

Airing the National's Not-so-dirty Laundry

By Arthur Ballet

It sometimes reads like a juicy "kiss and tell." But there's more to *Peter Hall's Diaries: The Story of a Dramatic Battle* than revelations, gossip and inside dirt. The former director of the Stratford-on-Avon Festival and one of the creators of the Royal Shakespeare Company begins his fascinating, eight-year account in 1972, just after he had been asked to succeed Lord Olivier as director of Britain's National Theatre. The chief "battle" of the book's title is to get the National company out of the Old Vic and reorganized in its shining new three-auditorium home on London's South Bank.

Most readers will relish Hall's reactions to some of the major figures in English theatre. Lord Olivier comes off as cantankerous and peevish: "It's very difficult to know what motivates Larry's vacillations. Certainly in some cases, a Machiavellian love of intrigue. He loves being naughty. [He] is exactly like the great actor-manager saying farewell to his public... with the proviso that if they insist, he will be appearing again next week." Peggy Ashcroft, on the other hand, is a dear; Ralph Richardson seems a fuddy-duddy, a great actor and a very good friend; John Gielgud is rather aloof; Albert Finney is loyal but never quite hitting his stride. Harold Pinter is, of course, simply brilliant; Peter Shaffer is "wonderful to work with." In fact, for a set of diaries which Hall protests "were never intended for publication," there really isn't much dirty business afoot.

But Hall can be wicked, as when he speaks of Jonathan Miller "directing plays as if he were advancing a theory for the *New York Review of Books*," and calls him a "dazzling intellectual turning out rather simplistic work." Proving that he's not above calling a dud a

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dud, if that's the way he sees it, Hall says of Robert Wilson's work: "This is Emperor's new clothes theatre. And it is bullshit: aestheticism run riot."

Sometimes Hall is wildly wrong-minded. For example, he adores Broadway's *Peter Pan* but dismisses *Evita*, *A Chorus Line*, *A Little Night Music* and most of American culture. But just as often he hits the mark precisely when he is examining plays. Of Coward's "brilliant" *Private Lives*, he says, "Strange how yesterday's commercial plays and films become undisputed artworks of today. A lesson for the over-serious... particularly the over-serious critic who naturally suspects the successful." Much of the academic criticism that has encrusted Shakespeare's plays, Hall believes, is so much nonsense. "I know Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter well," he reasons from more recent example. "I think I know how they write and why they write: instinctively. Yet already the world is full of scholars discovering their motives. It just isn't like that." Hall goes on to penetrate the Shakespeare tragedies, noting that each of them "is a microcosm of a man's life, full of effort and then exhaustion. So is the actor's performance. It is a metaphor as potent for the life of the individual as the Globe

Theatre is for the world itself."

Hall is primarily a director, and it is about directing that he is unfailingly intelligent. In a sense, he feels, all directors are "making new art objects out of old plays, almost as if we were writers. A dangerous activity." His caveat should not pass without attention: directors who must "improve" or "make relevant" older plays are engaging in dangerous work, indeed.

He reflects wisely on "the terror of creative work. Ideas come or don't come. You don't know when, where or why. You can't make yourself think a good idea." And he reveals the pain of that creativity when he recalls that Henry Irving "worked feverishly in the theatre because he wished to avoid life." Here Hall seems to be speaking, too, of his own career: directing far too many plays, busy with too many extracurricular threads (both personal and professional), attempting to reorganize and run a crisis-ridden theatre company.

Diaries should provide a healthy antidote for Americans who tend to think of British theatre as an ideal. We learn that subsidized theatre (a much better description, incidentally, than our "not-for-profit, professional") in England has problems, still largely unresolved, with public funding, government interference and cost over-runs. Union demands, not enough time ever, the challenge of creating both a popular and significant repertoire year after year, boards of directors—these are the problems which confront Hall, and they are not much different from those facing artistic directors everywhere. If an ideal were possible, what shape would it take for Hall? He notes, after a friendly chat with Trevor Nunn, his former colleague and now his rival: "We both agreed we didn't any more want to head huge organizations. We wanted just a simple space and 25 actors. We feel that all priorities are wrong in the theatre at the moment. The monsters we head [NT and RSC] are having to get bigger and bigger in order to justify their subsidies, and the bigger they get, the less clear they become as artistic enterprises." So, bigger is not better after all.

Speaking of size, *Diaries* is a big book, and sometimes an annoying one. Why doesn't Hall tell us more

PETER HALL'S *Diaries*



Edited by John Goodwin

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