

The Winding Road to King's Reach

by Richard Findlater (1977)

The vision of the National Theatre has hovered hazily above the British stage for over a century. Continental examples showed that the vision could be turned into a reality: France has had a National Theatre since 1680; Denmark, Sweden and Austria have had theirs for some two hundred years. Yet the first record of a specific British project dates from no earlier than 1848, when a London publisher – Effingham Wilson – prompted by the purchase in 1847 of Shakespeare's birthplace for the nation – issued two pamphlets proposing 'A House for Shakespeare', in public ownership, where the works of 'the world's greatest moral teacher' would be constantly performed. Several eminent Victorians – including two of the century's most successful playwrights, Lord Lytton and Tom Taylor – later spoke up for the ideals of a National Theatre. The visit to Britain in 1879 of the Comédie Française was a spur to enthusiasts. Among them was Matthew Arnold, who in 1880 published an essay urging our need for a Comédie Anglaise and ending with an exhortation 'The theatre is irresistible; organise the theatre!' that became a slogan among later campaigners (who sometimes overlooked the fact that Arnold attributed it to Sarah Bernhardt, in her 'most caressing tones'). Yet there was no sustained support for such an institution as long as the country's leading actors kept alive the classical repertoire (notably Shakespeare) in London and the provinces.

About a century ago the accessibility of the classics and the survival of the acting tradition were threatened by the emergence of the entertainment industry, with its economic dependence on long runs in London and their provincial tours. The ideals of a National Theatre (not necessarily modelled on French lines) began to gain increasingly wide acceptance – not least by actors. Among these the most conspicuous advocate was

Henry Irving, who speaking before a Social Science Congress – eloquently championed the National cause in 1878 (though he did not share Arnold's vision). This was the year in which he inaugurated at the Lyceum a managerial regime that seemed, to the late Victorian era, to be a kind of National Theatre in itself. Its collapse in the 1890s under severe economic pressures perhaps helped to point the need for an endowed, exemplary theatre of an entirely different kind from the speculative show business of even the most talented and enlightened of star soloists in private management.

The substantial history of the National Theatre movement begins in 1904, the year before Irving's death, when the critic William Archer (pioneer translator of Ibsen) collaborated with the young actor-director-author Harley Granville Barker in producing a detailed scheme (with estimates) for the casting, budget and repertoire of a National Theatre. This was at first circulated privately with the prefatory approval of six leading actors and dramatists: Henry Irving, Squire Bancroft, John Hare, James Barrie, Arthur Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. Meredith, Hardy, Bridges and Galsworthy were among other eminences who later added their support. Shaw, a friend of both Archer and Granville Barker, was a pillar of strength to the National movement for most of his life. When *A National Theatre* was published in 1907, the campaign began in earnest: and the vision of Archer and Granville Barker, who saw the National not as a museum or a monument or an elitist luxury, but as 'visibly and unmistakably a popular institution, making a large appeal to the whole community' has persisted in the design that made their dream come true seventy years later.

The National Theatre movement gained impetus in the Edwardian era by combining

forces with two other campaigns: one linked with the revaluation of Elizabethan staging, pioneered by William Poel and supported by the London Shakespeare League (founded in 1902); and another crusade that had also started around 1904, with more traditional and less expensive objectives, originating (like Effingham Wilson's scheme in 1848) in the veneration of Shakespeare not only as a dramatist but as a kind of household deity, or moral sage. Its begetter Richard Badger, was an octogenarian brewer who had 'acquired a Shakespearean taste' when at school for two years in Stratford-upon-Avon, and who wanted to make some recognition to Shakespeare for the debt that the world (and Mr Badger) owed to him, by building a statue in his memory. The army of memorialists attracted by Mr Badger's appeal were, in due course, persuaded by the National Theatre campaigners that the best way of remembering Shakespeare would be to build a theatre where his plays might be performed throughout the year (the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford was then open for only a few weeks annually). In 1908 the two sets of crusaders merged to form the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre committee. An appeal for funds was launched with an initial £70,000 from Carl Meyer (through the good offices of Mrs Alfred Lyttelton). In 1909 the committee issued a handbook listing the following aims for a 'Shakespeare National Theatre':

