

Kenneth Tynan (1927 – 1980)

Literary Manager of the National Theatre, 1963 – 1974

Kenneth Tynan was chiefly known as a journalist, finding fame with his work as a theatre critic with the *Evening Standard*, *Observer*, and *The New Yorker*. A brilliant theatre critic, he exhibited an acute understanding of acting and stagecraft and possessed a gift for characterisation and the witty put-down. Tynan had been a passionate supporter of the movement to found the National Theatre; in 1955 Tynan and fellow critic Richard Findlater, despairing of the Theatre's ever being built, staged a mock funeral beside the foundation stone. In an article titled 'Payment Deferred' (1956) Tynan again lamented the failure of the movement to achieve its goal and described his ideal National Theatre and its ideal artistic director:

'Must it again be urged that Britain is the only European country with a living theatrical tradition which lacks a national theatre... Of the six objectives prescribed for the National Theatre, Stratford and the Old Vic fulfil but one, that of presenting Shakespeare. The others

(those of reviving the rest of our classical drama, presenting new plays and the best of foreign drama, and preventing recent plays of merit from rusting into oblivion) have no roof at all over their heads... [On the artistic director] He should be a man like Brecht in Berlin or Khedrov in Moscow: a combination of sage and ball of fire. The type is rare in our theatre, though Granville Barker could have (and Gordon Craig might have) developed into it. Even so, a few names spring to mind; and two of them, in spite of the drawbacks involved, are the names of actors – [Anthony] Quayle and Olivier.' (*Observer*, 1 January 1956)

This prescient nomination of Laurence Olivier would be fulfilled in the following years. Tynan suggested himself to Olivier for the role of literary manager (dramaturg) and was appointed in 1963. His role included recommending plays for the repertoire, commissioning translations and selecting adapters for non-English plays. Tynan's understanding of the concept of a repertory



theatre was articulated in a speech to the Royal Society of Arts in 1964. The variety of the repertoire and the experimentation in its playing in these early years at the National owed a great deal to Tynan's catholic tastes and his influence on Olivier: amongst many other achievements Tynan commissioned Robert Graves' brilliant adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* for Franco Zeffirelli's 1965 production and brought *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* from the fringe of the 1966 Edinburgh Festival to the stage of the National Theatre.

A controversial figure throughout his career, several of Tynan's repertoire proposals were rejected by the Board of the National Theatre or fell foul of the Lord Chamberlain (who issued licences for plays); notably Rolf Hochhuth's *Soldiers* which accused Churchill of war crimes, and Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, about the effects of sexual repression on young people. *Soldiers* was not staged by the NT; *Spring Awakening* was. After 11 years at the National Theatre, Tynan returned to theatre criticism, originated and collaborated on several shows, including the erotic revue *Oh Calcutta!*, and continued to write biographies and books on theatre.

As part of Tynan's job as literary manager at the NT he produced a List of Plays for the National Theatre. This document presented a brief list of plays both British and foreign, from the Ancient Greeks to the 1960s, that Tynan considered suitable for selection by the National for its repertoire.

Kenneth Tynan Bibliography

By Kenneth Tynan:

He That Plays the King (Longmans, 1950)
Alec Guinness (Rockliff, 1953)
Persona Grata (Alan Wingate, 1953)
Bull Fever (Longmans, 1955)
The Recruiting Officer: The National Theatre Production (Rupert Hart Davis, 1965)
Othello: The National Theatre Production (Rupert Hart Davis, 1966)
Tynan Right and Left (Longmans, Green, 1967)
The Sound of Two Hands Clapping (Jonathan Cape, 1975)
Show People (Simon and Schuster, 1979)
A View of the English Stage, 1944-63 (Methuen, 1984)

About Kenneth Tynan:

The Life of Kenneth Tynan by Kathleen Tynan (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987)
Kenneth Tynan Letters edited by Kathleen Tynan (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994)
The Diaries of Kenneth Tynan edited by John Lahr (Bloomsbury, 2001)
Life Itself! by Elaine Dundy (Virago Press, 2001)
Kenneth Tynan, A Life by Dominic Shellard (Yale University Press, 2003)

Kenneth Tynan's personal papers are held at the British Library bl.uk

Photograph of Kenneth Tynan by Ida Kar, courtesy of the NT Archive.
nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive