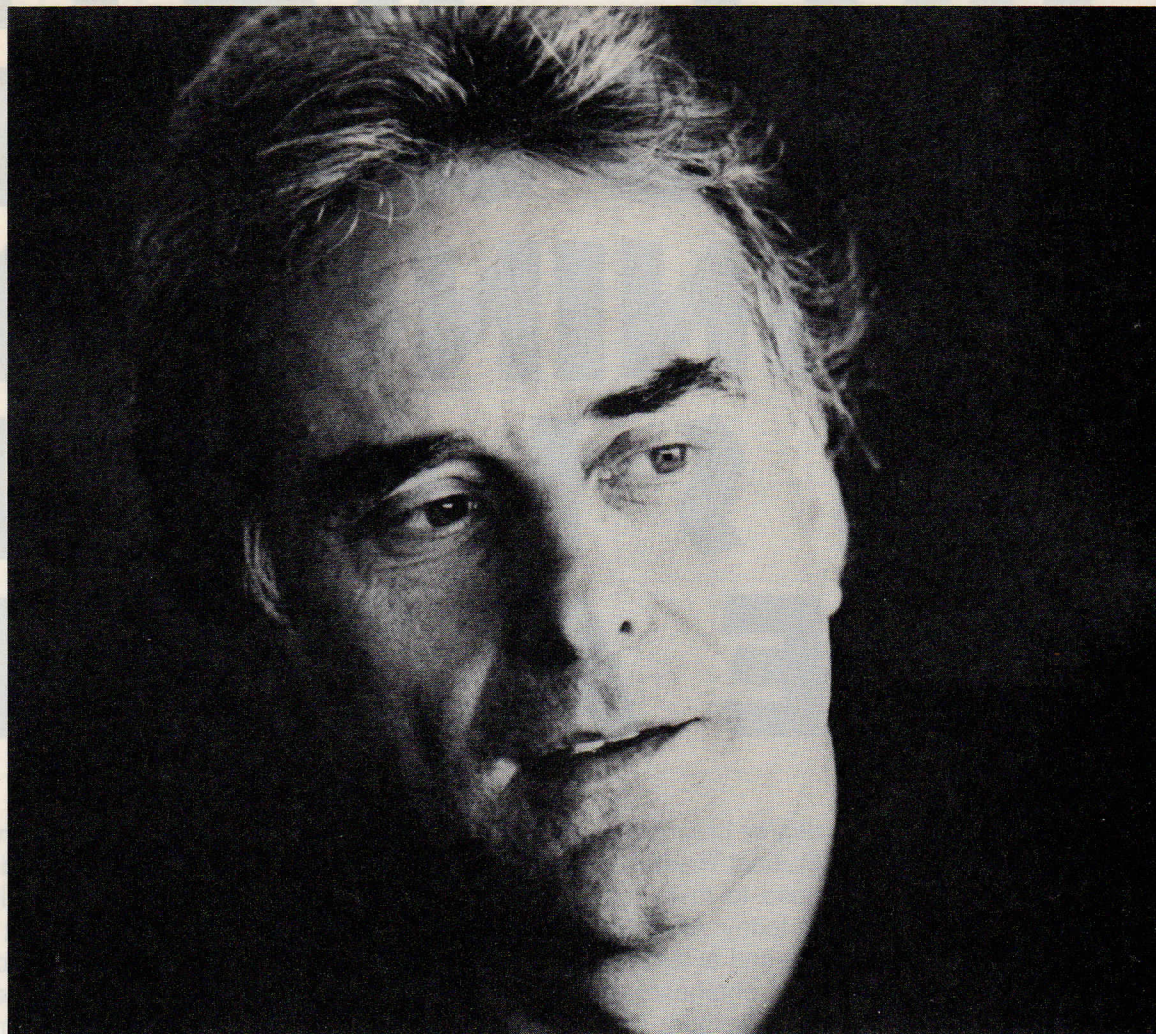


Eyre Apparent

By Gerard Raymond



Richard Eyre, photographed by Mark Douet

At a time when flashy directorial touches are often the only distinguishing marks of a theatrical production, it speaks highly for Richard Eyre's intelligence, sensitivity, and unobtrusiveness as a director that his work is most memorable for the performances he elicits from his actors and the insights he brings to the texts.

