

by Gerard Raymond

An Intellectual Of the Imagination

Kathleen Tynan's biography of her late husband, the critic Kenneth Tynan, was an act of passionate sleuthing

Reviewing the recently published *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (Morrow; 597 pages) the English playwright and director David Hare remarked, "Tynan is the only English language critic I have known to whom anyone who actually worked in the theater turned with any confidence of illumination. His praise had the unique power to cheer you up. His misgivings fed your own." Coming from a member of a species that regards critics as its only natural predator, this is high praise indeed. Often referred to as the finest drama critic after George Bernard Shaw, Kenneth Tynan had a magical flair for words, an intuitive mind, and above all a most extraordinary love and enthusiasm for the theater.

Tynan was born in 1927 in Birmingham and blazed through Oxford between the years of '45

and '48, creating a legend as an aesthete and a dandy. He began his official writing career as critic for *The Standard*, and then moved on to the *Observer*. He also wrote for the *New Yorker*, published nine books of his writings on theater and film, wrote a book on bull-fighting, and was co-architect with Lord Olivier of England's National Theater Company, serving as literary manager for the first decade of its existence. Olivier described him as a "major influence on what has now become our modern theater," and the playwright Tom Stoppard summed up him up thus: "He was a product of our time, but our time was of his making." He died in Los Angeles in 1980 after a painful battle with emphysema.

His biography was written by his second wife Kathleen. They met at the *Observer* office in 1962, where she was working as an art news columnist. Kathleen Tynan is the author of both the screenplay and novel *Agatha*. In *The Life of Kenneth Tynan*, she communicates the genius of the sometimes unbearable yet brilliant man. In putting together material for the biography, she discovered "millions of his words" in defunct magazines which had never been reprinted in previous collections. She also deals frankly with more intimate matters of their tumultuous marriage. A Canadian by birth, she now lives in England and is currently working on an original screenplay for Shirley MacLaine. She was in New York recently to discuss her book, and spoke with eloquence and passion about her late husband and her book.

Gerard Raymond: Tell me about writing *The Life of Kenneth Tynan*.

Kathleen Tynan: Ken had intended to write his own autobiography. At one point he had done a raid on his files in London and randomly gathered material together and taken it with him to Los Angeles. He was, however, too sick to start. When I was cleaning up, some time after his death, I started to look at it—inevitably: I am a writer. I suppose it sounds cold-blooded, but it isn't. I was totally engaged in and fascinated by the material I was sorting out. At the same time I began to feel that this amazingly, engrossing, and powerful relationship, that I had been in for sixteen years, was still in many ways baffling to me. Ken always astonished me, as I wrote in the book, and it seemed imperative to try to figure him out.

Of course, one never figures people out—not anyone worth their salt. All you can do is try to bring a little light on certain aspects and



Jerry Bauer

questions. Indeed, I did find out a lot about his childhood, which he frankly found rather boring. I excavated material which I think throws a good deal of light on Ken, as childhoods generally do. So it was a form of passionate sleuthing and also an exorcism.

It was a marvelous feeling to discover that I was released from Ken, in a sense, and loved him very much as well. The hoops of steel that had bound us together for so long seemed to fall away and I felt a great sense of lightness, which of course is only a private benefit. I also felt that the writing was dazzling, more so than I had ever imagined. I used to say to Ken, that he was a performer who happened to write. He thought that was absolutely correct, because he had such an ambivalence between being on the outside as well as on the inside of the theater. But towards the end of the book I reversed my position and really came to the conclusion that he was such a natural writer—you can't mistake his style; a sentence, a paragraph of Ken's is unlike anyone else's. That's where he belonged, and that's where he was in his natural habitat.

When I started the book, I had no idea what it would be. I knew I was attempting something difficult to do—both a personal memoir and a conventional biography. Therefore I chose to shape the book with a prologue, an interlude and an epilogue to ease myself and the reader into a natural relationship. It is a peculiar book in that respect, very personal and yet very objective.

The most striking aspect of the book is your objectivity and candor. This could not have been easy for you. In the book you quote your husband's advice to Marlene Dietrich when she

was working on her autobiography: "If you are frank with us, we will trust you. If not—if we feel you are holding us at arm's length—we may suspect you don't trust us." Did this counsel guide your work?

It was very painful and very tough. Sometimes marvelously rewarding, at other times appallingly difficult. But I chose to do it, so there was no going back. I'm rather a private person and it was hard for me to arrive at this degree of candor, but I realized that there was no other way to write this book about Ken. For one thing, he always wanted to write what he called a "totally honest autobiography." I don't think any of us can ever manage that. But I had to take a stab at such honesty, in as dignified a manner as possible. It would have done him a great disservice if I hadn't. Ken was a man who had no secrets. He once said a neurosis is a secret you don't know you're keeping. I felt that was very true of some of the things that happened to him in childhood, but there was no reticence about his ideas or his sexual life. Therefore I didn't feel I was betraying him at all. I might possibly have been betraying myself.

I hope my book will help re-introduce Ken—not that he is forgotten among his own peers and his own generation—he simply isn't available on the bookshelves. And it could be lovely to have theater students and theater addicts read him or re-read him for the first time. I would say there are two thirds more of unpublished material. The huge area is his journals, where he continued to perform as a drama critic. He claimed that after a decade of drama criticism he had said all that he wanted

The Theater World According to Tynan

Long before I became an undergraduate, I enjoyed setting down my impressions of plays in performance. It seemed to me unfair that an art so potent should also be so transient, and I was deeply seduced by the challenge of perpetuating it in print.

