



Hytner, Sir Nicholas (b. 1956)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Nicholas Hytner.
Video still from an
interview on Theater Talk
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RbpxX7yR8>).

Sir Nicholas Hytner, the British-born theater director, is acclaimed for his work on musicals and plays, in London as well as on Broadway. He is perhaps best known for his direction of the blockbuster musical *Miss Saigon* and a 1992 revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, and such plays as *The Madness of George III* and *The History Boys*. In addition, he has found success directing films and operas.

In 2003, Hytner was named Artistic Director of London's Royal National Theatre, where he has been associated with such productions as a two-part adaptation of Philip Pullman's fantasy novel trilogy *His Dark Materials*, the controversial *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, and the award-winning *War Horse*, which incorporated elaborate puppetry in its production to tell the story of a British cavalry steed during World War I.

In an assessment of Hytner's first year as Artistic Director for the National Theatre, critic Nicholas de Jongh wrote in the *London Evening Standard*, "If you were to look for a single individual who epitomizes the brightest and best of London theatre . . . Nicholas Hytner would be the absolute winner."

Despite being openly gay, Hytner is reluctant to discuss his sexuality publicly. When asked by a writer for the *Advocate* about the first time he became aware of his sexual orientation, Hytner replied, "I always cringe when I read something like that in the papers."

"I think to myself," he continued, "Shut up and tell us ideas. Tell us something interesting. What I would dearly love is not to ever have to say that I'm gay. The reason I do is that I would be far more humiliated by being thought to have something to hide than I am by saying that I'm gay, which is not humiliating at all. Ultimately, I'd like to talk just about the work."

As far as discussing personal relationships, Hytner says, "I just don't talk about anything like that. Other people are involved, and I don't think it's anybody's business. Let's just say I lead a boring and contented life and leave it at that."

Born Nicholas Robert Hytner on May 7, 1956, in Didsbury, an affluent suburb of south Manchester, he is the eldest of four children. His parents, Benet, a barrister, and Joyce, then a publicist at Granada TV and later a well-known theatrical fundraiser, are of Eastern European Jewish extraction. Hytner has, perhaps evasively, described his upbringing as being that of "a typical Jewish, cultured family."

But his parents' marriage was deeply troubled; in interviews Hytner has called his childhood a "domestic psychodrama." His parents divorced in 1980, and later remarried in 2003.

As a boy, Hytner retreated from the "unpredictable world" of his home life into his imagination. He covered the walls of his bedroom with images of Shakespearean characters and created plays on a toy theater his parents had given him.

Hytner attended Manchester Grammar School, where he sang in the boys' choir and played the flute. He also took advantage of school outings to Stratford-upon-Avon to see productions at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, as well as the opportunity to perform in school plays. In fact, Hytner was cast as Toad in a school production of *Toad of Toad Hall*, A.A. Milne's adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's classic of children's literature *The Wind in the Willows*.

"The place that seemed most alive," Hytner once reminisced, "was backstage, the rehearsal, the school play. That's when I felt happiest."

After graduating, he attended University at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he studied English.

While still a student, Hytner acted in several student productions, including co-scripting and performing in a televised production of the 1977 Cambridge Footlights Revue, an annual comic revue by the Footlights Club, a group of writer-performers at the University of Cambridge.

Although an early ambition of Hytner's was to be an actor--"I was a showoff," he confessed--before long he decided that acting was not one of his strong points. "I think I was savvy enough when I went to Cambridge to discover that I was a poor actor," he later admitted.

Instead, he became much more interested in directing. While still at Cambridge, Hytner directed a production of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's satirical opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

"If you can't act, and you can't write, it's the next best thing," Hytner has said of directing. "It gives you the impression of first-degree creativity."

After leaving Cambridge, Hytner's first job was assistant to Colin Graham at English National Opera, one of London's principal opera companies.

Some of Hytner's earliest successes as a professional director were in opera, including productions at National English Opera, Kent Opera, and Wexford Festival Opera.

Hytner's 1985 production at the English National Opera of George Frideric Handel's *Xerxes*, to mark the 300th anniversary of the composer's birth, was both a popular and critical triumph. Hytner's 1986 production of the openly gay composer Michael Tippett's *King Priam* for Kent Opera was later televised in the United Kingdom. Tippett's 1962 opera retells the ancient story of the siege of Troy and, in one scene, presents the homoerotic attachment between Achilles and Patroclus.

