Eyre Apparent

A Profile of the National Theater's Artistic Director, Richard Eyre

by Kathleen Tynan

THE NATIONAL THEATER OF GREAT BRITAIN is not merely buzzing, not merely hot, as you will hear loudly and often from a wide spectrum of the theater community, it is going through a Utopian period arguably unequalled since the heady early years of Laurence Olivier's reign in the 1960s.

At the helm, and largely responsible for the artistic and box office success of the huge grey theater complex on the South Bank, is Richard Eyre, 48 years old, with a long face, a strong nose, and a chin that would not look amiss above a Byron collar. Fastidious and cultivated, yet with a passion for show biz; droll and socially adept, yet a very private man; left-wing but not puritan; politic in his dealings, yet with a principled steeliness; modest yet with something of the dandy, Eyre combines to an unusual degree the qualities of both Roundhead and Cavalier. Now, three-and-a-half years into the job as Artistic Director of the National, with one-and-a-half years more to go on the present contract and five more years in the offing, he is at last at home in his part, and able to enjoy one of the most taxing jobs in British cultural life.

> "In rehearsal, you feel safe to confess anything. It's an openness I can't transfer socially."

His current production of *Richard III*, with Ian McKellan in the lead, recently opened at BAM and a 16-week U.S. tour will follow the New York engagement.

Even though Eyre sets *Richard III* in the 1930s, his production never seeks to establish literal equivalents between medieval and modern tyrants. "Nor has one line been twisted," Eyre insists, "in order to fit a conceit."

The final image of *Richard III* is an equivocal one, suggesting endless possibilities for the bloody cycle to be repeated. But the backdrop is of a peaceful country village with a church. Eyre says, "If I were asked what I was defending, it would be this idealized picture of England, which to me is much more than a metaphor, not an intellectual conceit but literally a heartland."

If Richard Eyre's taste as impresario is catholic, his own work at the National is very much informed by his relationship with England. He comes from an upper-class background, and has rebelled against it; he's a declared republican, and yet leads the Royal National Theater. Out of that tension, and as a result of his work with his colleagues has come a voice: "I wouldn't say a style, because that implies something which is imposed—but a kind of confidence with a theater that is very expressive, that uses minimal resources to arrive at distillation rather than decoration."

What he rejects as inhuman and alienating is the coldly-lit asceticism of much German theater as well as the decorative excesses and hollow effects of theater design in Britain during the 1980s.

