

The National Theatre by Kenneth Tynan

1968 Press release

'I am no conservative myself'

Britain has come late to the idea of state-aided theatre. One of the reasons for this is that our rulers have never officially concerned themselves with drama; and by rulers I mean royalty. Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed Shakespeare's plays but she never paid for their upkeep. Louis XIV, on the other hand, took Moliere's actors under his fiscal wing and gave France the Comedie Francaise. Similarly it was the rulers of the German city-states who founded the great German tradition of subsidised theatre.

Another reason for the British backwardness is the lasting damage inflicted on the theatre by the Puritans in the seventeenth century. Acting came to be regarded as a form of clothed prostitution; and though Charles II subsidised actresses, he did not subsidise plays. Until Irving was knighted in 1895, acting remained a shady profession, only a stone's cast away from the brothel. And this mighty back-log of Puritan disapproval had to be dislodged before a British government could be persuaded to spend a penny on an art so trivial. Nobody realised that the theatre had become trivial precisely because no public money had been spent on it.

The creation of permanent companies and of a repertoire of plays that throws a bridge between the past and the present is ruled out of court in the commercial theatre. The store-house of dramatic achievement, instead of being permanently open to the public, is burned down at the end of every season. This chaotic state of affairs still prevails in Britain; but the formation of a National Theatre is at least a step towards sanity. The pioneers of the National Theatre movement confidently expected that the battle would be won in time

for the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death in 1916. Victory, alas, was postponed until October 1963, when the National Theatre (temporarily housed at the Old Vic) presented its first production, *Hamlet* – just in time for the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth.

To support our first year's operation we received an Arts Council grant of £130,000 – only £50,000 more than the sum allotted the year before to the Old Vic, which employed a smaller company at lower salaries and presented a much shorter list of productions. To keep our standards and our output high, where money was soon needed for the financial year 1967/68, the total basic grant from public funds was £330,000: £240,000 from the Arts Council and £90,000 from the Greater London Council. The Arts Council also gives a guarantee of £20,000 against loss incurred while touring in the United Kingdom.

The tap of public patronage is not exactly gushing, but at least it has been turned on. The National Theatre, as a company, exists; it has a brilliant architect in Denys Lasdun, and its new permanent home with two auditoriums [from mid-1964 onwards two main auditoriums were projected, a proscenium theatre and an open theatre], will rise within the next few years on the South Bank of the Thames. But its immediate task is not just the obvious one of assembling the best available actors and putting them into a snowballing repertoire of the finest plays, ancient and modern, native and foreign; it also involves re-educating actors, directors, playwrights and audiences alike. You would be surprised how hard it is, in a society where 'theatre' 'means theatre for private profit', to explain to people that this theatre actually belongs to them. We are not selling a product; we are providing a service. Success at the box office is no longer the only

criterion: we would rather have a first-rate work playing to less than capacity than a third-rate one filling the house.

In the last five years we have opened thirty-six productions; in general the critics have applauded and the public have flocked. This may be partly due to the euphoria that attends the launching of every great enterprise, and cooler appraisals are doubtless in store. But we have not yet become (as some feared we might) a plush-lined museum; the names of Laurence Olivier, John Dexter and William Gaskill (the first two Associate Directors) are not exactly renowned for timid conventionality; and I am no conservative myself. Equally, we have not established a 'style' of our own. This is because we never intended to do so. Good repertory theatres fall into two main categories. One is the kind that is founded by a great director or with a novel and often revolutionary approach to dramatic art; he creates a 'style' for his own special purposes. Examples of this process include Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. The other category consists of theatres with a broader, less personal *raison d'être*; whose function – more basic though not more valuable – is simply to offer the public the widest possible selection of good plays from all periods and places. One such is the Schiller Theatre in West Berlin; another is the Royal Dramatic Theatre, in Stockholm; and a third is the National Theatre in London. Their aim is to present every play in the style appropriate to it – an ambition by no means as modest as it sounds.

A few years ago, I noticed that out of more than two dozen plays running in the West End of London, only three had been written earlier than 1950. The National Theatre can help to correct that imbalance; and to new playwrights it can offer not only longer rehearsal periods than the commercial theatre, but a chance of subsequent revival if their work fails on first showing to find an audience. Our present total of thirty-six productions has covered a broad spectrum from Sophocles to Samuel Beckett, taking in Shakespeare, Congreve, Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Brecht, and other mainstream playwrights on the way. Minor classics such

as (*Hobson's Choice* and *Hay Fever*) have been given an exhilarating second wind. Peter Shaffer, John Arden and John Osborne are among the younger dramatists who have contributed new work to our repertoire; and in 1967, the instant success of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* gave the English theatre another new name to conjure with.

Our programme for 1967/68 season has included an all-male version of *As You Like It*, two productions by Sir Tyrone Guthrie (Moliere's *Tartuffe* and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*), and two guest appearances by Sir John Gielgud, who played to Orgon in *Tartuffe*, and the title role in Seneca's *Oedipus*, directed Peter Brook. We have also presented Brecht's version of Christopher Marlow's *Edward II*, and the world premiere of *In His Own Write*, a stage adaptation of two books by John Lennon of The Beatles.

The list is long, various, and unmatched without high subsidy. It may give some idea of the direction in which the National Theatre is moving. I once defined a critic as a man who knew the way but couldn't drive the car. As a back seat driver at the National Theatre, I am putting that maxim to the test.