

# The Great Stage Directors: Vol. 3: Tyrone Guthrie

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## Introduction: The life and legacies of Tyrone Guthrie

[Fig. 1: The main entrance to Jean Nouvel's 2006 Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Craig Lassig, courtesy of AFP / Getty Images.]

From the first, William Tyrone Guthrie (1900-71) lived at the crossroads between multiple worlds. Depending on one's perspective, he was born into the last year of the nineteenth century or the first year of the twentieth; he grew up in the final days of the Victorian age, and in the early days of the modern era. On his father's side, he came from a long line of Scots Presbyterians, including numerous ministers of the Scottish Kirk; on his mother's side, he was descended from the popular nineteenth-century Irish actor Tyrone Power.<sup>1</sup> Guthrie himself was born in Tunbridge Wells; educated at Wellington College in Berkshire; and went up to St. John's College, Oxford, in the final months of the Great War.<sup>2</sup> By the time he was knighted in 1961 and made an Honorary Fellow of his *alma mater* in 1964, he might have been said to embody the English establishment. By his own report, however, he had from boyhood 'an exaggerated regard for "originality," an exaggerated dislike of English upper-middle-class routine'.<sup>3</sup> His own closest identifications were with his Scots and Irish forbears, and in the very first pages of his autobiography he describes himself as a rebel.<sup>4</sup> These tensions—between English and non-English, between traditionalism and rebellion, between conservation and innovation—were to define his identity and his vocation as a director.

In the pages that follow, we argue that Guthrie's foremost contribution to the modern theatre lies in his elaboration of the complex position we now call that of the 'Artistic Director': the

director who is also an administrator and leader of institutions. Over the course of his career, Guthrie served as Producer at the Old Vic Theatre, London (1933-4 and 1936-1946) and later also as Administrator of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells companies (1939-46), as well as being the founding director at the Stratford Festival in Ontario and the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. His work at these and other major theatres was praised for its invention but also disparaged as 'gimmicky',<sup>5</sup> for Guthrie was a self-conscious innovator who longed to rethink and put his stamp on established classics and entrenched organisational models. Such choices were, we shall argue, nevertheless governed by a fundamentally conservative agenda: conservative insofar as Guthrie made such choices primarily to preserve the relevance, popularity, and cultural status of the dominant dramatic canon and of the theatres associated with it. He was an organiser as well as an artist: a theatre-maker who defied time-honoured norms to keep time-honoured norms in place. By making such choices, he helped both directly and indirectly to shape the policies of the subsidised, festival, and repertory theatres that still dominate the Anglo-North American scene.

Our analysis of Guthrie's career takes its cue from Ric Knowles' 'materialist semiotics',<sup>6</sup> which reads directing as a branch of middle-management working within a theatre shaped by a 'hermeneutic triangle' that encompasses the 'performance text', the 'conditions of [its] production', and the 'conditions of [its] reception'.<sup>7</sup> Knowles suggests that this methodology 'can complicate, intersect with, and enrich historical and historicized analysis':<sup>8</sup> an approach, we believe, that will prove particularly beneficial to those striving to understand Guthrie's working life. As we analyse his output, we consider the material conditions that helped Guthrie first to develop and then to consolidate many aspects of the director's and artistic director's role that have now become so established in the Anglo-North American theatre as to seem almost self-evident. We also offer in-depth case studies of specific, key productions in his career, showing

how his directorial process both shaped and was shaped by the institutions and situations in which he worked.

A few preliminary words may serve to introduce the reader to the main milestones of this career, which we will analyze in more depth in the pages that follow. Tyrone Guthrie gained his first theatrical experience as an actor under the director James B. Fagan (1873-1933) at the Oxford University Dramatic Society: then, as now, the door into many stage careers. Though he went on to play some roles in the professional theatre, his physique and personality alike worked against a successful life as an actor: not only was he exceptionally tall (six feet five inches), but by his own report he had a ‘cutting voice and an incurable tendency to emphasize the grotesque’.<sup>9</sup> Like many theatre-makers of his generation, he gained much of his early professional experience working in radio, taking on jobs as a writer, director, and administrator with the BBC in Belfast and in London, as well as with a Canadian National Railway-sponsored radio project in Montréal. He also worked as a director with the fledgling Scottish National Theatre Society, at the Festival Theatre in Cambridge, and at the Westminster Theatre in London. His successes in these experiences led to his first key appointment: his ascent in 1933 to the position of Producer (that is, director of plays) at the Old Vic Theatre.

From this moment onward, though never uncontroversial, Guthrie’s career as a theatrical producer, director, and administrator would be one of the most influential and wide-ranging of his generation. He directed in the West End, for the Royal Shakespeare Company, on Broadway, for the Habimah company in Tel Aviv, for the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki, and for the Edinburgh Festival. His close association with the plays of Shakespeare began in earnest in 1932 with his ‘gossamer’ production of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* at the Westminster Theatre,<sup>10</sup> which caught the attention of the Old Vic’s Lilian Baylis (1874-1937). It continued at the Old Vic through critical successes such as an austere *Measure for Measure* (1933) and popular hits such as a

picturesque neo-Victorian version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1938). He directed multiple *Hamlets*, with star actors such as Laurence Olivier (1936-7) and Alec Guinness (1938) as well as with young performers like George Grizzard (1963). He also brought new attention to lesser-known Shakespearean plays like *Henry VIII*, which he directed to great acclaim in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1949-50; *All's Well That Ends Well*, with which he helped to christen the Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, in 1953; and *Troilus and Cressida*, which he offered in an excoriatingly sardonic modern dress version at the Old Vic in 1956. Still, he was not solely – or even primarily – a Shakespearean director. His career's highlights also included multiple masked, ceremonious productions of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (Habimah Theatre, 1947-8; Helfingors Theatre, Helsinki, 1948; Festival Theatre, Stratford, Ontario, 1954); and numerous tender, witty productions of Chekhov's plays, from an early *Cherry Orchard* for the Festival Theatre in Cambridge (1930) to a string of lyrical late-career stagings in Minneapolis (*Three Sisters*, 1963; *The Cherry Orchard*, 1965; and *Uncle Vanya*, 1969). He directed successful premieres of new plays, including notably J.B. Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* (Lyric Theatre, London, 1932) and Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* (Assembly Hall, Edinburgh, and Haymarket Theatre, London, 1954). He also helmed some famous flops, the most spectacular of which was the first production of Leonard Bernstein and Lillian Hellman's *Candide* (Martin Beck Theater, New York City, 1956). He directed operas, masques, operettas, and radio plays; his interests were wide, and his influence prodigious.

That influence, moreover, stretched well beyond the impact of specific productions, for Guthrie was a writer and mentor as well as a director. His numerous books, including among others *Theatre Prospect* (1932), *A Life in the Theatre* (1959), *A New Theatre* (1964), *In Various Directions* (1965), and *Tyrone Guthrie on Acting* (1971), affected the views of generations of theatre artists and critics. He collaborated with, and often nurtured the careers of, many of the greatest actors of his time: Sybil Thorndike (1882-1976), Edith Evans (1888-1976), John Gielgud (1904-200),

Laurence Olivier (1907-1989), Flora Robson (1902-1984), Alec Guinness (1914-2000), Charles Laughton (1899-1962), Jessica Tandy (1909-1994), and many more. He also formed lasting partnerships with numerous designers and technicians, foremost among them the great English designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch (1914-2003), with whom he worked not only at the Old Vic and in Stratford-upon-Avon, but also in Canada and the United States. During the final decades of his career, Guthrie created perhaps his most permanent legacy by helping to found two new North American theatres: the Stratford Festival in Ontario, and the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. In the last year of his life, he travelled to Australia to direct two of the plays that had meant most to him: *Oedipus Rex* in Sydney and *All's Well That Ends Well* in Melbourne. A traveller almost to the end, he nevertheless died at home, sitting in a wooden chair in his study on his estate at Annaghma-Kerrig in County Monaghan, Ireland. "A great tree has fallen," remarked a family friend.<sup>11</sup>

Some efforts have been made to understand Guthrie's career in biographical terms, especially with reference to his sexuality. The actor Anthony Quayle, for example, declared that Guthrie preferred spectacle and facetiousness to sentiment and intimacy – 'Any demonstration of love between a man and a woman, or a boy and a girl, this embarrassed him. He couldn't direct such a scene' – because of his own personal inhibitions.<sup>12</sup> In the most sophisticated and convincing scholarly reading of Guthrie's career to date, Robert Shaughnessy links Guthrie's directorial practice not only to his hybrid Anglo-Scots-Irish identity, but also to his own conflicted sense of masculinity and his intimate relationship with his mother.<sup>13</sup> As Shaughnessy notes, this reading stretches back to James Forsyth's 1975 *Tyrone Guthrie: A Biography*, in which Guthrie is described in maternal terms 'not as a creative radical opposed to the forces of order and the law of the father, but as a diplomat and a conciliator'<sup>14</sup>: a 'leader of men', but also 'a good listener, a good audience'.<sup>15</sup>

If biography can link Guthrie and his practice to the mother, however, it can also underline his paternalism. As a young director at the Festival Theatre in Cambridge, he programmed his friend James Bridie's play *Tobias and the Angel*, having done so, he gave it to Evan John to produce, choosing himself to play the part of the Archangel Raphael.<sup>16</sup> That decision was both personally and professionally revealing: Guthrie was in love with the young Flora Robson, who was making the transition from an amateur earning her living in a Shredded Wheat factory to professional acting in the Festival company.<sup>17</sup> It is tempting to see Guthrie positioning himself in a semi-paternal role as the producer-cum-Archangel looking adoringly down on the undiscovered actress, for whom he reportedly told Bridie to write another play during rehearsals for *Tobias and the Angel*. This same paternal strand would surface frequently throughout Guthrie's career. He was fond, for example, of retelling the story of successfully disciplining the star Marie Tempest during rehearsals for a 1935 production Robert Morley's *Short Story*.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, he rarely discussed such encounters with men, to whom he was, in any case, much more likely to defer. His tendency towards paternalism chimes, as we shall see, with his attitude towards North American culture, which he loved but also regularly and unthinkingly patronised.

