

by Gerard Raymond



Anthony Hopkins in the title role in David Hare's production of *King Lear*.

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National Theatre, International Influence

On the South Bank of the Thames, England's National Theatre produces an unparalleled range of events

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ny visit to London provides the theatergoer with rich and unusual fare, but the National Theatre has what must rank as the city's most varied and rewarding programming to be found in a single location: Picturesquely situated on the South Bank of the Thames, the National Theatre is the only place in the English-language theater world where one frequently has a choice of six different productions—in a diverse and international repertoire embracing classic, new, and neglected plays—all within the same complex.

The idea for a self-contained English national theater is known to have surfaced at least as early as 1848. It was in 1904 that the first comprehensive scheme was put forth, detailed by William Archer and the well-known Shakespearean scholar Harley Granville-Barker. But it was not until 45 years later that an act of Parliament brought the National Theater to life. In 1962 Laurence Olivier was named its first director, and a year later the company's first production, *Hamlet*, was presented from the

National's temporary offices at the Old Vic. Work began on a permanent house the following year. The National moved into the site in 1976, where it has remained ever since.

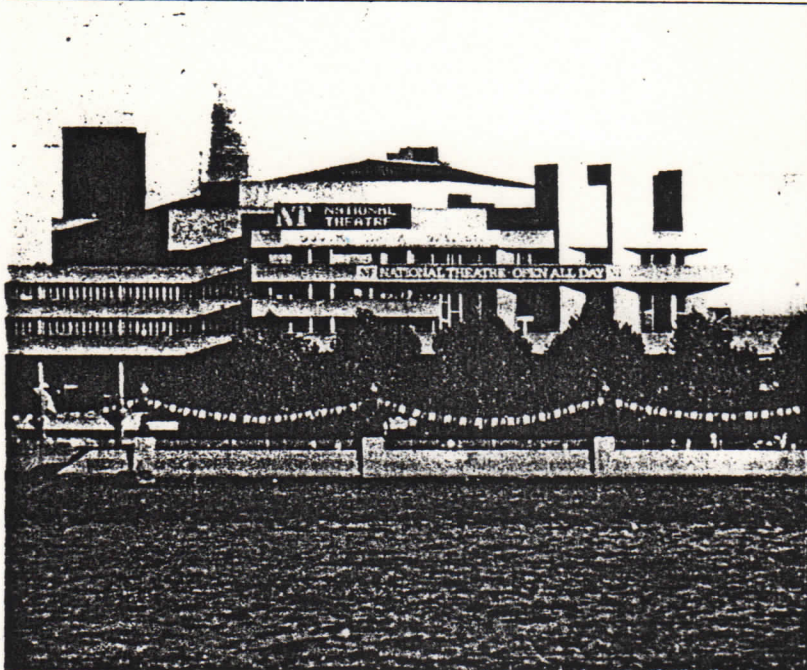
Each of the three theaters housed in the National complex is distinct in style and character, providing directors and designers with a wide range of theatrical possibilities. Sir Denys Lasdun, the designer, has explained that a national theater needs "to respond to the two mainstreams of drama: the 'open' situation, which the Greeks and Elizabethans knew, and the 'confrontation' situation, which is the realist theater with a proscenium which everybody has been writing for over the last three hundred years." The largest of the National's theaters, the 1100-seat Olivier, caters to the first need, built as it is on the classic Greek plan. The middle theater, the Lyttelton, seats 890 and has a proscenium that is more or less conventional, although it is adjustable to accommodate sets of various sizes. The small Cottesloe, which can seat up to 400, is a totally flexible rectangular room: Its playing

area depends entirely upon the wishes and whims of writers and directors.

The National is not, however, just its three theaters, its rehearsal spaces, set-painting or construction spaces, or costume studios. It is also, by intent, one of the friendliest social centers in London. There are spacious foyers and terraces along the Thames which are open to anyone—you don't have to be attending one of the plays to go there. There are frequent music recitals, exhibitions, and informal foyer events called Platform Performances. Due to its

season is currently scheduled to open with *Hamlet*, with Daniel Day Lewis as the Prince.

The actors of the National Theatre Company, while under the overall direction of Sir Peter Hall, work in groups of twenty under a one-year contract. There were seven groups this past season, directed by Hall, Mike Alfreys, David Hare and Richard Eyre, Jonathan Lynn, Michael Rudman, Di Trevis, and Alan Ayckbourn.



government subsidy and policy of affordable theater, the top price for a performance is never higher than \$20. There are low-priced stand-by seats available on the day of each performance for those who are enthusiastic enough to line up very early in the morning (and sometimes even overnight for the sell-out performances). Standing room is as low as \$3.50 and the view is extremely good.

