

British Theatre Guide

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Nicholas Hytner: Making Theatre Popular

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Nicholas Hytner, director of the National Theatre from 2003 to 2015, was asked by event chair James Runcie about the balancing act (to use the title of Hytner's book) between running the National Theatre and directing productions.

Hytner said that going into rehearsal with a play feels like a refuge or a holiday. He knows that there will be a queue of people waiting to ask him questions when they break for lunch but accepts that. What does sometimes take him aback is when he is stopped in the street by a member of the public to compliment the National Theatre for its car park or sandwich bar rather than its work on stage.

Of course he had some anecdotes about strong personalities with whom he has worked, including the inevitable Gambon stories. When rushed to hospital during rehearsals of *The Habit of Art*, the stage manager who had gone with Sir Michael asked if he had a message for the rehearsal room. "Never mind those bastards," he replied, "they'll already be on the phone to Simon Russell Beale." And he wasn't far wrong...

He also had some stories about his early encounters with Harold Pinter, including being shouted at in a crowded restaurant by the great man. He was told by a friend that you can't call yourself artistic director of the National Theatre until you've been called a shit by Harold Pinter.

He spoke about his 25-year partnership with Alan Bennett, with whom he was paired by his predecessor Richard Eyre when he was planning a Christmas production in the Olivier of *The Wind in the Willows* and wondering who could adapt it. He thinks his approach early on cemented their relationship when he calmed Bennett's worries about how something could work on stage by telling him, "you write it down and I'll stage it."

Apparently Bennett, when he has a new first draft, cycles to Hytner's house and pushes it through the letter box. He said working with writers on new plays is a balancing act between encouragement and analysis.

In the rehearsal room, he said he doesn't have extended periods around the table with the script: everyone needs to know what they're saying, but a lot of things are best not done around a table.

He noted that there has been a rise in productions of *Julius Caesar* since the election of Donald Trump. He said Shakespeare was never interested in a clash of ideologies but a pure lust for power for its own sake. Drawing parallels with our own government, he said he wished the people putting us through major ideological shifts really believed in them rather than doing it just because they want to be king.

Hytner's new project with Nick Starr, with whom he worked closely at the National, is a new commercial theatre, with no public subsidy, near to Tower Bridge on the South Bank. He said they will produce four shows a year, two of which he will direct, and every production will be filmed by NT Live, one of his proudest achievements at the NT.

The first play will be Richard Bean's *Young Marx* about Karl Marx's early life in London and then a new production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Nicholas Hytner's *Balancing Acts: Behind the Scenes at the National Theatre* is now available in hardcover.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)