Perhaps it is truest to say that in romance and sexuality, as in so much else, Guthrie was conflicted and contradictory. He proposed to Robson in 1930, but received an ambiguous response and the news that she would want children. Despite going on to become the 'father' of numerous theatres, Guthrie seems to have been uninterested in biological paternity, and the relationship did not develop. Nevertheless, the two would work together consistently for many years and Guthrie would name Robson, alongside Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Alec Guinness and Laurence Olivier as one of the greatest actors of his generation. In 1931, he married his sister Peggy's childhood friend Judith Bretherton, and by his own account 'lived happily ever after'.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, Guthrie emerges from this tale as a man whose love of the stage could easily overcome romantic disappointment; on the other hand, he also appears as a man who

longed to escape the metropolitan cut and thrust of his working life and retreat to a home safely beyond its reach. Both of these attitudes – the love of the gifted ‘star’ and the desire to escape the metropolitan rat race – would shape Guthrie’s professional practice.

To anyone wishing to understand that practice, an understanding of Guthrie’s personality is even more crucial than a knowledge of his biography. He was intensely charismatic: charming, funny, energetic, authoritarian, sympathetic, and commanding. He was also generous, a great listener, an astute observer of others, and a genius when it came to instilling confidence in the insecure. His Canadian friend and collaborator Robertson Davies wrote that his ‘greatest gift was not specifically theatrical; it was that power to discern what was best of each one of a group of widely differing people and to use them in a common cause, which is characteristic of great leaders in politics and the church’.<sup>20</sup> Guthrie’s particular form of directorial greatness, for these contemporaries, consisted not only—perhaps not even primarily—in inspired artistic choices, but above all in the ability to build a vision based upon the gifts of his collaborators and then to convince them of their own ability to put that vision into practice. Born between eras and between nations, he would be a builder of bridges: an imaginer of new artistic roles and a preserver of old canons. For better and for worse, this powerful personality helped to shape twentieth-century theatre on multiple continents, and has left a legacy with which we are still grappling today.

Among theatre scholars and practitioners today, Guthrie is remembered above all for his contribution to theatre architecture. In 2011, the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) published a booklet entitled *The Guthrie Thrust Stage: A Living Legacy* for the Prague Quadrennial of Scenography and Theatre Architecture. It identifies Guthrie as one of the ‘few geniuses [in ‘the rapidly evolving world of theatre architecture and scenography’] who have recast the theatre experience’.<sup>21</sup> The document was created with principal sponsorship from the

ABTT and the Royal Shakespeare Company who, that year, opened their own remodelled three-sided auditorium in Stratford-upon-Avon. Its opening pages position a portrait of Guthrie opposite plan drawings of various three-sided auditoria, implicitly identifying him as their progenitor. The featured auditoria range from the 1948 layout of the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh (created for Guthrie's production of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estates*) through Stratford, Ontario (1957); Chichester (1962); Minneapolis (1963); the Vivian Beaumont Theater in New York City (1965); Perth, Australia (1969); the Young Vic in London (1970); the Sheffield Crucible (1971); the Olivier Theatre in London's National Theatre (1976); the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon (1986); Shakespeare's Globe (1997); and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (2011). Relatively few of these theatres, however, were founded directly by Guthrie; moreover, any viewer who thinks beyond a very basic notion of the 'thrust' stage will realize that their shaping principles differ wildly. The featured theatres represent a loose and multifarious movement in twentieth century theatre architecture in which Guthrie played a part, rather than a singular legacy. We argue, therefore, that a focus on architectural impact as the defining characteristic of Guthrie's career is a flawed approach to his life and influence. Any account of Guthrie's status as a director that assumes that the thrust stage represents his major contribution will necessarily overlook his sophisticated use of other forms of staging, not to mention his work in other media, and his consistent dedication not only to staging plays, but to managing and administrating theatres.<sup>22</sup>

One key factor underpins not only all of the theatre buildings with which Guthrie was associated, but also, we argue, almost everything for which Guthrie strove in his professional life: the almost constant experience of existential crisis in which the mid-twentieth-century theatre found itself. Practitioners of many art forms experienced crises of representation during the years between the Great Depression and the cooling of Cold War relations in the late nineteen-sixties. In the case of the theatre, these were amplified by the incursions first of film and later of



television into the availability of audiences for theatre and the careers of performers, writers and directors, as well as by the considerable expense of maintaining theatre buildings and mounting productions. Consequently, Guthrie (who was professionally active between 1926 and 1971) spent almost all of his working life attempting not so much to reform auditoria as to reconstruct theatre organisations to make them artistically vibrant and economically viable. This is not to assert that Guthrie's commitment to redesigning auditoria was insignificant, but that (as Gay McAuley has argued of theatrical space more generally), the rebuilding of theatres should be considered not only as the production of an 'aesthetic object', but as 'a complex social process'.<sup>23</sup> The social processes that produced, and were produced by, the building of the theatres listed above were indeed complex, but they were also underpinned by a simple project, to which Guthrie was consistently committed: the effort to preserve what he and his contemporaries saw as an intelligent and artistic, as opposed to opportunistically commercial, theatre from extinction. Ironically, this attempt is part of the reason for publications such as the ABTT booklet claiming to represent 'Guthrie's living legacy': capital projects to secure support for the physical reconstruction of theatres (such as the RSC's remodelling of its main house) have proved an effective way of sustaining the organisations they contain. Guthrie's role in the construction of theatre buildings must, then, be considered within the wider context of his work to construct sustainably-funded, well-managed theatre organisations in order to secure the future of the art form, which he perceived as threatened by a combination of artistic negligence, market forces, and the creation of new media for performance.

So, too, must Guthrie's work as a director of specific theatrical productions be recognised: work that was commonly described in his time as 'superbly inventive'.<sup>24</sup> Amongst those for whom the inventiveness of Guthrie's directing was self-evident were perhaps the two pre-eminent English theatre directors of the twentieth century: Peter Brook and Joan Littlewood. Guthrie was the only mainstream English director for whom Littlewood ever expressed admiration,<sup>25</sup> and Brook

describes respecting him ‘almost to idolatry’.<sup>26</sup> He was also the only director named by Brook as an inspiration in a 2007 interview, where he placed him alongside Beckett and Shakespeare. In that interview, Brook lauded Guthrie’s masterly handling of large groups in rehearsal at Covent Garden, as well as the pace and rhythm of his productions, specifically recalling his 1944 *Hamlet* starring the dancer Robert Helpmann: ‘Suddenly *Hamlet* was the most exciting play’.<sup>27</sup>

Excitement was central to Guthrie’s conception of the director’s role: his cardinal rule was that one must not bore one’s audience, a pitfall he associated strongly with productions that moved ‘too slowly’.<sup>28</sup> He considered that the director used actors ‘like a sculptor uses material’ to generate both physical groupings and musical scores. In an uncontroversial articulation of the work of a director, Guthrie suggested that stage groupings should be arranged with characters ‘in a meaningful relation to one another that says something about their situation and them’.<sup>29</sup> Less conventionally, however, he described using ‘musical terminology [in rehearsals] all the time [. . .] to remind them that acting is music [. . . and] the spoken dialogue of a play is the score of an opera’.<sup>30</sup> Guthrie’s assertion that the play-text should be considered a unified score whose rhythm, tone, and dynamic are determined by a single vision was not unique, and indeed was shared by the other directors explored in this volume. However, given that he began his career as a director when the role was often not publicly recognised in the English theatre and worked in a mainstream Anglophone theatre that was (and often still is) conspicuously unwilling to see itself as a ‘Director’s Theatre’, Guthrie’s stance was unusually autocratic.

In fact, Guthrie repeatedly showed himself to be perfectly willing to assert the benefits of directorial control. In considering how to run a theatre, it would be ‘better’, he wrote, ‘to risk the dangers of autocracy than of democracy or oligarchy; at worst there is always the sanction of the box office; at best there is hope of a Granville Barker, a Jacques Copeau, or a Diaghileff’.<sup>31</sup> The name of Max Reinhardt, the early twentieth century’s most prominent European director, could

be added to this list since Guthrie considered his productions the best he had seen.<sup>32</sup> Although all of these four directors functioned relatively autocratically, the inclusion of Granville Barker and Copeau is revealing, as both sought at key points in their careers to establish ensemble companies and thereby to create theatre if not democratically then certainly collegially. Guthrie was not committed either politically or pragmatically to the idea of an ensemble, saying that ‘I don’t think committees can create anything’.<sup>33</sup> Even as he acknowledged his admiration for the autocratic Reinhardt, however, Guthrie professed himself unable to replicate Reinhardt’s method of creating his highly patterned productions in isolation, notating even minute details in his *Regiebücher* (director’s books). ‘I have to work with the people’, said Guthrie; ‘almost in every production I’ve done, I think most of the really best and most interesting ideas have been suggested by other people’.<sup>34</sup>

This was not a case of modesty (false or otherwise); Guthrie’s biographer, James Forsyth, described him as a man with ‘a gift for administration’, and this is borne out by Guthrie’s reflections on the work of directing.<sup>35</sup> He commonly described rehearsals as a matter of organisation and management, asserting, for example, the fundamental importance of knowing that ‘you’ve got the whole thing covered at least a week before the production’, and emphasising the director’s responsibility for maintaining a good working environment: ‘the atmosphere of the rehearsal must stem from the director’.<sup>36</sup> These observations anticipate a more recent turn, in academic studies of directing, towards a consideration of the director not so much as an artistic autocrat but as a branch of middle-management, responsible for mediating between industrial imperatives on the one hand and artistic instincts on the other, and for organising, ideally by consent, the work of a large number of collaborating workers. In the words of Dennis Kennedy:

Trade issues like systems of finance, theatre organization, actor training and unionization, along with shifting audience majorities and the incursions of mass media, all of these establish the base on which the superstructure of directing must operate.<sup>37</sup>

Following Kennedy, Simon Shepherd has suggested that ‘perhaps [...] the most significant aim and impact of the newly emerged role of director were that it assumed to itself the duty of *organising theatrical activity*’.<sup>38</sup> It would be hard to find a director whose career is more thoroughly compatible with Shepherd’s tentative definition of the role than Tyrone Guthrie.

