

Nicholas Hytner

An impresario is born



In the footsteps of Diaghilev...

And now for the good news. From March 2003, the National Theatre will be led by its new Director, Nicholas Hytner. He brings not only a broad raft of achievements as a director - from *The Madness of King George* to *The Magic Flute*, from *Carousel* to *The Winter's Tale* - but also an aggressive commitment to the role and responsibilities of the impresario. With passion he cites Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, the Russian ballet impresario, as having 'probably more effect on twentieth-century culture than any single individual'. In this interview with Locum non-executive director **Tony Hodges**, Hytner reveals his thinking on what lies behind the National, this bastion of British arts, one of the world's great cultural destinations.

Nicholas Hytner: Career Background

Early career

Born in Manchester and began directing at Cambridge University
First professional productions at Northcott, Exeter, and Leeds Playhouse

Associate Director: Royal Exchange, Manchester

As You Like It • *Edward II* • *The Country Wife* • *Mumbo Jumbo* • *Don Carlos*

For the RSC

Measure For Measure • *The Tempest* • *King Lear*

For the RNT

Ghetto • *The Wind In The Willows* • *The Madness of George III*
The Recruiting Officer • *Carousel* (later transferred to the Shaftesbury and then to the Lincoln Centre, New York)

Other Work

Volpone (Almeida) • *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Aldwych)
Miss Saigon (Theatre Royal Drury Lane) • *The Lady in the Van* (Queens)

Opera

Rienzi (ENO) • *Xerxes* (ENO) • *The Magic Flute* (ENO) • *The Force of Destiny* (ENO) • *The King Goes Forth to France* (ROH) • *The Knot Garden* (ROH) • *Giulio Cesare* (Paris Opera)

Film

The Madness of King George • *The Crucible*

Awards

Two Olivier Awards • Two 'Evening Standard' Awards
One London Critics' Circle Award • One Drama Desk Award • One Tony Award

In September 2001, Nicholas Hytner was appointed Artistic Director of the Royal National Theatre to succeed Trevor Nunn when his contract expires.



Olivier: Hytner's most famous predecessor

Good news for the National

Nicholas Hytner's name may be best known for his successful debut as a film director, on *The Madness of King George*, but his reputation is firmly based on the stage. Throughout his garlanded career, he has returned again and again to live theatre and to classical theatre at that, in particular to Shakespeare.

However, much though he loves the Bard, that is not the true thread running through his CV. No single theatrical type provides the link. His passions are too catholic for that to be the case. One link is passion itself. This is a career guided 'by my enthusiasm which is, I think, boundless'.

The second thread is acute self-awareness. Unlike many inhabitants of theatre, for Hytner this is not a simple question of ego. 'In my career... I think ... there is a sense of what I am capable of and what I am not ... and I am not in any sense a first-degree creative person. People compose symphonies, write plays, choreograph ballets. That kind of imagination I don't have ... I'm really an intermediary between material which needs my skill ... and an audience.'

This self-awareness has helped make him the director he is and fuelled the consistency of his achievements in that role. As an achiever, he is not alone within his family. Hytner will modestly declare that he is just part of a 'typical third generation Jewish family', but in the family are three brothers and all bear the same mark (and resemblance). His youngest brother, Jim, is the marketing director of ITV and the only executive within that beleaguered institution to have emerged with credit from the past year. His middle brother, Richard, led Publicis to more recent success than any other multinational agency in the UK, and has been touted as the most liked and respected advertising executive of his generation. Where they all end up, heaven knows, but it will be on the road signposted Achievement.

Nicholas Hytner's enthusiasm and self-awareness have informed his achievements but there is something else that suggests his accession to the top job in British theatre is A Good Thing: his clarity of thought, in particular on the themes of what makes successful theatre and what his role within that should be.

Listen to what Hytner said (at the recent Cheltenham Literary Festival) about Shakespeare and about what will be the first play

with which he opens his account as the National Theatre's Director: *Henry V*.

'It has never been done at the National, perhaps because the great wartime film made by the National's first Director, Laurence Olivier, casts such a long shadow.' (It is a first; it has news value; it has historic potential.)

