Stage by Stage
South Bank: 1988 – 1996

Stage by Stage
The Development of the National Theatre from 1848

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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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1988
Peter Hall’s last year as Director of the National Theatre. He stages three late Shakespeare plays (The Tempest, The Winter’s Tale, and Cymbeline) in the Cottesloe then in the Olivier, and leaves to start his own company in the West End.

‘This building in solid concrete will be here for ever and ever, whatever successive governments can do to muck it up. The place exists as a necessary part of the cultural scene of this country.’ Peter Hall

September: Richard Eyre takes over as Director of the National.

Alan Bennett’s Single Spies, consisting of two short plays, contains the first representation on the British stage of a living monarch, in a scene in which Sir Anthony Blunt has a discussion with ‘HMQ’. In Howard Davies’ production of Dion Boucicault’s The Shaughraun, the Olivier’s drum-revolve is put to full use for the first time by William Dudley’s award-winning set. New writing includes plays from David Hare (The Secret Rapture) and Nicholas Wright (Mrs Klein), and Harold Pinter’s 20-minute Mountain Language.

Tony Harrison’s The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, using fragments of a lost satyr play by Sophocles, has its one-performance world premiere in the ancient stadium at Delphi, presented by the National’s Studio.

To mark the company’s 25th birthday in October, The Queen approves the title ‘Royal’ for the National Theatre, and attends an anniversary gala in the Olivier.

The funds raised are to set up a National Theatre Endowment Fund. Lord Rayne retires as Chairman of the Board and is succeeded by the Lady Soames, daughter of Winston Churchill.

Prince Charles, in a TV documentary on architecture, describes the National as ‘a way of building a nuclear power station in the middle of London without anyone objecting’.

1989
A series of co-productions with regional companies begins with Tony Harrison’s version of Molière’s The Misanthrope, presented with Bristol Old Vic and directed by its artistic director, Paul Unwin. Later co-productions are with the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, and with Nottingham Playhouse.

The first Lloyds Bank Theatre Challenge – a scheme administered by the National’s Education Department, which encourages young people’s theatre companies from all over Britain, and which will continue for the next five years – culminates in three ‘Showcase’ nights in the Olivier.

Laurence Olivier, the National’s first Director, dies. The National co-publishes Olivier At Work in his memory.

First-time directors for the National this year include Declan Donnellan with Lope de Vega’s Fuente Ovejuna, Nicholas Hytner with Joshua Sobol’s Ghetto, Deborah Warner with Brecht’s The Good Person of Sichuan, Sean Mathias with Martin Sherman’s Bent, Steven Berkoff with Oscar Wilde’s Salome, and Tim Supple with the year’s Christmas play for children, Whale.

Overseas visitors this year are Teatro del Sur from Buenos Aires, Steppenwolf from Chicago, the Moscow Art Theatre, and the Ninagawa Company from Tokyo.

Barrie Rutter and Jack Shepherd in The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus. Photograph by Nobby Clark.
1990
Stephen Sondheim’s *Sunday in the Park With George*, directed by Steven Pimlott, runs in the Lyttelton; Tony Harrison’s *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* joins the repertoire in the Olivier and is revived the following year. Other new work this year includes plays by Trevor Griffiths (*Piano*), David Edgar (*The Shape of the Table*), and David Hare (*Racing Demon*). *Racing Demon* wins several awards and transfers to the Olivier, and later to the Lyttelton, before touring the UK.

Arthur Miller, two of whose plays, *The Crucible* and *After the Fall* are presented this year, describes the National as ‘One of the glories of Britain – a demonstration of what civilization can do’.

Impresario Cameron Mackintosh announces a £1 million contribution to the National to help finance a series of classic musicals. The first of these, *Carousel* and *Sweeney Todd* are staged in 1992 and 1993.

The most ambitious tour ever staged by the National begins: of *Richard III* and *King Lear* with Ian McKellen and Brian Cox in the respective title roles, leading a company of twenty-three actors all over the world. Jatinder Verma’s all-Asian version of Molière’s *Tartuffe*, produced by the National’s Education Department, begins a tour which eventually takes it, too, all over the world.

An 11 per cent lift in the National’s subsidy from the Arts Council goes some way towards making up recent reductions.

The year’s visitors include the Abbey Theatre from Dublin in Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which goes on to the West End and Broadway, Robert Lepage’s company, Théâtre Repère from Quebec, with *Tectonic Plates*, and the Bulandra Theatre from Romania with *Hamlet*.

Genista McIntosh succeeds David Aukin as Executive Director.

In November, the National stages two special performances of *Guys and Dolls* in memory of Ian Charleson, Sky Masterson in Richard Eyre’s 1982 production. He had died of an Aids related illness earlier in the year, shortly after taking over as Hamlet in Eyre’s production.

The Christmas production this year is Alan Bennett’s version of Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, directed by Nicholas Hytner. It proves enormously popular with all ages and is revived in 1991 and 1993.

1991
Theatre de Complicite visit the Lyttelton with their production of Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*. A company from Tokyo visits with Grand Kabuki as part of the Japan Festival.

New plays include Christopher Hampton’s *White Chameleon*, Keith Dewhurst’s *Black Snow* (from Bulgakov’s novel), Mustapha
Matura’s *The Coup*, the second part of David Hare’s planned trilogy, *Murmuring Judges*, and Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of George III*.

