

Presenting The Royal Court Theater

*Max Stafford-Clark discusses the present
and future of the adventurous British company*

by Gerard Raymond

Situated in a small Victorian playhouse in southwest London for the past three decades is the English Stage Company at the Royal Court, popularly known as the Royal Court. Under either name, this company has become world-famous for supplying the theater with several generations of provocative new plays and playwrights. The Royal Court's latest New York export was the highly controversial *Serious Money*, by Caryl Churchill. But the Royal Court's illustrious past also includes works by John Osborne, Joe Orton, Edward Bond, and Howard Brenton, to name a few. *Theater Week* recently spoke to Max Stafford-Clark, the Royal Court's current artistic director, about the theater's history and his plans for its future.

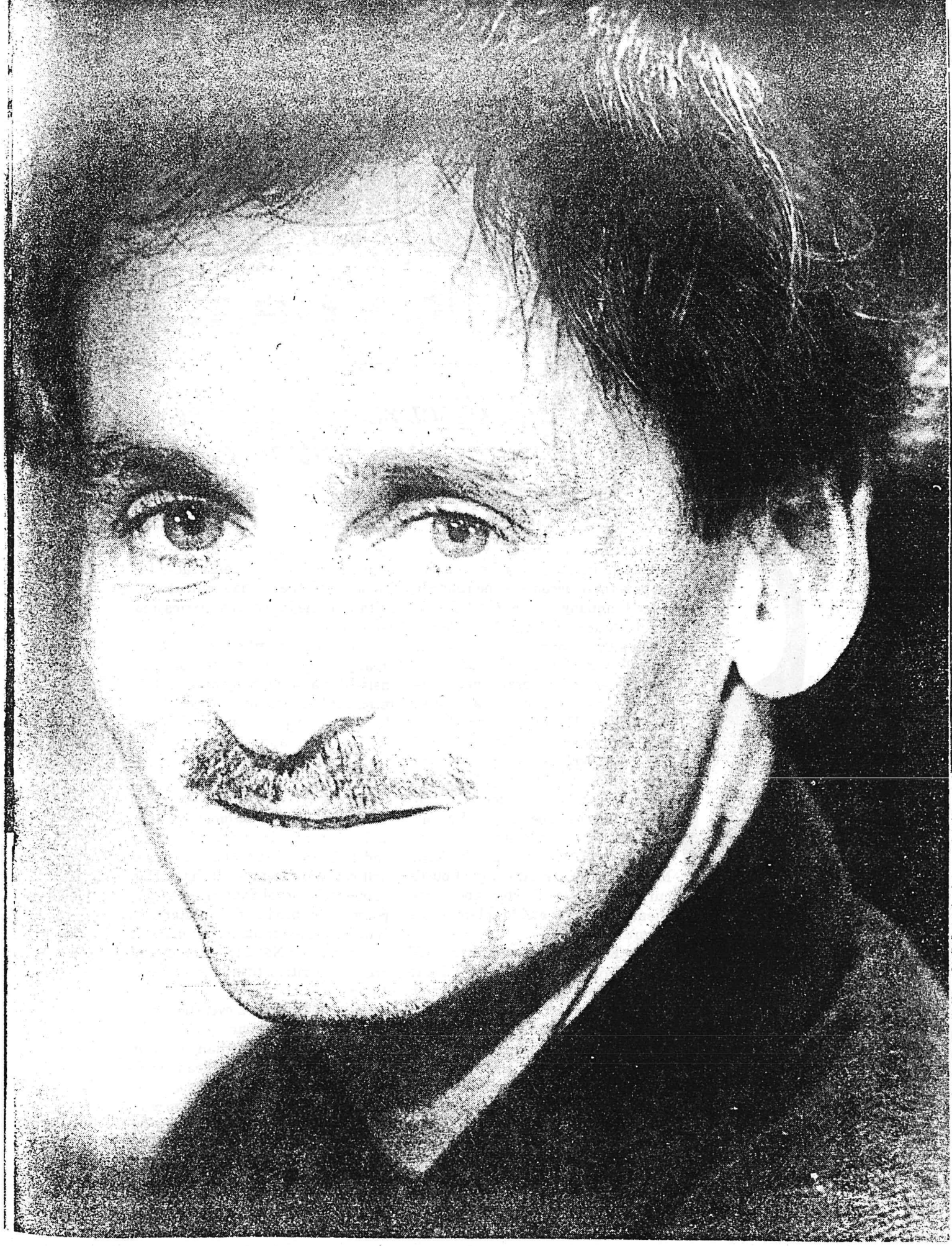
The Royal Court opened in 1956 with a production of Angus Wilson's *The Mulberry Bush*. It was an opportune moment; the 1954-55 London season, described as "a vast desert," had fourteen American shows playing in the West End with very little contemporary English writing. Under the leadership of artistic director George Devine, the Royal Court rapidly moved to the forefront of English theater, establishing itself as a home base for the new generation of English

