

**Stage by Stage  
South Bank: 1976 – 1987**

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

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Monica Sollash and The Theatre Museum

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

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Peter Hall. Photograph by Zoë Dominic.



## 1976

28 February: the last night of the NT at the Old Vic – a single performance of Val May's documentary about Lilian Baylis, *Tribute to the Lady*, with Peggy Ashcroft as the Lady.

The cost of the new building is by now put at £16 million. 'Like many a luxury... it may well turn out to have been a bargain. ...Anything comparable, begun today, would cost from £25m to £40m.' (*The Economist*).

It is clear that the Cottesloe will be the last of the three new theatres to open, and short seasons of 'studio' work are staged at the ICA and Young Vic Theatres.

The first productions in the Lyttelton Theatre (named after Oliver Lyttelton, Lord Chandos), are transfers from the Old Vic, and on 8 March a week of previews of five plays begins with Beckett's *Happy Days*. Peggy Ashcroft plays Winnie.

16 March: The Lyttelton Theatre officially opens with Albert Finney as Hamlet, directed by Peter Hall.

A radical new seat pricing scheme is introduced – a ticket costs £4.35 for a specified seat booked in advance,

£2.35 for a voucher guaranteeing a seat, which must be swapped for a ticket before the performance. The scheme proves unpopular and by December the following year has been dropped.

Ralph Richardson inaugurates Ralph's Rocket, which is fired before every NT first night. 'I love fireworks,' he says, 'they're so unnecessary'. (The practice is discontinued later when terrorist alerts make it inadvisable).

The work at first known as 'NT Extras' starts, under Associate Director Michael Kustow. The first Platform Performance is staged

Peggy Ashcroft in *Happy Days*. Photograph by Zoë Dominic.



### The Actors for the inaugural season on the South Bank:

Desmond Adams  
Polly Adams  
Peggy Ashcroft  
Michael Beint  
Kenneth Benda  
Jill Bennett  
Brenda Blethyn  
Andrew Byatt  
Anna Carteret  
Norman Claridge  
Nora Connolly  
Rowena Cooper  
Oliver Cotton  
Jeananne Crowley  
Roland Culver  
Paul Dawkins  
J G Devlin  
Robert Eddison  
Ray Edwards  
Michael Feast  
Frank Finlay  
Albert Finney  
Susan Fleetwood

Kevin Flood  
Carol Frazer  
Angela Galbraith  
John Gielgud  
John Gill  
Michael Gough  
Sebastian Graham-Jones  
Glyn Grain  
Gawn Grainger  
Catherine Harding  
Wendy Hiller  
Andrew Hilton  
Gareth Hunt  
Paul Imbusch  
Brenda Kaye  
Michael Keating  
Barbara Keogh  
Dinsdale Landen  
Angela Lansbury  
Philip Locke  
Harry Lomax  
Kenneth Mackintosh  
Michael Melia

Patrick Monckton  
Peter Needham  
Derek Newark  
Dandy Nichols  
Rynagh O'Grady  
Rose Power  
Diana Quick  
Denis Quilley  
Trevor Ray  
Ralph Richardson  
Terence Rigby  
Ray Roberts  
Peter Rocca  
Struan Rodger  
Gladys Spencer  
P G Stephens  
Michael Stroud  
Daniel Thorndike  
Dennis Tynsley  
Simon Ward  
Alan Webb  
Harry Webster  
David Yelland

– *Scenes from National Life*. It begins a programme of short, early-evening events – plays, talks, readings, discussions in each of the three theatres – which has continued to the present day.

Foyer music begins – free live concerts ranging from baroque and jazz to folk, given by professional groups each day in the foyer before performances. The first free exhibitions go on view in the foyers, which are described by Denys Lasdun as ‘the fourth auditorium ... all the public areas, foyers and terraces are in themselves a theatre with the city as a backdrop’.