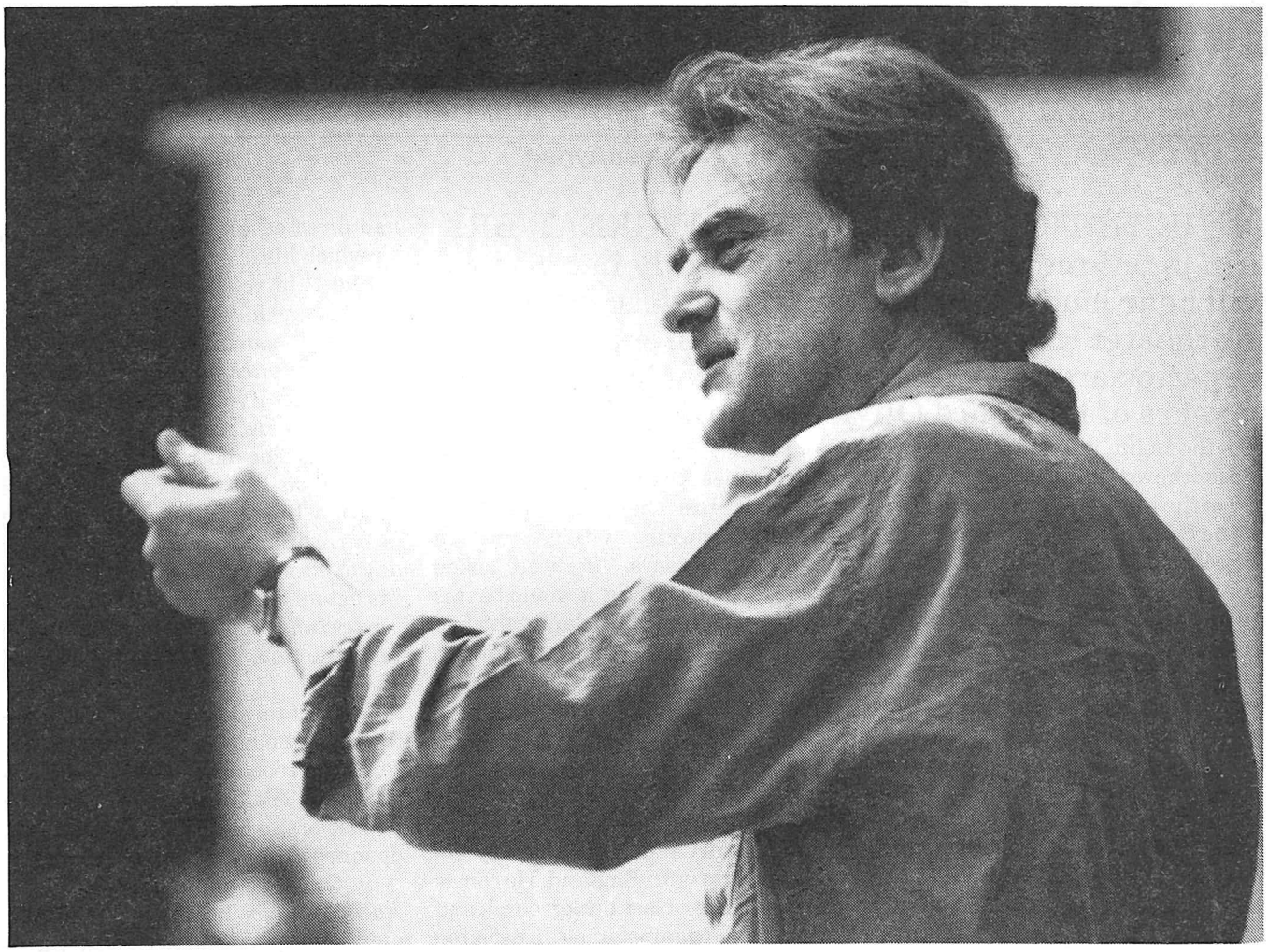
The new voice that Eyre refers to is perfectly exemplified in *Racing Demon*, about the Church of England, the first of a trilogy by David Hare about our great public institutions, a series that might be called Plays for England, touchstones of the moral temperature, not just of the Church, the Law, or our political system but metaphors for the condition of the soul.

In the wake of *Racing Demon*, first performed in February 1990, Eyre had directed an intelligent *Hamlet*, for which his friend Daniel Day-Lewis in the title role received mixed notices; it was followed by a production of Harley Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*, in which Eyre was able to identify with the son who sets out to clean up his father's fraudulent dealings. For both productions he drew upon his uneasy and painful relationship with his then-ailing father, a blimpish man who never saw any of his son's productions. Eyre told his actors during rehearsals for *The Voysey Inheritance*, "What breaks me up is the line, 'I know he did it, but I love him.'

"Plays are always about extreme feelings," he elaborates, "and in the rehearsal room you feel safe to confess anything. The license there is like the license of the psychiatrist's room, an openness I can't transfer socially."

By the time he began to work on *Racing Demon*, he was prepared both emotionally and artistically. David Hare describes his three part trilogy set in South London as an attempt at a Western *Mahabarata* about contemporary life—which should, on completion, be performed in its entirety one day. Hare began working with Eyre and the designer Bob Crowley before a word was written so that "the three functions became blurred. What we are trying to do—our artistic manifesto—is what Shakespeare did with the history plays: deal with the whole sweep of society by means of farce, comedy, tragedy.

"I wrote the police scenes in the second play *Murmuring Judges* [which is about the Law] to show off Richard's director's bravura," Hare continues. "He liked those scenes because they're unflinching about how hopeless the criminal process is. Into the charge room of a police station come a tramp vomiting, a woman with cancer, while the police just carry on regardless of the comic awfulness of people's lives. Richard's own background was so potentially wounding that the only way he's been able to deal with it is through



John Haynes

comedy."

