



Richard Eyre who replaced Sir Peter Hall as Director of the National Theater of Great Britain. Eyre has directed many successful productions, including *Guys and Dolls*, (National Theater) *High Society*, (West End), and *The Changeling* (National Theater).

Richard Eyre: Director of the National Theater in London

After a year at the head of the National, Eyre finds the roles of director and administrator totally incompatible.

by Gerard Raymond

"The Phantom is a great transition role for me after all those juveniles."

The interview over, Solo escorted me across the vast stage to the stage door. He helped me avoid falling through trap doors, banging into the barricades, entangling myself in the black velour, tripping on crevices caused by the revolving stages.

"This stage is a minefield, isn't it?" I observed.

"Oh, doing the show isn't easy," he answered. "We've had lots of accidents. Sometimes I think, 'If this is the brass ring, it's an awful lot of work.' But," he added with a big grin, "I wouldn't have missed a minute of it."

I walked nine blocks south to the Majestic Theater to see *The Phantom of the Opera* also with a new leading actor: Cris Groenendaal who moved up to the role after creating "M. Andre" in the original cast. What I saw at the matinee continued to renew my faith in Broadway for, like the *Miserables* I'd seen the night before, the house was packed, the performance was sparkling, the audience response was explosive. No Wednesday matinee-in-heat-of-summer walk-through this. The centerpiece of this musical is "The Phantom," and after witnessing Groenendaal's masterful performance, I felt something like the current ad campaign slogan: "I eagerly await my audience with you!" Two days later, I met Groenendaal in his dressing room. An affable and garrulous young man, he was ready to share with me his secret life as "The Phantom."

"I eased my way into 'the Phantom,'" he said. "I was cast as was 'M. Andre,' a role I thoroughly enjoyed playing because it is different in every way from those I usually play. And I understudied Raoul, and played him ten times. I liked playing him less because he was the kind of character I've made a career playing. The young, vapid leading man. 'Raoul' was like 'Anthony' in *Sweeney Todd*, 'Candide' and 'The Soldier' in *Sunday In The Park With George*. I prefer roles that are more eccentric—like 'Captain Paul Fontaine' in *The Desert Song*—whom I played for Beverly Sills at the New York Opera. He was an egotistical, womanizing prig—everything

I'm not. I enjoy 'character' roles, and the 'Phantom' is certainly one of those."

"How did an understudy to 'Raoul' get to play the 'Phantom,'" I asked.

"Circuitously. When Michael Crawford left, I auditioned for the role. I didn't get it—Tim Nolan did—but I was made second understudy for the Phantom. So now I was playing M. Andre, covering Raoul, and ready to go on as the Phantom. Hal Prince and Cameron Mackintosh saw me play the 'Phantom' at one of the six performances I gave during Tim Nolan's run, and when he left the cast, I auditioned for Andrew Lloyd Weber, who hadn't seen me play it, and I was offered it."

As for the demands of the role, Groenendaal said, "it's a long evening for me. And on matinee days it's a marathon run. It used to take an hour and a half just to apply the makeup, but now I've gotten the makeup artists to pre-paint the three prosthetics that are applied to my face, so now it's down to sixty-five minutes. But that's too long to do in intermission, so I wear the scars and the wild wig under the mask and under the cosmeticised rust-colored second wig all through Act One, even though neither is seen until Act Two.

"I had an Aunt see the show recently, and she knows my own hair is thinning a bit, so when Christine ripped off my mask and wig, revealing the ravaged hair beneath, she thought that was really me, and she was very upset."

"The Phantom is a role of enormous emotional intensity, and it must be draining," I said.

"This isn't a role that should be played by one actor eight times a week. Oh, it can be done, and we've all done it, but I think we could all stay with it longer if we only had to do it six times a week. You see, though other roles require more singing, the Phantom is the toughest part I've tackled, including 'Sweeney Todd' and 'George Seurat.' 'The Phantom' is on his own. Even when he's in a scene with someone, he gets nothing back from him or her. The other characters are either in a hypnotic trance, or their backs are to him. Or he is soliloquizing. I have no contact with the company of actors. I'm here long before they

arrive, and I leave long after they're gone. The only contact I have is in passing on my way to the stage. It's a terribly insulating role.