playwrights described by Martin Esslin as having "a measurable influence on the social climate of Britain in the late fifties, sixties and seventies."

Devine, who regarded the theater as "really a religion or way of life," insisted that a company must have a recognizable attitude; "you must decide," he said, "what you feel the world is about and what you want to say about it, so that everything in the theater you work in is saying the same thing." Over the next ten years, he created an environment whereby artists, specifically writers, could try and fail, profit from their mistakes and continue to grow. If Peter Hall founded the Royal Shakespeare Company as a producer's theater and Laurence Olivier nurtured an actor's theater at the National, then Devine created a writer's theater at the Royal Court.

Stafford-Clark took over the leadership of the Royal Court in 1979. "It is marginally easier than running either the Moscow Arts Theater or the Abbey Theater in Dublin," he says, "in the sense that there isn't so much of the weight of mythology behind it. I was the first artistic director to be appointed to the Court who had never met George Devine. So I was less con-

Martha Swope





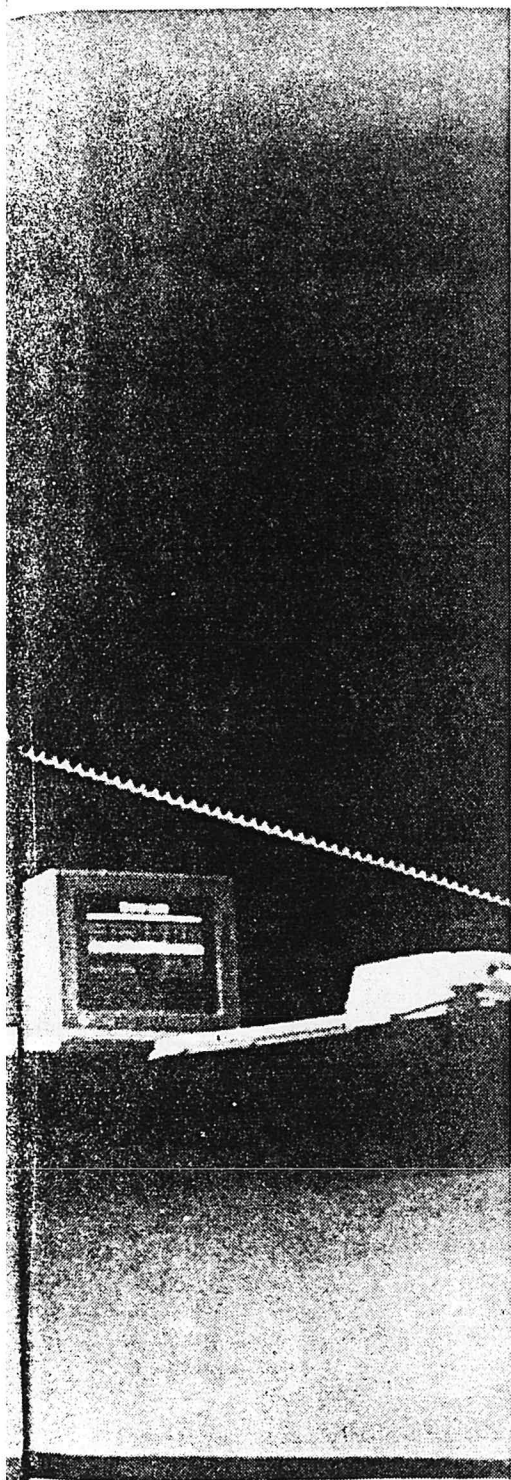
The American cast of *Serious Money*: Alec Baldwin (foreground), Kate Nelligan (above), Melinda Mullins (right), and Wendell Pierce (right)