Racing Demon is specifically about four Church of England clergymen trying to make sense of their mission in a South London parish with a dwindling congregation. The question is addressed as to whether you can love God and man at the same time. As one critic pointed out, "It's about what liberals do next."

"What is remarkable and radical about *Racing Demon*," Eyre believes, "is that it's a play stuffed with good people, however wrong-headed. There is a desperate wish to believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I feel in this country that people are so crippled by recent history—the loss of what Great Britain meant. The central character, Lionel, can't articulate his belief, loses his job, and feels that he's sacrificed his life for nothing. He ends up asking his estranged wife to go to bed with him, to which she answers, 'No. It's too late.' 'It's too late,' " Eyre echoes. "That sense of waste! I found that unbearably moving."

Racing Demon was cast and directed with perfect pitch. Working on it, Eyre felt he has made a sort of "Brookian journey without going to Africa—Peter Brookian in our attempt to express a metaphor for the play in three dimensions. Once Bob Crowley came up with the idea of a traverse stage in the form of a nave and transept the rest was easy, in the same way we arrived at a black box for *Richard III*. You set yourself these limits, and then you can only put certain things on the stage."

Murmuring Judges is equally ambitious but less well realized. It illustrates rather than jolts, or enlightens, or moves—perhaps because the subject under investigation: the three autonomous worlds of the law, the police, and the prison service—is by definition heartless.

Eyre had earlier, in 1991, directed another new play, Christopher Hampton's *White Chameleon*, cousin in subject and manner of production to the Hare trilogy. It is set in Alexandria during the Suez crisis and reflects Britain's loss of Empire behind a small-scale autobiographical story about a writer in the making. Eyre had proposed the idea of a play about Suez and Hampton then used the setting "to unleash a whole box full of childhood memories," Hampton says. "The play wouldn't exist without Richard," he continues. "He midwifed it. He took to coming round and reading what I'd written. He persuaded me to finish it."

In the context of Eyre's contribution, David Hare recently told a reporter: "The shortage of good new plays is less to do with a lack of writers than a terrible lack of dedicated young producers with the courage to do what Max Stafford-Clark has done for Caryl Churchill, or Greg Mosher for David Mamet."

When Eyre directed *White Chameleon*, according to Hampton, "He got the rhythms right. The atmosphere in the rehearsal room was very relaxed and happy. No histrionics or bad temper." Hare views Richard Eyre as a diffident director, "Old enough and wise enough to let actors

"My grandfather would ride his mount down those narrow lanes, stop cars, and take his whip to the motorists."

use their own talents; unfrightened to let things run—he doesn't jump up to intervene."

As for the actors, they uniformly sing his praise. Judi Dench, who played Gertrude in Eyre's production of *Hamlet* says, "He breeds confidence which allows an actor to go out on a limb. He hates any kind of confrontation at rehearsal. He'll go pale grey at the edges as if he's in a wind tunnel. His gentleness is paramount." And Daniel Day Lewis says, "He creates for himself the necessary order which allows intuition to come into play."

Directing plays is only one wing of Richard Eyre's job, a job which Ian McKellan describes as "All consuming. Richard thinks of it as his life—much more than Peter Hall ever did. And he practically lives at the National." Eyre must oversee a diverse repertory of plays embracing classic, new, and neglected work from the whole of world drama in order to give audiences a choice of six productions at any one time. He must fill most of the 2300 seats 52 weeks a year. As an impresario he must cast well (as McKellan says "his taste is recognizing how good other people are").

With the help of Genista McIntosh, his Executive Director, he must oversee 780 employees, a touring department, platform and education events, foyer performances, a bookshop, and 17 catering outlets. He must join the Government-appointed Board for meetings chaired by Churchill's daughter Lady Soames.

He must attend all sorts of official functions outside the theater, including fundraising events. At the end of a full day, some hostess who may help the National's sponsorship is impatiently waiting for her pound of flesh.