‘Denys Lasdun’s ambitious building has brought off a triumph to confound the sceptics. The huge foyer, with its tables and its Folies-Bergère Manet bars, with its people of all ages and classes walking up and down, listening to music, talking, creates an ambiance of social enjoyment that the French find it easy enough to evoke with their cafe tables spreading over the Paris pavements, but which has hitherto been unknown in London.’

Harold Hobson, *Sunday Times*

The opening of the Olivier Theatre, due in July, is put back further by contractors’ delays and industrial troubles within the theatre. It eventually opens on 4 October with Marlowe’s

*The Mysteries: The Passion*. Photograph by Nobby Clark.



Maria Aitken and Joan Hickson in *Bedroom Farce*. Photograph by Anthony Crickmay.

*Tamburlaine The Great*, directed by Peter Hall with Albert Finney in the lead. The company had been in rehearsal since April, and had resorted to performing sections of the play outside on the terraces during the summer.

The Queen officially opens the National Theatre on 25 October, although the building is still unfinished. Laurence Olivier, giving a speech of welcome in the auditorium named after him, makes his only appearance on one of the new NT’s stages.

The first visitors from overseas are the Théâtre National Populaire from France with Marivaux’s *La Dispute* and Molière’s *Tartuffe*.

## 1977

The first of the plays commissioned for the new building to have its premiere there is Howard Brenton’s *Weapons of Happiness*, in the Lyttelton. Others this year are Robert Bolt’s *State of Revolution* and Alan Ayckbourn’s *Bedroom Farce*, which later transfers to the West End.

4 March: The Cottesloe finally opens with a visiting production from the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool, Ken Campbell’s eight-hour epic *Illuminatus!* Bill Bryden and Sebastian Graham-Jones’ promenade production of the medieval Mystery plays, *The Passion*, is one of the first plays to open in the Cottesloe, a few days earlier, its Crucifixion scene had been played outside on the terraces on Easter Sunday.

The theatre is closed for five nights by an unofficial strike over the dismissal of a plumber. The deficit on the first year’s operation is

£250,000, caused by the late opening of the Olivier and the high costs of servicing the building. Much of the machinery, including the Olivier's drum-revolve, still does not work.

### 1978

Peter Hall appoints associate directors to lead each of the three theatres – Christopher Morahan and William Gaskill in the Olivier, Michael Rudman in the Lyttelton, Bill Bryden in the Cottesloe.

Further industrial action causes cancelled performances and threatens the premiere of Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*. Other new plays this year include Edward Bond's *The Woman*, Arnold Wesker's *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, David Hare's *Plenty* and Keith Dewhurst's version of Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise* – another promenade production.

### 1979

An unofficial strike over pay and work shifts by backstage staff completely closes all three theatres. *Strife*, John Galsworthy's play about a strike in Wales, and other productions in the repertoire are staged in limited, or the wrong, decor, since no scenery can be moved without 'black-legging'. Audiences are offered seats to these at low prices. The strikers are eventually dismissed and the strike peters out, having

cost the NT over a quarter of a million pounds.

An Arts Council inquiry into the costs of running the National recommends a once-for-all grant to clear the accumulated deficit.

Warren Mitchell wins three best actor awards as Willy Loman in Michael Rudman's production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Peter Shaffer's new play, *Amadeus*, directed by Peter Hall, wins 13 awards, and later transfers to the West End and Broadway.

### 1980

Brecht's *The Life of Galileo*, with Michael Gambon in the title part, directed by John Dexter in the Olivier, is the biggest popular success a Brecht play has had in London.