conscious in that respect than some of my predecessors." Nonetheless, the Royal Court is an institution and "just as the National Theater existed after Olivier left it, the Royal Court existed after George Devine left it and will exist after I leave it. You feel like a guardian of a national institution for a period of time and then you pass it on. I think the Court has changed. Our

work has become more socially conscious in the last seven or eight years, and there are a number of things that we take the responsibility for, such as instigating projects like *Serious Money* by commissioning work about a subject."

Churchill's biting farce about the non-existent ethics and intense excitement of The City, London's equivalent

to Wall Street, was commissioned by Stafford-Clark in 1986 and produced at the Royal Court in March, 1987. After an extremely successful run it transferred to the West End, where it is still playing at the Wyndham Theater. It arrived in New York last November and played for a sell-out six weeks at the Public Theater under a unique theater exchange program



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Churchill] as the first play to form part of the exchange and since then [1982] his commitment and my encouragement has kept it going." Both British and American Equity keep records of the number of actor-weeks worked on both sides of the Atlantic: "Say a four-hander play goes to London from the Public Theater for a run of six weeks, that's four times six—twenty-four weeks. Say a ten-hander play comes to the Public and runs for five weeks, that's fifty weeks. That would result in an imbalance and we would probably have to bring one more play here to even it out. I think that at the moment it is more or less balanced. We exchange actors as well. Will Patton was in *A Lie of the Mind* at the Court and Alan Corduner in *Serious Money* on Broadway.

"I think that before the Sarah Brightman affair concerning *Phantom of the Opera*," he continues, "there was a general loosening up on Equity's part. Certainly I found English Equity very amenable and American Equity protective of their own actors. They obviously don't want an English invasion. But once it was clear that we were running a bona fide exchange, American Equity has been very cooperative and helpful. Joe has a veto over any play that we bring here, as do I over any play that would come to London." Court productions done at the Public include *Tom and Viv* (1985) and *Rat in the Skull* (1985) while Public Theater productions of *Tracers* (1985) and *The Colored Museum* (1987) have been done in London. Wallace Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon* was undertaken as a joint venture between the two organizations in 1985-86.

If the Court has become more aggressive in its approach towards commissioning the kind of plays that it wants, the emphasis on writers has not changed. "We have thirty plays at any one time under commission," Stafford-Clark explains. The Court has various resident writers, generally young, unknown artists. Jim Cartwright, whose play, *Road*, is scheduled to be produced by the Lincoln Center Theater Company in the fall, was a former Court resident writer. However, even someone

with commercial clout like Churchill can get produced at the Court. "Though in principle," Stafford-Clark adds, "Caryl is free to take a commission from any theater that offers it. In fact, you can't really tie a writer down."

Stafford-Clark feels that it is the "ability to actually make an apprenticeship for a writer" that distinguishes the English situation from that of the U.S. He points out that here, "The occasional writer is a star like Mamet or Shepherd, or the occasional writer like Harvey Fierstein emerges from La Mama by a process that seems fortuitous and is plonked on Broadway. But actually sustaining a career as a writer is much harder and it is pretty well impossible to earn a living from it." In spite of the deteriorating arts funding situation in Britain, "you can see a writer like, say, Hanif Kureishi, whose work has been supported by a number of theaters, not exclusively the Royal Court, being able to write with reasonable honesty, 'writer,' on his passport. Now it is the British film industry that is reaping the benefit of his apprenticeship."