He must suffer comparison with his predecessors.

The idea for a state-subsidized national theater was first proposed in 1848 by Effingham Wilson, a radical London publisher. Matthew Arnold, Bernard Shaw, and a host of others campaigned for the thing. In 1907, William Archer and Harley Granville-Barker proposed that such a theater should preserve and foster the best in world drama. But it was not until the autumn of 1963 that the National was launched at the Old Vic.

As the first artistic director, Laurence Olivier presided over a decade of unarguably great theater. "Pound for pound," he said years later, "we were the best troupe of players in the world." By 1972, in poor health and without a successor, Olivier was ousted and replaced by Peter Hall. He left in a kind of despair, suffered a near nervous breakdown, and resented the "usurper."

Peter Hall, a Titan of organizational energy, moved the company, with the help of the Chairman Lord Rayne, into the new building on the South Bank. He worked on the principle that once the building was there and in operation, no government would close it down, and that subsidies would be forthcoming (a policy he had initiated as head of the Royal Shakespeare Company). During the course of an uneven tenure at the National, marked by some absenteeism, he directed notable productions of the *Oresteia, Amadeus*, and the late Shakespearian romances. He handed over an institution trusted by the public, and declared that he had accomplished two good things in his time: "I left the Royal Shakespeare to Trevor Nunn, and the National to Richard Eyre."

Eyre's credentials for the top job were in order: He had run three theaters, directing a range of classical and modern productions. For six years in the 1970s, he made the Nottingham Playhouse the most exciting repertory in the country, discovering actors like Jonathan Pryce and Antony Sher, and developing new plays: Hare and Brenton's *Brassneck*, Brenton's *The Churchill Play*, and Trevor Griffith's *Comedians*. He then spent two years with "Plays for Today" at the BBC. His productions at the Royal Court were models of clarity and brilliance: Alan Bennett's *Kafka's Dick*,

David Mamet's *Edmond*, and a *Hamlet* (sans ghost) with Jonathan Pryce.

His half dozen films include an anti-Thatcher polemic, with a script by Ian McEwan, called *The Ploughman's Lunch* (whose direction Eyre now describes as "mean spirited"), and the award-winning *Tumbledown*, an unapologetic attack on the Falklands War. He's about to film his production of *Richard III*.

During his seven years as an associate at the National, he directed a very successful *Guys and Dolls* and *The Futurists* in which Day Lewis played Mayakovsky.

In 1988, when he took over, he abandoned Peter Hall's system of dividing the three auditoria—the open stage Olivier, the proscenium Lyttleton, and the open space Cottesloe—into separate fiefdoms. He concentrated on bringing power back to the center, and on humanizing the building. As a democrat, he knew that theaters operate best with a pyramid structure, under benign dictatorship—"And sometimes not all that benign." From the start he realized that successful policy is "What you do. Not what you say you'll do."

He has successfully raided the rest of the theater for the best directors, adapters, actors, writers, and technicians. From the Royal Shakespeare Company he wooed the directors Nicholas Hytner, Deborah Warner, and Sam Mendes. He persuaded Declan Donnellan of Cheek by Jowl and Neil Bartlett of Gloria to leave their particular companies to work at the National.

Productions of the classics include Sean Mathias's acclaimed *Uncle Vanya* with Ian McKellan and Antony Sher (now in repetory); Brecht's *Arturo Ui* in a translation by Ranjit Bolt; and Brecht's *Good Person of Sichuan* directed by Deborah Warner. Nicholas Hytner has flourished with two Alan Bennett entertainments, *Wind in the Willows* and *The Madness of George III*. Another big success is Eyre's production of Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*—with Eileen Atkins in the role of the New England spinster. Judi Dench gave a bravura performance in an Edward Bond revival, *The Sea* (directed by Sam Mendes). Foreign classics have included Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, directed by Declan Donnel-

lan, who is also responsible for a superb production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, described after its American premiere in San Francisco as "a landmark not just among AIDS plays, but in American theater."

