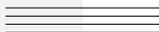


B A L A N C I N G A C T S



N I C H O L A S H Y T N E R

In a National Theatre rehearsal room, Michael Gambon has been wrestling for three days with Alan Bennett's new play *The Habit of Art*. Michael has given many prodigious performances at the National, most recently as Falstaff in Shakespeare's two *Henry IV* plays, though there were occasional memory lapses which he covered with Elizabethan rhubarb. I had a couple of letters complaining that my production had made Sir Michael incomprehensible, to which I replied politely, although he's a famous hoaxer so he may have written them himself. One of them compared him with suspicious pomposity to that admirable Shakespearean and model of clarity, Simon Russell Beale.

He now seems much less confident than he was as Falstaff. He's playing an old actor who is struggling with the part of the poet W. H. Auden to Alex Jennings's Benjamin Britten in a play about Auden and Britten within a play about a theater company putting on the same play. Alex has an almost mystical faith in the great tradition of British acting, so he's urging Michael on. With them onstage is Frances de la Tour, who in the face of life's absurdities has an eyebrow permanently raised and a voice permanently tuned to deadpan. She's playing a stage manager, and I'm sure that she can nurse Michael through anything that goes off-piste.

But at the moment he can barely get to the end of a sentence. And then, suddenly, the blood drains from him. He staggers, and falls into a chair. We call for help, an oxygen tank is hurried into the room, then a stretcher. Michael is wheeled out, the oxygen mask over his face. One of the stage managers goes with him in the ambulance to St. Thomas's Hospital. As he's carried into the A&E [Accidents and Emergencies], she asks him whether there's any message he'd like her to take back to the rehearsal room.

"Don't worry about those bastards," he says. "They're already on the phone to Simon Russell Beale."

And as he speaks, I'm with Alan Bennett and the rest of the company recasting the part. Simon Russell Beale is doing something else, probably making a documentary about Renaissance choral music: he is as erudite as he is audible. So he's not in the running. But once we know that nothing serious has happened to Michael, we barely have a thought for him. We're in the canteen, overlooking the river. Tourist boats glide under Waterloo Bridge, and glum office workers stare at computer screens in the building next door, while we make a list of actors who are available for the part, all of them distinguished, none of them immune to our brutal assessments of their suitability. By the end of the day, Michael has been advised to withdraw from the play, and I've called Richard Griffiths, an actor renowned for his delicacy and wit, but also for his immense girth. Alan has already written lines to justify the casting of a fat actor in the part of Auden, who, although dissolute, was not even plump.

You start with a vision, and you deliver a compromise. And you're pulled constantly in different directions. So although you want the actor who plays W. H. Auden to be as much like W. H. Auden as possible, you know that the play will work best with an actor who can remember what the playwright wrote.

You know that what works generally trumps all other considerations, and you also know that if you care only about what works, you'll end up with something slick but meretricious.

You want a play to be challenging, ambitious, nuanced, and complicated. You also want it to sell tickets.

You want playwrights to write exactly the plays they want to write. You also want what they write to reflect your own image of what your theater should stand for.

You want your theater to vibrate with the rude, disruptive energy of the carnival. But in your heart of hearts, you recoil from the chaos: you seek intimations of celestial harmony.

You want to look into the abyss, and make sense of human misery. But you flinch from pretension, despise self-importance, and take refuge in irony.

You want Shakespeare to be our contemporary. You also know him to be writing very specifically about a world that is separated from our own by four hundred years.

You want to tread a tightrope between all your conflicting impulses, to find poise and balance. But you despise yourself for your caution; you want your work to be full of jagged edges and careless abandon.

So when Richard Griffiths picks up the phone and says, “It may interest you to know that you have called me from my exercise bike,” you dismiss the unrealistic thought that he may be thinner than he was when you last saw him, because you know it doesn’t matter. You explain to him the pickle you’re in, and you aren’t surprised that it doesn’t occur to him to remind you that you might have asked him to play W. H. Auden in the first place. But Richard is always a model of good grace, and he says he’ll start on Monday.

Monday comes, and Richard is stuck in traffic on the A40. He calls to say he’ll be half an hour late. He’s one of the world’s great raconteurs, but his stories never have a destination and they go on for hours. And we’re now two weeks behind, which is why Alan Bennett says plaintively from the back of the room, “Start rehearsing as soon as he arrives or we’ll be here all morning with Traffic Jams I Have Known.”