In Hanif Kureishi's current film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the two protagonists mention that they go to the Royal Court on Monday nights. Tickets cost four pounds on Mondays, and there is a loyal audience for these evenings. The identification of the characters as Royal Court theatergoers immediately places them, for the London viewer, in a certain social and political context which, even as early as 1960, some critics labeled as leftist. Stafford-Clark comments, "From the perspective of New York, it would seem that the Royal Court has a very left-wing bias. Certainly the politics of most of the people who work there are left-of-center." On the other hand, he said, from the point of view of someone who works in some of the more radical avant-garde or feminist theater companies, Court politics "may seem very liberal and wishy-washy."

"It depends on where you are. The National Theater, for instance, has an obligation to present work of a very wide panorama. The Royal Court has an ability to present a much more honed perspective. If I were running

established by Stafford-Clark and Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival. (The same production, with a mostly American cast, was a quick flop on Broadway).

"It was my idea," says Stafford-Clark, speaking of the Royal Court-Public Theater exchange program. "Joe became enthusiastic when we suggested *Top Girls* [also by Caryl



Margaret Tyzack, Julie Covington, and David Haig in the Royal Court production of *Tom and Viv*

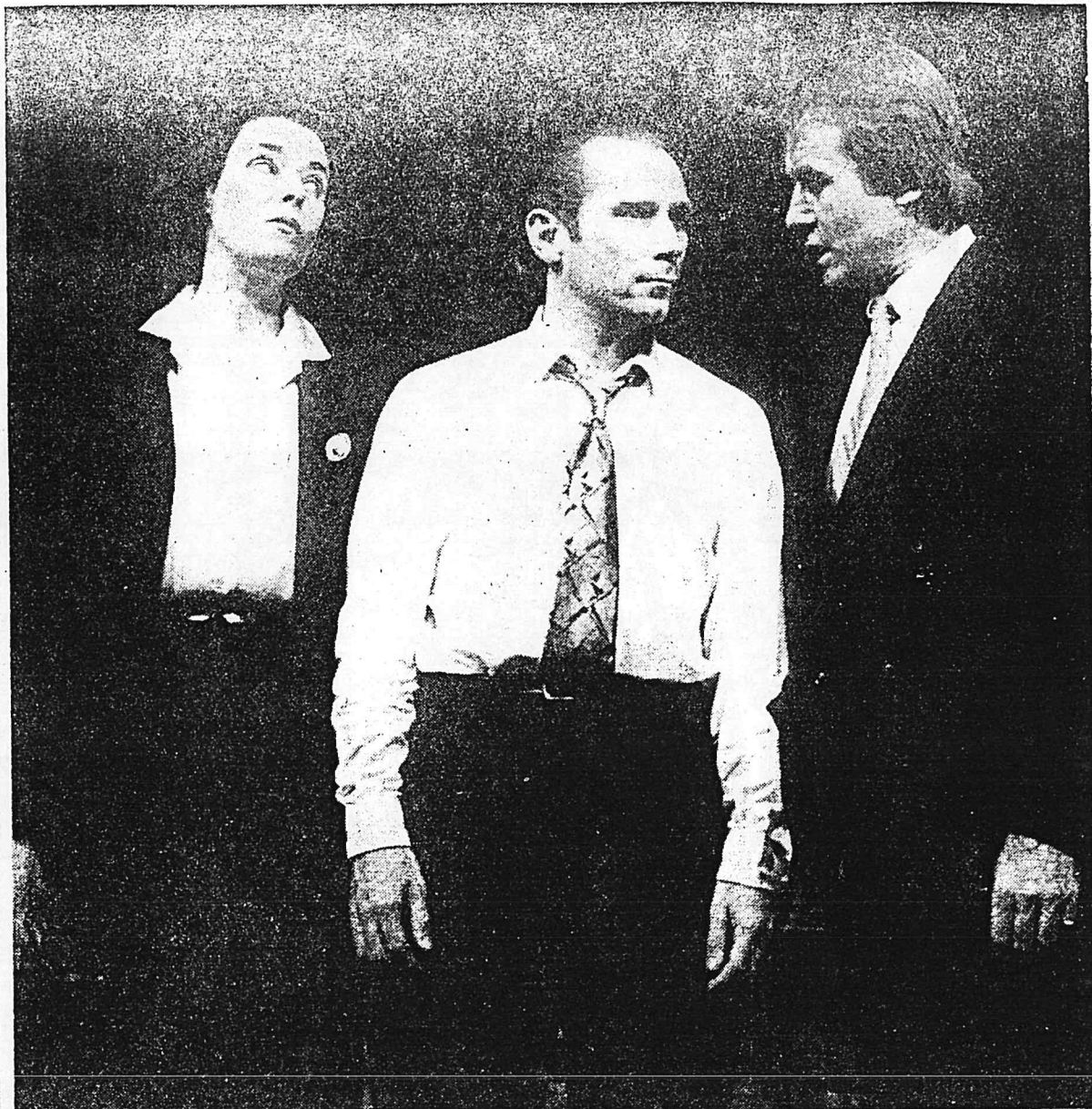
the National Theater, I would be accused of narrow-mindedness. Running the Royal Court, I am delighted to be accused of this, for it seems to me that we are presenting a view of England today that the Royal Court should be doing." The fact that the Court's perspective is often exactly that of its core audience has prompted some critics to dismiss it for preaching to the converted. "It's true we are not a populist theater," agrees Stafford-Clark. "I don't see that it is a major function of theater to convert—one of its most pleasurable functions is to celebrate. Part of the function of theater is to articulate what is on the tip of people's tongues, but which they haven't actually said. In the current

