

**Stage by Stage**  
**The early years: 1963 – 1975**

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**The Development of the National Theatre from 1848**

Designed by **Michael Mayhew**

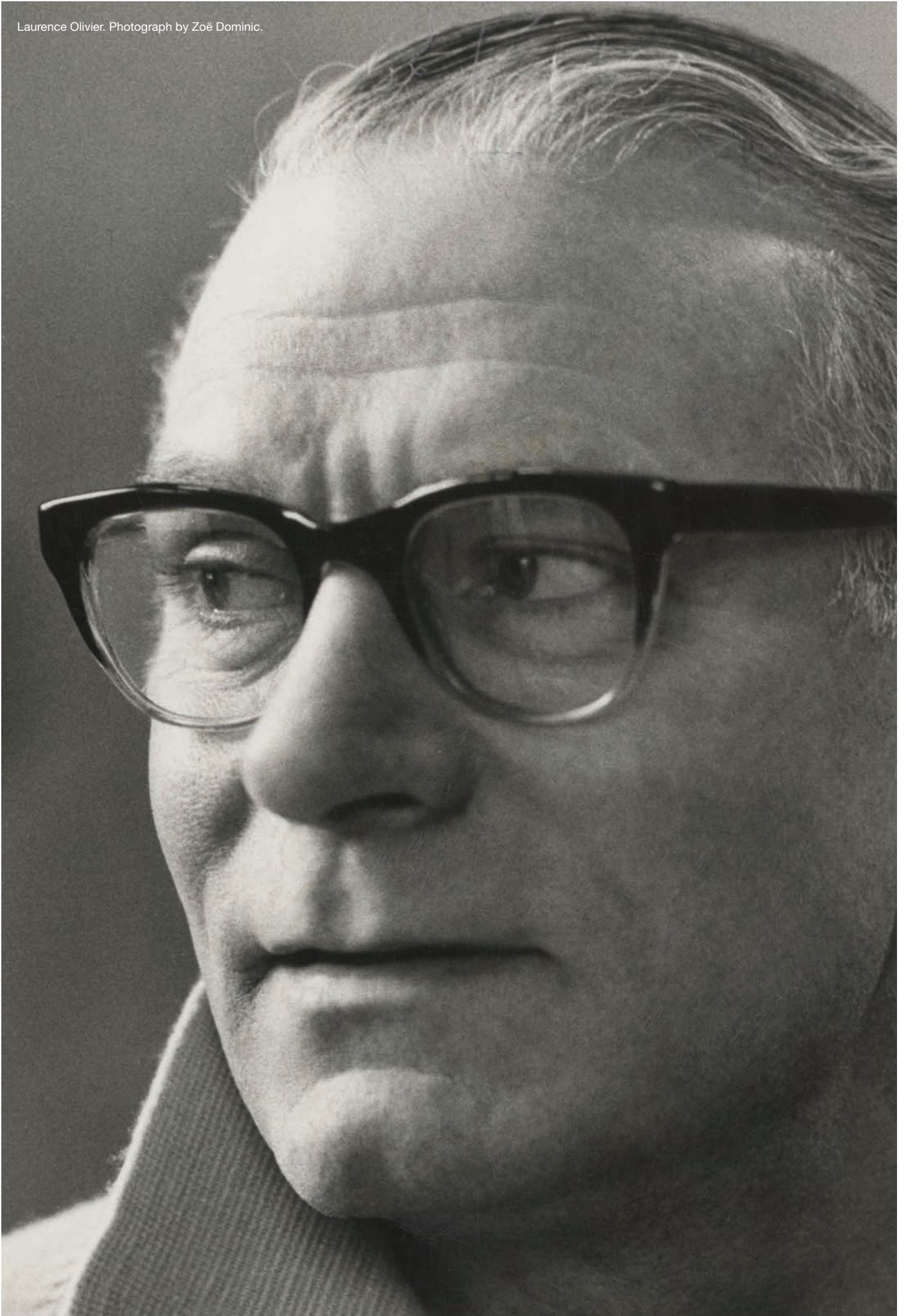
Compiled by **Lyn Hail & Stephen Wood**

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The majority of the photographs in the exhibition were commissioned  
by the National Theatre and are part of its archive

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Laurence Olivier. Photograph by Zoë Dominic.



This part of the story covers the first years of the National, when it was mostly performing in the Old Vic.