So that’s what we do. And *The Habit of Art*, though not as popular, or probably as good, as Alan’s previous play, *The History Boys*, turns out to be worth a couple of hours of the audience’s time, as it is provocative, funny, touching, sad, and original. The playwright, the actors, and I have spent the short rehearsal time left to us trying to reconcile our high ideals with what’s achievable. We want to make art, and we know we’re in show business. It’s one of the balancing acts that the National Theatre is about.

Michael Gambon was back four years later, in 2013, for the National’s fiftieth birthday, formidable in a scene from Harold Pin-

ter's *No Man's Land*, in the part originally played in 1975 by Ralph Richardson. He and Derek Jacobi, who played John Gielgud's part with all the finesse of his predecessor, were part of a two-hour celebration of the National's history, which brought together actors from all of its five decades in a program of scenes from many of its most memorable productions, broadcast live by the BBC. Michael and Derek recorded a brief and irreverent introduction to Pinter, admitting that they had no idea what his plays were about. They wouldn't have dared if he'd still been alive.

There was never a chance that the fiftieth-birthday celebration could in a mere two hours balance the need to do full justice to the range of the National's achievements against the need to deliver a good show. But as much as a single evening could, it touched on most of my preoccupations.

It started as the National itself started at the Old Vic Theatre in 1963, with Act 1, Scene 1, of *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare haunts these pages as his plays haunt me. I was afraid that *Hamlet* might be too high-minded for an opener, but "Who's there?" is an unimprovable first line; and when Derek Jacobi, who played Laertes in the 1963 production, appeared in armor as the Ghost, he was a reminder that high-minded can also be showbiz gold.

Hamlet himself doesn't appear in the first scene of *Hamlet*, but later in the evening, Simon Russell Beale stood on the vast Olivier stage, as vulnerable and lonely as he was in 2000. "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth." Adrian Lester and Rory Kinnear had only finished their run of *Othello* a couple of months earlier. Their gripping account of the climax of Othello's descent into jealousy gave way briefly to a tape of Laurence Olivier and Frank Finlay in the legendary 1964 production, recorded live at the Old Vic. Time turned somersaults.

Olivier was the National's founding director, and, according to many of those who saw him live, its greatest actor. Archive footage of his stage performances is a spectral counterfeit of what it must have been like to be there. But a few days before the show his wife, Joan Plowright, returned to the Old Vic to film a scene from George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, fifty years after she'd first played it. She asked if she could stop if she forgot or stumbled over her lines. I said we could stitch her performance together from as many takes as she wanted. The cameras rolled, and the years

rolled back. She did the whole thing in one take. A young guy on the camera crew had no idea who she was, and no idea that she was playing a girl who was going defiant to the flames, but he was still in tears.

Among the biggest regrets of my twelve years as the National's director is that I found nothing for Maggie Smith, who, like Joan Plowright, was part of Olivier's first company. She was aware of the irony when I asked her to be in the birthday show: irony is one of her special subjects. But she suggested a short, enigmatic speech from George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*. She said she remembered it because when she played Mrs. Sullen, it took her so long to work out what it meant. I didn't believe this: in a rehearsal room, she's always several steps ahead of everyone else. At the party after the show, she spoke to William Gaskill, *The Beaux' Stratagem's* director in 1970. He admired how still she'd been. "You told me not to move my hands," she said, pleased that he'd noticed. More than forty years on, she still remembered his note, maybe because it was so practical and unpretentious, and a lesson in how a director should talk to an actor. Judi Dench arrived one afternoon to rehearse Cleopatra's elegy for Antony, after a gap of more than twenty-five years. "Any notes?" she asked, when she'd finished. How do you give notes to someone like Judi Dench? Or Helen Mirren? Are any of us really up to Maggie Smith?

My years as the National's director brought me into the kind of contact with theater directors that I would never otherwise have had, as we rarely see each other at work. Actors know everything about all of us, but will only under extreme provocation spill the beans. I've watched many of the most celebrated British actors at work, and I'm still trying to crack the mystery of how they do what they do. Many of them were there for the birthday show, but two survived only in grainy video, which grabbed the audience by the throat: Paul Scofield as the composer Salieri in *Amadeus* (1979) and Nigel Hawthorne as the king in *The Madness of George III* (1991).