'But it's time we did it. It's a play about a charismatic young English leader who commits his troops to a dangerous foreign invasion for which he has to struggle to find justification in international law... It's a patriotic epic. The reasons for doing it now include how different its world is from the world of current affairs, as well as how similar.' (It's topical; it's political; it could be controversial.)

'We can be fairly certain about some of the reasons why Shakespeare wrote it and they make good business sense. His company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, had had great success with two plays about *Henry IV*... They wanted a sequel - and *Henry V* had already proved himself at the box office... Shakespeare was a shrewd company man and a shareholder in his company. He wanted a hit.' (Plays need audiences. Artists lead but they need punters to follow. Watch them roll up for this.)

What inspires confidence is not just Hytner's obvious understanding of commercial imperatives, but his refusal to allow his art or artists to be subjugated by them. Rather like a creative ju-jitsu practitioner, he uses the weight of commercial reality and turns it to help him create a cultural event. Consider his casting of *Henry V*. Our hero, 'this star of England', is Adrian Lester. This is a consummate commercial and artistic choice. Hytner ticks off the reasons. This is 'the guy who played *Hamlet* for Peter Brook, who played Rosalind in the famous mono-sexual production of *As You Like It*, the guy who has won two Olivier awards, who made a big movie with Mike Nichols.' This is all indisputable, an excellent response to the question which newspapers tend to ask: 'What do we do about the story 'BLACK MAN PLAYS HENRY V'? Hytner has already told us that this is not the real story. Lester's star quality and acting talent are the real story. But, like the reasons the Bard wrote *Henry V* in the first place, both stories 'make good business sense'.

Lester: today Rosalind, tomorrow Henry V



This is a true impresario at work. Now we understand, beyond his love of dance, his admiration for Diaghilev. 'In the same way that I suppose every writer wants to be Shakespeare and every composer wants to be Mozart, every impresario wants to be Diaghilev. And Diaghilev could not write a note or choreograph a step or paint a picture. But this is the man who enlisted the great composers, dancers and painters of the century for his productions. Hytner lists them: 'Picasso, Stravinsky, Balanchine, Nijinsky, Satie, Debussy, Braque, the lot!'

Nicholas Hytner has personal and professional strengths that make him a fine, proven director. He has personal and cultural passions, such as dance and music, that make him a rounded authority on the performing arts. But what appears to make him good for the National Theatre is his sense of mission, as an impresario. 'The reason I am here now, the reason I wanted to do this, is because I had got to the stage where I felt it was no longer enough to be an intermediary one show at a time, on behalf of myself. I very much wanted to be the lynchpin of an institution like this which was dedicated to the furtherance of the form, the involvement of a wide audience, 300-plus nights a year, the production of theatre from all sorts of places, all sorts of eras. Because I felt it was time for me to be an impresario and this was the only place I ever could be an impresario.'

To repeat the point, this is not a man driven by ego, but by mission. Which may well be why his peers wanted him in this job. The informed view is that Hytner will be good for the National, as he will for the theatre.

Good news for theatre

The National sits at the head of a vast city and land of theatre. In London alone there are over 200 theatres, attended by audiences of over 11 million each year. The West End has more theatres, more shows and larger audiences than Broadway. But the commercial

theatre is under pressure, even greater pressure than subsidised theatre (see Tables 1 and 2), in terms of attendances, revenues and capacity sold. This is partly by dint of the greater exposure of the commercial theatre to tourism trends, partly a symptom of a deeper problem: the first signs of a disenfranchised audience.

Nicholas Hytner has much to say and a debate to lead on the role of theatre in education (and vice versa) which may address the latter, deeper malaise. (This he will warm to as our interview progresses.) More immediately, he recognises the responsibility of the subsidised theatre towards its commercial brethren. 'We are now at a point where the commercial theatre is completely dependent, for the people who work in it, on the subsidised theatre.' It is in relation to the talent available that Hytner's role at the National could prove crucial. It will be by leading, stretching, inspiring this talent that he can deliver the National's responsibility to theatre at large.