Despite such early successes, and occasional forays back into this world, Hytner came to feel that his work in opera became too "timid" and was an "aesthetic mistake." As he explained in a 2012 *New Yorker* interview, "My premises were wrong. I tried to find the kind of circumstances where I could achieve in the rehearsal room an illusion of spontaneity--a form of spontaneity which was not useful and expressive to opera singers trying to get on with the business of delivering an opera."

Hytner also directed several theatrical productions for Leeds Playhouse, in the north of England, and in 1985 was named an Associate Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, a position he retained until 1989.

Earlier that same year, Hytner received one of his most important, and certainly most lucrative, commissions when producer Cameron Mackintosh hired him to direct the musical *Miss Saigon*.

Mackintosh later explained, "I had seen several of Nick's opera productions--Handel's *Xerxes* and Mozart's

Magic Flute--as well as some of his classical plays, and he has a marvelously visual point of view."

Miss Saigon, a musical by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, with lyrics by Boublil and Richard Maltby, Jr., is a loose retelling of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, now set during the Vietnam War, in which an American marine abandons a Vietnamese woman and their son.

The musical, a follow-up to Schönberg and Boublil's earlier success *Les Misérables* (1985), premiered at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in London, on September 20, 1989 and closed some ten years later, on October 30, 1999, after more than four thousand performances.

Hytner also directed the New York production, which opened on Broadway at the Broadway Theatre on April 11, 1991 and closed on January 28, 2001, again after more than four thousand performances.

"It just felt like a huge lark," Hytner has said of his experience directing both the London and New York productions. "It was gigantic, and I was into gigantic at the time, so I threw everything I knew at it. It was big, honest, moving, brash, and kind of crazy. I had no idea that it would take off."

The London production was nominated for several 1989 Laurence Olivier Awards, including Best Musical and Best Director for Hytner. The New York production was nominated for ten Tony Awards in 1991, with Hytner receiving a nomination for Best Direction of a Musical.

The musical has subsequently played in multiple cities and embarked on several worldwide tours. It remains one of the most profitable and longest-running Broadway musicals in American musical theater history.

As part of his contract with Mackintosh, Hytner received a percentage of the profits from the musical, leaving him quite comfortable financially. "It was a huge--a massive stroke of fortune," Hytner later exclaimed. "It meant that thereafter I only needed to do what I wanted to do."

In the 1990s, Hytner began a prolific and artistically gratifying collaboration with the British bisexual playwright Alan Bennett when he directed Bennett's adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1990).

The following year, Hytner directed Bennett's historical play *The Madness of George III* at the National Theatre. Although based in fact, the play is a fictionalized account of King George III and his descent into mental illness late into his reign as King of Great Britain and Ireland.

The play opened on November 28, 1991 with Nigel Hawthorne in the title role.

The play was an unqualified success, and a film version was soon after planned.

Supposedly, Bennett would agree to a film adaptation only if Hytner would direct, making his film directorial debut, and Hytner would agree to direct only if Nigel Hawthorne, who had before then mainly appeared in theatrical and television productions, reprised his role as King George III.

The film version was released as *The Madness of King George* in 1994, directed by Hytner, with a screenplay by Bennett, and starring Hawthorne.

The film was nominated for a total of 14 British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Awards, winning three including Best British Film and Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for Hawthorne. The actor also received a 1995 Academy Award nomination for his role in the film.

Hawthorne was publicly "outed" by *The Advocate* when an article in the magazine described him as "the first openly gay actor to be nominated for a Best Actor [Academy] Award." Although Hawthorne lived openly with his partner, the writer Trevor Bentham, he had chosen to protect his private life from the prying of the press.

Following that public outing, Hawthorne began to speak more openly and freely about his personal life.

Hytner returned to Broadway in 1994 with a critically and commercially successful production of *Carousel* (music by Richard Rodgers; lyrics and book by Oscar Hammerstein II), which won five Tony Awards that year, including Best Direction of a Musical for Hytner. The production also won Hytner a 1994 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Musical.

Hytner's next film, *The Crucible* (1996), is an adaptation of Arthur Miller's award-winning play about the Salem witch trials. Miller had written the play as his response to the Communist "witch hunts" conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1950s.

One of the "basic impulses" of the play, Hytner noted, is "the need to demonize those in a community that are felt to be dangerous or 'other.'" Hytner also saw parallels between the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials and homophobia in today's society. "There will definitely be gay people who will be able to relate this to their own experience," Hytner said.