Even at the very start of his directorial career, Guthrie was acutely aware of the crucial significance of organisation as both the conceptual and practical basis for his work. His 1932 book *Theatre Prospect* has been described somewhat dismissively as a prediction of ‘the impending demise of bourgeois civilisation’, ‘the death of naturalism’ and ‘a new avant-garde founded on [...] the classics’, and it is indeed somewhat impetuous and declamatory in tone.<sup>39</sup> It may, however, be read quite differently. Guthrie begins by describing the stage as a fireplace: it illuminates the spectators and is illuminated by their attention. He asserts that ‘it is this relation between the stage and the audience that constitutes the essence of “Theatre”’ and that ‘this relation is reciprocal’.<sup>40</sup> Even so, he moves very quickly on from theorising to organising, declaring that ‘if an intelligent theatre is to survive it can only be by carefully planned organisation, not only behind the curtain but in front as well’.<sup>41</sup> Guthrie also rejects any idealistic separation of art and finance (with art organised ‘behind the curtain’ and finance ‘in front’). Instead, he describes the purpose of organisation ‘in front’ as both ‘financial and artistic: to fill the house, and to fill it with the kind of people who want the kind of play that is being produced’.<sup>42</sup> From this moment on, ‘organisation’ becomes an operative term in the book, explicitly featuring in a third of its chapters, and driving its project:

those who wish for the continuance of a serious theatre will be obliged to face the necessity for organisation; to face the fact that unless the public for serious plays organises itself to form some scheme for both the production and the attendance of such plays, the Theatre of Ideas will have to put up the shutters once and for all.<sup>43</sup>

By the 'Theatre of Ideas', Guthrie seems simply to mean a not-for-profit theatre committed to the staging of literary, canonical, and largely classical, plays. His commitment to this ideal leads him to dedicate himself, in subsequent pages, to the analysis of various models for what would now be called 'audience development', which seek to mitigate the risk of a purely commercial venture. These models include subscriptions, the selling of season tickets, and theatre clubs. Guthrie favoured season tickets and advocated reducing expenditure on marketing to limit costs and reduce pressure on their sale, proposing instead a more informal network of communication that would leverage existing networks of amateur theatrical societies and the British Drama League. Thirty years later, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis would adopt a similarly canny approach to publicity, depending upon what Guthrie called 'wealthy women with nothing to do' but to phone their social circles and nag them into purchasing tickets.<sup>44</sup>

*Theatre Prospect's* attitude to the artistic side of directing is similarly pragmatic. It proposes two alternatives for the production of classic plays, 'the most conscientious possible reproduction of the original' or the application of 'a contemporary viewpoint and the best available contemporary technique to the play', before concluding that 'in practice, of course, a compromise between the two must be adopted'.<sup>45</sup> Guthrie is also clear-sighted about the limitations placed upon experimentation by technique:

Any attempt to break wholly away from the current naturalistic convention requires on the part of the director, not only sufficient originality to invent a new means of

expression, but sufficient executive technique to make a new means of expression intelligible to the public.<sup>46</sup>

Again, Guthrie moves quickly to organisation, proposing ‘no “star salaries”’, ‘long contracts’, ‘long association [...] with the same producer’, and ‘a school attached to the theatre’ as well as ‘the training of dramatic authors’,<sup>47</sup> so as to create the conditions for successful experimental work:

It is only by familiarity with prevailing conventions that the foundations can be laid for experiment. And a theatre will only be able to achieve valuable experimental work when author, designer, director, and actors are all working in close co-operation in a technique that they have evolved together.<sup>48</sup>

This aspect of Guthrie’s work aligns him closely with pioneers of the Studio movement such as Granville Barker and Copeau.<sup>49</sup> It even echoes closely ideas that would be much more radically articulated in the UK by Joan Littlewood. She expressed admiration for Guthrie’s work but stopped short of endorsing him, complaining that ‘he didn’t try to change the world’.<sup>50</sup> She was right: the fundamental conservatism of *Theatre Prospect* continued throughout his career.

Guthrie’s conservatism was not simplistic, however. Robert Shaughnessy has argued persuasively that he was at his directorial best when plays’ neglected or unknown status gave him the freedom to reform them.<sup>51</sup> He sought the freedom to be at least a little radical, but he used that freedom to fundamentally conservative ends. If he sought out abandoned plays, he did not do so to challenge or to overhaul the canon, but to broaden and sustain its appeal, and thereby to reassert its value and extend its reach. Recalling the appeal of working as Director of the Old Vic in 1933, Guthrie cited two reasons: its ‘classical repertoire’ and its ‘anti-metropolitan’ situation

(though it is hard to believe today, the pre-war Old Vic was certainly not a ‘London theatre’ at the time in the same sense as those in the West End).<sup>52</sup> Opening the Guthrie Theater thirty years later, he followed the same principles, choosing Minneapolis, in part, because of its distance from the metropolitan hub of American theatre in New York, and creating a programme founded on the classics. The thirty years that separated these two directorial ventures had taught Guthrie a great deal. He had, in fact, used them to develop a *modus operandi* that continues to shape the work of almost all artistic directors in the Anglophone theatre today. The nature and scope of the role of the Artistic Director, and its imbrication with the structure and function of mainstream theatre organisations today, is, we will argue, Guthrie’s most significant ‘living legacy’.

In the two core sections that follow, we delve more deeply into Guthrie’s work as it both influenced, and was influenced by, the social and theatrical world that surrounded him. We do not divide his **Art** from his **Importance**, but rather consider them side by side, for we agree with Knowles that the artistic choices reflected in a performance text are always shaped not only by the conditions of its production but also by those of its reception, and that “‘meaning” in a given performance situation – the social and cultural work done by the performance, its performativity, and its force – is the effect of all of these systems and of each pole of the interpretative triangle working dynamically and relationally together’.<sup>53</sup> A similar logic determines our division of the analysis that follows into two main parts: ‘Guthrie in the UK’ and ‘Guthrie in North America’. Because the conditions of production and reception that shaped Guthrie’s work in Britain were so different from those that affected it in Canada and the United States, we consider these periods of his career separately, focusing on his negotiations with emerging UK funding bodies and institutions in the first section, and on his fraught relationship with the legacy of settler colonialism in the second. The key productions we analyse in depth are not always the most exquisite – or even the most celebrated – examples of Guthrie’s work in each place and period;

rather, we focus upon works that exemplify the inextricability of Guthrie's *mises-en-scène* from the theatre institutions in which they were staged and the audiences for whom they were performed. Whether helming the Old Vic during the Second World War or building a new theatre in Cold War-era Minneapolis, Guthrie was formed by the material and historical conditions of the world into which he was born: a modern world struggling between old and new, between preservation and destruction, between values of commercial success and values of 'high' art. Guthrie embodied that world's contradictions, and in that embodiment remains richly worthy of our attention.



## **Guthrie's Art and Importance, Part 1: The United Kingdom**

### **Learning to Produce, 1926-1933**

1926 and 1933 saw Guthrie's first 'big breaks'. In 1926, he was offered a contract to direct for the Scottish National Theatre Troupe. This job, which he accepted as an inexperienced recent graduate, set him on a path to one of the British theatre's most prestigious roles. On 26 January 1933, he was offered the contract of Producer (that is, a creator of productions) to the Shakespeare Company at the Old Vic by the theatre's manager, Lilian Baylis. The terms of his engagement stipulated that 'the producer's whole time belongs to the Vic', and that he would be responsible for 'selecting plays and artists' and creating productions for a season that would run from September 1933 until June 1934. Guthrie was 32, and becoming well-known as a 'producer', having already enjoyed a rather varied career. After graduating from Oxford, he had worked in radio, editing scripts and directing radio dramas for the BBC and the Canadian National Railways. He had also written plays for the radio, and had begun to make a name for himself in the theatre, directing first for the Scottish National Theatre Troupe (1926-1927), and then, in 1929 and 1930, at the Festival Theatre in Cambridge before moving to the Westminster Theatre in London in 1931. Guthrie's work in this period was by no means always successful. His radio plays, in particular, had not been sufficiently well-received to suggest that he had a future as a writer. But he had learned the ropes and served an informal apprenticeship, an approach he would later advocate for would-be playwrights, whom he encouraged 'to come and work in a theatre' because 'that's how all the great playwrights have learned their craft [...] without exception'.<sup>54</sup> Whether or not that final assertion carries any weight is less significant than what it tells us about Guthrie's own approach to his work. He regularly stressed the significance of technical knowledge in all branches of theatre, and his early career was characterised by its acquisition.

Guthrie's period at the Festival Theatre was inevitably influenced by what he described as the 'good dose of avant-garde theatre' it had already received under Terence Gray (1895-1986), whose anti-realist interventions into theatrical production had been strongly influenced by Edward Gordon Craig. Gray's ideas are recorded in his 1926 book *Dance-Drama: Experiments in the Art of the Theatre*, where he attempts to imagine into existence a theatre where:

freed from all the trammels of bureaucratic interference and commercial competition, dramatic artists and all artists of the theatre would be at liberty under almost ideal conditions to practise their art [. . .] for the benefit of a public who knew where to go in order to satisfy its interest and who would increase in ever-widening circles until the drama became once more a national and popular enthusiasm.