## 1963

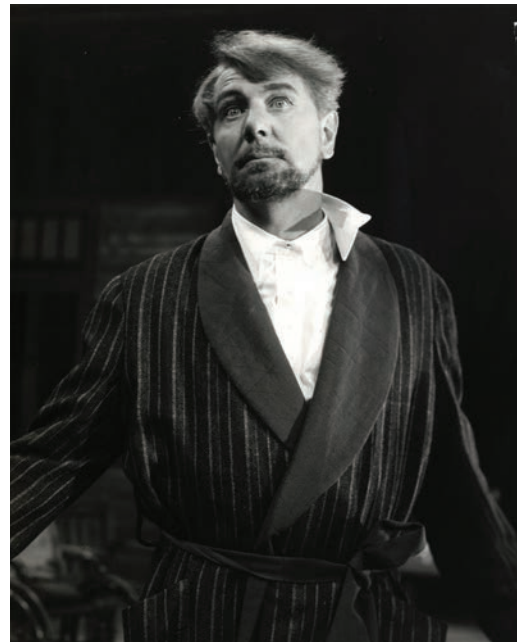
'Our aim is the best of everything' Kenneth Tynan

October 22: The National's inaugural production opens – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, directed by Laurence Olivier, with Peter O'Toole in the lead. The repertoire for the first season also consists of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and Shaw's *Saint Joan*, which had opened at Chichester, Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, Harold Brighouse's *Hobson's Choice*, Beckett's *Play with Sophocles' Philoctetes*, Max Frisch's *Andorra*, and Shakespeare's *Othello*, a ticket for which is to become 'The most difficult piece of paper to get hold of in Britain' (*Daily Express*).

A ticket in the stalls for the first season costs 27s 6d (£1.28) and in the gallery 3s (15p). The Arts Council grant for the first season is £130,000. Despite 'House Full' signs every night, the first season ends with a deficit of £22,500.

Denys Lasdun is chosen as the architect of the new theatre and opera house on the South Bank. For two years he explores the problems with a building committee consisting of Laurence Olivier, and directors Michael

Michael Redgrave in *Uncle Vanya*.  
Photograph by Angus McBean.



### The Actors in the 1963/64 Company:

Max Adrian	Jeanne Hepple	Edward Petherbridge
Rod Beacham	William Hobbs	Joan Plowright
Colin Blakely	George Innes	Bruce Purchase
Martin Boddey	Derek Jacobi	Louise Purnell
Janie Booth	Caroline John	Lynn Redgrave
Elizabeth Burger	Peter John	Michael Redgrave
Edward Caddick	Celia Johnson	Joyce Redman
Peter Cellier	Tom Kempinski	Sheila Reid
Byron Chandler	Terence Knapp	Alan Ridgway
Christopher Chittell	Jeanette Landis	Maggie Riley
Raymond Clarke	Robert Lang	Jean Rogers
Wynne Clark	Harry Lomax	John Rogers
Tom Courtenay	Enid Lorimer	Michael Rothwell
Cyril Cusack	Kenneth Mackintosh	Adam Rowntree
Lewis Fiander	Keith Marsh	Robert Russell
Frank Finlay	Trevor Martin	Clive Rust
Neil Fitzpatrick	Dan Meaden	Ann Rye
Michael Gambon	Mary Miller	Maggie Smith
Reginald Green	Tom Minnikin	Robert Stephens
Richard Hampton	James Mellor	John Stride
Edward Hardwicke	Mary Miller	Christopher Timothy
Raymond Hardy	Anthony Nicholls	Michael Turner
Rosemary Harris	Laurence Olivier	Derek Ware
James Hayes	Peter O'Toole	Billie Whitelaw
Roger Heathcott	Michael Parker	Mervyn Willis
Janet Henfrey	Ron Pember	Diana Wynyard

Benthall, Peter Brook, Michel St Denis, George Devine, John Dexter, Frank Dunlop, Michael Elliott, William Gaskill, and Peter Hall; designers Roger Furse, Jocelyn Herbert, Sean Kenny, and Tanya Moiseiwitsch; manager Stephen Arlen; lighting designer Richard Pilbrow; and actor Robert Stephens; and with consultation from Kenneth Tynan.

### 1964

*The Royal Hunt of the Sun* by Peter Shaffer is the NT's first world premiere, and the first visiting company from overseas is the Compagnia Proclemer-Albertazzi from Italy with *Hamlet*. The National begins a policy of splitting the company into two for a period each year in order to tour 8 or 10 UK cities.

### 1965

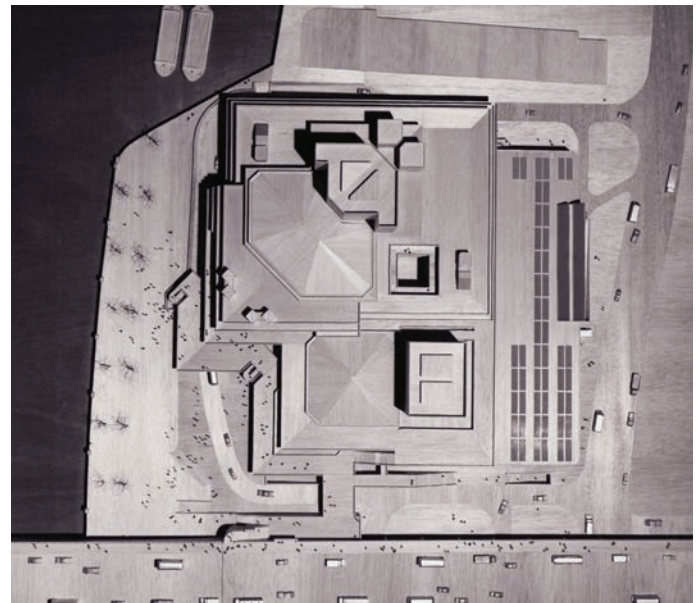
The National Theatre Company visits Russia and East Germany with *Othello*, *Hobson's Choice* and *Love for Love*. Franco Zeffirelli is the first director from overseas to direct at the National, with a hugely popular *Much Ado About Nothing*.