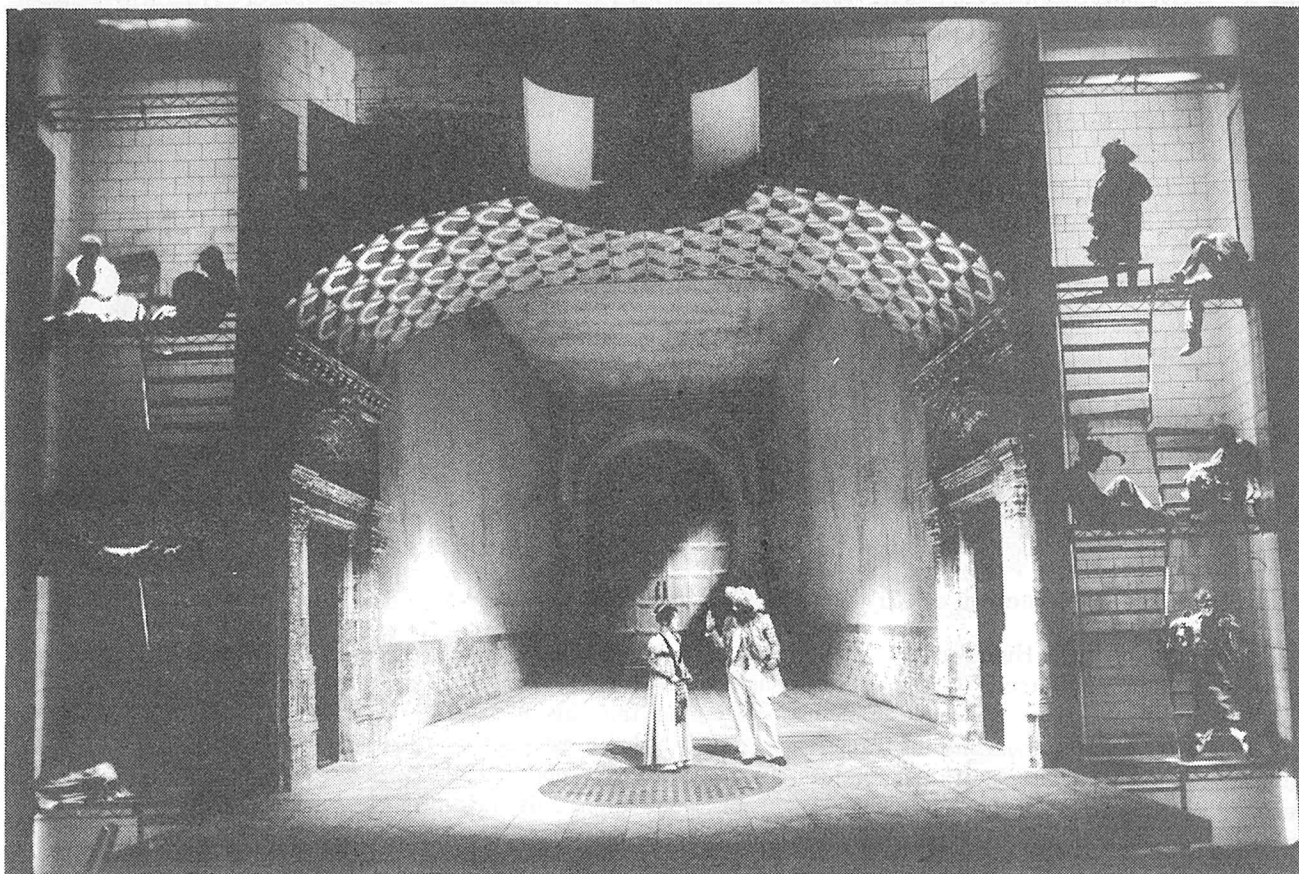
"You must never lose your concentration either, because that would be dangerous. You're up on top of the cross, and you have a cape that's often under your feet. You walk backwards down some very narrow steps—there's no railing, there's no safety. And none whatever in the Angel, either [at the end of Act One, "The Phantom," concealed in a gilded angel, is lifted to the very top of the proscenium, and then, higher still, off into the flies]. There's nothing behind you. So you're never free."

With all these drawbacks, I asked him whether he was still happy to be doing the role.

"I'm happy I'm doing it about half the time. It's a great work, and it's a great transition role for me, after all those juveniles. And the curtain call is extraordinary. That's the one time in the show when you really do get it back. Because you realize how much they love this man, and you realize too that's partly because of what you've done. But the other half of the time, I have tremendous stage fright. The Phantom doesn't appear until twenty five minutes into the show, the audience is really ready for him, and you are shot from a cannon. You enter at the height of insidious rage. And I know I'm out there alone—nobody can help me. When folks ask me if it isn't fun playing this great role in this wonderful musical on Broadway, I often answer, 'Would it be fun to play Hamlet or Lear eight times a week—for a year?'"

I asked him how it felt to replace a star like Michael Crawford.

"If I thought about that at all, I couldn't go on. Besides, my personal career has always involved starting out with a small role in a show and moving on. In *Sweeney Todd*, I moved up to the Sailor, in *Sunday In The Park* I moved from 'Louis' to the 'Soldier' to playing 'George Seurat.' Here I've gone from 'Andre' to 'Raoul' to the 'Phantom.' So to me, it's sort of a natural progression. Maybe some day I'll be able to originate a leading role. And be eligible for a theater award. Wouldn't that be nice?" □



John Haynes

William Dudley's stunning set for *The Changeling*, directed by Richard Eyre at the National Theater in 1988.

Last September the Royal National Theater of Great Britain celebrated its 25th anniversary and Sir Peter Hall, after fifteen years of stewardship, handed over the reins of the country's major theatrical institution to Richard Eyre.

At 45 Eyre was the same age as Peter Hall when Hall took over from Sir Laurence Olivier in 1973. But unlike Hall, who had created the Royal Shakespeare Company, Eyre did not have a high public profile. He did, however, have a very impressive record as a director.

Eyre began his career as an actor in a regional theater in Leicester in 1965 but was soon persuaded that he would make a better director. From 1967-70 he was Associate Director of the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh and from 1973-78, Artistic Director of the Nottingham Playhouse. At Nottingham he directed Howard Brenton's controversial *The Churchill Play* and Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians*. In the three years that followed, he was the Producer-Director for the BBC's *Play for Today*. At the Royal Court he directed David Mamet's *The Shawl* and Alan Bennet's *Kafka's*

Dick. His first film, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, was considered one of the best British films of 1983.

He joined the National as an Associate Director in 1981 where, in the following year, he directed *Guys and Dolls*, the National's most successful production to date. Since his appointment as Director of the National, he has directed Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew's Fair*, *Hamlet* (with Daniel Day Lewis, Judi Dench and Michael Bryant) and Harley Granville Barker's 1905 play, *The Voysey Inheritance*, starring Michael Bryant. The last two productions are currently in the National's repertoire.

As the head of one of England's two major subsidized theater companies, Richard Eyre is currently very much in the limelight. Like his predecessor, he has to fight vigorously against government cut-backs, look for private sponsorship and defend his choice of repertoire against criticism from the press and the tax-paying public. One of the first changes he made at the National was to break up the system, instituted by Peter Hall, where the actors were divided into several groups, headed by a director who

worked in all three of the National's theaters.

Gerard Raymond: *How does the National under you differ from the theater under Peter Hall?*

Richard Eyre: Our company is split into two streams which work in the Olivier and the Cottesloe theaters. In the Lyttleton we work more on a project to project basis. This makes it possible for us to do more touring and to bring in international companies. It also means that we can respond quicker to the success of a show such as Alan Bennet's *Single Spies* [with Bennet, Simon Callow and Prunella Scales] which played at the Lyttleton and then moved out to the West End.

But I suppose the real difference, which is not necessarily better or worse, is just one of taste. In the end, it is the Director's job to choose the repertoire, so however much it is filtered through associates and committees, it is actually a reflection of my taste in plays, directors and designers.

Although you have done extensive classical work in the regional theater, you are best known in London for Guys and



John Haynes

Richard Eyre's production of *Guys and Dolls*, the Frank Loesser-Abe Burrows-Jo Swerling musical.

Dolls at the National and High Society in the West End. What exactly is your taste in theater?

My tastes are pretty catholic. I think that theater has got to be visually and verbally expressive. It has got to be more exciting than life, more vivid than the images you can see around you, otherwise, in some sense, it is letting you down. If you draw a line consistently through my taste it would be for plays that essentially have some sort of public theme. I like plays which link the public world, the world of a social group, with the dilemma of the individual.

Hamlet is not just the story of one man who has problems with his parents. It is about somebody who is in a uniquely exposed position because he is the son of a king, the prince in a highly politicized and military court. He has responsibilities and is obliged to face up to them.

In doing Hamlet you maintained a tradition where each Director of the National has directed the play in the first year of their regime: Olivier in 1963 with Peter O'Toole and Hall in 1975 with Albert Finney. But you had directed the play once before in 1980 at the Royal Court, with Jonathan Pryce. Do you feel any differently about the play now?

Yes, I think that the whole world which contains Hamlet the character is much more important than I saw it ten years ago. I saw it then much more in terms of the fate of an individual. Now I see the individual's fate in relation to a social world that I think is depicted very

clearly and is sharply defined. This young, sensitive, intellectual stands out against everything that his society represents. Finally he has to espouse the values of that society in order to discharge the mission to revenge his uncle that has been set by his father. And this seems so to me now, I suppose, because in the succeeding years I have come to understand more and more about the world of realpolitik; the values of practical politics have become more interesting.

In 1974, when you were running a regional theater, you were part of a group who protested that the National would absorb so much government money that other theaters would be starved, and that it was attracting staff and technicians with salaries higher than others could afford. How do you feel about the institution that you now run with respect to the survival of the regional theaters?

I don't know that you can point a finger directly at the large theatrical institutions like the RSC and the National Theater. Although I think there is tendency in both to expand. To be voracious in their self-interest, and there is no reason why they shouldn't be. But if you are at the receiving end of that voraciousness, it can seem very tough.