Gray's utopian theatre is a product not only of symbolism and expressionism, but also of technology. He particularly notes the significance of early twentieth-century developments in lighting for the theatre, which enabled producers of plays to think beyond the dominance of text and the spoken word and to consider the stage's plastic and dynamic possibilities as expressive means on a par with the script.

These ideas were clearly important to Guthrie's development as a producer. He recorded in *Theatre Prospect* that 'a great change was wrought in production by the fact that movement – crosses, exits, entrances, and all business – was now conditioned by the new stage settings'.<sup>55</sup> Guthrie quickly developed a reputation for his skilled and inventive use of movement, particularly that of crowds, that he would retain for the duration of his career. He also firmly believed that the future of the theatre would not be found in naturalistic dramas dominated by the spoken word. However, Guthrie was not required, while in Cambridge, simply to serve Gray's legacy. He reported having 'an almost completely free hand on the artistic side', and his

memories of producing at the Festival Theatre focus largely upon the pragmatic realities of learning to handle the theatre's technologies:

Professionally, I learned during this time how to put a performance together inside the limits of a very hurried schedule. [. . .] Technically, my range was being broadened, partly by the wide variety and style of the plays, partly by the design of the Festival Theatre . . . [which] was almost unworkable for a realistic play. [. . .] Moreover, Terence Gray had bequeathed to us the services of a really brilliant electrician, Mr Steen, who taught me a great deal.<sup>56</sup>

In spite of his success while at Cambridge with, for example, the anti-realist *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1929), it seems that Guthrie considered his experience there more valuable as practical training in what Knowles identifies as the 'conditions of [theatrical] production'<sup>57</sup> than as an induction into the aesthetic ideologies with which the theatre had become associated.

Guthrie's success in Cambridge took him, in 1931, to London's Westminster Theatre, which was opened by Anmer Hall (1863-1953), who had also managed the Festival Theatre. Guthrie chose, for his London debut, James Bridie's *The Anatomist*, which had opened in Edinburgh in 1930.<sup>58</sup> It starred the established Edwardian actor Henry Ainley alongside Flora Robson, whose name was made in the press by her performance. The *Times* announced that she 'carries off all the honours'.<sup>59</sup> Guthrie was pleased but somewhat frustrated by Ainley, reporting privately that, in spite of being 'reasonable, patient and polite', 'he's not intelligent: he doesn't understand what things mean. He's carried through by a wonderful, wonderful God-given bel aire – and his voice is a fine organ'.<sup>60</sup> This implicit attempt to reconcile the legacy of grand, late-Victorian acting (in theatres that absolutely required a strong voice) and the pleasant demeanour of Edwardian style with the intellectual demands of the new, modernist theatre of the nineteen-twenties would run

through Guthrie's career. His productions' skilled and dramatic handling of crowds and larger-than-life central performances harkened back to the Victorian theatre, while his willingness to make bold directorial interventions, his penchant for strikingly realistic touches, and his experimentation with open stages all derived from the scenographic experimentation of the inter-war period. Guthrie's next production at the Westminster, a return to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, productively exploited that tension in his work, combining contemporary absurdism and the opportunity for inventive production with heightened theatricality and bravura performance. It gave both Guthrie and Robson another well-publicised success.

During this period, Guthrie was fortunate in having Hall as a manager. He later described his regime as 'a rich management which was not primarily interested in money but in doing something of significance'.<sup>61</sup> We might expect Guthrie to have considered this a benefit, but, in fact, his reflections in *Theatre Prospect* show that he was not satisfied with dependence upon beneficent patronage of the kind offered by Hall. Even when matched with a degree of box office success, he did not believe that it could secure the theatre's future. Nonetheless, it was thanks to Hall's support that Guthrie achieved his first commercial hit in the form of J.B. Priestley's play *Dangerous Corner*, which he directed in 1932, with Robson starring, at the Lyric Theatre in the West End, where it ran successfully.

All of these experiences combined, by 1933, to make Guthrie an obvious choice for Baylis' producer. He had a strong understanding of dramaturgical structure and substantial experience of both traditional and experimental stagecraft. He was young and energetic, but also an authoritative figure, not least thanks to his towering height and somewhat aristocratic bearing. All of this prepared him admirably for a job loosely defined in Brander Matthews' 1914 book *On Acting* by the need 'to know how the play should be acted in every part' and the ability to 'suggest

to the several performers the various effects they are to accomplish'.<sup>62</sup> But the years between 1933 and the end of the war in 1945 saw Guthrie shift from this role towards a prototypical version of the role of 'director' that would come to dominate the post-war theatre. Even late in Guthrie's career the job title 'Director' did not have the secure meaning it carries today. In the early nineteen-sixties, for example, Peter Hall was 'Director' of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the sense that he might have been 'Director' of any business: he was ultimately responsible for the company's strategy, financial regulation, personnel management, and so on. Even so, Guthrie's activities in the pre-war and wartime periods, mainly but not exclusively at the Old Vic, would set the mould for the role of 'Artistic Director' in the post-war subsidised theatre in which he would hardly work, but which he was instrumental in establishing.

### **From Producer to Director, 1933-1945**

Guthrie's 1933-1934 season at the Old Vic was described by its previous producer, Harcourt Williams, as the opening of 'a kind of flood-gate': 'it was drastic, but, taking a long view, probably the best thing to do'.<sup>63</sup> Guthrie brought the film star Charles Laughton into the company with his wife Elsa Lanchester, to play alongside leading actors such as Leon Quartermaine, Flora Robson, and Athene Seyler in productions of *Twelfth Night*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Henry VIII*, *Measure for Measure*, *Love for Love*, *The Tempest*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Macbeth*. At their best, Guthrie's productions contained the 'brilliant effects' of staging for which he was already well known, such as 'hosts of men armed with tall spears flooding over the built-up sides of his set' at the climax of *Macbeth*.<sup>64</sup> At their worst, they appeared opportunistic, as in Guthrie's attempt to profit, by staging *Henry VIII*, from Laughton's appearance in the film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, which offered opportunities for character acting that Shakespeare's play was finally found to be lacking. In all, the season was markedly more commercial than had been the case in previous years at the Old Vic, attracting notably greater press attention and many more West End theatregoers, principally thanks to the presence of Laughton. But Baylis'

opposition to the West End and its values, as well as the mixed reception of Guthrie's productions, led to the non-renewal of Guthrie's contract for the 1934-1935 season. He returned to the commercial theatre, directing in the West End in 1935 and, the following year, on Broadway. Although Guthrie's productions of this period were for the most part frankly commercial, they had mixed success at the box office: on Broadway, *Call It a Day* by Dodie Smith ran for six months, while a revival of Jay Mallory's *Sweet Aloes* closed after only 24 performances.<sup>65</sup>

Guthrie had not abandoned the artistic theatre. In late 1935, he revived his staging of Auden's *The Dance of Death*, which he had directed for the Group Theatre (1932-1939, 1950-1956) for two performances in February and March 1934. Led by the actor Ormerod Greenwood and the dancer Rupert Doone (1903-1966), the Group Theatre was a short-lived attempt to establish an experimental collective in the UK on a continental European model. Guthrie's conversations with Doone had informed his assertions in *Theatre Prospect* about the value of reviving English folk dance both in performance and training, and Guthrie had been involved with the Group Theatre from its beginnings in 1932.<sup>66</sup> He worked jointly with Doone, composer Herbert Murrill, and a large chorus to bring what Michael Sidnell describes as Auden's "'epic" construction' to the stage, creating a 'strongly sequential choreographic, verbal and scenic montage, ... without benefit of plot'.<sup>67</sup> Sidnell notes that 'Guthrie was in his element directing a large company in an intricate sequence of movement and song, though quite out of it as far as the political theme was concerned'.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Guthrie never again returned to such an overtly political text as Auden's, which combined the agitprop techniques employed by companies such as Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood's Theatre of Action (the pre-war forerunner of Theatre Workshop) with the expressionist movement seen in London performances by companies such as the Ballets Jooss and Saint-Denis' Compagnie des Quinze. He would, however, return to the morality play structure and pageant-like presentation of *The Dance of Death*, albeit in a far more conservative

vein, in his 1947 production of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estates* at the Edinburgh Festival. Not only does this process of adaptation chime with Guthrie's brand of innovative conservatism, but it foreshadows the post-war phenomenon of the commercial exploitation of radical aesthetic tropes, as seen – for instance – in Sean Kenny's adaptation of the Brechtian aesthetic he had developed with John Bury at Theatre Workshop during the 1950s in his design for *Oliver!* (1960). But that trend was yet to come. At the end of 1936, Guthrie found himself caught between a commercial theatre he considered unreliable and of questionable value, and an experimental theatre whose politics were substantially more radical than his own and which was constantly threatened with collapse.