Looking back at some of Eyre's best productions at the Royal National Theater, the organization he has headed since September 1988, these are some of my memories: Oliver Ford Davies hunched in despair and voicing doubts about his faith

in the original 1990 production of David Hare's *Racing Demon*; Ian McKellen in 1930s military garb seductively turning England into a fascist dictatorship in the 1990 *Richard III*; Eileen Atkins poignantly describing her only sexual encounter in the 1992 production of Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*; Claire Higgins waking up from a drunken stupor to contemplate the scheming gigolo lying beside her in last year's production of Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*; and Michael Gambon fidgeting with boundless energy in his former lover's tiny flat in the current London pro-

duction of David Hare's *Skylight*.

But Eyre's success at the National isn't based on his own work alone; it is also distinguished by the artists he lured to the massive three-auditorium complex located on London's South Bank. The National's repertoire during the past seven years has reflected Eyre's catholic tastes, a willingness to go out on a limb coupled with a shrewd sense of popular theater. Under his stewardship directors such as Nicholas Hytner (*The Madness of King George*, *Carousel*), Declan Donnellan (*Angels in America*, *Sweeney Todd*), Deborah Warner (*Richard II*), Stephen Daldry

(*An Inspector Calls*), Sean Mathias (*Les Parents Terribles*, *A Little Night Music*), and Phyllida Lloyd (*What the Butler Saw*) have flourished. Eyre has also broadened the scope of British mainstream theater by inviting to the National a wide range of artists: avant-gardists Robert Lepage and Theatre de Complicite; Jatinder Verma, founder of the South Asian-British theater group Tara Arts; and performance artist Ken Campbell.

The 52 year-old English director made his American debut with the touring *Richard III*, which played at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1992. His exquisite production of David Hare's *Racing Demon* (the first part of a trilogy that includes *Murmuring Judges* and *Absence of War*) played in Los Angeles during the 1994 UK/LA Festival. He is currently directing the same play, this time with an American cast, at Lincoln Center in New York.

Eyre has announced that he will retire as Director of the National Theater when his contract expires in mid-1997. According to recent reports in *Variety*, before he ends his tenure he will direct a production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* (Spring 1996), revive *Guys and Dolls* (which he originally directed at the National and on the West End to great acclaim 13 years ago) in December '96, and direct *King Lear* in the Spring of 1997. The following is an edited version of his conversation with *TheaterWeek* earlier this year about the job he has excelled at these past seven years.

Running the National

I guess the most difficult thing is just keeping the standards up, keeping the invention, the continuity, and keeping the circus on the road; giving the party and hoping that the people are going to turn up. I look at the programs from my tenure and it is over a hundred shows. It's like a long-running performance—every night you perform is, as far as the audience is concerned, the first night of that show. So the war against indolence and cynicism, that is my charge to myself.

The truth is that—anyone who runs a

theater if they are half honest will tell you this—first and foremost the motor for running a theater is opportunism. Because, finally, you need the hits. When Laurence Olivier [the National's first director] was asked about his policy, he said, "to make the audience applaud." Actually, that is a perfectly honorable policy. Now, inevitably, there is a filter of taste, and that is what I am employed to be.

[When I took over the National] there was a lot of over-manning, and a lack of clarity of what people were doing, and what they were motivated by. The danger

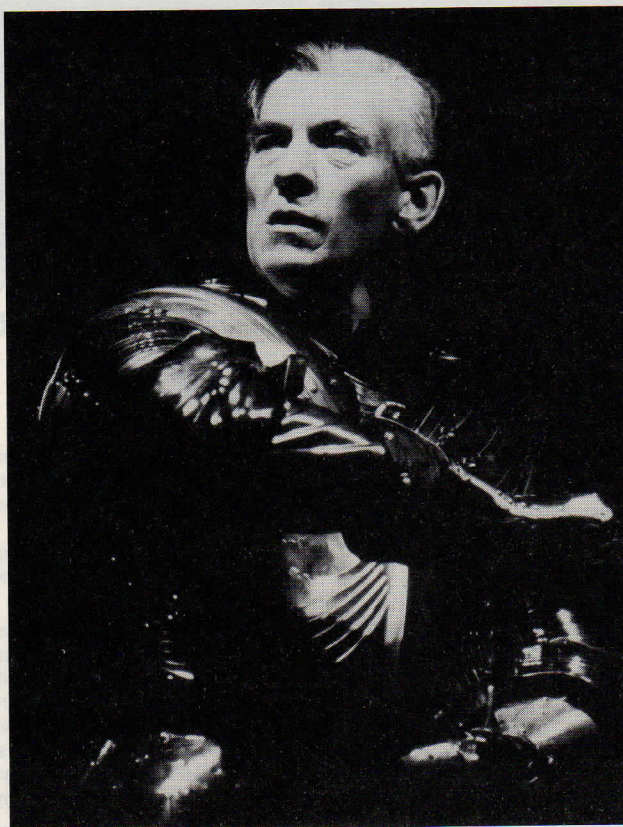
higher things now). I tried to create a program that was without an explicit aesthetic manifesto, but which reflected the tastes of the group, who in turn reflected my taste. I suppose the aesthetic principle that binds the work together is the notion that the medium of theater ought to be pushed to its extremes. That is to say, that I am interested in work which exploits the singular aspects, characteristics, and meaning of the theater. And I hope that the work [we do] reclaims the word *theatrical* for respectability.