Critics in the past have seen themselves variously as torch-bearers, pall-bearers, and lighthouses shining over unmapped seas; I see myself predominantly as a lock. If the key, which is the work of art, fits snugly into my mechanism of bias and preference, I click and rejoice; if not, I am helpless, and can only offer the artist the address of a better locksmith.

From men like Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Miller, I learned that all drama was, in the widest sense of a wide word, political; and that no theater could sanely flourish unless there was an umbilical connection between what was happening on the stage and what was happening in the world.

High Definition Performance: The ability to communicate the essence of one's talent to an audience with economy, grace and no apparent effort and absolute hard-edged clarity of outline.

Laurence Olivier: His relationship with his audience is that of a skillful but dominating lover. He is one of that select group of performers (great athletes, bullfighters, singers, politicians, ballet dancers and vaudeville comedians are some

of the others) whose special gift is to be able to exercise fingertip control over the emotions of a large number of people gathered in one place to witness a single unique event.

Vivien Leigh: (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, 1951) Miss Leigh's limitations have wider repercussions than those of most actresses. Sir Laurence, with that curious chivalry which sometime or other blights the progress of every great actor, gives me the impression that he subdues his blow-lamp ebullience to match her. Blunting his iron precision, levelling away at his towering authority, he meets her halfway. Anthony climbs down, and Cleopatra pats him on the head. A cat, in fact, can do more that look at a king: she can hypnotize him.

Katharine Hepburn: (*The Millionaire*, 1952) She glittered like a bracelet thrown up at the sun; she was metallic, yet reminded us that metals shine and can also melt.

Marlene Dietrich: She has sex, but no particular gender.

Johnny Carson: He is a grandmaster of the one show-business art that leads nowhere. He has painted himself not into a corner but onto the top of the mountain.

Ralph Richardson: There was a unique physical presence, at once rakish and stately, as of a pirate turned prelate.



to say and wanted to move onto something else. In fact he crossed the footlights and worked at the National Theater as dramaturg and then proceeded to launch other theatrical follies and diversions. He couldn't resist writing however, just as when he was a teenager. He kept journals automatically, not for publication, but because he had this need to record the event. He wrote down his views on movements in the theater subsequent to the death of the Lord Chamberlain's office [England's theater censor], on David Hare, Bill Gaskill, and Max Stafford-Clark. His continuing thoughts on Peter Brook, whom he thought was a genius, are complicated and fascinating.

Ken was brilliant at seeing what was missing in the theater. Early in the '60s, he wrote that there was a great lack of the incendiary art of satire in the theater and indeed, partly I suppose because of his pushing, the satire movement began to burgeon in England. I don't say he did it exclusively, but he had a huge nose for what was missing, plus this extraordinary enthusiasm. He was fascinated by the possibility of a National Theater here in the U.S. I'm sure he'd be very interested to see that is happening now with Gregory Mosher at Lincoln Center. Time and again, I go to a new Robert Wilson or Peter Brook piece, and I



long for Ken to be there to tell me what to think.

Tom Stoppard, you mentioned, said that Tynan believed that the theater consisted of a lot of people working toward a common artistic end. And that as a critic he did not consider himself outside this world.

That's absolutely true. Unlike his fellow critics, he always was part of the theater. And he was very astonished when actors were wounded after a review which somehow wasn't personal. He was insensitive to the fact that they might be wounded as human beings.

Which of course brings to mind his reviews of Vivien Leigh. Olivier said his pen was "brilliant and often dripped in acid."

It could be acid but his great skill was enthusiasm. I never saw Vivien Leigh—he might have been correct. Reading the reviews, though, I thought he went over the top when attacking her. It was the only time that I thought Ken unfair. Part of it was his worship of Olivier's talent. He thought that she was holding him back—and she probably was. There was an aspect of waspishness which I found disagreeable. I never found that in any of his other work. Elsewhere it always seemed to me to be judicious. If you read Ken's reviews

consistently, there is a good deal of thoughtfulness and complexity. He doesn't just use his marvelous pen to attack or confuse.

Olivier also commented: "Apart from his blindness toward Vivien, it has to be said that he was the finest drama critic of the 20th century." Yet when Tynan died, the first announcement on the BBC mentioned only that he was notorious for saying a four-letter on television in 1965 and that he had been responsible for the "obscene revue" Oh! Calcutta! To many people, this long-running erotic "entertainment" is what is first associated with the man.

What went wrong?

What went wrong was that Ken had a conception of what the show should be, which I described in the book; totally different from what eventually appeared on stage. A cautionary moral to be drawn is that if you have to do something, do it yourself. One of Ken's problems was that he was an awfully shy man and he felt he had to do this show in collaboration. I think it initially had a lot of life and buoyancy—but it wasn't his show and he paid the penalty. It is very sad and it really enrages me that *Oh! Calcutta!* is the one thing people remember and attach to the name of

Kenneth Tynan.

You say that your husband might have "surprised the world and himself" had he not been ill. . .

Oh, very much so. I despise the attitude that he failed. The body of work, once it is accessible, could hardly be called a failure. If he hadn't been so desperately, mortally ill he might have gone in all sorts of different directions. He might have run a theater like the Royal Court brilliantly. He would never have been put in charge of the National—he was too much of a trouble-maker, and no establishment would have allowed it. If he had been in control of a smaller concern, as Jonathan Miller is about to take over the Old Vic, I think that Ken would have done wonderfully. He had a natural impresario flair, an incredible showman sense—in the best sense of being able to put together a program.

An "intellectual of the imagination" is how you described him.

I think he had a poet's imagination for putting things together, for making connections. That's really what imagination is about. . . using memory to make connections in astonishing, or surprising, or beautiful ways, and that's what Ken did. □