In addition, Steven Pimlott directed Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, Gregory Mosher, Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow*, Michael Blakemore, Miller's *After the Fall*, and Howard Davies, Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*—not a bad representation for American playwrights.

What fault can one find? What is missing? There may be a dearth of European plays—contemporary and classic. There is certainly little evidence of a contemporary political play set among the working class—there are no abusive Jimmy Porters sounding off (though perhaps something will emerge from the National's Studio which has a season of new plays in workshop). There is no evidence of a tight company, working with "the hot breath of unity," as Olivier described his players—though Eyre argues that 50 out of the 100 odd actors working at the National at any one time do form a de facto extended ensemble; and that star performers like Ian McKellan, Judi Dench, and Michael Bryant are constantly at work in one of the three auditoria.

One might ask, in a perfect world, for a few more giant performances, and on occasion, a stronger smell of grease paint. A more serious criticism is that the National unbalances the theater's ecology in a climate of shrinking subsidy. The effect of the concentration of monies and energy in London, compounded by the Thatcher government's refusal to bring grants in line with inflation, along with cut-backs by local and regional councils, have caused most subsidized theaters to go into deficit, and many to close. Schemes for incentive funding and patronage have been time-consuming and not seriously productive. Sponsorship here comes off the advertising budget, and the *quid pro quo* is publicity. Patronage does not bring with it tax concessions, as in the States. "And with sponsorship," Eyre points out, "you're being asked to justify your existence. If the reviews are bad, you feel your license is being withdrawn, and that erodes the anarchic artist in you who would normally say 'Fuck you.' I fear self-censorship. It's insidious."

By Autumn 1990, the situation reached such a serious crisis that the profession mobilized. Philip Hedley of the Theater Royal, Stratford East, spearheaded a campaign to raise funds. Richard Eyre warned that if the limbs of the body were severed, the whole would eventually wither and die: The health of his own theater, he argued, was dependent on "a healthy theater in the nation."

A year later, the Government agreed to bandage the wounds with a 14% increase to the Arts Council—the independent body that distributes Government funds. But the grass roots—small theaters, regional repertories, education facilities—are still being bled dry by the effective cut-backs.

The National meanwhile goes from strength to strength. Its Arts Council grant went up by 7% to $20 million which represents 44% of the theater's revenue. (It receives 56% for box office, catering, books, etc., and from patronage and sponsorship. And the theater, at the moment, sells 90% of its tickets.)

Though we remain second from the bottom in Europe in public spending on culture, the success of our theater is still dependent on state subsidy. "Subsidy gives you risk capital plus the continuity of investment," Eyre points out. "And the inestimable right to fail." Subsidy indirectly feeds the commercial theater, and very obviously boosts the tourist trade. Eyre also points out that the National must play to 80% capacity to make ends meet; and he argues that too lavish subsidy, as in some German theaters, can be a bad thing. "Absolving the practitioners from a relationship with the audience," he says. Subsidy finances working class access to the theater, through education and drama schools.

Despite his left-wing allegiance, Eyre is typical of the group of men and women in charge of the theater: top-notch Oxbridge, predominantly middle-class. One could well imagine these University Wits working successfully in other fields. Alan Bennett finds many of them rather rigorous: "You expect them to get 'slewed,' not

drunk. They make me feel like a flibbertigibbet."

Eyre is probably too compassionate to make anyone feel like a flibbertigibbet. "He's someone who worries terribly if a friendship's gone wrong," writer Ian McEwan explains. "And is quick to put it right." He is reserved, though, according to Daniel Day Lewis: "His emotions are much closer to the surface than one would guess." "A man of honor of the old school" is how the actor Michael Bryant describes him.

Richard Eyre was born on March 23, 1943 to a county background. "Their decibel level!" he complains. "Like a buzz-saw. They pitch their voices beyond any kind of acceptable level of social exchange, as if to cauterize the senses." The thought of the braying members of the upper class produces a sudden explosion of laughter.

His family is Anglo-Irish, from Galway. An eighteenth century Lord Eyre started the Galway Blazers Hunt. Another ancestor was Edward J. Eyre, notorious for putting down a riot in Jamaica in 1865 and famous for protecting the Australian aboriginine. His great-grandfather fought in the Crimea and died in the Sudan.

