "a landmark and beacon in the postwar English theater, a triumphant vindication of Mr. Hall's policy, as well as his power,

as a producer."

While still with the RSC, he established a unique relationship with playwright Harold Pinter. His production of Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) was huge success, and he won his first Tony for Best Director (1967) when it transferred to Broadway. He also directed Pinter's *Old Times* (1971) and, later, *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978) at the National. The first British productions of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* (1969, RSC) and *All Over* (1972, RSC) were Peter Hall productions. The 1979 National Theater production of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* was a tremendous hit and won him a second Tony in 1981.

At the National, hall fostered the productions of new plays by then up-and-coming playwrights Howard Brenton, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, and Edward Bond, bringing them, as he put it, "to larger stages and larger audiences." He also created a system of separate companies, each under one director, which resulted in the emergence of playwrights Alan Ayckbourn and David Hare as major directors. He is particularly pleased about his decision to work with Ayckbourn. "When I care here [the National]" Hall told the magazine *Time Out* recently, "he was being derided as a commercial dramatist. I think historically Ayckbourn is going to be as important as Molière because he is a social chronicler. And I've stuck by that, and I've also stuck by him, because he has been a superb director."

Hall's position in the center stage of British theater has not always brought him praise and fame. "When you run the National Theater you are a bit like Nelson standing on his column and must expect attention from the pigeons," he has said on many occasions. He was appointed director of the National when the institution was preparing to move from its temporary headquarters at the Old Vic to its present day home, the massive triple-theater complex on the South Bank of the Thames. The radical left-wing theater felt he was selling out into the establishment. Lord Olivier, whose job he was taking over, was ambivalent towards his younger successor from



Basil Henson and Tim Pigott-Smith in Hall's production of *The Winter's Tale*

John Haynes

the opposite (RSC) camp. Kenneth Tynan, then literary advisor to the National (1963-73), with whom Hall refused to work, actively campaigned against him. And Hall was convinced that Jonathan Miller and Michael Blakemore, two directors from the previous National regime, did everything in their power to discredit him and his administration.

In the early '70s Hall/National Theater bashing was a popular sport in the London press. "It was certainly very painful, having been a young lion of the '60s, generally encouraged by the media, to find myself an abused figure of the '70s. Don't ever believe anyone who says that a bad press doesn't really hurt. You just have to find ways of coping with it," Hall wrote in 1983. In 1986, when the *Sunday Times* attacked Trevor Nunn (Hall's own appointed successor at the RSC) and Hall, accusing them of profiteering and of making use of their subsidized bases to generate commercially-oriented productions that would feather their own nests, Hall was not willing to merely cope with it. As the other newspapers picked up the allegations, he angrily sued the *Times*. "It's all pending a legal solution and I really can't talk about it, I'm afraid," was his cautious response.

Three years prior to the *Sunday Times* furor, Hall was embroiled in another controversy, this time generated by the publication of his *Diaries* in 1983. The period covered by this "daily confessional" (1972-80), chronicled his early National days, providing the readers with rather unfavorable portraits of Miller and Blakemore. The latter responded by reviewing the book in *The Observer* in the form of a parody, casting Hall as Claudius. Miller, who claimed that working for Hall was like working for Richard Nixon, is known to have said to some actors, "it must be awful to wake up each morning and find you're Peter Hall."

What the *Diaries* did reveal was a man whose workaholic nature caused to overextend himself severely. While coping with the gigantic task of administrating the National, dealing with labor unions, delays in opening of the new building, building a repertory,



John Bluthal, Tony Haygarth, Steven Mackintosh in Hall's production of *The Tempest*

and planning the seasons, he was also directing at least two productions a year, directing operas at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, hosting a television series, editing his most recent (and favorite) film *Akenfield* (1974), and taking off to Germany to act in films. The best parts of the *Diaries*, however, are the insights into many of the major playwrights and actors of this century. There are memorable portraits of John Gielgud and the late Ralph Richardson, the "Old Lions," as he lovingly calls them.

Hall has no regrets about the publication of the *Diaries*, except for the fact that his mention of Harold Pinter's private life deeply hurt the playwright, who temporarily severed their 25-year-old relationship on account of it. "I'm happy to say that we

have made that up," Hall confirmed. Nevertheless, he will not continue to keep a diary. "I didn't really write them for publication," he explained. "When they were published and they were a success the publishers asked me if I could give them a volume every three or four years. I tried to go on doing it but I felt terribly self-conscious and couldn't."

"The megalomaniac of the South Bank" is how Hall once mockingly described himself in response to constant references to his "dictatorial policies" and "lust for power" at the National. In a 1973 entry in his diary he commented on how every journalist who writes about him first consults the existing files for background. "These files are self-perpetuating. I was described as ruthless and power-

loving by Peter Lewis in *Nova* magazine in 1962. I have been ruthless and power-loving ever since." Whether there be any truth to the accusations or not, Hall's contribution to the theater is most impressive and it is against his record that he can be measured.

His farewell productions at the National, first performed at the intimate Cottlesloe Theater in May and now currently playing the large open-stage Olivier Theater, are magnificent, landmark productions of Shakespeare's so-called "late romances." *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are indeed the crowning glory of Hall's National Theater career. Rather than presenting the plays as the work of a playwright who was retiring from the stage, the trilogy is offered as evidence of a new creative period—one of experimentation and vigor—in Shakespeare's work.

"I wanted to do them before I left the National. I've been trying to do them for the last five years, actually. I've always thought that to do the late plays together would be very interesting and for one reason or another—logistics, economics, cast availability—it hasn't been possible to do them before and I just managed to get them in before I leave. That's really and honestly the only reason." The productions themselves bear, to borrow the late Tynan's phrase, the "Hall-marks" of his talent. At the Cottlesloe, there was nothing more thrilling than to hear Shakespeare spoken with such clarity and purity that it sounded contemporary.