context of England as a whole, left-wing beliefs are in need of some kind of articulation and solidifying."

The Court season currently consists of four mainstage plays, with a fifth production on the smaller, more flexible space known as the Theater Upstairs. The theater operates all year round; this season's focus is on Howard Brenton, a Court apprentice who moved on to the National. Brenton's latest work, *Greenland*, will be followed by revivals of *Bloody Poetry* and *Sore Throats*. Later in the season, keeping with a policy of doing classics ("because you refresh your own standards that way"), the Court will produce George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). Also in the

works is *The Playmaker*, a loose adaptation of Thomas Keneally's novel set in Australia, about a 1788 all-convict production of *The Recruiting Officer*.

In the late fifties, the Royal Court was the only British company presenting contemporary work and approaching the classics with a fresh eye. In the early sixties, when the Stratford-based Royal Shakespeare Company expanded its operations to London and the National Theater finally got off the ground at the Old Vic, the Court's position seemed redundant to many people. At frequent intervals, detractors have declared that it has outlived its purpose. Glenda Jackson once said that the Court was like "an albatross round the neck of the



The British cast of *Serious Money*: Linda Bassett, Daniel Webb, and Paul Moriarity

British theater." Stafford-Clark, who has never had the nerve to ask her why she said that, speculated that "There was a point when the Royal Court was subsidized quite heavily and its function seemed unclear." He is certain that Jackson would not say the same thing about the Court today. "I think it is vital to preserve your institutions, even if they are going through a poor phase, because once you lose them, you have no means of regenerating them."

By the time Stafford-Clark became director, the Royal Court was part of the British theater establishment. But, in his opinion, "The last five years has been a very lively period. It is true that once the Royal Court has

enabled writers to establish their careers, they may go to the National. But this doesn't always mean that they are necessarily going to stay there. I think that the Royal Court has an editorial policy that is quite distinctive and different from the other London theaters specializing in new work. The fact that the Royal Court isn't in a monopoly situation anymore keeps us on our toes.

"You produce a period of work. It has a kind of identity and a climax and then that begins to atrophy. Then it's important to look at it and change again. The Royal Court is still the only theater in London that has a studio, a mainstage, and a Young People's Theater all committed to contem-

porary writing. To give a single writer like Howard Brenton a major retrospective is something that another theater would find much harder to do. Any theater in the country will be delighted to do Caryl Churchill's new play, there's no question of that. What the Royal Court can do is find the next Caryl Churchill and to use its facilities to create the power of that writer. I think it has had to redefine that position for itself."

As for himself, Stafford-Clark's contract expires at the end of March 1989. "I have decided that I will be re-applying for the job. There is no other job I particularly want to do and I think I still have something to offer the Court." □

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