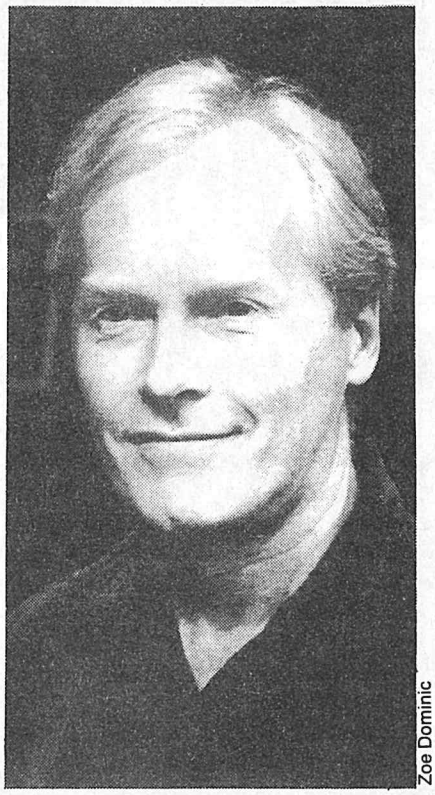
Nicholas Wright: The Play's The Thing

The author of the London hit Mrs. Klein *is also the literary manager at England's Royal National Theater*

by Gerard Raymond

When playwright Nicholas Wright completed his new play, *Mrs. Klein*, he was faced with an unusual dilemma: Should he take it to Britain's Royal National Theater, where he is literary manager, or should he avoid accusations of self-promotion and take it to the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National's chief rival in the British subsidized theater world?

"I felt very exposed," explains Wright in his tiny office in the National Theater complex on the South Bank of the Thames, "because if the play had been a flop, people would very reasonably have said, 'If you are going to do flops, at least do somebody else's flops.' But looking at it the other way, if I wrote a play and I took it to the RSC, it would raise another very interesting question. People would ask, 'Where are your loyalties, and did you think the RSC would do it better than the National Theater? In which case why you encouraging people to get their plays done at the National?' "



Zoe Dominic

Mrs. Klein opened at the National's Cottlesloe Theater last August and was a resounding success. It transferred to the West End in December, where it is still playing at the Apollo Theater. The play's subject is child psychologist Melanie Klein, whose work, exploring aggression in the very young, was both original and controversial in the 1930s. Klein was so obsessed with her work that she even analyzed her own children and published the results. Her daughter, who became an analyst herself, never forgave her mother and became her bitter opponent professionally. The play takes place on the day in 1934 when Klein learns of her son's probable suicide at the age of 27. Hailed as one of the best new British plays of 1988, *Mrs. Klein* was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award for Best Play of the Year and actress Gillian Barge (who plays the title role) was nominated for Best Actress.

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The other two members of the cast, Zoe Wanamaker and Francesca Annis, received excellent notices for their performances, as did Peter Gill for his precise direction. [Zoe Wanamaker was profiled in last week's issue of *TheaterWeek*.]

For the 48-year-old South African-born playwright, *Mrs. Klein* marks a departure in style. Two previous plays, *The Custom of the Country* (1983) and *Desert Air* (1984), produced by the RSC, had broad epic structures. The former is a comedy on colonial themes and was the result of Wright's one-year stay in Zimbabwe, and the latter a comedy about covert activity during World War II. Wright turned to the chamber style of *Mrs. Klein* "partly out of dissatisfaction with the epic-scale plays I had been doing. They were fun, but I really wanted to see how much depth you can get out of a very limited setting and a very small group of people. That led me to thinking about psychoanalysis and to Melanie Klein. Then I came upon this very interesting story of her children, this daughter that she couldn't handle and who hated her so much. I actually have never written a play like it before, very symmetrical and hermetically sealed."

Wright originally trained as an actor in London and then joined the Royal Court as a casting director. In 1969, he became the first director of the Theater Upstairs, the Court's new studio space. He left the Court in 1976, after serving as joint artistic director with Robert Kidd. In 1984, he joined the National as an associate director, and was particularly responsible for new writing. When John Russell Brown resigned from his post as repertoire advisor to the National in 1987, Wright formally became literary manager.

Wright recalls Peter Hall telling him on his first day at the National, "Good literary managers get plays on." Nothing, he concurs, "gives a literary manager more deliciously secret relish than that obscure classic which nobody else has heard of, or that brilliant new playwright which she or he alone can claim to have discovered."

