

Letter From London

The Olivier Awards and News and Reviews from the National Theater

by Gerard Raymond

At the National

National Theater productions dominated the Olivier Award nominations garnering a total of 21 nominations including two for Best Play (*The Madness of George III* and *Angels in America*). However the NT eventually won just one: Nigel Hawthorne's Best Actor award for his bravura performance as the troubled monarch in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* (*TheaterWeek* 1/13/92).

But at a time of recession, and when attendance in the West End has dropped significantly, the National is enjoying sell-outs for many of the plays in its repertoire. Completely sold out, the much acclaimed studio production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* ends its limited run with two final performances this month. Sean

Mathias directed a high-powered cast headed by Sir Ian McKellen and Anthony Sher. No recent Chekhov production has received so much attention to detail, and in the intimacy of the Cottesloe theater the actors were able to work in close-up, embellishing their characters with finely judged nuances. Perhaps I caught it on a flat night, but I couldn't help feeling that too much study can rob a production of its spontaneity. However, London critics were wildly enthusiastic and many of them penned one-for-the-history-books reviews. The consensus was that this *Uncle Vanya* successfully met the challenge of the landmark production directed by Olivier for the National's inaugural season in 1963.

Past history is also being invoked for the current production of George

Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* directed by Nicholas Hytner. The celebrated production in this instance is William Gaskill's 1963 version with Robert Stephens and Maggie Smith which was also presented in the National's opening season. Current director Hytner is pursuing an eclectic career: he followed *The Tempest* at the RSC with West End and Broadway productions of *Miss Saigon* and then moved to the National for hit productions of Alan Bennett's *Wind in the Willows* and *The Madness of George III*. His production of the Farquhar restoration comedy features Alex Jennings, Ken Stott and Sally Dexter.

One of the hottest tickets in London is *Angels In America*. Every time someone writes a glowing report about this play, they are probably do-



John Haynes

Frances Barber and Eileen Atkins in *Night of the Iguana* at the National Theater.

jokes—including one about a horse who defecates on a manuscript—fall flat; and some of the actors, notably Patinkin (as de Musset) and Peters (as an aristocrat), are woefully miscast. Asked to assess the film, Lapine says: “Based on knowing what I had to go through, I am satisfied with it. I don’t think it’s perfect. But relative to most movies I see, I like it a lot.”

Despite his troubles with *Impromptu*, Lapine wants to get behind the camera again. “I love doing things I know nothing about,” he says. “I think that breeds some kind of ingenuity because you don’t have any preconceived notions.” For now, though, his attention is on Broadway. And what does the man who, in *Sunday in the Park With George*, gave the musical theater one of its most innovative works, see when he surveys the scene?

“I think Broadway’s in great shape,” he says. “All the theaters are filled—the more shows the better. I don’t have a vested interest in Broadway, but I like to see people working.”

Fair enough—but just how excited can you get when there are nothing but revivals or “new” shows with old scores around? “This nostalgia craze is kind of wild,” he admits. “Part of it comes from the fact that there isn’t the kind of talent out there that can write a Gershwin score. I happen to think that our score is as good as a Gershwin score,” he says, adding, when a skeptical look crosses my face: “I do believe that.

“And part of it,” he continues, “comes from producers who feel safer starting with a score that they know has great numbers in it. It’s easier to put a show together when one of the elements is already in place.”

With all the fuss surrounding giants like *Guys and Dolls* and *Crazy For You*, *Falsettos*, even with rave reviews and Tony nominations, is going to have to struggle for attention. Lapine knows it’s a tough sell. “If our show can run, it will be great for Broadway,” he says. “Everything doesn’t have to be a spectacle or a big revival. And I think the two halves together are better than each of them individually. So I’m hoping it will give audiences a sense they’re getting more for their money. It’s a very moving evening, in my estimation.” □

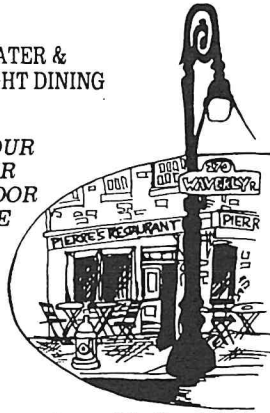
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The 1992 Olivier Awards



Michael Byrne, Juliet Stevenson, and Bill Paterson in *Death and the Maiden*.