Ironically, given his 1933-34 Old Vic season that, in the words of Harcourt Williams, 'shook the traditions and outlook of the building to its foundations', the compromised position somewhere between the commercial and art theatres in which Guthrie now found himself was notably well-aligned with the values of Lilian Baylis' Old Vic. Its policy of providing a socially diverse audience with high quality productions of Shakespeare at an affordable price combined a traditional, conservative sense of canonicity with innovation and populism while also demanding dynamic productions, all of which resonated clearly with Guthrie's strengths as a producer. In 1936, then, he returned to the Old Vic, but, as Robert Shaughnessy notes, with 'extensive powers over the company organization and repertory system'.<sup>69</sup> These he used, in the first instance, to allow himself to continue to direct commercially and to commercialise the Vic's policies, in particular doing away with its repertory Shakespeare company. These changes were summarised in an anonymous editorial for the Vic-Wells magazine in autumn 1936: 'Plays to run as long as they attract but not longer than eight weeks; the best available cast for each new production'.<sup>70</sup>

### **'Extraordinary Flashes': *Hamlet*, 1936 and 1938**

When Guthrie decided, in 1936, to stage the first of his four productions of *Hamlet*, he was indeed free to look for the ‘best available cast’. Since Harcourt Williams’ 1930 Old Vic production, John Gielgud had effectively owned the Prince’s role on the British stage. Gielgud’s *Hamlet* had been phenomenally successful with critics as well as with members of the acting profession and the public. James Agate called it ‘the high water-mark of English Shakespearean acting of our time’; the foremost Shakespearean actor of the generation before Gielgud’s, Dame Sybil Thorndike, described it ‘*Hamlet* played as in one’s dreams’; and its popularity with the public enabled a transfer to the West End’s Queen’s Theatre, where it played in a slightly abridged version.<sup>71</sup> Guthrie responded to this situation with characteristic brio. Gielgud’s 1935 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which he had alternated the roles of Romeo and Mercutio with Laurence Olivier halfway through the run, had established the two young stars as polar opposites in acting terms. Where Gielgud, according to Agate, performed Mercutio’s ‘Queen Mab’ speech ‘exquisitely’ and greeted his death with ‘a smile which is all benison’,<sup>72</sup> Olivier gave a reading of the part that W.A. Darlington described as ‘full of zest, humour and virility’.<sup>73</sup> The opposition between their Romeos was similarly marked: Gielgud’s ‘romantic’ rendition had ‘a much greater sense of the beauty of the language’ than Olivier’s ‘impetuosity’ in the role allowed.<sup>74</sup> Later in life, Olivier would relate his comparative failure as Romeo positively:

I was the outsider and John was the jewel, and a shining one, too – deservedly so. John still has the most beautiful voice, but I felt in those days he allowed it to dominate his performances. [...] His voice, of course, was musical enough to sell his performance to the people on the old grounds. He was giving the familiar tradition fresh life, whereas I was completely disregarding the old in favour of something new. Somehow I feel that he was a little led by the nose by his audience and by his acolytes. He was greatly admired, in fact adored, and like all of us at some time in our careers he believed his publicity. So by the time we did *Romeo*, I was considered by the Establishment to be



his opponent. Everybody was in his favour, while I might have been from another planet.<sup>75</sup>

Olivier's reputation as a reckless and virile moderniser must have occurred to Guthrie as he considered how to approach Hamlet; he decided to cast Olivier and to give the headstrong young star his head. Olivier recalled that Guthrie praised his make-up before the first night as 'every inch a Hamlet', warning his leading actor that 'they'll probably fault you for the verse speaking, and to a certain extent they may be right, but I expect you will come to your own decisions about that in your own good time'.<sup>76</sup>

This willingness to allow Olivier to follow his instincts defined the production much more than the preparatory work Guthrie and his Hamlet had done by visiting the psychoanalyst Ernest Jones to discuss his 1923 essay 'Hamlet and Oedipus'. Their discussions with Jones did set the pattern for Olivier's 1948 film of the play, which is obsessively Freudian in its scenography, with Hamlet probing the passageways and staircases of his own consciousness and mounting his mother on a conspicuously vulval bed.<sup>77</sup> Conversely, critics of Guthrie's 1936 *Hamlet* remained, as Robert Shaughnessy notes, 'universally unaware of the production's Oedipal dynamics and much more impressed by Olivier's astounding athleticism, vigour and masculinity'.<sup>78</sup> Later in life, Guthrie was caught between praise for Olivier's 'protean [. . .] attack' and 'displayey sort of art which I personally find endearing' and the nagging sense that this 'talent' was ill-suited for Hamlet: 'I don't think he was well cast as Hamlet, I didn't like his movie of *Hamlet* at all, but this was a performance of extraordinary flashes'.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the critic J.C. Trewin felt that Guthrie 'played up to' Olivier, allowing him exceptionally free rein: 'I don't say it was Shakespeare's Hamlet, but it was terrifically exciting'.<sup>80</sup> Some of the production's flourishes were considered excessive. Harcourt Williams thought Olivier 'a shade too acrobatic', and felt that Gertrude plummeting from a rostrum to her death was unnecessarily distracting.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, both

Guthrie and his star would go on to repeat these tricks many times. Olivier appropriated the death-leap in his film of *Hamlet*, swinging from a balcony to kill Laertes, and in his 1959 Stratford *Coriolanus*, when his death was staged as a spectacular dive, head-first towards the stage, from which he was rescued by being caught by the ankles. Guthrie used the fall again in his 1963 Minneapolis *Hamlet*, with Laertes collapsing into the waiting arms of courtiers.<sup>82</sup>

[Fig. 2: Laurence Olivier in Tyrone Guthrie's *Hamlet* (1936): The young star graces the cover of *Play Pictorial*. Image courtesy of Getty images.]

The Guthrie / Olivier *Hamlet* is now best known, however, for its June 1937 transfer to a courtyard inside Kronborg Castle in Helsingør, Denmark. There, its opening night was threatened by torrential rain, leaving Olivier and Guthrie to restage it, at the last minute, in the ballroom of the Marienlyst Hotel. The success of this improvised staging, with the audience on three sides of the action, subsequently helped to shape Guthrie's arguments for the power of the open stage: 'at its best moments, that performance in the ballroom related the audience to a Shakespeare play in a different and, I thought, more logical, satisfactory and effective way than can ever be achieved in a theatre of what is still regarded as orthodox design'.<sup>83</sup>

In spite of that retrospectively-narrated realisation, Guthrie's next *Hamlet*, staged at the Old Vic in 1938 with Alec Guinness in the title role, betrayed no obvious interest in exploring an unorthodox relationship between audience and stage. Guthrie seems, instead, to have taken his cue from Barry Jackson's 1925 contemporary-dress staging of the play in London and Birmingham, creating one of the earliest examples of the modern dress Shakespeare that would become a recurrent feature of his work. Later in life, Guthrie reflected that Guinness' talent was on a 'smaller scale' than that of Olivier and Gielgud, so perhaps the decision to use a contemporary staging was taken to play to his leading actor's strengths.<sup>84</sup> In any case, these two

*Hamlets* set the pattern for a career as interpretively pragmatic as it was theatrically inventive. Guthrie did not restage the play at Elsinore in response to a theory of the open stage, but as a practical reaction to weather conditions. He did not give the young Olivier freedom – or clothe the young Guinness in modern dress – because he thought it would produce a definitive Hamlet, any more than he staged Gertrude tumbling to her death because it provided the perfect climax to the character’s development. He made these decisions in response to his audience’s expectations, hoping to thrill but not to disconcert.

### **Guthrie and His Funders: Forging Alliances**

A no less dramatic death than Gertrude’s, that of Lilian Baylis on the opening night of Olivier’s Old Vic *Macbeth* in November 1937, put Guthrie in overall control of the company. He officially became Administrator of both the Vic and its sister opera and ballet companies at Sadler’s Wells in 1939. Guthrie’s period as Administrator of the Vic-Wells companies would become most significant for his role in developing the close collaboration between the Vic-Wells organisation and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which had been established by a royal charter in 1940 to provide public funding for the arts for the first time. CEMA was quite open about its unusual commitment to the Old Vic as a vehicle for delivering its goal of ‘the best for the most’, a mission that underpins public funding of the arts to this day. In a short article included in the programme for Old Vic Tours during the war, Ivor Brown, CEMA’s Drama Director, states openly that ‘[i]n the sphere of professional drama, CEMA has worked mainly through the “Old Vic”, the reasons are obvious. The Old Vic’s standards of performance are unquestionably high, and its policy has always been that of CEMA [. . .] a theatre that appealed to all and kept nobody out who had a few coppers to spend’.<sup>85</sup> The article goes on to stress both the quality of artistic experience and the value for money offered by this arrangement (‘so economically and successfully does it work that the calls [on CEMA] guarantees

against loss] have so far been very small'), and concludes by presenting the success of CEMA support for Old Vic touring as a clarion call for a National Theatre:

No theatre is really national or really popular unless it gives the nation and the people a chance to see if they like it. The essential conditions of such a theatre are excellence, mobility and cheapness . . . The "Old Vic" has a tradition of the big achievement and the small price. The war has added mobility, and that quality, once discovered will not, I am sure, be abandoned. When the "Old Vic" returns to its London headquarters after the war, it will remember to re-visit the friends it is now making. Having made an important production in London, it will not allow that to be wastefully thrown aside when a new piece is wanted, but will see that it goes on tour and is widely enjoyed. That, in my opinion, is the proper function of a truly National Theatre, to link the capital with the counties, while it links the present with the past by building a programme in which the modern drama is interwoven with the classic.

This rhetoric was echoed almost to the letter at the end of 1941 by the Old Vic's Managing Director, Reginald Rowe, speaking on behalf of the Old Vic's governors in the annual report of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells companies who asserted that 'our work in the provinces must continue'. Quoting Guthrie, Rowe declared that

[t]he gifts that the Vic and Wells can bring must no longer be reserved for the metropolis, but scattered as widely as possible over a land that is evidently ready and eager to receive them. [. . .] [W]e are learning how to expand, so that in future London may see not less of our companies, but the provinces far more.<sup>86</sup>

Here, Guthrie the pragmatic administrator, already so evident in *Theatre Prospect*, is joined by Guthrie the visionary, anti-metropolitan conservative who would, only a decade or so later, be equally attracted to the idea of establishing a North American theatre away from the centres of power and influence on that continent.