He is well equipped for the task, quite apart from the missionary zeal with which he sees the impresario's role in attracting talent. (Remember the artists Hytner named as disciples of Diaghilev.)

First, people want to work with him. He gets on well with other directors. 'One of the reasons I probably got this job was that I think other directors were happy for me to have it. Because I really do have a very sanguine view of what I can do and what I can't do. What I would not want to do here is use this as a vehicle for my work as a director of plays. I'm going to direct twice a year but that will not be the priority. The important thing is that other directors do the kind of stuff they do best....'

It may matter less, because most actors will give eye teeth for decent roles at the National, but his reputation as 'an actors' director' will do the atmosphere and *esprit de corps* no harm. (Just read the late Nigel Hawthorne's autobiography for an actor's view of Hytner.)

Perhaps most important will be the effect Hytner's leadership has on writers, for the National has unique spaces and a unique remit with which to challenge writers. And it is some 40, even 50 years

The Lyttleton, one of the National's three main stages



Table I: Attendances at London theatres

	Commercial Theatre		Subsidised Theatre	
	Attendances (millions)	Share of total (%)	Attendances (millions)	Share of total (%)
1998	10.17	85.3	1.75	14.7
1999	10.09	84.6	1.84	15.4
2000	9.52	82.4	2.04	17.6
2001	9.57	81.6	2.16	18.4

Source: SOLT Box Office Data Report 2001

since a constellation of writing talent, led by Beckett and Osborne and Pinter, took our theatre to the heights of a new, golden age.

He flings down his gauntlet. 'Writers who may not have felt that this place was their first port of call should come here and should write ambitiously, should write big, National plays. That's what we need to do and if we can't get that going, life will be pretty hard. To a degree one is not in control of it. If people aren't writing the stuff, then we can't produce it. There are things we can do, create an atmosphere to encourage them to write things they might not have written, but we'll need some luck.'

So what is a 'National play', the play Nicholas Hytner wants to see written? 'A National play has scale, ambition. Ambition in terms either of its physical scale or its emotional or intellectual reach.'

He is cautious about the prospects for this shift to new work. 'It can't be done overnight. It will take a few years. And we really have to be lucky with the first two or three big plays we do to encourage other people to have a go.'

The focus on contemporary writing is something of a surprise, partly given Hytner's Shakespearean authority, partly given the National's greying audience and Trevor Nunn's joy in musical theatre. Quite simply, I expected more classics. 'I love that stuff, but I think we should probably do half and half. Half new and half from the core repertoire or rediscoveries.' Hytner is also quick to defend his about-to-be predecessor. 'There have been times, this year, that Trevor Nunn's regime has shown some wonderful new stuff.' Yet you sense he brings more zeal for what is contemporary, from his treatment of Shakespeare onwards. 'We are here to do as exciting a spread of work as we possibly can. Work that includes totally alive, totally alert revivals of the core repertoire, of the canon in a contemporary context, right through to the newest things said in the newest way, said sometimes in a way that might be confusing to an audience which has grown up on a different kind of work.'

Shades of John Osborne at the Royal Court and, indeed, early Peter Brook at the National. There is something dangerous stirring in the undergrowth. The Director-designate cites an example of this, of

what he is interested in. 'Some guy comes along and realises that on the Jerry Springer Show there are people tearing passions to tatters the way that opera singers do and thinks: "What would happen if you set the Jerry Springer Show to opera?" [With a totally straight face.] And it's a brilliant idea and it's completely new and it owes nothing to any kind of musical that went before. And it's worth a try.' Writers, please note. *Jerry Springer. The Opera* was created at the Battersea Arts Centre, 'by a guy called Richard Thomas', whose next show Hytner is commissioning. 'I saw it at Battersea and on the Edinburgh Fringe and thought it was a fantastic show. We will give it its big London premiere.'