The evening was studded with scenes from modern classics that were first produced at the National. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), *No Man's Land* (1975), *Bedroom Farce* (1977), *Amadeus*, *Arcadia* (1993), and *Copenhagen* (1998): major plays by playwrights – Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, Alan Ayckbourn, Pe-

ter Shaffer, and Michael Frayn – whose work is the backbone of the British theater. Central to the National’s identity are the new plays that take the temperature of the nation. Peter Nichols’s *The National Health* (1969) was the first of them, the National Health Service no less emblematic of the nation’s health then than now. Howard Brenton and David Hare’s *Pravda* (1985) was a prophetic account of the debauching of the British press by a proprietor eager to stick two fingers up to the British establishment, and happy to shaft his readers. Nobody who saw Anthony Hopkins lope onto the empty Olivier stage as the Rupert Murdoch avatar Lambert Le Roux will forget it. Luckily, Ralph Fiennes hadn’t seen it, or he might not have agreed to give his own terrifying performance.

David Hare’s gift of second sight was on display again in a scene from *Stuff Happens*, which in 2004 interwove verbatim reportage with informed speculation in a gripping drama about the build-up to the Iraq War, with Alex Jennings uncanny as George W. Bush. Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1992) had its British premiere at the National, before it played New York, and was as comprehensive in its anatomy of contemporary America as anything we produced about ourselves.

It was harder to chip fragments from many equally striking plays. Some of them were too challenging to sell many tickets, but the box office is an imperfect measure of success. Still, I’m eager to explore what made *War Horse* (2007) such a phenomenon, and why *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011) made so many people laugh. What is funny? How do you do comedy? And what part should musical theater play in the National’s repertoire? Richard Eyre’s production of *Guys and Dolls* (1982) marked a sea change in the way the London audience looked at Broadway’s golden age. Trevor Nunn’s gorgeous *My Fair Lady* (2001) was the climax of a series of incisive reevaluations of classic American musicals.

The first new musical I programmed as the National’s director was Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee’s *Jerry Springer – The Opera* (2003), which married low entertainment to high art even in its title. The theater has been finding ways to test the boundaries of taste since Aristotle suggested that comedy had its origins in phallic parades. There will always be a part of me that would prefer to be at the Wigmore Hall listening to a Haydn string

quartet, so I'm glad that *Jerry Springer* did without the phallus, but it was still as blithely offensive as it was musically literate.

Many of the *Jerry Springer* company reappeared in a scene from *London Road* (2011), by Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork, based on testimony from residents of Ipswich caught up in the trial of a serial killer, and evidence, if it were needed, that musicals can be as far-reaching in form and subject matter as any other theatrical genre. The immense range of the entire evening was answer in itself to one of the questions I asked myself throughout my years as director: What is the National Theatre for?

There were two scenes by Alan Bennett, who has entrusted his plays to me for the past twenty-five years. Working on *The History Boys*, about history, literature, education, and eight clever school-boys, was as good a time as I've ever had in the theater. Most of the original company came back, though not, to our great sorrow, Richard Griffiths, who died only a few months before the reunion. Alan Bennett played Richard's part, the teacher everyone wishes they'd had. He didn't efface memories of Richard, but he landed an enormous laugh that Richard never got, because ten years previously, neither Richard nor I had understood the line properly. "It used to drive me mad," said Alan. "Why on earth didn't you tell me?" I cried. The history boys, all of them at least fifteen years too old for school, jeered triumphantly.

The show closed with the final speech from *The Habit of Art*. As a National Theatre stage manager, Frances de la Tour remembered the move from the Old Vic to the intimidating new building of the South Bank. But there was no need to be frightened, because what's knocked the corners off the place, taken the shine off it, and made it dingy and unimposing are plays. Plays plump, plays paltry, plays preposterous, plays purgatorial, plays radiant, plays rotten – but plays persistent. Plays, plays, plays.

Backstage, we created a temporary green room in one of the rehearsal rooms. School benches were lined up in front of a big screen so that the cast could watch the show. Members of the 2013 company sat with members of the 1963 company, colleagues on equal terms. Actors who will be around for the National's centenary in 2063 shared a bench with Maggie Smith and Judi Dench. They'll be able to tell actors whose parents aren't yet born that they were there.

The green room was the place to be: even during the dress rehearsal it was a magnet for everyone involved in the show. I decided I'd slip out of the auditorium for twenty minutes during the performance and run backstage. But I'd bought a new suit and, determined to show everybody how thin I still was, I didn't want to spoil its line with my wallet. So I came without it, and had to borrow somebody else's pass card. Halfway through the show, I slid out inconspicuously, and ran to the pass door. The card didn't work.