From October 1942, Guthrie shared the role of Administrator of the Vic-Wells Companies with the commercial manager Bronson Albery, who made it possible for both companies to use the New Theatre for London seasons, an arrangement that persisted until the reopening of the renovated Old Vic Theatre in 1947. Albery also took on the management of the ballet company. Again, we can see in this decision Guthrie's willingness to experiment in the name of tradition, an instinct that would go on substantially to shape the post-war title of Artistic Director that would be modelled substantially on Guthrie's activities during this period. It would, of course, also be true to say that Guthrie's position was fortuitous, and that the role of Artistic Director emerged more as a consequence of the matrix of influences from CEMA, the governors of the Old Vic and Sadlers Wells, and the public demand for consoling and fortifying renditions of dependable classics than as a result of his individual agency. Yet there was not a lengthy queue of highly-qualified alternative candidates for the role. The actor Lewis Casson had produced plays at the Vic before the war, and was instrumental, along with his wife the actress Dame Sybil Thorndike, to the success of the CEMA tours. But Casson was well into his sixties by this time and showed none of Guthrie's flair for leadership. Guthrie also noted himself that his priorities shifted during this period: 'I did a certain amount of production because man-power was so short, but as far as possible, I got other people to do the producing because I was occupied with the arranging'.<sup>87</sup>

Archival records from the wartime Old Vic provide clues as to Guthrie's success in 'arranging'. In his own introduction to the Vic-Wells Annual Report for 1941-1942, Guthrie describes 'a

period when values have had to be revised, old methods scrapped, new ones improvised'.<sup>88</sup> He is open about the challenges of touring, stating publically that '[t]hese tours have been difficult to organise, a tussle for the performers and they can never be commercially profitable'.

Furthermore, in private correspondence with CEMA, he can be found arguing against touring to too many small rural venues on the grounds that it is excessively debilitating, and advocating longer contracts for 'a substantial nucleus of the personnel', as well as improved pay. In all, these documents show Guthrie as a skilled manager and political operator. On the one hand, he writes to company member Herbert Marshall to chastise him for expressing left-wing views in association with the Old Vic and CEMA, insisting upon steering 'absolutely clear of politics' rather than risking 'losing [the Vic's] Charity Commission charter'.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, Guthrie was himself deeply embroiled in politics. He wrote to the governors in June 1942 to advocate closer association with CEMA so as to prevent exposing 'state-subsidy-to-the-theatre to the severe risk of being jettisoned in the first, enthusiastic economies of a post-war parliament' by building up 'CEMA's body of achievement'.<sup>90</sup> He is also regularly to be found in private correspondence with the highest officials at CEMA. He wrote to Ivor Brown, its first Drama Director, in July 1942 to congratulate him on being made Editor of the *Observer*, to ask 'who the hell will replace you at CEMA?' (his flattery disguised a genuine and urgent question), and to put on paper 'what I don't suppose I shall be able to say: thank you for much help and advice and backing during the period of our alliance'.<sup>91</sup>

Guthrie's close and informal relationships with CEMA went higher still. When he left the Vic in 1944, he left behind him, as requested in 'an informal conversation' with CEMA's Chair, Lord Keynes, a 'Policy for Old Vic Drama', explicitly distinct from 'a plan or plans for individual productions'. The policy was broken down into five sections: Theatre, Repertory Policy, Staff, Company, Finance.<sup>92</sup> 'Theatre' describes the policy to install the Old Vic Company at the New Theatre, with a larger theatre or theatres being found for the Opera and Ballet companies.

‘Repertory’ outlines a plan based on eight productions per year, with three available for performance in rotation at any one time. The repertory should always include plays from the following categories: ‘a Shakespearean or Elizabethan play’, a British play of the period from the Restoration to the nineteenth century, a ‘classical play of other nations’, and ‘a modern and, where possible, a new play’. In short, Guthrie’s plan charts a repertory that would characterise those of the large, subsidised theatres that emerged in the 1960s both in the UK and abroad, and that remains familiar to audiences at London’s Royal National Theatre today. Under ‘Staff’, the plan names director John Burrell as the putative ‘Director of Drama’, supported by an ‘Advisory Panel’ including Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson. Again, this structure remains common today, with an ‘Artistic Director’ taking responsibility for the output of major, subsidised theatres with the support of ‘Associate Directors’ or ‘Associate Artists’, who typically direct or perform in certain productions and advise the Artistic Director about programming and artistic policy in general. The plan also stipulates a company of ‘about 15 artists’ employed for 48 weeks of each year and supported by other actors, engaged as necessary. Though this company is substantially smaller than the National Theatre and RSC companies of the early 1960s, it offers the same model of employment that those theatres would go on to use. The plan concludes by acknowledging that ‘the scheme would be expensive’, while noting that ‘CEMA is prepared for ambitious proposals’. Guthrie’s success in arranging such proposals subsequently made him the obvious choice to advise the Australian government about a possible National Theatre, and, as we shall see, to establish major new theatres in post-war North America.<sup>93</sup> In Knowles’ terms, Guthrie’s plan also represents a brokered compromise between the expectations that condition the reception of plays by their audiences and the practical and financial pressures that shape the conditions of their production, one that has continued to influence the management and funding of theatres into the twenty-first century.

When Guthrie left the Old Vic in 1944, leadership of the company was handed to the actors Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, who led productions that toured internationally.

Despite their high-profile success, however, neither they nor their co-director, John Burrell, made a success of the Vic as an organisation. They were responsible for establishing the Old Vic Centre, run jointly by Michel Saint-Denis, George Devine and Glen Byam Shaw, but this effort to run a theatre school, touring company and experimental theatre at the Vic never sat happily alongside the Old Vic company and inevitably lost the support of the governors before ending disastrously in 1951 amidst an embarrassing public airing of resentment and recrimination.<sup>94</sup>

When the collapse of the Old Vic Centre threatened the company's future, it was to Guthrie that they again turned. He came back to the company for just a year, taking the characteristically pragmatic decision to engage the popular, if somewhat untameable, Donald Wolfit for a season in which he played Tamburlaine. Robert Shaughnessy observes of that production, of which Guthrie remained proud, that an 'unobtrusive stage direction ('One brings a map' [5.3.125])' cued the unfurling of a colossal map of the world across which Wolfit magnificently swayed and staggered, marking out the territory of his conquests'.<sup>95</sup> In Gielgud's 1940 portrayal of Lear, the line 'Give me the map there' was, as Terence Hawkes memorably argued, 'a dog that didn't bark': political resonances were sacrificed for heroic acting.<sup>96</sup> Here, by contrast, Guthrie was arguably attempting to harness his unruly star to a conception of the play that would reverberate strongly with contemporary geopolitics, as the British Empire likewise 'swayed and staggered'.

At about this time, however, Guthrie seems to have lost his taste for a high-profile career in British theatre. He handed the Old Vic company over to Michael Benthall in 1953, and in spite of having successfully laid the groundwork for a National Theatre based upon its model he chose not to pursue this ambition any further. Instead, he spent the greater part of his post-war career in North America, as far as possible from urban centres of power and artistic privilege. Before those pioneering excursions, he would spend a few years consolidating his international



status as a director, through two mechanisms which, like his Draft Artistic Policy for the Old Vic, have become the stock-in-trade of Anglophone theatre directors in subsequent years: directing for the international festival circuit and re-staging key productions across the Atlantic.

### **Directing on the International Stage: *Thrie Estates* and *Carmen*, 1948-1952**

1947 saw the launch of the Edinburgh Festival, which was designed to present the highest quality work from major international artists working in a range of art forms. Scotland, however, provided only a backdrop to this spectacle, which did not feature Scottish artists. In its second year, critic Ivor Brown noted that '[t]he high standards achieved by Scottish actors, writers and producers in Scottish theatres, and principally the Citizens' Theatre of Glasgow, were held to justify a major contribution to the theatrical presentations'.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the decision was taken not simply to include a production from the Citizens' Theatre in the festival but to commission 'a Scottish "classic"' for 'the Festival's first great experiment in purely Scottish drama'. Brown's account of the genesis of this project implies that the production needed not only to be Scottish, but overtly to perform Scottish identity in ways that bring to mind the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, which began the following year under the title 'Something About a Soldier' and has been performed throughout the festival every year since. Brown describes Guthrie as 'the obvious choice as commander of these operations' because of his 'reputation as a producer of plays and spectacles', his previous association with 'the people with whom he would be working and his genius for production, particularly of the pageant-like, masquing kind'.<sup>98</sup>

Guthrie was offered a choice of three plays and rejected Alan Ramsay's pastoral *The Gentle Shepherd* and John Home's tragedy *Douglas*, choosing instead to stage Sir David Lindsay's sixteenth-century morality play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estates* – a work that had not been performed in living memory – in the Kirk Assembly Hall in Edinburgh (now well known to Fringe-goers as the Assembly Hall venue).<sup>99</sup> Guthrie transformed the Assembly Hall by

constructing a platform stage twenty-five feet by fifteen, with a musicians' gallery opposite from where, according to Ivor Brown, 'Cedric Thorpe Davie could conduct his own admirable music with an eye looking down on the surge of movement that Guthrie was to organize'.<sup>100</sup> Guthrie used this structure to frame a quasi-Elizabethan *theatrum mundi* account of the play, in which, in Brown's recollection, '[t]he three "estaitis" which give the play its title were allotted their own quarters':

The "Spiritualitie" or Ecclesiastics were seated in pomp in the gallery over the stage, the "Temporalitie" or Barons and the Burgesses or Merchants were quartered on the flanks of the "Spiritualitie", while a fourth element, the common people, were strewn about the steps of the platform facing the exalted pews of the Lords Spiritual . . . As a form of social landscape, this was not only proper to the theme of the play but notably decorative in itself.<sup>101</sup>

The propriety of Guthrie's staging was distinctly conservative. It both established a strong connection between aristocracy and divinity and occluded the absolute power of the ruling classes by seating the representatives of the church above them, implying that the tail of religious authority wagged the dog of property ownership.

[Fig. 3: Tyrone Guthrie's production of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites* for the Edinburgh Festival, 1948 (Scottish Theatre Archive, University of Glasgow Library). Photo by Paul Shillabeer, by permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.]