Nicholas Hytner does not plan to make artistic concessions. His enthusiasm for the new, the alive, the contemporary, will stretch audiences. And here is the rub. Hytner wants 'to change the terms of the debate about the audience'. Whereas the commercial theatre or his brother's television channel or most private sector destinations have to start with the audience, the consumer, the visitor, the director of the National Theatre must, must, must start with the work. 'We start with the show. And then we find the audience.' It is the difference between the artist and the marketing man. 'The hard thing is finding the show. If the show's good, we're going to do it. It's not hard to find the audience, if the show is good.'

Ask Hytner if he would ever adapt his productions to give marketing people a hand and you hear a contemporary Lear. 'Never. Never. Never. That is not the function of the not-for-profit theatre. And we won't. If we cast stars, it is because they are good, because that's the best person for the part.' Referred to the recently debated (but exquisite) performance by Glenn Close in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he responds aggressively and with good reason. 'Whether you like it or loathe it, I am sure Trevor (Nunn) cast Glenn Close because she is absolutely fantastic. There are people who have filled West End theatres whom we would never cast here because they are crap. And there are shows we would never do, however much they might fill the theatre, because we think they are not right.'

Table II: Economics of London theatre

	Commercial Theatre		Subsidised Theatre	
	Revenue (£)	Capacity (sold %)	Revenue (£)	Capacity (sold %)
2000	232,778	63.1	53,710	74.6
2001	236,746	62.6	62,244	76.4
Difference (±%)	+1.7	-0.49	+15.8	+1.86

Source: SOLT Box Office Data Report 2001

The National Theatre: landmark on the South Bank



Fact File

July 2002: Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell announces arts funding will increase from £297 million in the current fiscal year to £412 million in 2005/6.

Central government subsidy of the arts in the UK equates to £5.08 per capita p.a. well behind France at £9.48 and Germany at £7.44 (excluding local government subsidy, on which Germany's arts depend).

Between 1995 and 2000, the contribution of Creative Industries to London's GDP grew from £12 billion to £21 billion, and is now only behind Business Services and Health and Education as an employer.

The last major study of West End Theatre's economic impact (in 1998) estimated this at £1,075 million, including £433 million of 'ripple' effect on hotels, transport and merchandise and generating 41,000 jobs.

26 per cent of visitors to London view its theatres as expensive or very expensive, far less than for hotels (61 per cent), shops (67 per cent) or restaurants (75 per cent).

The National Theatre's three stages mount 27 productions in approximately 1,200 performances a year, for audiences of up to 2,500 per performance.

The National's contribution to our culture is not to fill its boots with paying customers, first and foremost. It is to lead the way, show the best work. 'The trap that we must avoid is playing to our traditional audience because we need to, in order to keep the place open - once you are doing that, then frankly you lose your remit as the National Theatre.'

Remember, this is not a vainglorious aesthete without a care for the bottom line. This is a director consistently associated with critical and box office success. He is leading anew the debate about audience. 'The reason to have a broad audience is that a broad audience enables us to do a broad spread of work. We are here to do the work.'

If the National is truly to be the locomotive for theatre in this country, then its director has to provide a lead. Not in how to compromise or increase ratings or make money. But in attracting talent and galvanising writers and putting on the best shows. Where the National Theatre leads, the nation's theatres will follow. Often known in commercial worlds as the 'trickle down' theory, it would have been tough for traditional Labour politicians to buy but - in theory - less troublesome for New Labour. We shall see.

Good news for the politicians?

Nicholas Hytner accepts the extra loads that his new job brings. Ask if he foresees himself taking on active roles in the debate about culture in our economy and society, actively driving the discussion, he answers, 'Yes. I think it's one of my jobs. One of the things I have to take on, not as an individual, but as a director of the National Theatre.' Is he happy to be quoted as an authority on the role of arts in our society? He answers, with due modesty, 'It's something I have thought about and have to go on thinking about more deeply.'

Already he has stepped forward and been counted on the subjects of arts funding and arts education. He warms to both issues in the context of his theatre audience.