Verse-speaking is one of Hall's specialties and he is considered by many actors its best exponent. It was by working on the actors's speech that he revolutionized the RSC in the '60s and established its identity. Speaking of this emphasis on verse, he says, "Well, it makes me sound like I am some cranky academic, and I am not. The way Shakespeare has to be spoken, as far as I am concerned, is not something that I have invented—it was something that was passed on to me by Edith Evans [1888-1976] who was taught by William Poel [1852-1934, director, actor, manager and founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society]"

Hall particularly acknowledges his debt to his mentor at Cambridge, George Rylands (director of Gielgud's 1944 *Hamlet*), who also taught the RSC stalwarts John Barton and Trevor Nunn. "It's a tradition which goes back a long way. It is based on common sense and being able to get through the text terribly quickly and nimbly without being rhetorical and boring and pompous. There is a sort of stupid camp at the moment among many actors that if you understand what the line means, the form of it, the way it is emphasized, will become evident. I think this may be true 50 percent of the time. But 50 percent of the time if you actually understand what the form is, what the rhythm is, where the emphasis is, it will lead you to the meaning. The system is also based on where you can breathe, when you can speak trippingly on the tongue, as Shakespeare said to us. Not to do it, I think, is a bit like a singer saying, 'I'll sing this Mozart aria but it doesn't matter where I breathe. I'll just speak it and never mind about the phrasing.'"

These last three plays of Shakespeare are particularly troublesome for directors, with their fantasy and dream sequences involving supernatural deities, and pastoral frolics. Yet Hall seems to effortlessly bring them to life and demonstrates their importance to the structure of each play. "As to the interpretative approach to Shakespeare, of course one ends up with a concept, but I'm increasingly tired of directors who go into rehearsals with a concept already made. I think what you should do with Shakespeare, because he is multifaceted and so contradictory and very complex, is use the rehearsals as a means to discover the play. Then of course you have to make editorial decisions because no play speaks for itself. I'm not advocating a director just letting the play happen, but I think you ought to release everything in the play before you make editorial decisions.

"I've become increasingly worried about the way we cut and adapt Shakespeare. I think if he is the greatest geniuses in drama we've ever seen, its pretty amazing that we happily cut 25 percent of the play, perhaps

more. Cutting is changing meaning, changing shapes, changing forms, changing what the man meant, and we usually cut because we don't know how to do it, we don't know what it means. It is usually a demonstration of our own inadequacy and, again, if you apply it to the musical world, no one would really think of cutting a few chunks of Wagner or saying this Beethoven would really be much more interesting if we change the order of the movements!"

Hall's directorial style was influenced in the '60s "by the Berliner Ensemble idea of highly selective realism on stage." His fidelity to Shakespeare's texts was shaped by influential literary critic F. R. Leavis in Cambridge. Has his style changed over the years? "I don't know. I can't say. I think I'm better. I hope I'm better. I think I was a much more romantic director in the '50s than I am now. But it is very difficult to know where you go; you have to follow your own obsessions. Its really for other people to say where you are going."

Where he is going, in the next phase of his remarkable career, is to the West End and the commercial theater. In December this year, the Peter Hall Company will present Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* at the Haymarket Theater with Vanessa Redgrave. Doesn't this move constitute a radical change from over two decades of work within the subsidized sector?

"Actually they are not very different from this point of view—I had to fill the three theaters at the National at 80 percent capacity. So I have been very concerned about the box-office reports. Why I have been vociferous about the government's subsidy is because their policy towards the performing arts generally has been that all of us do less and less. We could actually do more and more for very little extra money. But to say that I was running a theater that was subsidized and wasn't concerned about the box-office is wholly untrue. And obviously I shall be as concerned when I am at the Haymarket."

Will this factor affect the kind of plays that could be done at the Haymarket?

"I don't think so, no. The subsidy at

the National is used to keep the seat prices at a reasonable level and to pay for the repertory to change over, the size of the operation, the variety of plays. I'm only going to do one play at a time at the Haymarket. The difficulty will be if it's a flop, I shan't have anything to put in its place, unlike what I had at the National. That's the beauty of repertory; you can play the successes more than the failures. But I don't think there'll be that much difference."

The plays will be given 12 week runs and transfers to Broadway will depend on how well they fare. Similiar plans are being considered to originate plays in New York and then transfer them to London. Hall will not be forming a permanent company, but as he pointed out in *Plays International* (May), "there are thousands of actors in this country, but there are only 750 or 800 who work all the time and who comprise the company of the British theater. They all know each other and have all worked with each other and if you cast a play with eight to ten actors from all over the place you find on the first day that there are several hundred years of shared experience between them."

Hall is full of enthusiasm for his new venture. "It's a very exciting possibility because I think it's probably the most beautiful theater in London. I have the opportunity to do four or five plays a year. There'll be a bit of Shakespeare, I'm sure, and I'm hoping to do new plays. I think one of the things that I am proudest of at the National is that the number of new plays that have been done. I certainly think that unless you are engaged in new drama you're not really in the center of living theater. And there are a lot of classics I still want to look at. I haven't done much Ibsen or much Chekhov. I haven't done any Shaw and of course there is Granville Barker. I've done very little classic comedy—Sheridan, Goldsmith; that's a whole area that I want to develop right. I shall direct two or three of them myself and instead of trying to run a company which has to be all things to all men, I've going to run a company which will be the things I like. I mean my own personal obsessions." □

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