The performance text of the *Thrie Estates* created for Guthrie by the Scottish writer Robert Kemp, which edited Lindsay's play from six or seven hours to two and a half, was designed to render it palatable to both popular tastes and established authority. Kemp removed a long sermon and cut 'some light relief whose bawdy nature would not have been tolerated by the Censor or by the owners of the Assembly Hall [The Church of Scotland]'.<sup>102</sup> Guthrie's cast was

drawn from the Glasgow Citizens' company, combined with amateur performers, and Brown notes that Guthrie managed to 'keep his crowds volatile and make his platform a sea of colourful movement' as everyone would have expected, but that it was also an 'agreeable surprise' to see 'each role [. . .] become so realistic and each abstraction so charmingly concrete'.<sup>103</sup> As in his 1938 *Hamlet* with Guinness, so here Guthrie's customary pragmatism led him to renege somewhat upon his theoretical rejection of realism, and to use it as an aesthetic strategy to communicate to a popular audience. For example, the masque's allegorical figure of Sensuality was rendered as an entertaining, bouncy lady of relaxed morals, while the virtues appeared as 'dessicated maiden aunts'.<sup>104</sup> Such contemporary touches served to render a morality tale from another time, which might easily have been seen as lacking in both wit and drama, clear and intelligible to a broad audience: a strategy the production's huge success vindicated, and which Guthrie must have remembered when opening theatres in North America in the coming decades.

If masque form allowed Guthrie to make discoveries in this period, so too did opera. Looking back on his career, Guthrie reflected that his interest in opera was 'entirely accidental': he first grappled seriously with the art form as a result of his responsibilities to the combined companies of the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells after 1939. When he did, however, he found in opera an ideal site for his artistic signature, which combined virtuoso performances from star actors, skilled choreographic handling of large crowds, and a strong sense of the rhythmic composition of staging. With 'the right concatenation of conductor, work, cast, audience, décor and all the rest of it', he said, opera is 'an enormously soul-satisfying occasion'.<sup>105</sup> The somewhat distant tone of this praise reveals that Guthrie always felt himself to be a visitor in the opera house – a list published by Alfred Rossi acknowledges his direction of only eight operas in his entire career, plus two Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and the premiere of Leonard Bernstein's controversial musical picaresque, *Candide*<sup>106</sup> – but he was an influential visitor nonetheless. In 1952, for

example, he directed a production of *Carmen* for the Metropolitan Opera in New York that made its star, the American mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens, the most famous Carmen of her generation. Guthrie's conception of the opera – and indeed of its leading role – was created, however, not in New York, but in London, where he directed the opera at Sadler's Wells in 1949.

[Fig. 4: Risë Stevens and Richard Tucker in Tyrone Guthrie's production of *Carmen* for the Metropolitan Opera, filmed for the 'Toast of the Town' show hosted by Ed Sullivan on November 8, 1953. Photo by Steve Ochs, courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images.]

The Sadler's Wells production had rejected picturesque staging in favour of a seedier account of daily life in nineteenth-century Seville and starred Anna Pollak, whose Carmen also rejected sentimentality. She was, in Guthrie's words, 'not afraid to make Carmen the vulgar, violent slut the story demands'.<sup>107</sup> Guthrie's framing of misogynistic judgement as modern and realistic was not out of character; seeking to avoid a clichéd presentation of Ophelia as an ingénue in his 1963 Minneapolis *Hamlet*, he likewise swapped one side of misogyny's coin for the other, depicting her as a worldly and sexually available 'girl who knew a thing or two'.<sup>108</sup> Audiences and critics seem to have been amenable to the gender politics of Guthrie's 1949 *Carmen*, which was widely admired, not least by Rudolf Bing, who would take over the directorship of the Metropolitan Opera the following year. It was therefore understood that the production of *Carmen* that he invited Guthrie to direct in New York in 1952 would be, substantially, a restaging of his London version. Guthrie continued to approach the story realistically, staging the opera's conclusion in the dressing-room of the bullfighter Escamillo rather than outside and thus confining Carmen, both literally and metaphorically, in a hidden corner of a world created for male display. Stevens was not new to the role, but her account of it seems to have been strongly influenced by Guthrie. *Time* magazine reported that the 'trace of well-cred sorority girl' that had featured in her previous performances was replaced by something 'just short of plain alley-cat'.<sup>109</sup> Although the

recurring image of confinement in Guthrie's staging and *Time's* description of Stevens' performance could be read as signalling a production that was proto-feminist in its intent to depict the structural violence inflicted on Bizet's heroine, that would ascribe an intent to Guthrie's staging that he never articulated himself. Likely, the very possibility of that reading emerged from a combination of the two instincts that defined so much of his work in this period: the desire to tweak established accounts of canonical texts, and the willingness to deploy a combination of theatricality and realistic detail to that end.

## **Guthrie's Art and Importance, Part 2: North America**

### **A 'Pioneer' Across the Pond**

The fact that Guthrie's *Carmen* moved so confidently from London to New York underlines another characteristic aspect of his career. Among the great European directors of the twentieth century, Tyrone Guthrie is perhaps unique in his close relationship with North America: a relationship both institutional and ideological, which has entered into theatrical legend as few other transnational encounters between director and theatre have done. No other prominent director of his period can claim to have played such a pivotal role in the establishment of enduring theatrical organizations on a continent into which he was not born. As the founding Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival in Canada and the Guthrie Theater in the United States, he powerfully shaped both directorial practice and institutional policy in the emergent regional theatre infrastructure of North America. In the pages that follow, we will draw upon Knowles' materialist theatre semiotics to consider the close ties between the productions Guthrie created in this context, the critical controversies they produced, the legacies they left behind – and the spectre of colonialism that haunted the entire process.

By Guthrie's own account, his commitment to theatre-building in North America was the fruit not of commercial concerns but of fervent personal conviction: a conviction shaped by his experiences in both London and the provinces, and reflexive of the same dual instinct both to innovate and to preserve what he had developed during his years of work in the UK. In a 1964 interview recorded for the BBC, he declared, 'I think it's a great disaster of our times that the metropolitan cities gobble up all the plums and – and the rest just have to exist on the husks'.<sup>110</sup> When asked about decisions he had made on this principle, he immediately singled out his choice 'to go to Canada when they asked me, to start the Shakespeare Festival at Ontario'.<sup>111</sup> Describing the genesis of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, he similarly constructed this 'theatrical project aimed at those parts of the United States into which Broadway's influence did not penetrate' as an endeavour driven as much by 'missionary zeal' as by 'common sense'.<sup>112</sup>

Bound up with his commitment to theatre outside the metropolis was Guthrie's growing determination to find a home for the 'open' or thrust stage for which he believed Shakespeare's plays had been intended. When first asked by Dora Mavor Moore whether he would consider coming to small-town Stratford, Ontario, to help found a theatre, Guthrie wrote back that his interest in the project was inseparable from his eagerness 'to produce Shakespeare on a stage which might reproduce the actor-audience relationship for which he wrote'.<sup>113</sup> After working alongside designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch to create the famous thrust stage at the Stratford Festival Theatre, Guthrie returned to a similar plan for the Guthrie Theater, declaring that the 'open stage' would underline 'the experimental and pioneering character of the whole venture'.<sup>114</sup>

Guthrie's 'pioneering' rhetoric about these North American ventures is mirrored in the writing of many of his contemporaries, who viewed his new theatres as watersheds in their nations' cultural histories. The opening night of the Stratford Festival on July 13, 1953, has entered the annals of Canadian mythology as an event whose magnitude could be fully understood only by

those privileged to be present. The Canadian critic Nathan Cohen, elsewhere a great opponent of Guthrie's work, remembered the audience's conviction that 'something absolutely original and world-important was going on' that night.<sup>115</sup> In a synoptic view of the first season at Minneapolis, Guthrie's friend and sometime collaborator Brooks Atkinson similarly constructed the director as a godlike progenitor of global theatres, 'roving the world like a Jovian Johnny Appleseed'.<sup>116</sup> In such encomia, Guthrie appears as innovator and benefactor, seeding new theatres with the courage and foresight of a trailblazer.

Over time, this frontiersman image of Guthrie has taken on a darker hew. As early as 1959, Nathan Cohen was describing the Stratford 'miracle' as a 'blight' on Canadian theatre, asserting that under the mask of innovation Guthrie had saddled the country with a classical stage whose standards, style, and repertoire were all based upon those of Britain.<sup>117</sup> Such critiques have also been applied to the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis; Joseph Ziegler remarks that its 'particular mission was very much based in colonialism',<sup>118</sup> while M.G. Aune has analyzed its inaugural production of *Hamlet* as a prime example of 'British Cold War cultural colonization of the United States'.<sup>119</sup>

In this section, we will argue that these dual perspectives reflect Guthrie's own dual, conflicted identity and practice, to which he responded in North America by creating what might be called 'settler theatres' and working—both consciously and unconsciously—as a settler director. In *The Settler Colonial Present*, Lorenzo Veracini has defined settler colonists as those who distinguish themselves from 'colonial sojourners who would move on at the earliest opportunity and possibly return to a colonising metropole'.<sup>120</sup> Rather than longing to 'go home', settlers long to create permanent institutions and identities within their adopted land. Although Tyrone Guthrie did not arrive in either Canada or the United States with any plan to take up permanent residence there, he certainly strove to create theatres that would distinguish themselves from

those of ‘colonising metropolises’ like London, and that would maintain permanent, localized identities within their communities. Like many settlers, moreover, Guthrie identified simultaneously with both ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds, with both centre and margin. Even as he rebelled against established British artistic values, he sought to educate others in them. The result was a deeply contradictory institutional and artistic practice that evolved unique institutions for emergent markets while maintaining key tenets of dominant ones. The stages Guthrie built, the organizations he helped to found, the directorial tactics he used, and the controversial productions he created all reflected the viewpoint of a rebellious character deeply entrenched in—and, indeed, engaged in maintaining—the *status quo*.