I pushed hard at the door, but it wouldn't open. On the other side, down the stairs, was the green room, but I was locked out of my own theater. I started to beat at the door, in a fury of frustration and disappointment. Harder and harder I battered the door, hammering with my fists at a reinforced glass panel, which suddenly shattered, though as it was reinforced it didn't give way, and I still couldn't get through.

I retired hurt, though the new suit still looked sharp, and I slunk back into the auditorium. It seemed like a brutal reminder that the clock was ticking on my twelve years at the National, so I told nobody what I'd done until, eighteen months later, I 'fessed up during the farewell speech at my leaving party. Out in the crowd, a contingent from Security nodded gravely. They'd known all along. I'd been caught on CCTV.

It's Monday morning, first thing. I've been in the job a couple of years. I'm in my office on the fourth floor, which has a view over the Thames to Somerset House, and though I'm growing used to it, I'll never get used to the noise of the recycling van collecting last night's empties from the goods entrance below my window. The National Theatre regularly appears on lists of both the ten most loved and the ten most loathed buildings in London. I love its uncompromising exterior; I love the concrete fly towers when they're etched sharp by the sun against a blue sky, and even when they go soggy like an egg box in the rain; I love the buzzing, purple-carpeted foyers; but I'm not crazy about the vast rubbish bins that occupy one of the best river frontages in Europe.

On my desk is the current repertory chart: for each of the National's three auditoriums, the next eighteen months are divided into slots for six or seven shows to play in repertory: around twenty shows every year. The top of the chart looks good. We've

planned promising shows for all three theaters: the 300-seat Cottesloe, the 900-seat Lyttelton and the 1,150-seat Olivier. Nine months in, gaps start to appear. By the bottom of the chart, there's next to nothing. Choosing the repertoire and shepherding it onto the stage are at the heart of my job.

In the office next door, Nick Starr is already hammering at his keyboard. As director of the National, I'm its chief executive; but Nick, its executive director, runs the building and the organization, while I manage the writers, directors, actors, and designers whose attachment to the theater is more intermittent.

"You busy?" I ask.

"Board papers," he says.

Nick has an encompassing grasp of the National's business, but behind his managerial nous is the student idealist who volunteered at the Half Moon, a radical fringe theater that twenty years ago was where the action was.

"Still nothing in O3," I say, waving the rep chart, meaning that the third slot in the Olivier hasn't been filled yet.

"What happened to *Oedipus at Colonus*?" he asks.

"I got another letter from Scofield, apologizing for being so enthusiastic in his first letter," I say. I would have loved to bring Paul Scofield back to the stage one last time, and for a few tantalizing days, it looked as if he would play the dying Oedipus in Sophocles' strange valedictory tragedy, but he's decided against it. "I'm afraid I responded in a moment of euphoria at being invited by you to do it." Without him, there's no point in doing the play.

"How was Friday night?" I ask. Nick has been to see a show at a theater for which neither of us has much time, because nothing that reaches its stage seems to bear any relation to the world as it actually is.

"Entirely self-referential," he says, "ridiculous." We spend ten satisfying minutes slagging off stuff we don't like.

I leave his office and go down the corridor to the casting office and catch up on which actors have accepted our offers and which have turned us down. Then I move on to the literary office, where the shelves groan with thousands of scripts, arranged alphabetically by author from Aeschylus to Zweig: old plays we've done, plays we might do, successive drafts of new plays that we've commissioned. I ask whether the play we're expecting from a young

writer we all admire has come in yet. It hasn't, which makes me even more nervous about the gaps in the chart. Then everyone tells me what shows they've seen over the weekend, and we do some more slagging off.

"There's a meet-and-greet in Rehearsal Room 2 at ten o'clock," says my assistant Niamh Dilworth when I return to my office. On the first day of rehearsals for a new show, the acting company and the creative team gather to meet colleagues from every department in the National: stage crew, lighting, props, costume, front of house, marketing. As I go downstairs, there's an announcement on the tannoy. "Would the darlings on the Lyttelton crew please go to the stage?" Linda Tolhurst at stage door has discovered that English National Opera has issued new guidelines to its staff about acceptable forms of theatrical address, and *darling* isn't one of them. She is now like a dog with a bone.