As for himself, Hytner told an interviewer that he had never really suffered from homophobia. "In the performing arts in England and New York," he clarified, "there is no problem [with being gay], and therefore it has never been an issue in my work. As far as Hollywood, I have no horror stories to tell . . . people there have been supportive of me both professionally and personally."

Hytner's third feature was a film version of gay author Stephen McCauley's novel, *The Object of My Affection* (1998). The film, with a screenplay by the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein, concerns the close relationship between George, a gay male school teacher, played by Paul Rudd, and Nina, a pregnant, single social worker, played by Jennifer Aniston. Sir Nigel Hawthorne makes an amusing cameo in the film as an unambiguously gay character.

Apropos of the film's theme, Hytner was asked about the strong dynamic between straight women and gay men. "I think it has to do with the lack of sexual tension--or a tension that is mischievous at best," he offered. "I love women's company . . . I really can't cope without the feminine presence or the feminine influence . . . [T]here's something about a woman and a gay man--the one completes the other because each sex complements the other."

After completing *The Object of My Affection*, Hytner spent an "unremittingly horrible" fifteen months involved in a thwarted project to bring the Broadway musical *Chicago* to film (with Madonna set to star). Although an award-winning film version was eventually released in 2003, Hytner was no longer associated with the project.

"I made a mistake professionally," Hytner later explained, "because I had an apartment in New York, and I spent more time there than [in London]. That was partly because--actually mainly because--I was in a relationship that was important to me, but also because I thought I could make it in American movies."

Hytner's next feature was the ballet film *Center Stage* (2000), which focuses on a group of young students in their first year of intensive training at the fictitious American Ballet Academy in New York.

The film features the actor Shakiem Evans as Erick, an openly gay male dancer at the Academy. Dance sequences for the film were staged by Susan Stroman and the gay classical ballet choreographer Christopher Wheeldon.

Hytner and Wheeldon collaborated two years later on the Broadway musical *The Sweet Smell of Success* (music by Marvin Hamlisch; lyrics by Craig Carnelia; book by John Guare), based on the 1957 film noir of the same name. Although the musical received decidedly mixed reviews, it garnered seven 2002 Tony Award nominations, including Best Musical.

In 2003, Hytner was named Artistic Director of London's Royal National Theatre. According to a 2010 profile in the *Guardian*, "Hytner has led [the National Theatre] through its most stable and creative period since it was set up . . . nearly 50 years ago."

Hytner immediately launched a string of diverse, innovative productions, including a six-hour, two-play adaptation of Philip Pullman's fantasy novel trilogy *His Dark Materials* (2003); the 2003 musical *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (music and lyrics by Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee) based on incidents from the notorious television program *The Jerry Springer Show*; David Hare's dissection of the events that led up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, *Stuff Happens* (2004), which intermingles verbatim quotes from real speeches and press conferences with fictionalized versions of private meetings between British and American political figures; *War Horse* (2007), about a British cavalry steed during World War I, based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo and adapted for the stage by Nick Stafford; and *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011), a modern update by Richard Bean of a 1743 commedia dell'arte comedy by Carlo Goldoni.

Hytner also continued his successful collaboration with Alan Bennett on *The History Boys*. Set in 1983 within an all-boys grammar school attended mainly by working-class students, the play, in a highly entertaining and witty way, focuses on a discussion of pedagogic methods, setting new and imaginative approaches to learning against more established and less flexible ones.

The play pits Douglas Hector, an eccentric teacher who revels in knowledge for its own sake, against Mr. Irwin, who advocates a more cynical and ruthless style of learning. Bennett also complicates the issues by making Hector an amiable pederast who likes to grope the male students as they ride on his motorbike and by making Irwin a closeted homosexual terrified of acting on his impulses.

The play opened at the National Theatre in 2004 where it was met with ecstatic reviews and was transferred to Broadway two years later. Both productions won multiple awards, including the 2005 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play and the 2006 Tony Award for Best Play.

Hytner himself won an Olivier Award for Best Direction and a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Play, as well as the 2006 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Direction of a Play.

A film version of the play was released in 2006, directed by Hytner, with the original National Theatre cast reprising their roles. The film was nominated for a 2007 GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Award for Outstanding Film.

Other theatrical collaborations with Hytner and Bennett include *The Lady in the Van* (1999), *The Habit of Art* (2009), about the relationship between the gay poet W.H. Auden and the gay composer Benjamin Britten, and *People* (2012).

In 2010, Hytner was knighted for his "services to drama."

He currently divides his time between homes in New York and London.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.