Sir Peter Hall succeeded Lord Olivier as Director of the National in 1973. His has been a highly controversial stewardship and he has taken the organization through its most difficult years. His first season included a noteworthy production of *Hamlet* starring Albert Finney and Angela Lansbury, and he has since directed memorable productions of Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal*, Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, and a marathon *Oresteia*. Recently, Hall has been severely criticized by some sections of the British press for relying too heavily on commercial productions and has been accused of utilizing the National's subsidy to generate productions more likely to make successful West End and Broadway transfers than the sort of plays some feel a national theater should be putting on. He leaves the National when his contract runs out next year. Richard Eyre (best known for the National Theatre's highly acclaimed production of *Guys and Dolls* and a production of *High Society* currently running in the West End) will take over as director in September 1988. In keeping with a historical tradition, the 88-89

Of these, it was Ayckbourn who made the most spectacular impression in the '86/87 season. A prolific writer of popular farces (some that crossed the Atlantic, however, did not flourish on Broadway, i.e. *Bedroom Farce* and *The Norman Conquests*), he has come into his own as a sensitive director of not only his own, lately more serious work, but also of other writers' work as well. The three plays he chose for his group amply demonstrated his growing skill as director, highlighted his group's ensemble work, and while quite varied in style, content, and locale, seemed to be thematically linked as well.

Tons of Money is a vintage 1922 farce which, by all reports, Ayckbourn staged with all the high-speed technical virtuosity he has displayed in his own writing. Michael Gambon, acclaimed as the actor of the season, played a butler to rave notices. It was in the second play of Ayckbourn's cycle, however, that Gambon triumphed, giving what many will swear is the definitive performance of Eddie Carbone, the tragic hero of Arthur Miller's *A View from a Bridge*. In fact, the play was staged so sensitively at the intimate Cottesloe Theatre that Ayckbourn was able to muffle the creaks in Miller's self-conscious attempt at setting a Greek tragedy in Brooklyn. Led by Gambon, the cast's performance was so compelling that the powerful emotional core of the play was revealed.

Ayckbourn completed his dazzling hat trick with the premiere of his new play, *A Small Family Business*. This stunning play takes the farcical elements of *Tons of Money* and weaves

them into an uncompromising look at a suburban family who run their own furniture business. While making serious moral comments about honesty, greed, and the nature of compromise, this play is also one of the funniest of recent times. Ayckbourn presented his multi-level comedy with such dexterity that audiences screamed with laughter at Ayckbourn's onstage business while they simultaneously responded to its darker exposé of human behavior. Once again, Gambon was superb, this time as the head of the business, who learns how insidiously corruption can compromise the most honest of men. A striking feature of this production, which was staged at the Olivier, was the split-level set representing four different homes without any change of dressing. Based on the premise that all the homes were furnished with stock from the family business, the setting not only had great artistic impact, but must also have represented a great reduction in the set budget as well.

Peter Hall's production of *Anthony and Cleopatra* was simply spellbinding—even from a hard-to-come-by standing room spot at the back of the Olivier Theatre. Sir Peter staged the play in a manner which captured the ebb and flow of the passions and fortunes of the two protagonists. The play has often been criticized for the number of very short scenes which jump back and forth between Egypt and Rome at dizzying speeds. In Hall's hands, these so-called flaws became the very qualities which make this one of Shakespeare's most poetic works. Rather than indulge in the sort of pyrotechnics that draw attention to the director, Hall concentrated on getting superlative performances from the actors. Judi Dench's Cleopatra embodied all the qualities which so fascinated Anthony that he was prepared to forsake his duties and power in Rome in order to stay by her side. Anthony Hopkins conveyed the tragic heroism of the warrior whose strengths were of such epic proportions that they were too large for the era about to be ushered in by the brash and uptight Octavius (played by Tim Pigott-Smith).

In coming weeks, audiences at the National will have a choice of Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business* (presented with a new cast, as the original one led by Michael Gambon moves to the West End with *A View from a Bridge* on October 28); *Anthony and Cleopatra*; *King Lear*, in its final performances of David Hare's production with Anthony Hopkins in the lead; a five-hour dramatization of Eugene Sue's 1844 epic *The Wandering Jew*, which is the first production of Mike Alfred's group; Brian Friel's adaptations of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, performed by Michael Rudman's group; and the works of two up-and-coming playwrights: David Edgar's *Entertaining Strangers*, performed by Peter Hall's group with the leads played by Judi Dench and Tim Pigott-Smith, and Nick Drake's *Ting Tung Mine*, also by Michael Rudman's group. In the middle of November, Rudman, who directed Dustin Hoffman in *Death of a Salesman*, will direct the first National Theatre production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, to star Alec McCowen. Even though the National has put on some spectacular flops and has been criticized for making some rather strange choices as far as repertoire, few institutions offer its continuous range and diversity, night after night, season after season.

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