In Rehearsal Room 2, the stage managers have marked the outlines of the set for the new show on the floor. The sixty people who have gathered for the meet-and-greet hover on the edges of the markout, as if it would bring bad luck to step into it. Everyone gathers in a large circle. It's my job to welcome the new company of actors, the director, the designers, and the playwright if the play is new, though this morning's playwright is Henrik Ibsen. I say how excited we are to be working with them, which is always true. It's even truer today, as this show is the first to be directed at the National by Marianne Elliott, whose work has bowled me over at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. Marianne addresses the circle; she's inspiring and staggeringly well prepared. I'm already looking forward to the opening of the show, six weeks later.

By now, it's time for me to go to my own rehearsal, if I have one. I direct maybe two shows a year (after twelve years as the National's director, I'd done twenty-six). But if I'm not in rehearsal, I go back up to the office.

"Could Nick Hytner call extension 3232? Thank you, darling," says Linda on the PA, as I climb the stairs. Extension 3232 is Lucinda Morrison, head of press. Lucinda and I go to the ballet together when she isn't quietly feeding the arts press the stories we want them to tell, but this morning she says the *Daily Telegraph* is after fifteen hundred words about why the government should support the arts. "But I've written that piece at least four-

teen times already,” I say. Lucinda says I haven’t written it for the *Telegraph* yet, and the case can’t be made often enough. I say I’ll write it as soon as I can.

Beneath my window, a saxophonist has started to play “Moon River” very badly to the passersby on the South Bank. He will keep this up all day, every day, until the day I leave. Another of the stage managers puts her head around the door. I rely on them to be my moles: if there’s trouble in rehearsal, I want to know. In Rehearsal Room 3, a director and a playwright are locking horns. I’ll talk to the director later, and I’ll probably take the playwright’s side in whatever tussle they’re having, because in the end, it’s her play.

I pull up the weekend’s show reports on my computer screen. They include box-office results for our shows at the National, in the West End, and on tour, as well as anything that struck the stage managers as noteworthy. In the Olivier, “the understudy was excellent as the Fish Woman this afternoon but the Gypsy was very late on as he was in the wrong place and couldn’t find his heather. We had to cut the Knicker stall.”

I have a meeting with a young playwright, who wants to write an ambitious new play for the Olivier; it’s an entirely convincing pitch, so we commission it. Then I push through the pass door at the end of the corridor outside the office into the sepulchral dark at the back of the Olivier, to see how the technical rehearsal for the next show is going. It is during the tech that tempers sometimes fray: a show that has been painstakingly created over six weeks in a rehearsal room is forced onto the stage, all its design and technical components suddenly thrust onto the actors over two or three days before its dress rehearsal. I’m in time to see a heavy wall descend slowly from the flies and shudder to a halt six feet above the stage. “Is it stuck?” the director calls from the stalls. I don’t hang around to find out: the final run-through of this show in the rehearsal room worried me, but there’s nothing I can do about it until I’ve seen it in front of an audience at its first preview tomorrow.

In a windowless studio beside the lift on the fourth floor, Wendy Spon, the head of casting, brings in five actors at twenty-minute intervals to audition for a part in my next production. I talk to them a little, ask them to read from the play, work with them on what they’ve read. Their lives are an endless parade of rejection; directors sit safely in judgment, though very few of us are wiser or

more expert than the actors we judge. A candidate walks into a room, and often if she doesn't look right, she's finished before she's opened her mouth. She's a victim, maybe, of the director's lack of imagination. He wants someone stockier, or brasher, or more like Julia Roberts.

Some of the actors this morning, all of them men in their twenties, can't conceal their nerves: as they read, their eyes keep darting toward me as they try to work out whether they're hitting the target. They give it everything they've got under the harsh fluorescent lights, but four of them are simply wrong for the part: I probably haven't described accurately enough to Wendy what I'm looking for, or maybe I'm only discovering the part through seeing it done by good actors who don't nail it. So the audition process is constructive for me, but a painful injustice for the four actors. I've seen the fifth onstage in another show, so I'm eager to meet him, which could be why he's the first who seems not to care what impression he makes. His name is Rory Kinnear, and when he reads the part, he's totally immersed in it, so I ask him to play it.

When I return to the office, a group from Marketing is waiting with proofs for the next leaflet. Niamh reminds me that I have lunch with a potential donor. I groan, but Niamh knows how to cheer me up: she tells me that over the weekend, Security found a famous actor up to no good with an autograph hunter in the underground car park. I'm usually the last to know about this sort of thing, so I run down the corridor to share it with everyone else. It turns out that I'm the last to know again.