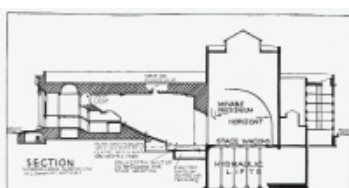
1. to keep the plays of Shakespeare in repertory;
2. to revive whatever else is vital in English classical drama;
3. to prevent recent plays of great merit from falling into oblivion;
4. to produce new plays and to further the development of the modern drama;
5. to produce translations of representative works of foreign drama, ancient and modern;
6. to stimulate the art of acting through the varied opportunities it will offer to members of the company.

These targets were devoutly, if mistily, kept in view during the next fifty years.

Zealots in and outside the theatrical profession, fired by the wish to commemorate the coming 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 1616, combined to spread the gospel and to raise the cash. The good works included a Shakespeare Ball, a Shakespeare Pageant, a Shakespeare Exhibition. And in 1913 a site was acquired for the National Theatre in Bloomsbury – the first of five in the next forty years.

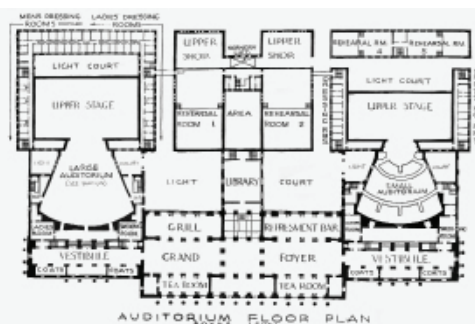
The First World War blocked the progress of the National Theatre movement. With the disappearance of the stability maintained by leading actor-managers and the domination of the stage by speculative finance, the need for a National Theatre became increasingly evident

– but so did the economic and organisational difficulties. Archer and Granville Barker had assumed in 1904 that state aid was out of the question; and it seemed no more probable in the 1920s, when theatrical costs were far higher than ever before. The Meyer gift accumulated interest; funds were raised in many ways; money continued to be given by individual believers. (Many donors' names were lost when air raids destroyed the records, but those that survive are engraved on a plaque in the National Theatre's foyer.)



PLANS FOR A NATIONAL THEATRE by W. L. Somerville

Section of Large Auditorium.
Floor Plan at Upper Level.
Floor Plan at Street Level.



AUDITORIUM FLOOR PLAN



FLOOR PLAN STREET LEVEL

H. Grassville-Baker: "A National Theatre,"
Skpwick & Jackson, Ltd., 44 Museum Street, London, W.C.2

Dedicated activists like Mrs Lyttelton, Sir Israel Gollancz and Geoffrey Whitworth (of the British Drama League) talked on. In 1930 Granville Barker brought out a revised edition of his pioneering book, urging the need for two theatres under one roof. There were many articles, letters to the press, debates, demonstrations. The idea of the National, propagated ardently, won new adherents. Yet the reality remained remote between the wars. The only material advance was the acquisition in 1938 of another site – in Cromwell Gardens, opposite the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was, as many people soon realised, in the wrong part of London. It was also too small – as were nearly all other sites later considered, in Leicester Square, Belgravia, Trafalgar Square, and other quarters. But it was to serve a purpose in the protracted manoeuvres that led to the eventual construction of the National Theatre.

The movement's history repeated itself. Within a year of buying a site, a world war broke out. The movement stopped. But the Second World War, unlike the first, had a decisive effect on the fortunes of the National Theatre campaign. By the time that the peace was signed its aim appeared, for the first time, to have become practical politics. For this there were three reasons:

1. State aid for the arts introduced in the 1940s by the establishment of CEMA (the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts), later transformed into the Arts Council. It was no longer as it had seemed to Archer and Granville Barker, 'A waste of time' to look to Parliament for funds.
2. About 1942 the London County Council, considering the post-war development of the South Bank of the Thames, made approaches to the SMNT committee about the possible gift of a site there (anticipated in 1930 by Granville Barker) in exchange for the land in Cromwell Gardens.
3. Towards the end of the war, the Old Vic organisation put out feelers to the SMNT committee, with a view to association in creating the National Theatre.