New Plays

One of the primary functions of the National is to do things that either couldn't or wouldn't be initiated in the commercial sector. Patrick Marber's play, *Dealer's Choice* [transferred from the National to the Vaudeville theater] is terrific, and in many senses it is a perfect West End play—six characters, simple set. But the fact is Patrick came through the National Theater Studio. I would say almost all young writers come through the subsidized theater and West End managers just wait for them to emerge. I can't think of single example of a British new play which has gone another route. I know there is a lot of bitterness on the part of commercial managers because we appear to be massively privileged—we have investment, we have risk capital given to us, we don't have to close if we have a disaster, and we keep our seat prices low. But on the other hand, they are more or less

completely dependent on the subsidized theater for the spotting and training of actors, and for the nurturing of writing, directing, and designing talent.

In the end, the plays make their own case. With *Angels in America* (we heard about it when it was workshopped in San Francisco), by the time I had read the first scene I thought this is fabulous, there is no question that we must do this play; this is just incredible writing. This is what is so difficult for the writers who get rejected to accept. Yes, there is a taste filter, but in the end the really good plays just fight their way off the page, they are clawing at you; there is no problem making a decision about them. [In fact] as you are reading



Ian McKellen as Richard III. Donald Cooper

with very large organizations is that you tend to apply management structures that might make sense in a car factory or a regular manufacturing plant, but that don't make sense in terms of the singularity of theater activity. Broadly speaking, I tried to introduce the principle that the theater is a theater is a theater. People really do work in theaters for sentimental reasons, for reasons of the heart, and unless you acknowledge that, unless you mobilize those feelings, it is counterproductive.

The Repertoire

I gathered together a cabinet of directors who initially did quite a lot of work here (several of them have flown off to

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Eyre on Williams: "I think Tennessee Williams is really one of the three or four best writers of the 20th century. I feel more and more guilty about misunderstanding him when I was in my 20s. I thought he was a wispy, fey, writer, [whereas] he is so tough. He is also a visionary writer; he has an idea of how his plays should be staged, which is way ahead of his time." Above: Robert Knepper and Clare Higgins in Eyre's production of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Below: Frances Barber and Eileen Atkins in Eyre's *The Night of the Iguana*. Photos by John Haynes.



Richard Eyre's production of *Hamlet* at the National Theater starred Judi Dench and Daniel Day-Lewis. John Haynes

them, you have a sense of panic that you are not going to be able to get to do them.

The Company

What I haven't tried to do, and I suppose this is for thoroughly pragmatic reasons, is to gather together a permanent ensemble and doggedly pursue the notion of a group of actors sticking together as a matter of principle. However, what has happened, de facto, is that quite a large number of actors have recurred over the years. For instance, the cast of *Racing Demon*, when we took it to Los Angeles [1994] was, with one exception, the cast that we had opened with at the Cottesloe Theater four years before.

People say you need years to create a company, well, actually you don't. The British acting culture is such that—and this is one of the reasons I love working in the theater—you can create this model world, this model society. You choose a group of actors that you know broadly speaking are compatible, and within a couple of days they have started to create this utopian world. They share essentially the same sort of apprenticeship. I mean, it's disappearing, but even now they have been to a drama school, they have done a bit of work in regional theater, they have worked with the same directors, they have identified the villains and the heroes, they share the same stories; it's one degree of separation, actually.

Very few people are lured by the cash here. I think you will quite shocked if you know what we pay; it's about half American not-for profit fees. So cash is not a weapon. What we have to offer—it's partly prestige—is an ethos. We offer better conditions. I don't mean physical conditions, but a belief in excellence that actually goes right down the line to the humblest person working on every production. You get fantastically well looked after as a director, a designer, and as an actor here. Everybody wants you to do your best.

Life After the National

I get offered quite a lot of films, and maybe I'll write a bit; I have also said I would do another opera with Solti. I look forward to a life where I don't have to be responsible for an audience turning up, and where I don't have to be responsible for unblocking the toilets in the foyer.

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