The potential donor is staying at the Savoy Hotel, and I walk across Waterloo Bridge, looping and re-looping a tie. She's American, and an admirer of President Bush. I steer the conversation onto how theater can transform the lives of disadvantaged young people, and how anxious we are to extend the reach of our Learning Department. The potential donor is all in favor of the transformation of young people's lives, as long as it isn't big government doing the transforming. I keep quiet about the money the National receives every year from the Arts Council.

I return to the theater through the Espresso Bar, and buy coffee from Jay Miller, who will soon leave to turn an old factory in Hackney Wick into a theater of his own called the Yard. Behind the National's bars, selling programs and tearing tickets, is an

ambitious army of young people who are tomorrow's writers, directors, actors, and producers. Back on the fourth floor, one of the production managers wants to see me about the designs for a show that goes into rehearsal in a couple of months. Production managers are responsible for delivering designs to the stage on time and on budget, and these designs are much too expensive. I think the show would benefit from a less extravagant set, so I tell the production manager to stand firm, happy that I can use the budget to nudge the show in the right direction, without having to engage the director and designer in another awkward conversation about why I don't like what they're doing.

Outside the office I hear Niamh fighting off someone from Development who wants to brief me about a fundraising event later in the week. "He has to go to a run-through. Come back tomorrow," says Niamh, whose ferocious gatekeeping is belied by her infectious cackle.

The run-through is in Rehearsal Room 1, next to the workshops, so I spend a few minutes with the scenic artists, carpenters, and prop makers. Up on the paint frame is a vast and gorgeous cloudscape. Next door in props, someone is working with punctilious delicacy on a severed head. I tear myself away and go into the rehearsal room, where the actors are warming up as light streams in from the high windows. It's my first sight of a show that started rehearsals four weeks ago, and I'm impatient to see how it's come together. I sit with a gaggle of dressers who are there to work out when they're going to be needed backstage for quick costume changes. At the end, I'm expected to give perceptive notes to the director, who this afternoon is Howard Davies, laughter and fierce conviction fighting for possession of his sky-blue eyes. But his productions never need any intervention from me. "It's great," I tell him, though he's already worrying about everything he thought was less than great.

Jeannette Nelson, the head of Voice, follows me back upstairs to the office, wondering whether I'd been able to hear the actor who has come back to the theater after three years on television. Jeannette is serene and sane even when actors are losing their heads, and helps them find vocal reserves they never knew they had. The actor was excellent, but I tell her I'll check him out again when the show moves into the Lyttelton.

Nick Starr is in his office with Lisa Burger, the finance director.

I slump onto his sofa. “Howard’s show is terrific. Any ideas yet for O₃?” I’m still worrying about the vacant third slot in the Olivier, but Nick and Lisa are on to next year’s budget, so we’re soon talking about O₂ next year and O₁ the year after that.

“And what about the goods entrance? And the rubbish bins? Anything in the budget for that?” I ask, not for the first time.

“It would cost millions,” says Lisa, “but one day we’ll do it.”

And I believe her, because she knows where to find the money, and if she can’t find it, she and Nick know how to raise it. I tell them I want to see another preview of the new play in the Cottesloe before it opens on Wednesday. Most shows at the National have around six previews before they open officially to the press, and it is during previews, when everyone involved in a show can gauge how it connects with an audience, that much of the most valuable work is done. Scenes are cut or rewritten, performances are adjusted, sound and lighting improved. So Lisa, Nick, and I go down to the canteen to grab something to eat with the actors, ushers, dressers, and technicians. The neighboring building is deserted: they’ve all left work to play with their children, argue with their partners, or watch TV. At the National, we’re fueling up for the evening shows.

The play in the Cottesloe has much improved, so I have a cheerful drink with its cast in the green room, where in defiance of puritan good sense there’s still a bar, though the days when the actors downed a few pints before going onstage are long gone. And although some of them are starting to fret about the last train home, none of us would swap our lives with the office workers’ next door.

I can remember day after day like this, though maybe I’m merging many Mondays into one, as I kept no diary. But I spent twelve years as director of the National, thinking about what to put on its stages, about what made an evening in the theater good, and about what was good about the theater. And I rarely thought alone. I talked, my colleagues talked back, they shaped my thoughts, and they allowed me to tell them their ideas were terrible, knowing that ten minutes later I’d play back to them the same ideas as my own. If a lot of what I did is the result of grand larceny, I stole from the best, and the balancing act I will never be able to perform is the one that does justice to how much I enjoyed it.