In 1946 the wagon started to roll. The LCC presented a site between Waterloo Bridge and

the site of the future Festival Hall. The Governors of the Old Vic and Trustees of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre made a 'contract of betrothal' (as it was called by Oliver Lyttelton, later Lord Chandos) to get the National Theatre built – at which time the marriage of the two charities would be solemnised by Royal Charter. A Joint Council was appointed, with the prime task of selecting an architect. In 1948 the Chancellor of the Exchequer promised that the Treasury would – if the necessary legislation was passed – contribute up to a million pounds to the construction of a National Theatre, if the LCC provided the site. And in the following year, history was made, halfway, when the National Theatre Bill – enabling such a subsidy to be given, at the Chancellor's discretion – was passed without a division (on 21 January 1949). The figure of a million pounds made no allowance for the equipment of the theatre, nor for its annual running costs. The importance of the Bill was, indeed symbolic, not practical. The principle had been established, but its implementation was to be postponed – indefinitely, it came to seem.

Another symbolic gesture was made two years later when a foundation stone was laid by Queen Elizabeth (now the [late] Queen Mother) and dedicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Dame Sybil Thorndike read a poem, especially composed by the Poet Laureate, John Masefield. It was another historic non-event. A year later the site was quietly changed. The foundation stone was moved. It was the only thing that did move.

Nearly ten years passed before anything material happened. In spite of the National Theatre Act, in spite of the widespread support inside and outside the profession, it seemed all too possible that nothing would ever happen, that no Chancellor would judge the time ripe enough for investment in a National Theatre. Sceptics found confirmation in occasional stonewalling Ministerial speeches. A number of main factors rescued the project from paralysis in the 1960s. One was the imagination and zeal of a few people on both sides of the political fence in Parliament (notably, Jennie Lee and Oliver Lyttelton) and in the Arts Council (conspicuously Lord Cottesloe,



then its chairman, and Lord Goodman, who succeeded him). Another crucial factor was the initiative of the LCC under Isaac Hayward's leadership: when in 1961 the Government declared that, in effect, the country could not afford a National Theatre, the LCC offered to pay half the cost of construction, in addition to providing the site rent free. Yet a third factor was that Hugh Jenkins, at the time a Labour Councillor, later Arts Minister, moved a resolution, carried unanimously – that the Theatre should be built without further delay. The Government then announced that it was ready to consider a National Theatre scheme, but only if the Stratford, Old Vic and Sadler's Wells organisations merged, and only if an opera house was built on the South Bank under the same roof. This proved to be impractical. Stratford withdrew from the attempted shotgun marriage in the following March. And in July 1962 the South Bank National Theatre and Opera Board was set up to build the theatres on two sites given by the LCC between County Hall and Hungerford Bridge. It had also been decided to establish a National Theatre company without waiting for the building to be opened; and another body – the National Theatre Board – was established to run this company. The Trustees of the Old Vic granted the Board a lease of the old playhouse in the Waterloo Road. In August 1962 the first artistic director of the National Theatre company was named as Laurence Olivier. (He was then

director of the Festival Theatre at Chichester, the first open stage playhouse to be built in Britain since Shakespeare's day). They gave their first performance (*Hamlet*) at the Old Vic on 22 October 1963.