While his father was away at sea during the war, he lived in North Devon with his paternal grandfather, an eccentric tyrant. The house had neither running water, nor electricity, nor telephone. "Not because he was poor but because he was trying to arrest the onward march of time," Eyre says of his grandfather. "He was quite often arraigned for brutalizing motorists. He'd ride his mount down those very narrow lanes and stop an oncoming car. When bemused motorists would get out and ask to pass, he would take his whip to them. I think he was probably psychotic. Eric von Stroheim could have been his role model. He dressed in Edwardian tweeds, tight, high-buttoned jackets; and he had his hair cut within a whisker of his scalp. He terrorized my mother and refused to recognize the existence of her family. He wanted me christened 'bastard son of Richard.' Yet outside our family, he was thought to be charming and witty. My sister and I made it our business to like him because we knew how much it upset our parents. I was fascinated by him, and I've written a memoir of him."

> "I tried LSD, smoked a lot of dope, and listened to jazz, but my heart was never beating in time to the '60s."

Eyre's maternal grandfather was Charles Roydes, Commander of the Discovery, and on Scott's first Antarctic expedition. He became Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and died at the Savoy Hotel, having taken the floor for the first waltz of the Police Ball. His grandmother had been an actress for a brief time. His mother, Minna, an only child, was "Lovely and quite bright, but subsumed by her husband's life."

His father, Commander "Snowy" Eyre, retired from the Navy to farm in Dorset and ride to hounds. Ten years ago his mother developed Alzheimer's disease and died earlier this year. His father, Commander Eyre, died recently after suffering a stroke.

"When your parents get ill or die one of the shocks is discovering feelings you didn't know you had, or rather how infinitely complicated they are. It's not as simple as not getting on with them. Even when you love them, there's a spectrum of ambiguities which you travel through. My parents appeared to be socially confident to the point of brashness and I always used to wilt. It just seemed they always spoke too loudly. My father always told particularly dirty jokes.

"There was always a war between us. My father always referred to religion as fucking mumbo-jumbo. But shortly before he died I got a letter from a vicar which said, 'You will be surprised to hear that I have been talking to your father in hospital and he wants to make peace with God. I feel very strongly that he wants to make peace with you too.'

"I went and made my peace, and it was terribly painful. I sat beside his bed—by that time he was home, rambling a bit. He kept on talking about the Cheltenham Gold Cup and having a terrible hangover. I said 'You haven't got a terrible hangover, you've got a terrible stroke.' He said 'No, no, I was in bed with three women, there was a party last night.' I just held his hand and said, 'I wish we'd got on better, but I don't blame you.' And he said, 'Well, all I hope is that I didn't give you as bad a time as my father gave me.' And I said, 'You didn't, you didn't.' There was a real sense of peace being made.

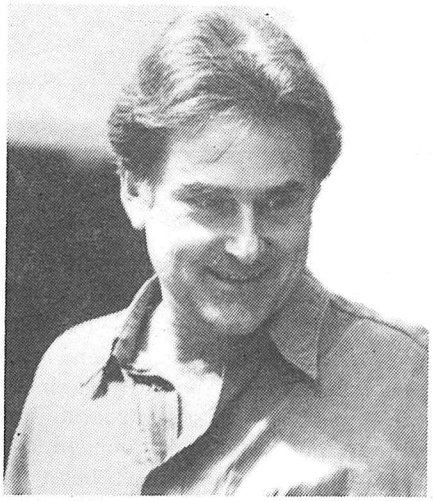
"When he died I went and sat in the room with him. I realized I'd spent 30, 40 years just trying to attract his attention, and I'd never got it. I realized that I was driven, that I had an unnatural, obsessive desire to succeed at something. And in a preposterously crude, Freudian sense, it was simply to do with him."

Eyre went to Sherbourne where, aged 16, he had "a blinding Marxist vision," no doubt in revolt against the school's injustice and tyranny. He was eventually expelled for telling the school Chaplain to "go fuck himself." He was at that moment boarding a train for London dressed in winklepickers and a black shirt.