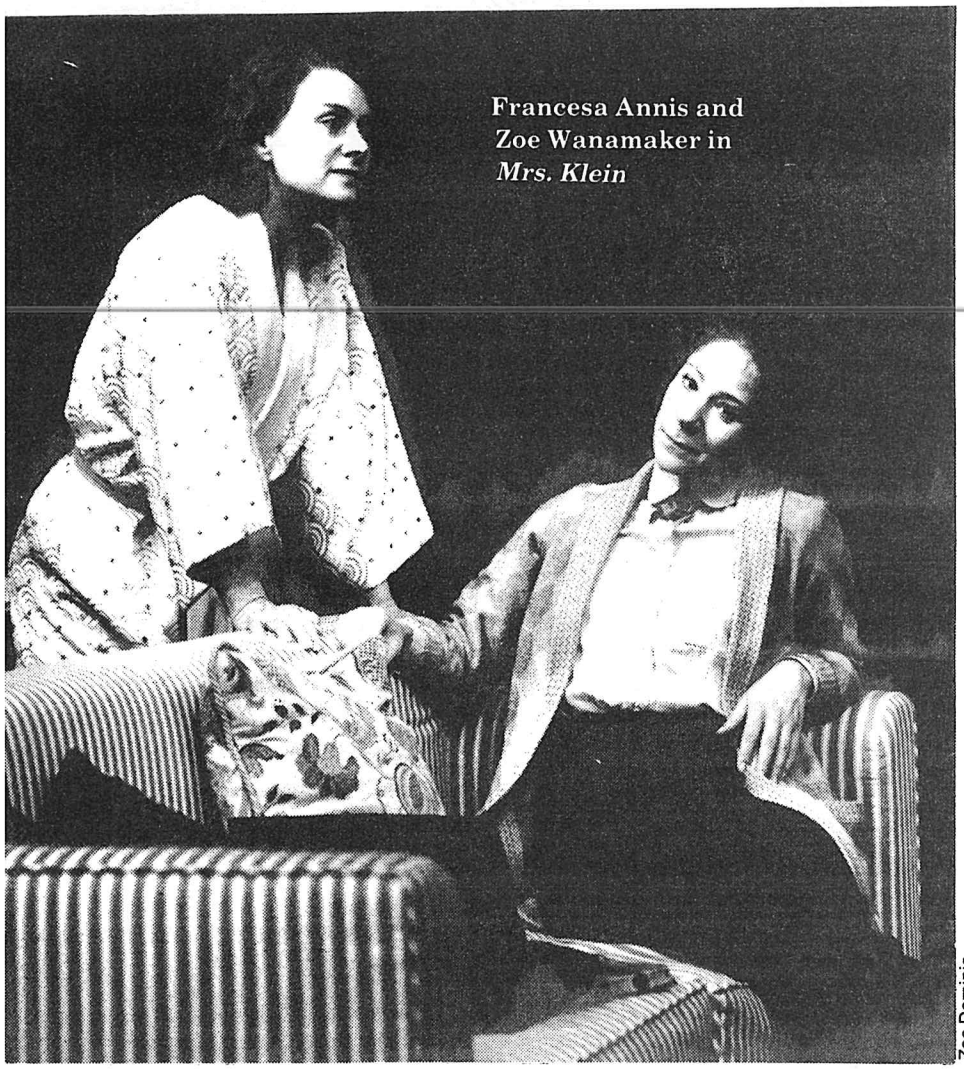
Yet under the system that existed at the National in the last two years of Hall's stewardship, this pleasure was not easily come by. Hall created several companies, each of which was led by a director, which meant each director set the program for his own season. "A program that is already fixed is very uninteresting for me," says Wright, who had very little say about what plays were being done. The practice was changed by current National director Richard Eyre and executive director David Aukin, who took over last September.

Still, Wright points out that, as in the U.S., "theaters here tend to be run by directors, so usually the plays we are doing are the plays the directors want to do, rather than the plays that the playwrights want performed. I make recommendations about the program which are sometimes taken and sometimes not. Obviously, it is a mark of one's success and a boost to the morale, the more work you have in the repertoire that you feel responsible for personally." Wright is reluctant to mention any particular projects that he was able to get through. His influence on these choices is necessarily more subtle. "Obviously, Richard Eyre will be making the final decision about what the balance of the program is going to be, but it's my job to throw new facets into it."