In the following month Denys Lasdun was appointed as architect (Lutyens and O'Rourke had submitted schemes on previous sites). Like his predecessors, he had never built a theatre. Unlike them he had made no preliminary plans and brought no preconceived ideas. For two years after his appointment he explored the problems with leading directors (Michael Benthall, Peter Brook, Michel St Denis, George Devine, John Dexter, Frank Dunlop, Michael Elliott, William Gaskill, and Peter Hall); four designers (Roger Furse, Jocelyn Herbert, Sean Kenny, Tanya Moiseiwitsch); a lighting designer (Richard Pilbrow); a manager (Stephen Arlen); and an actor (Robert Stephens). Kenneth Tynan, then Literary Manager of the National Theatre company, was also consulted.

In 1960 it had been planned to build both a proscenium stage and an arena theatre, each with some 1,200 seats. Later the brief changed to one main, adaptable amphitheatre, combining an apron stage with a proscenium arch; and a second, small theatre seating about 400, 'mainly for experimental purposes'. During Lasdun's discussions the idea of an adaptable theatre was jettisoned. What was needed, the building committee decided, was an open stage and a proscenium stage, with a studio/workshop as well. In May 1965 the architect presented his preliminary plans and model, for both a theatre and an opera house. But in March 1966 the Government decided to sanction only the National Theatre for the time being. The following year the opera house scheme was shelved, and Denys Lasdun's plans for the National Theatre were approved by the National Theatre Board. They had to be adapted to yet another site given by the GLC (successor to the LCC): the 4.7 acre Princes Meadow on King's Reach. Here work began on 3 November 1969, twenty years after the passing of the National Theatre Act, with shovels symbolically wielded by Jennie Lee; Lord Chandos, Chairman of the National Theatre Board; Lord Cottesloe, Chairman of the South Bank Board; and Desmond Plummer,

then leader of the GLC. Four years later it was 'topped out' by Laurence Olivier and Lord Cottesloe. In March 1973, after two serious bouts of illness, Olivier ended his ten highly successful years as director of the National

Theatre company and was succeeded by Peter Hall.

The National Theatre was scheduled to open in April 1975; but there were severe and continuing building delays, because of the demands of specialist labour and the problems of getting innovative equipment made to measure, installing it and testing it. Nothing like this had been built or designed before in Britain: it took far more time, patience and money than had been expected (with the help of Lord Eccles, then Minister with responsibility for the arts, the government limit of £3.75 million – half the estimated capital cost, the LCC undertaking the other half – had been raised in 1973 to £9.8 million, but by 1976 delays and inflation were to cause a further rise of some 70%).

Eventually it was decided to open the Theatre in phases, in order to avoid any further frustration and procrastination. On 16 March 1976 the Lyttelton (though not even fully complete) opened its doors with productions transferred from the Old Vic, leading with Dame Peggy Ashcroft in Beckett's *Happy Days*. The Olivier (together with half the bars and buffets and, later, the restaurant) was launched in October 1976 with Albert Finney in the full text of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, directed by Peter Hall. The Cottesloe staged its first public performances – a visit by the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool in Ken Campbell's and Chris Langham's epic show *Illuminatus!* – in March 1977.

Only when all three of the playhouses were in full swing, with the great organism of which they form a part, could the real history of the National Theatre be said to have begun.



Richard Findlater was one of this country's most respected writers on the theatre. His drama criticism for a number of publications, and for the BBC, was admired inside and outside the profession. As well as biographies of such luminaries as Redgrave, Ashcroft, Olivier, Richardson, Lillian Baylis, and the clown Grimaldi, his eighteen books include a definitive history of stage censorship, *Banned*, and an account of contemporary British Theatre, *The Unholy Trade*, which made his name. He edited the arts pages of the *Observer*, and was assistant editor of the paper, from 1963 until his sudden death in 1985.

This essay is also available in Simon Callow's book *The National: the Theatre and its Work 1963-1997*; contact the NT Bookshop to enquire about this and other books on the National.

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Photographs used in this PDF:
Page 2: Somerville's plans for the National Theatre
Page 4: Laurence Olivier and Denys Lasdun.
Photo by Angus McBean.
Page 5: Building site for the new National Theatre, May 1971 (photographer unknown).
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