

Adrian Noble and *The Art of Success*

*The British director guts the
Manhattan Theater Club.*

by Gerard Raymond

Audiences at the Manhattan Theater Club's mainstage at City Center are in for a surprise. The interior of the theater has been gutted in order to stage Nick Dear's *The Art of Success*, which opens on December 19. The man who requested the renovation is Adrian Noble, the thirty-nine year old English director who, in the last ten years, has achieved a remarkable track record at the Royal Shakespeare Company. He resigned from the company last month, but many feel that it won't be long before he returns. Now that Terry Hands, Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the RSC, has announced his decision to resign in 1991, Noble is on the short-list of contenders for the job.

Noble certainly does not have to pad his resume to apply for the post. After enduring severe criticism following the Broadway debacle of *Carrie* and a financial crisis that is still not quite over, the Royal Shakespeare Company is currently riding a wave of successful Noble productions. He scored three hits this year in London: *The Plantagenets* a marathon adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry VI Parts I, II & III* and *Richard III*; Ibsen's *The Master Builder* which was hailed by *The Guardian* as "the theatrical event of the year" and *Macbeth*, which, despite bad reviews, was a commercial success.

The London press has dealt extensively with Noble's candidacy to head the RSC. When interviewed in his office at the Barbican (the RSC's London home) a few weeks before he left the company, Noble was noncommittal about his departure from the RSC and his possible return to it. "I thought it was time to
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move on and do other things. My beliefs are well-known. The governors have to decide which way they want the company to go."

In Noble's view the Royal Shakespeare Company is "first and foremost dedicated to the mounting of classical theater, especially the work of Shakespeare. It should train actors to that end and explore the most exciting, experimental and innovative ways of dealing with classical theater."

He defended the company's more popular ventures like *Les Misérables* saying they are absolutely essential, not just from a financial point of view but because "Shakespeare himself wrote plays which were essentially designed to reach a complete spectrum of the population. If Shakespeare is not accessible then we are probably doing it wrong." The need to reach wide audiences "sits right at the heart of the company." But he cautioned that the right balance has to be made. "In the kind of marketplace we live in, I think there is temptation for any theater company to go for the money."

As a timely audition for the top RSC post, Noble demonstrated his administrative skills when he ran last year's season at Stratford-Upon-Avon. Not only did he take on the daunting task of managing the largest company ever at Stratford—102 actors—he also mounted his epic production of *The Plantagenets*. "I wanted to do something really big just to stretch everybody's imagination—I mean not just the actors but the cutters, the carpenters, the electricians—everybody at Stratford." The colossal effort was also an excellent

morale-booster for the company which seemed to have lost its course. "It was a wonderful sensation. It was sometimes like feeling five hundred hands holding you up. It was just fantastic! And that's what this company does like nowhere else."

For his final production with the RSC, Noble chose *The Master Builder* because he wanted to work with John Wood (who returned to the RSC after a long absence to play Prospero in Nicholas Hytner's acclaimed production of *The Tempest*). Noble also wanted tackle Ibsen because one of his earliest successes at the RSC was *The Doll's House*. *The Master Builder*, with its interior speculation on the nature of an artist, is a notoriously difficult play to stage. "It is one of the most delicate pieces I've ever done and we needed to do constant maintenance on it."

Combining a desire to create a vivid theatrical experience ("I don't think there is any moral virtue in minimalism per se") and a strong fidelity to the text, Noble belongs to the same school as former RSC chiefs, Sir Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn. In these days when the term *auteur* has become something of a dirty word, he affirmed his passionate belief in "the tradition—by which I mean theater that has a strong interpretation, a very strong attempt to discover the meaning of the play and relate that meaning to our current experience."

Actor/directors like Simon Callow, and recently Kenneth Branagh, with his actor-run Renaissance Theater Company, have called for an end to the "hegemony of the director" and challenged the director-dominated bureaucracies of the RSC and the National. Noble concedes there is validity to their arguments and admits that as the RSC grew in size there has been "a sense—sometimes real, sometimes imagined—of dislocation between management and actor." Nevertheless he doesn't believe in democracy in the theater. "But I also don't believe in the director just riding roughshod and just imposing his vision in the European way. If people think this is directors' theater they should go to the continent." Noble believes in a benevolent dictatorship in which the central vision is, almost inevitably, worked out in collaboration with the leading actors.

Noble pointed out that actors such as Dame Judi Dench, Geraldine McEwan and Derek Jacobi (all of whom recently directed Renaissance Theater Company productions) don't get judged in the same way as other directors do. "Of course it's news [that actors are directing] and it has got people to the theater. That's marvelous. I think we should be honest about it that's all. You have to ask, 'Did Judi Dench direct that scene well? Do I know what to look at?' Whether she is an actor or not is absolutely irrelevant."

Kenneth Branagh has, of course, taken the concept of actor/director even further with his film of *Henry V* which has captured the attention of New York filmgoers and garnered unanimous raves from the critics. But it was Noble who directed Branagh in *Henry V* at Stratford in 1984, the production which led to the making of the film four years later. "I directed a lot of the actors who were in his film, in exactly the same roles," he chuckled. "We got on great, actually."

Noble was set to make his American debut with a Broadway transfer of his 1987 RSC production of Cole Porter's

Kiss Me Kate. Plans were scuttled after they were unable to cast the leads in New York. "There are no doubt people in New York who can play Kate and Petruchio, but they either weren't free or weren't interested in doing it." Consequently he is making his American debut at the Manhattan Theater Club.

The Art of Success was commissioned by the RSC as part of their program to foster experimental and new writing at The Other Place, an intimate space at Stratford. Set in 1730s the play condenses the events of an entire decade into a single frenzied night with portrait painter William Hogarth, playwright-soon-to-be novelist Henry Fielding, and Prime Minister Robert Walpole among its protagonists.

The play was presented in 1986 at Stratford and moved to the RSC's equivalent intimate space, The Pit, in London the following year. The production, which acquired something of a cult following, caught the attention of Michael Bush, artistic associate at the Manhattan Theater Club. With the help of Stephen Sondheim—a former MTC board member who had also seen the play in London—Bush persuaded Lynne

Meadow (Artistic Director) to consider the play for the MTC.

Noble, who directed the RCS Production and was closely involved with the project from its inception, was a natural choice for director of the MTC version. He insisted that the physical environment be the same as The Pit's, and the Manhattan Theater Club agreed to convert their proscenium arch into an arena stage. The sets and costumes are designed by Ultz who was responsible for the RSC production as well.

The theater-in-the-round environment is essential for this play because, Noble explained, "there is something about the play which is very public." Crucial historical events—the passing of the Copyright Act and the establishment of the Lord Chamberlain's Office to censor the theater—and the behavior of the play's eighteenth-century characters parallel current events. "It's a debate, a very extroverted play, a very scatological play, a very rude play—quite an offensive play actually, but in a very nice, warm way," said Noble. "If people find sex offensive, then it's offensive. There is no violence in it; there's a lot of sex in it. I think sex is great."

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