BBC Award for Play of the Year

Death and the Maiden
by Ariel Dorfman

Actress of the Year

Juliet Stevenson
Death and the Maiden

Actor of the Year

Nigel Hawthorne
The Madness of George III

American Express Award for Musical of the Year

Carmen Jones
by Oscar Hammerstein II

Outstanding Revival for the Year of a Musical

The Boys from Syracuse

Outstanding Entertainment of the Year

Talking Heads
by Alan Bennett

Outstanding Performance of the Year by an Actress in a Musical or Entertainment

Wilhelmina Fernandez
Carmen Jones

Outstanding Performance of the Year by an Actor in a Musical or Entertainment

Alan Bennett
Talking Heads

Outstanding Revival of the Year of a Play or Comedy

Hedda Gabler

Director of the Year of a Play or Comedy

Deborah Warner
Hedda Gabler

Comedy of the Year

La Bête
by David Hirson

Comedy Performance of the Year

Desmond Barritt
The Comedy of Errors

Outstanding Performance of the Year by an Actor in a Supporting Role

Oleg Menshikov
When She Danced

Outstanding Performance of the Year by an Actress in a Supporting Role

Frances de la Tour
When She Danced

Outstanding Performance of the Year in a Supporting Role in a Musical or Entertainment

Jenny Galloway
The Boys from Syracuse

Choreographer of a Play, Musical, Comedy, or Entertainment

Rafael Aguilar
Matador

Set Designer of the Year

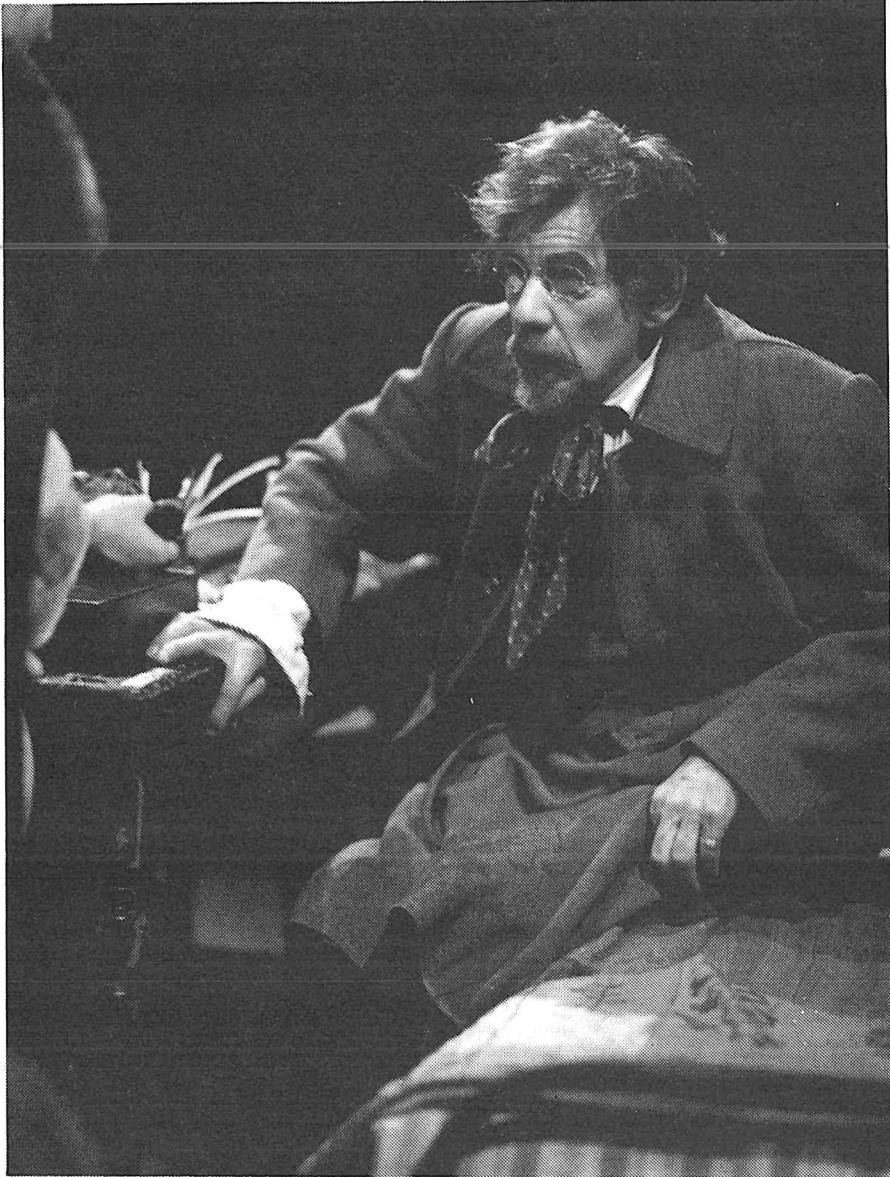
Mark Thompson
A Comedy of Errors, and Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat

Costume Designer of the Year

Mark Thompson
The Comedy of Errors

The Observer Award for Outstanding Achievement (In Memory of Kenneth Tynan)

Gate Theater, Notting Hill
For a season of classics from the Spanish Golden Age including Tirso de Molina's *Damned for Despair* and Lope de Vega's *The Great Pretenders*



Mark Douet

Ian McKellen in *Uncle Vanya*.

ing playwright Tony Kushner a disservice. No playwright should have to live up to the enormous build-up and expectations generated by this play so long before the play's, as yet unscheduled, professional premiere in New York, and a full six months before the two-part work is to be mounted in its entirety for the first time in Los Angeles.

But *Angels in America* is without doubt the best new play to open in London in the past season. An epic fantasy of politics and personal relationships, it intertwines the lives of seven characters in an America where chaos seems the only prospect as the millennium approaches. Declan Donellan's production boldly embraces the play's exuberant theatricality and vivid characters like Roy Cohn; luxuriates in Kush-

ner's dexterous facility and obvious love for language, and provides a fertile setting for the play's ambitious ideas and themes to surface.

The production encompasses a painfully realistic scene depicting the physical discomforts of a man with AIDS, as well as a preposterous, hallucinatory trip to Antarctica by a valium-addict. Disparate people are linked, sharing the same stage area together, and in one hilarious scene, visiting one another other in their own private nightmares. A kitschy waltz to the strains of "Moonriver" becomes a moving demonstration of how one man's love for another cannot transcend the ugly realities of AIDS; two men graphically simulate casual sex in Central Park, but they are completely isolated, at separate ends of the stage, emphasizing the

brutality and utter lack of emotional or spiritual connection between them—in other words, the audience is kept on its toes for the three and a half hours duration of the play.

If *Angels in America*'s deliberately mock-Spielbergian ending, where a much heralded angel finally descends onstage, is a slight let-down, it is only because the part two of the play is not yet available, and the epic journeys in which Kushner has got us involved are only half-way completed. The playwright has set himself the daunting task of having to top his own already impressive work.

Two highly acclaimed National Theater productions return to the National briefly this month, prior to commencing international tours. Declan Donellan's first production for the NT, a theatrically stunning presentation of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* which was originally seen in 1988, plays for seven evenings at the Cottesloe theater before going to represent Britain at Expo '92 in Seville. NT director Richard Eyre's 1991 Olivier award winning production of *Richard III*, starring Sir Ian McKellen, returns to the Lyttelton theater for eight performances before embarking on a U.S. tour, which starts at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in June.

A special treat for National theatergoers this month is Eileen Atkins, who gives a sublime performance as the New England spinster, Hannah Jelkes, in Richard Eyre's production of Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*. Radiating a genuine and compassionate understanding for the "subterranean" journeys that the "spooked and bedeviled people are forced to take through the unlighted side of their nature," Atkins reveals Jelkes to be one of Williams's most wonderful creations. Standing perfectly still, or uttering the smallest of sighs or sounds of commiseration, Atkins imbues Jelkes with the serenity, the practical nature and the wry sense of humor of the woman who believes in "broken gates" between people "so they can reach each other, even if it is for just one night only." We should all be so lucky as Alfred Molina, the Reverend Shannon in this production, to meet a Hannah Jelkes like Eileen Atkins during a dark night of the soul. □