I think there has been some decline in some regional theaters but the insatiability of the larger institutions is only part of the story. When I was running a regional theater, it was natural for an actor to work two or three years in the regional theater after leaving drama

school. Now the proliferation of quite good television, a number of small budget films, a lot of fringe-work in London and small-scale touring work has opened the choices to young actors much, much wider.

There is also a whole tribe of casting directors who have been bred in the last ten or fifteen years. These talent scouts are sniffing talent at drama schools and actors are lured with offers that they simply wouldn't have received ten or fifteen years ago. So it is a phenomenon of the market but it has had a very serious effect on regional theater.

Right now in London there are a number of serious plays in the West End, including Shakespeare. Does this fact affect the sort of plays you do at the National?

Of course we are, to some extent, swimming in the same pool. Because we have three theaters we don't have the option of not doing so. We can't keep a policy that is, as it were, fastidiously uncommercial because the dividing line between what is artistically desirable and what is commercially desirable sometimes isn't there. In the case of a play like *Ghetto* [which opened in April this year], it clearly wouldn't have been done anywhere else in the country but at the National Theater or the Royal Shakespeare Company because of the resources involved.

One takes huge risks on something you believe to be of importance. In the case of *Ghetto* it has been triumphantly successful. If it hadn't been, I'm sure

money towards creating a classical repertory company."

And that brings up the defining issue in Randall's life today. Actively involved in the 42nd Street renovation project, where he serves as an advisor on both the city and state committees, he is hoping to establish in one of the 42nd Street theaters a permanent not-for-profit repertory company that will present Chekov, Shaw and Ibsen in addition to newer and more experimental works.

"America is one of the few countries that does not have a classical repertory company," says Randall. "Ideally we will have a junior and senior company."

The suggestion has met with resistance. (See "Come and Meet The New 42nd Street", *TheaterWeek*, 10/31/88). Detractors contend a non-profit theater would be a serious money-loser and more important it would violate the honkey-tonk spirit of the block they wish to preserve even while cleaning the area up.

To which Randall replies: "That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. The only way we're going to save Broadway in general and that block in particular is with small not-for-profit theaters. Broadway has already out-priced the ability of most New Yorkers to buy tickets. We're losing audiences because of the price and because of what's being shown. America invented the musical. But for some reason we're not able to create them anymore.

"As for small plays with small casts—that can't be done on Broadway either. A play like *M. Butterfly* on Broadway is an anachronism. The theaters on 42nd Street are perfect for small plays. And a not-for-profit theater would mean lower prices. That would generate audiences. And a national theater would increase tourism. That's good for the city's tax base and Broadway. Gerry Schoenfeld (head of the Nederlander organization) understands that and is chairman of our committee. But most importantly, the street would be well-lit and well-attended and that's a political plum for any mayor or governor.

"I have actors from all over the world interested in joining. Now all I have to do is raise fifteen million dollars. . . . Do you have any extra money on you?" He is only partially kidding and almost willing to accept the subway token the visitor offers. □

SKATERS AUDITION

FOR

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR

Auditions for Ice Skaters (couples only), who also dance, for the 1989 "Radio City Music Hall® Christmas Spectacular" will be held on Wednesday, September 13, 1989 at SKYRINK, 450 West 33rd Street (at 10th Avenue) at 11:00 am. Callbacks will be

Thursday September 14th. Applicants should bring updated photo, resume and a cassette tape of music. A tape recorder will be provided. AGVA and non-AGVA sign-up sheets will be at the rink on the day of audition. AGVA members will be seen first.

All Ice Skaters should have a short routine prepared.

Rehearsals begin the week of October 20th, 1989.

The 1989 "Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular" runs from November 10th, 1989 to January 3rd, 1990.

Performance schedule varies from 2-5 shows per day.



RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL PRODUCTIONS
A ROCKEFELLER GROUP COMPANY

SINGERS AND DANCERS AUDITIONS

"RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR"

General auditions for the 1989 "Radio City Music Hall® Christmas Spectacular" will be held September 11th through 14th, 1989 at 890 Dance Center, 890 Broadway. Applicants should bring updated photo and resume, have music ready and be prepared to sing or dance. Check-in will be in Studio 4-3 at times and dates specified below. AGVA and non-AGVA sign-up sheets will be at the Radio City Music Hall stage door one day prior to audition day. AGVA members will be seen first.

Monday, Sept. 11th-	10:00 am	Female Singers who dance.
Tuesday, Sept. 12th-	10:00 am	Male Singers who dance.
Wednesday, Sept. 13th-	10:00 am	Male Dancers who sing (5'10" and over)
	2:00 pm	Female Dancers who sing (5'4" and under) Must be able to perform on pointe.

Thursday, September 14th- CALL BACKS AS SCHEDULED

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