He went to Cambridge in 1962 to read Mathematics and switched to English. His tutor was Kingsley Amis, "in very early training for the role of Colonel Blimp," Eyre recalls. "He taught me how to reject received opinion. I wrote an essay on *Twelfth Night*, a kind of cocktail of literary criticism, and he said, 'Now look, what do you think about this play. It says here it's a comedy. Is it funny? Is it well constructed?' "

At Cambridge, his friends were Sonny Mehta, Brian Gascoigne, Eric Idle, and Stephen Frears. For Frears's production of the musical *Espresso Bongo*, he wore a gold lamé suit and got girls screaming. He says he wasn't much of an actor (though he's a fine mimic). "Stephen sent me to a hypnotist to relax me, to destroy the last atoms of self-consciousness. I didn't want to let the man down, in fact I longed to be taken out of myself to give him satisfaction. But it didn't work. I tried LSD and smoked a lot of dope and listened to jazz. I wasn't taken by the Beatles—even less by the Stones—my heart was never beating quite in time with the '60s."

According to Richard Eyre's great



Richard Eyre

friend, the actor Jack Shepherd, "You've got to be a manic depressive to enjoy jazz—to feel the two aspects simultaneously. Then the music catches fire. Richard knows that. He told me he's played some of the greatest jazz scores inside his head though he can't write music."

Shepherd's wife, Ann Scott, who has produced several of Eyre's films, adds: "Music's what he'd most like to be able to do." "Not to write it," her husband contradicts, "to express it."

Eyre started directing professionally in 1965, and spent several years running the Royal Lyceum Theater in Edinburgh before becoming Artistic Director of the Nottingham Playhouse in 1973. In Nottingham he set up house and married Sue Birtwistle, a pretty, auburn-haired, highly intelligent woman from a working class family. She was already established in Nottingham in young people's theater. Now a successful producer for television and independent film, she is described by her colleagues as more outgoing, less complex than her husband, and wonderfully well organized. "She loves to get in there and get things in alphabetical order," says the novelist Ian McEwan.

Both Richard and Sue Eyre are excellent cooks, entertaining large groups at their kitchen table. On holiday, en groupe, they will take enormous trouble to seek out the right kind of lobster. They once rented a chateau near Paris for 28 friends and their children to spend Christmas. Occasionally they spend a weekend in a rented cottage in Gloucestershire, where Richard Eyre rides and bicycles, and reads through insomniac nights.

Their terraced Edwardian house is spacious and ordered. The books are on the shelves but look as if they've been reached for. On the walls are paintings by their friends.

The third member of this family is Lucy, the daughter of the house, a dark-haired 17-year-old who attends St Paul's School and whom Eyre describes as "heart-stoppingly beautiful."

At the pinnacle of success in the theater world, where will Richard Eyre's desire to succeed next lead him? To write down the jazz score which lies in his head? To direct more films? Small films, whose environment he can control?

"I sometimes think," he once told me, "that what I'd most like to be doing is to be standing on top of a mountain in the middle of the night in the freezing cold and battering rain, filming a very very difficult scene, rather than being at a managerial meeting here at the National, exercising the painful process of democracy."

I doubt he'll leave the theater. Tell him the theater's finished, and he'll jump up to defend it—its immediacy, and danger, its human dimension, its sense of occasion. Theater as a place of magic and moral debate.

"Did you see that very louche article the other day," Richard asked, "On why do people go to the theater because it's frightfully unfashionable—as if there's some forum in London or anywhere else where everyone's scuttling off to see these great new films, or this vivid opera, or to buy that great new novel. Bollocks! I really felt insulted. Every night here there are people queuing from the front door to the box office for returns for three shows in three different theaters. Are these people despicable?"

For the pleasure of those "despicable" people, and the health of our theater, I hope Richard Eyre stays in the job. □

Novelist, journalist, and screenwriter Kathleen Tynan is the author of The Life of Kenneth Tynan, *a biography of her late husband.*