First, he is sceptical about the supposedly 'correct' political trends to 'judge a cultural organisation, a performing arts organisation, in terms of its capacity as a social engineer. That trend must be resisted.' Much like Peter Jonas, the former head of the English National Opera who now runs the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, who opines: 'The English system of funding has fallen victim to the necessity of political justification. Everything has to have a catchphrase - outreach, cultural identity, accessibility. All these things were inherent in the best companies anyway - but it has led to tremendous bureaucracy.' In the same *Guardian* article that quotes Jonas (Hytner's fingerprints are clearly visible all over this piece), our incoming director moves the debate on to education: 'The arts should not continue to paper over the cracks left by the Education Department.' A week later the same newspaper headlines a speech he gave at a fundraising event for LAMDA. 'Theatre chief warns of arts apartheid.' As he detailed in our interview: 'Where 25 years ago, kids from state schools would be taken - on their school budgets - to the theatre, now they are not.' A generation of less well-off school children is being 'disenfranchised', forced to study Shakespeare and the classics 'without ever seeing a play'.

Hytner resists the idea that the National audience should be broadened for the sake of a younger profile. 'There is no absolute good in this thing called "a young audience". If all we wanted was a young audience we would put on stand-up ... which would be



'The Madness of King George': Hytner's most famous production

cheaper than putting on a Shakespeare play.' His point goes way beyond audience composition to the role of arts in education. 'We charge £8 a seat to school parties. That's no problem to a London independent school ... but if you are teaching at a London comprehensive, you cannot ask the kids to stump up £8, so they don't come. And not only should they be coming here, but boy should they be going to dance. Dance is a form that appeals directly to kids but they can't go because they can't afford it.' He argues that arts funding should be increased to a level that would allow seat prices to be halved to bring in new audiences. Why not?

This is no naïve politician-basher, however. He studiously allows, on subsidies: 'We've actually done quite well, particularly in the last spending round.' His interventions are intelligently directed more at Mr Clarke than Ms Jowell: 'I'm more concerned now that Education looks to itself and creates, not just for us but for the nation and for their own sake, tomorrow's audience.'

Yet the truth is that the National receives less than 40 per cent of its funding from government subsidy. Compare that with 55 per cent at its neighbours in the South Bank Centre or the 60 per cent that was allowed when the National began. Britain has an uncomfortable midway position between the public arts funding system of the US and continental Europe. As Hytner declares: 'In the Western world, the performing arts have always been massively subsidised but we have always had a "mixed economy" from the very beginning.' In France, central government devotes £9.48 per capita to arts subsidy, versus £5.08 per capita in Britain. In Germany it is £7.44 per capita but that cultural contribution is dwarfed by local government's, at ten times that amount. In America, on the other hand, public arts subsidy is at first sight minuscule, until you realise that, as Hytner puts it, 'the US government is doing its bit by the back door ... as those who give get back enormous tax breaks ... it has always done its bit, much more than Europeans, to encourage private individuals to give to good causes.'

Nicholas Hytner does not resent our mixed economy where he has to keep up the pressure on government and sponsor alike. He actually seems to welcome the debate with the former and interaction with the latter. 'The contact and relationships we have with both the representatives of corporations and private individuals are two-way affairs. It's not just that they write the cheque and we say thank you. It's often very, very useful and I actually enjoy these contacts I have.' This director can count, I posit. 'An impresario has to,' he replies.

He fully appreciates the economic importance of the arts, in terms of both employment and destination making. Yet, again he prefers to discuss the bigger role, beyond the walk-on part of tourism attraction. 'I'm more interested in attracting *talent* from abroad.' (Diaghilev echoes again.) 'Historically we have survived slumps in tourism because our audience is basically a native one Taken as a whole, we all know the cultural life of the capital is essential to the economy of the capital. And the theatre as a whole is a huge attraction for tourists. But the days have come and gone when we used to justify an existence and subsidy in terms of tourism.'

He moves on, robustly, to the real issue, what is important rather than merely measurable. 'Look at the Rattle effect. Birmingham revitalised itself, using Simon as its catalyst. It's what began the city's transformation.' As with Manchester and his old colleague, Sir Bob Scott (on the cover of *Locum Destination Review's* previous issue)? 'Absolutely.'