A good part of Wright's task as literary manager, which he describes as the passive part of the job, is "simply reading and evaluating unsolicited scripts," of which the theater receives about five hundred a year. Another, "very important part of the job is keeping relationships going with writers we are particularly interested in, making it clear that we are very open and very accessible and that this is a theater that is actively interested in their work." An example of the long process by which a new play makes its way to the National's main stages is Jim Cartwright's *Bed*, which was commissioned by the National Theater Studio and opened at the Cottesloe Theater this month. Wright read a script by Cartwright before that author's first play, *Road*, was produced at the Royal Court in 1986. "It was a very early version of *Road*, something like five or six years ago," Wright recalls. "Then it must be three years ago that I talked to Jim about possibly doing something for the Studio. Finally, he and the director Julia Bardsley wanted to work together and they did a short play in the Studio in 1987." Cartwright was then commissioned to write a second half to this piece and the result is *Bed*, produced over five years after initial contact with the writer.

Given Wright's Royal Court roots, it is not surprising that he is particularly interested in new writing. "Nothing will give me greater pleasure than if we were living through a time when new writing was very exciting," he says wistfully. "I think there are very good writers at the moment, some in their 40s and early 50s who are writing as well or better than ever, but we don't have a new school of writing. There is no actual group like in the early 70s when a lot of writers were coming up through the Fringe [London's equivalent of off-Broadway]. There is no group of young writers really making noise and challenging all the things we feel we know about."

Wright does not feel that the National's establishment image limits the kind of new writing presented there. "I think our audience is very tolerant and multifarious. It is not at all snotty or snobbish. Where the National can, and has, come in very well is in introducing a writer to a big stage for the first time. This is what we should doing and what we are not doing enough of. We are presenting the work of writers like Alan Bennett (*Single Spies*) and David Hare (*The Secret Rapture*). I am delighted to be doing that, but it would also be very nice if the stages of the Olivier and the Lyttleton could present, once every year or two, a brand new voice which hasn't met the challenge of a big, fairly popular audience before."



Francesa Annis and Zoe Wanamaker in *Mrs. Klein*

Zoe Dominic

Another aspect of Wright's job as literary manager is the dramaturgical work, "which is research on plays that we are doing, quite often comparing different texts of the play." He cites as an example Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan*, a likely prospect for next year. Brecht revised the play "a number of times in a number of different versions. You have got to decide which translation you are going to use or if you are going to commission a new translation, and if so, from whom." In some instances, Wright will work closely with the director in this matter; at other times, the directors prefer not to get involved in this process. He mentions that Howard Davies, who directed Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the National last year (and is scheduled to direct an American production as well), "Very much enjoys the detailed work of comparing one text with another. As you know, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* really exists in three versions: the pre-Kazan version, the post-Kazan version [director Elia Kazan made textual changes for the acclaimed 1955 Broadway production], and then there is a meld of the two which Williams did in 1972." The version that the National eventually staged was the original Williams version, made before Kazan made any changes.

The issue of translations and adaptations, Wright adds, causes "terrible acrimony and professional translators get furious when you say this, but although they are very accurate, they seem to lack a bit of life and sparkle, really." The National prefers to commission fresh translations/ adaptations, trying to arrange the best marriage between a writer and the work to be adapted. If the writer does not know the original language, a literal translation and an advisor is made available. Wright is particularly proud of John Osborne's adaptation of August Strindberg's *The Father*: "He is such a great rhetorician and I think he has done a marvelous version, terribly actable, and very alive." David Lan, whose last play dealt with Lithuanian refugees, was commissioned to do the English version of an Israeli play with a similar subject, Joshua Sobol's *Ghetto*, opening in April at the Olivier (a different production using the same adapatation will premiere simultaneously in New York at Broadway's Circle-in-the-Square Theater).

Wright has adapted *Slave Island* and *The Double Inconstancy* by Pierre Marivaux, and in 1987 his version of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was presented by the National. Of the Pirandello, critic Michael Billington noted that Wright's changing of the play-within-the-play to *Hamlet* paid "increasingly brilliant dividends."

Wright admits a conscious attempt at reintroducing an international flavor to programming at the National. "In the last few years, the National did some very good work, but every director seemed to want to do one safe production; we got an awful lot of Broadway hits. We were just not doing European plays at all. Hence the Strindberg, the Ibsen [*Hedda Gabler*, adapted by Christopher Hampton, opened in February], the Lope de Vega [*Fuente Ovejuna*, which opened in January], and *Ghetto*."

The position of literary manager of the National Theater is essentially the same one created for Kenneth Tynan 25 years ago when the theater was founded by Laurence Olivier. "One of the things Kenneth did which was very useful," Wright remarks, "was that he made a list of more than a thousand plays which people still use—it's a very good list. It's a list you can look down to jog your memory. There are lots of omissions which are very interesting; for example there is no Odon von Horvath because at that time Horvath was not a writer anybody knew. Since then the National has done two of his plays [*Tales From the Vienna Woods* in 1977 and *Don Juan Comes Back From the Way* in 1978] and is constantly talking about doing another one."

Tynan's achievements as literary manager were indeed legendary. Wright continues, "He took the very unusual step of putting a completely unknown writer on the main stage at the Old Vic." Tynan had seen Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) at the Edinburgh

Festival and "had a marvelous intuition for that play. Signing it up and pushing it to go on was one of the great dramaturg's coups ever. The other very brilliant thing he did was to rehabilitate the old warhorses that amateur companies used to do. *Hobson's Choice* was one. It is a wonderful work but when the National Theater first put it on, in 1964, it was rather an odd choice because it had become a corny old play. Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* [produced in 1964] and J.B. Priestley's *When We Are Married* [1979] were others. But you see, the commercial theater has changed. Now they do these plays all the time. I don't know quite what we have got left in the English repertoire."

When it comes to the perennial classics and Shakespeare, is there is a way of knowing what the other companies are doing when plays are being selected for the season? "It's very informal. I think somebody once did try to institute a system by which the RSC and the National used to send each other a piece of paper which had all the plays they wanted to do. But of course it became ridiculous because every company just put down *King Lear, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, The Good Woman of Szechuan, Twelfth Night, She Stoops to Conquer,* and others and this list of identical plays went back and forth. Of course, the plays you really wanted to do, you never let on to! So that attempt at cooperation fell by the wayside. At about the same time, 20 years ago, it was thought that the companies might exchange actors. One company had at that time a very brilliant but notoriously difficult actor called Max Adrian and the other had a comparable actress called Patience Collier. Immediately, both these actors were loaned to the other company and the scheme never got any further than that!"

How does Wright manage his twin careers as a writer and literary manager? "It's terribly difficult. I couldn't bear to be a playwright and just sit home all day, go to the shop and get a newspaper, and go for a walk in the park—I'd get so bored and so depressed. So it's wonderful to have a structured job to go to. On the other hand, I think to write a play you have to build up a

very distinct fantasy about what you are writing, and it's very difficult to do that when you are constantly having to cope with practical problems of dates and schedules. It took me an awful long time to get into a state to write *Mrs. Klein*. It didn't take a long time to write—four or five months—but it took years to get into the state to do it, whereas it would have taken me much less if I hadn't been doing this job. You see, I'm in a funny position because I started writing plays very late. By the time I started I already knew quite a lot about theater and had a fairly detached view of it. I had directed a lot and so I went in with a nuts and bolts attitude."

In relation to his job at the National, Wright says he doesn't know if his career as a playwright influences the sorts of play he likes. "I do get very impatient at plays which are woefully bad. I am glad I write plays because I really do know how much work is involved and I can spot a play which has been lazily written and that does make me very irritable."

Wright says that, unlike in the U.S., the practice of getting playwrights to rewrite their plays is uncommon in England. "It's coming in here and I'm a bit suspicious of it, personally. I think it creates a level of middle-management called literary managers who see themselves as indispensable, that nobody can write a play without them, which is manifestly not true. People actually wrote quite good plays before literary managers were ever invented! Then writers just had to cope with the free market and see whether people liked their plays or not, which is not a bad test. When there is something basically not quite right about a play, some entrenched problem with that writer, then the best thing is just to put it in a drawer and forget all about it and go to the next. What I see often is that writers will spend years rejigging it and trying to restructure it and never really getting it much better.

"I think what I have learnt from writing my own plays is that everybody's voice is really different and people have just got to write plays the way they can. What makes a play successful for me, usually, is if the writer's voice is distinctive and strong and that the subject and the treatment come together in a way that gives it force." □