A programme of sign language interpreted performances for the deaf begins, and classes in sign language are given to members of staff. Later, audio-described performances are offered regularly for blind and partially sighted people.

**1992**

In the Cottesloe, the team of director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod stage *Millennium Approaches*, the first part of Tony Kushner’s ‘gay fantasia on national themes’, *Angels in America*. Part two, *Perestroika*, follows in 1993.

A Studio production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* in Pam Gems’ version, with Ian McKellen and Antony Sher in the leading parts, plays in the Cottesloe.

Jim Cartwright’s new play *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, directed by Sam Mendes, is another Cottesloe success, later transferring to the Aldwych, and Robert Lepage’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, featuring a large pool of mud, causes a stir. Stephen Daldry’s first production for the National, J B Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls*, moves to the Olivier and then also transfers to the Aldwych. For the next several years it is in various West End theatres, and tours all over the world.

Productions by Giorgio Strehler with the Piccolo Teatro from Milan, and by Franco Zeffirelli with a company from Rome, visit the Lyttelton as part of the European Arts Festival.

Richard Eyre’s production of *Richard III*, with Ian McKellen in the title role, tours the United States for sixteen weeks.

The Studio makes the first-ever visit to Lithuania by a British theatre company, taking a group of actors, designers, directors and theatre practitioners to work with actors from thirteen different companies there. They hold classes, discussion groups and an open public forum.

The production of *Fuente Ovejuna* is revived to visit Expo ’92 in Seville, and, as the National is a member of the Union des Théâtres de l’Europe, the company visits the Union’s first festival, in Düsseldorf, with *Angels in America*.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel*, directed by Nicholas Hytner and choreographed by Sir Kenneth MacMillan, plays for sixteen weeks...
in the Lyttelton, transferring the following year to the Shaftesbury. This was to be Sir Kenneth’s last work; he died suddenly during the rehearsal period.

The year’s work results in 24 awards being received by National Theatre actors, writers, directors, and designers.

1993

During the financial year 1992/1993, the National undertakes more touring than ever before. Over 34 weeks, its work is seen, outside London, by more than 200,000 people. Nicholas Hytner’s production of *The Madness of George III* is revived in the Lyttelton and tours the United States.

*Springboards*, a celebration of new work from the Studio, and studio theatres nationwide, is held in the Cottesloe (where five new pieces are seen) and elsewhere throughout the UK.

The David Hare Trilogy, directed by Richard Eyre and designed by Bob Crowley, is completed by *The Absence of War*, which is staged together with the other two, *Racing Demon* and *Murmuring Judges*, in the Olivier, all three plays being several times performed on a single day.

On one day – Saturday 18 October 1993 – eighteen performances of Royal National Theatre productions are given: a record that will be hard to break. They are: The David Hare Trilogy in the Olivier x 3; Ken Campbell’s one man shows in the Cottesloe x 3; Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* in the Lyttelton x 1; Euripides’ *Ion* at the Studio x 1; Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of George III* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York x 2; Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* at the New Theatre, Cardiff x 2; Brecht’s *Mother Courage* at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester x 2; and in the West End, J B Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls* at the Aldwych x 2, and Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Carousel* at the Shaftesbury x 2.

1994

Jeremy Sams’ translation of Cocteau’s *Les Parents Terribles* goes to Broadway as *Indiscretions*, and Stoppard’s *Arcadia* to the West End. Peter Brook’s *The Man Who*, visits the Cottesloe; it will return in 1995, this time to the Lyttelton.

First visit of the National to South Africa: the Market Theatre, Johannesburg hosts a Studio residency: 32 practitioners in workshops, classes, seminars and performances.
1995

Patrick Marber’s first play, *Dealer’s Choice*, developed in the Studio, opens in the Cottesloe, wins the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy, and transfers to the West End. It will later tour all over the UK, to Ireland, Australia, and the States, opening the 1996 Cultural Olympiad in Atlanta, Georgia.

David Hare’s *Skylight* wins the Olivier Award for Best Play, transfers to the West End and Broadway, and in 1997, re-cast, tours the UK and returns to the West End.

The first phase of BT National Connections, a partnership between BT, the National, regional theatres, numerous playwrights, and hundreds of young theatre companies, ends with showcases at the National. The scheme continues to grow over the next years.

Judi Dench wins both best actress Olivier awards – for Rodney Ackland’s *Absolute Hell* in the Lyttelton and for Sondheim’s *A Little Night Music* in the Olivier.

Mary Soames ends her Chairmanship of the Board, and is succeeded by Sir Christopher Hogg.

1996

Peter Hall’s production of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Plays* opens at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus before its run in the Olivier.

Pam Gems’ new play, *Stanley*, on the life of Stanley Spencer, opens in the Cottesloe and transfers to New York. *Mary Stuart* and *The Designated Mourner* bring French actress Isabelle Huppert and American Mike Nichols to the English stage for the first time. Co-productions with Shared Experience (*War and Peace*) and Birmingham Rep (*The Alchemist*), and a visit by Robert Lepage with *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* which has some all day performances on Sundays, a first for the National.

The Arts Council Lottery Fund announces an award of £31.5 million to develop and renovate the National’s building. A campaign is launched to raise the £10.5 million needed to match this.

Richard Eyre’s production of *Guys and Dolls* returns to the Olivier for a sell-out run.

The Studio holds a residency at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, holding workshops, masterclasses and discussions for theatre professionals. This is repeated in following years.