It is now estimated that the new building will cost £5.5 million to build, plus another £4 million for the opera house.

### 1966

The National at the Old Vic goes £250,000 into the red. Arts Minister Jennie Lee announces an increase in the government subsidy to cover the deficit. Jacques Charon, from the Comédie Française, directs an acclaimed production of Feydeau's *A Flea In Her Ear* adapted by John Mortimer. To increase their audience,

Robert Stephens and Laurence Olivier in *The Recruiting Officer*. Photograph by Lewis Morley.



Lasdun's model of the new building. Photograph by Robert Kirkman.

the company plays a season at the Queen's Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. *Othello*, *A Flea In Her Ear*, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *A Bond Honoured* (by John Osborne from Lope de Vega), with Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy* play there from August to October.

### 1967

The opera house is dropped from the new building scheme. (The Sadler's Wells Company, due to be housed there, eventually move to the Coliseum to become the English National Opera.) The site for the new theatre is shifted a few hundred yards eastwards – its last move. The capital cost is now estimated at £7.5 million.

The National's proposed production of Rolf Hochhuth's *Soldiers* is stopped after pressure from the NT Board, led by its Chairman, Lord Chandos. The play portrayed Winston Churchill as being involved in the 'assassination' of General Sikorski, the Polish leader who died in an air crash in 1943. Chandos, then Oliver Lyttelton, had been a member of Churchill's wartime cabinet.

The National stages *As You Like It* with an all-male cast, and its first new play by an untried author: Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Harold Hobson calls the latter 'the National's biggest gamble to date – a winner at 66 to 1'.

### 1969

An amendment to the National Theatre Act

authorises increased government expenditure of up to £3,750,000 for building and equipping the NT. This amount is to be matched by the Greater London Council (formerly the London County Council). Work starts on the building and is expected to be completed by 1973.

### 1970

Money from recent surpluses is used to finance the Young Vic, a hundred yards down The Cut from the Old Vic. The director is Frank Dunlop and the opening production is *Scapino*. The Young Vic serves the NT as a studio theatre until 1973 when it becomes a separate company.

The National company begins a season at the Cambridge Theatre, where Ingmar Bergman directs *Hedda Gabler*.

Olivier receives a life peerage, the first ever offered to an actor.

### 1971

Olivier's illness leads to the postponement of a planned production of *Guys and Dolls*. He was to have played Nathan Detroit, with Geraldine McEwan as Miss Adelaide, Denis Quilley as Sky Masterson, and Louise Purnell as Sarah Brown.

The National is brought to a low point with a series of unpopular productions at the Old Vic, and a season of plays staged at the New Theatre (now the Albery), unsuccessful apart

from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, with Olivier as James Tyrone. 'The National Theatre can never be what the public wants if it isn't allowed sometimes to be what the public doesn't want'. Laurence Olivier

Sir Max Rayne (later to be Lord Rayne) succeeds Lord Chandos as Chairman of the NT Board.

### 1972

The NT's first mobile production (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore* directed by Roland Joffe), tours small venues and colleges. The National's fortunes revive with Jonathan Miller's production of *The School for Scandal* and Michael Blakemore's of *The Front Page*.

### 1973

The National Theatre and Museums of London Bill becomes law, providing another £2 million for construction. The new building is 'topped out' by Laurence Olivier and Lord Cottesloe.

Olivier gives his last stage performance – in Trevor Griffiths' *The Party*. He resigns as Director, to be succeeded by Peter Hall, founder and former director of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

'I was always dreaming of marching my little troupe up the road but that wasn't for me. I was hoping to feel a glow of satisfaction but I was so tired out, I was just glad to let it go.'  
Laurence Olivier

Left: Laurence Olivier and Constance Cummings in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Photograph by Zoë Dominic.  
Right: Laurence Olivier in *The Party*. Photograph by John Haynes.





Michael Feast, John Gielgud and Terence Rigby in *No Man's Land*.  
 Photograph by Anthony Crickmay.

## 1974

The opening of the new NT is delayed further by construction difficulties; but the National Theatre Bill 1974 removes the limit on government support for the building work.

Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians*, directed by Richard Eyre, visits the Old Vic from Nottingham Playhouse.

## 1975

Associate Director Jonathan Miller resigns, describing the new building as 'a mixture of Gatwick airport and Brent Cross shopping centre'. He is followed a year later by fellow Associate Michael Blakemore, who criticises Hall's leadership.

Peter Hall takes the decision to move into the new building as soon as one auditorium is ready. The NT staff leave the huts in Aquinas Street which have served as their 'temporary' offices throughout the company's years at the Old Vic. They move into the still unfinished South Bank building to prepare to open it theatre-by-theatre.

Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*, one of several new plays written for the opening of the National, opens at the Old Vic with Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud, directed by Peter Hall.

Rehearsal room at Aquinas Street.  
 Photograph by John Haynes.