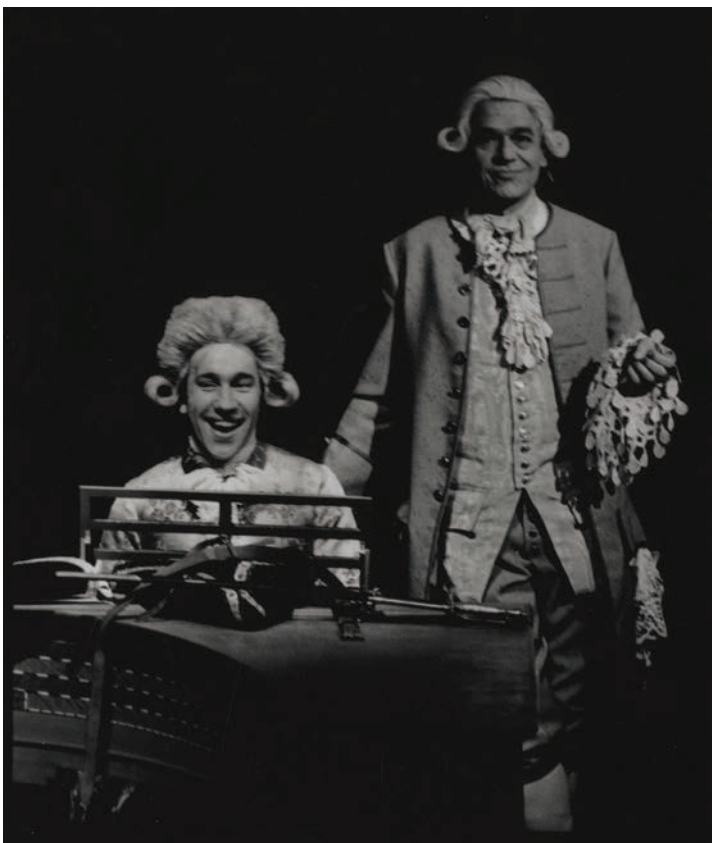
The premiere of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*, which includes a scene depicting attempted homosexual rape, causes an uproar. The GLC's leader, Sir Horace Cutler, threatens to recommend cutting the grant to the National and Mrs Mary Whitehouse, despite never having seen the play, brings a private prosecution for obscenity against the play's director, Michael Bogdanov. (The case is not to come to trial until 1982.) Bogdanov's production of his own adaptation of *Hiawatha*, staged as a Christmas show for children, is a popular success and returns in successive years.

### 1981

Peter Hall's production of Tony Harrison's version of *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus is staged in the Olivier, and later visits the ancient theatre at Epidauros, the first foreign company to play there. Sam Shepard's *True West*, directed by John Schlesinger is a hit in the Cottesloe.

### 1982

*The Romans in Britain* director, Michael Bogdanov, is brought to trial at the Old Bailey amid a storm of media coverage. The prosecution is dropped after three days and nolle prosequi (unwilling to proceed) entered on the record.



Simon Callow and Paul Scofield in *Amadeus*. Photograph by Nobby Clark.



Bob Hoskins and Ian Charleson in *Guys and Dolls*. Photograph by John Haynes.

Richard Eyre's production of *Guys and Dolls* is an enormous hit in the Olivier, eventually playing to nearly 400,000 people before transferring to the West End, and enabling the National to withstand the effect of cuts in real terms in the Arts Council's grant.

Alan Ayckbourn's *Way Upstream*, featuring a cabin cruiser sailing down a river, proves too much for the technical resources of the Lyttelton when the tank is punctured and floods result in the loss of several performances.

The NT's Education Department sends out its first production, Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, to 20 centres. It carries no costumes, sets, or props, but uses what each venue provides. Over the next eleven years, sixteen of these small-scale productions are toured nationally.

An anonymous gift enables the National to give a series of 'Bargain Nights', with all tickets costing £2 (the normal top price is now £8.50). The first Bargain Night is of *Guys and Dolls* and the scheme continues for each production over 14 months.

### 1983

The year's hits include Peter Wood's production of *The Rivals*, the premieres of Christopher Hampton's *Tales from Hollywood*, directed by Peter Gill, and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* directed by Bill Bryden. A major flop is the Marvin Hamlisch musical, *Jean Seberg*, directed by Peter Hall.