'You talk of the cultural life of the capital and the nation - what we're offering here is, in its own terms, immensely enriching and



Revealed: Hytner's recent production of 'Mother Clap's Molly House'

"We start with the show. And then we find the audience ... It's not hard to find the audience if the show is good."



'There is a fresh breeze blowing along the South Bank, and it is called Nicholas Hytner'

relatively cheap One can be very robust about this - we could drop the whole thing, abolish subsidy - but there would be an enormous outcry, even from people who never go to a concert, a theatre, a gallery It's right at the centre of the fabric of our community It justifies itself as part of what we do to make ourselves feel human to each other.'

The National Theatre did not just hire itself a new Director. It found itself an impresario, with a voice that will be heard beyond theatre, speaking for people who represent over a billion pounds in London theatre revenues and over £21 billion in London creative industries' turnover. Politicians, lend him your ears.

Good news for the South Bank

To most visitors, the 'South Bank' stretches a short walk east from Westminster Bridge, maybe as far as Blackfriars Bridge. To some, it might now travel further, incorporating Bankside, Tate Modern and the Globe Theatre, but the heart of the 'South Bank' is that collection of '50s and '60s buildings at the western end of this promenade. Together they comprise the largest cultural centre in Europe, housing as they do the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, Poetry Library and Hayward Gallery. And, of course, the National Theatre. Except that the National Theatre is not officially, structurally, corporately, part of the 'South Bank Centre' at all. Formally, the National is a separate entity. (Formally, its name happens to be The Royal National Theatre as well, but that, as Nicholas Hytner notes, 'has never caught on. The truth is we don't use it. Only pompous journalists use it.' So there.)

Whatever the structural and corporate facts of the matter, the South Bank is a geographical entity that includes the National Theatre and stands for certain widely accepted values: the highest cultural standards (within highly debatable architectural ones). As such, it has always seemed to this outsider rather odd that the theatrical wing of the South Bank was kept entirely separate from the rest. The different venues together proclaim London's status as a world-class cultural capital. Together they appeal to particular immigrants and visitors, mainly those of higher education, sophistication and indeed wealth (perhaps too much so). Together they say: in a civilised society, the arts matter. Why do they not

operate together, for the common good, the good of all the venues there located: as one, easily visualised, desirable, encapsulable, memorable, cultural destination?

The answer, of course, lies in history and statute and Englishness. It is not structured in that way because it is not structured in that way and, as Nicholas Hytner fully accepts, 'it can't be done structurally'. What is intriguing, encouraging even, is that this new Director is already engaged in doing something about creating productive connections with his neighbours in the South Bank Centre. 'We are all working on it.' Five simple words that may mean a real step forward for the destination as a whole. 'There probably is an argument for something to be done in terms of marketing but ... now just some kind of coordinated attempt that starts with simply human contact. Nick Starr and I are talking with Michael Lynch and we are just trying to see what we can do with each other.'

Hallelujah. Go for it, brothers. You may work for different institutions but you play to the same punter, in one destination, to one set of standards. Cooperation between you can only be good for the South Bank and for London.

Looking back at Hytner's great predecessors, you can understand why cooperation might not have been on the agenda before. Hytner clearly respects Trevor Nunn enormously ('I can't think of anyone who has influenced me more') and is very close to Richard Eyre (under whom he worked as an Associate Director at the National) but both are greats of the *theatre*, to their bootstraps. Before them? Well, cooperation with an ego as major as Peter Hall's or as awesome as Laurence Olivier's would have required imagination at the very least.

The prospect of even informal cooperation all of a sudden looks realistic. There is a fresh breeze blowing along the South Bank and it is called Nicholas Hytner. He will set high standards and will not compromise artistic integrity. He will welcome and challenge a broad church, of writers, actors and audiences alike. He will establish a high profile for his theatre and speak up for the arts. There is an impresario at work on the South Bank and everyone who enjoys the sight of a successful destination should wish him well. Hytner may not be a Diaghilev, yet, but he is our own and I for one will wager that he succeeds in this vastly important cultural destination.