### 1984

*Wild Honey*, Michael Frayn's version of Chekhov's *Platonov*, wins nine awards for its director, Christopher Morahan, designer, John Gunter, and lead actor Ian McKellen. McKellen also plays Coriolanus, in Peter Hall's production, which visits Athens the following year, playing at the Herodes Atticos theatre, where it receives a ten-minute standing ovation. Ian Charleson and Julie Walters play the leads in Peter Gill's production of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* which later transfers to the West End.

A number of different groups of actors are formed within the framework of the NT – each group to work in all three theatres over a nine-month period. The first are led by Bill Bryden; Richard Eyre and David Hare; Peter Wood; Ian McKellen and Edward Petherbridge; and Peter Hall. Later groups are led by Mike Alfreds and Alan Ayckbourn.

Peter Gill founds the National's Studio, an experimental workshop for the company, which encourages new writing. It is funded by private sources, and housed in the Old Vic annexe which Ed Mirvish, owner of the Old Vic Theatre, leases to the NT free of charge.

### 1985

A gap has been steadily widening between the theatre's financial needs and the amount the government provides for them. Over the previous five years, the subsidy paid to the National has failed to match inflation by a third.

At a press conference called to announce swingeing cuts in the NT's activities, including the closure of the Cottesloe, Peter Hall attacks government cut-backs in spending on the arts. During a debate in the House of Commons, Michael Foot asks, 'What is the use of having a great and adventurous National Theatre and a Cabinet of barbarians?' The government advice to theatres is to seek private sponsorship. Meetings of artistic directors of subsidised theatre companies from all over Britain are held at the National. They declare no confidence in the Arts Council and contradict the government claim that there has been a real increase in funding.

The last performance in the Cottesloe is *Doomsday* – the final part of Bill Bryden's production of *The Mysteries*, all of which transfer to the Lyceum, becoming the first live theatre to be staged there in 30 years.

The NT has a series of hits – including David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Pravda*, Alan Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval*, and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Mike Alfreds – and receives 20 major awards for its year's work.

In the autumn, the Cottesloe re-opens, thanks to a special grant from the GLC, which is soon to be abolished. The Studio stages a festival of new work there.

The National commissions an independent scrutiny into its workings, led by Lord Rayner. His favourable report records his support for increased government funding for the NT.

Paul Bentall, Robert Ralph, Stephen Bent and Charles Baillie in *Animal Farm*.  
Photograph by Nobby Clark.



## 1986

Peter Hall's adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which opened in the Cottesloe in 1984, becomes the first production to play in all three NT theatres. It also tours to nine cities in Britain and six more overseas. Eastern bloc pressure stops it being performed in an international theatre festival in Baltimore, USA, where it is finally staged outside the festival.

*The Threepenny Opera* is the first main-house NT production to be sponsored. The Christmas show is *The Pied Piper* by Adrian Mitchell, using children from local schools. Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs* transfers from the Lyttelton to the Aldwych. Anthony Hopkins gives a record 100 performances as King Lear in David Hare's production.

The company tours abroad more than ever before, including visits to France, Austria, Switzerland, the USA and Canada.

David Aukin joins the NT as Executive Director, 'to share with Peter Hall the responsibility for overall direction and management'.

## 1987

Private sponsorship enables the National to present an International Theatre Festival, produced by Thelma Holt. The first visitors are from West Germany (Peter Stein's production of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*), Sweden (Ingmar Bergman's productions of *Hamlet* and *Miss Julie*), Japan (Ninagawa's *Macbeth* and *Medea*), and Moscow (the Mayakovsky Theatre's *Tomorrow Was War*). The Market Theatre of Johannesburg also visit with *Bopha!*

A record twenty-two major awards are received for the year's work. Successes include Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* with Michael Gambon as Eddie Carbone, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* with Anthony Hopkins and Judi Dench, and Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business*.

A party is held in the Olivier to celebrate Laurence Olivier's 80th birthday.