### **Guthrie at Stratford: Fairy Godfather or Wicked Uncle?**

In *A Life in the Theatre*, Tyrone Guthrie describes his first visit to Canada in 1929 as a young director charged with managing a series of radio plays on Canadian history entitled *The Romance of Canada*. The project is a challenging one, for ‘[i]n those days there was no professional theatre in Canada’.<sup>121</sup> Guthrie has to winkle his casts out of the amateur theatres of Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, and to cope with the limited store of ‘obviously ‘radiogenic’ episodes in Canada’s rather brief history’.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, the director reports, ‘I left Canada thrilled with what I had seen, eager to return and to be somehow, at some time and in some way a participant in the adventure of developing this land with its vast possibilities, so many of them still dormant, still undreamed—the romance of Canada’.<sup>123</sup> In this construction, Canada appears from the first as a Sleeping Beauty waiting to be awakened from its artistic slumber. Guthrie is determined to kiss her awake.

Guthrie’s rhetoric here is perfectly fitted to his role in the founding of the Stratford Festival: one of the best-known fairy tales in twentieth-century theatre history. Guthrie himself participated enthusiastically in the making of this tale. In *A Life in the Theatre*, he tells how he received an



initial phone call of invitation from Stratford businessman Tom Patterson, who asked, 'Will you come to Canada and give advice? We want to start a Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario'.<sup>124</sup> The enchantingly naïve enthusiasm of Patterson and his collaborators wins Guthrie round to its passion, and he agrees to help found the festival. He selects plays, auditions casts, finds a designer in his established friend and collaborator Tanya Moiseiwitsch, and survives multiple financial crises. Sometimes the venture appears as a comic lark, as when Guthrie describes rehearsing in a barn whose scenes of 'unbridled bird sexuality made the life of *Richard III* seem very anaemic and suburban'.<sup>125</sup> At others, the tone is more evangelical, as when he insists on a thrust stage configuration on the grounds that 'the best practical results would be gotten from a stage which closely conformed to what is known of the stage for which Shakespeare wrote, and by relating the audience to that stage in a manner which approximated to the Elizabethan manner'.<sup>126</sup> In the end, the fairy-tale denouement arrives: where the founders had hoped for a five-week run at houses sixty percent filled, the 'first season played six weeks to 98-percent capacity [...] and a total audience of more than 68,000',<sup>127</sup> as well as to an enthusiastic critical reception both within and beyond Canada.

In the accounts of his collaborators and observers during that first triumphant season at Stratford, Guthrie as Artistic Director of Stratford is every inch the fairy godfather of Canadian theatre. William Hutt – one of the young actors who scored early success during those seasons and later went on to become a doyen of the Canadian stage – recalled that at a time when 'professional theatre in Canada was more or less in its infancy',<sup>128</sup> Guthrie was able to provide his inexperienced company with a sense of artistic purpose and highly concrete paths to achieving it. Hutt calls him 'one of the few directors in the world who could take absolutely rank amateurs and make them look all but totally professional. Because he had so many tricks, particularly with crowd scenes'.<sup>129</sup> Dawn Greenhalgh, who appeared in those crowd scenes during the first Stratford season, describes how this process worked:

He'd pay such attention to detail. He loved it. So that even though I was just in the crowd scenes and understudying, he'd still say it was very important. And you'd be asked to do certain things right on the centre of the stage just as part of the crowd, which is what made it really exciting. You really had to be on your toes. He didn't miss a thing.<sup>130</sup>

In such accounts, Guthrie appears as a strategic, result-oriented shepherd figure, less interested in a particular concept or approach than in convincing his cast that they could achieve a goal and using his skills of *mise-en-scène* to ensure that they *did* achieve it. As Timothy Findlay, another young actor from that first season who went on to become a giant of the Canadian arts scene, puts it, 'He didn't shy away from saying "Look, come. Come up. Be better. Do more."<sup>131</sup>

Recent scholarly interpreters of the Stratford Festival and its founding have cast a doubtful eye upon this inspiring tale. Robert Shaughnessy, for example, dismisses as 'disingenuous' Guthrie's yarn about the fortuitous call from Patterson, rightly noting that Guthrie had long been in conversation with Canadian interlocutors about his possible contributions to a Canadian National Theatre.<sup>132</sup> As for the nature of those contributions, Dennis Salter argues that they consisted in 'a set of reactionary ideas', fundamentally conservative and imperialist in bent.<sup>133</sup> In place of a truly organic tradition, Ric Knowles argues, Guthrie saddled his band of admiring young Canadian artists with 'a Shakespearean National Theatre in Canada after the British (imperialist) Model, in which Shakespeare was used to serve the interests of cultural colonization'.<sup>134</sup> Viewed from the standpoint of such critiques, all the qualities praised in Stratfordians' eulogies of Guthrie – his missionary zeal for the classics, his eye for talent, his 'tricks' and detailed instructions, his fatherly attitude toward his actors – appear as the deadening hand of established British tradition moulding an emergent theatre to its own, dominant form.

Pivotal to such critiques is the very aspect of the Stratford Festival that Guthrie viewed as most vital to its uniqueness and to his own legacy: the famed thrust stage designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, first for the tent in which the early Festival seasons took place, and later for the permanent Festival Theatre. Delighted by his fortuitous exploration of the open stage configuration during the 1937 tour of Olivier's *Hamlet* to Elsinore, Guthrie had come to the conclusion that progress in modern Shakespearean staging required the director 'first, to set the actors against a background with no concessions whatever to pictorial realism, the sort of background which the Elizabethan stage provided', and 'second, to arrange the actors in choreographic patterns, in the sort of relation to one another and to the audience which the Elizabethan stage demanded and the picture-frame stage forbids'.<sup>135</sup> Moiseiwitsch designed the Stratford stage with these specifications in mind; in a first-night review by Morley Safer, the result was vaunted as 'the first Elizabethan stage ever used in a large scale production, since the days of Queen Elizabeth herself'.<sup>136</sup> Canada, that colonial theatrical backwater, was suddenly at the forefront of innovation in theatre architecture. As J.L. Styan argued in *The Shakespeare Revolution*, 'the success of the thrust stage in Canada led to new thinking on both sides of the Atlantic'.<sup>137</sup> Guthrie's and Moiseiwitsch's vision was largely responsible for this coup.

From the first, however, dissident voices arose to underline the shortcomings of this theatre. Though he had shared the fervent enthusiasm engendered by the theatre's first night, Nathan Cohen came to see the thrust stage as a liability to the Stratford Festival, and the Festival itself as a liability to the Canadian theatre. The acoustics of the open stage, he argued, rendered Shakespeare's text inaudible to all but those lucky enough to be faced by the actor speaking at any given moment. To try to maximize the likelihood that spectators *would* be able to hear and see most of the actors on the stage at any given time, directors were forced to constantly to move them from one place to the next. The result, Cohen believed, was frantic 'squirming and rotating for the benefit of the audience on all three sides', which destroyed any chance of

intimacy or stillness.<sup>138</sup> Cohen linked these disadvantages of the Festival stage directly to Guthrie's own strengths and weaknesses as a director; while admitting that Guthrie was a great manager of crowds and choreography, the critic believed that he tended to suppress 'those elements in the acting which fail directly to relate to zestfulness and drive'.<sup>139</sup> Under the influence of such directing and the stage upon which it took place, Cohen argued, Stratford had rapidly trained its audiences to look for spectacle instead of substance, 'persuad[ing] its public that they need not take Shakespeare seriously' and trapping them in a childish playground of movement and colour where they could find no contemporary relevance or insight.<sup>140</sup>

Cohen's inheritors have been harsher still in their judgments, viewing the Festival stage as a spatial inscription of colonialism that infantilized not only its spectators but also its actors and, indeed, the whole Canadian nation. Salter, for example, argues that Guthrie's platform stage knocked Canadian actors out of any sense of historical and geographical grounding as it placed them in a 'decontextualized, ahistorical, pseudo-universal, *unn*naturally hybrid space' that laid claim to both past and present, both England and Canada, but actually inhabited neither.<sup>141</sup> What it does inhabit, Ric Knowles has argued, is a liberal space that views theatrical meaning—especially the meaning of classic plays like those of Shakespeare—as delocalized and universal.<sup>142</sup> In relation to such a space, performers are trapped in 'conventional actorly readings' as they struggle to replicate established and widely acceptable interpretations of Shakespearean characters.<sup>143</sup> By their very definition, such interpretations are likely to come from old, established theatrical centres and not from new and marginal ones such as Canadian small towns.

We are left with two possible images, not only of Guthrie as a director and founder at the Stratford Festival, but also of his legacy to Canada and its theatre: the fairy godfather on the one hand, and the wicked uncle on the other. Arguably, neither of these readings does full justice to the complexities inherent both in Guthrie's directorial practice at Stratford and in the durable

institution he helped to create there. A striking corrective to both extremes is offered by Shaughnessy, whose analysis of Guthrie's 1953 Stratford *All's Well That Ends Well* underlines the optimism, tensions, and complex implications of a production in which Guthrie imagined both Shakespeare's characters and the Canadian theatre as poised 'at the threshold of a new, and as yet unrealised, era of theatrical health, happiness and liberty'.<sup>144</sup> On what, in Guthrie's mind, might that dreamt-of era have depended, and how did he express this vision in directorial terms? To answer that question, we need, like Shaughnessy, to turn to one of Guthrie's own productions for Stratford.

### **'A Strong Thread of Melodrama': *Richard III*, 1953**

In his accounts of the Stratford Festival's founding, Guthrie focuses on the strategic choices he made in the moment, stressing not only their artistic value but also their ability to ensure the long-term survival of this fledgling institution. His approach mixed zeal for the future well-being of the Canadian stage with a bluntly commercial pragmatism. For example, after his initial meetings in Stratford, Guthrie returned to England on a 'star-shopping expedition' to find an actor who could headline the festival.<sup>145</sup> He fixed his sights on Alec Guinness, who was not only 'a great actor' and his own established collaborator but also 'well known to Canadians from his films': a box office draw, as well as an anchor for the cast.<sup>146</sup> Guinness, writes Guthrie, accepted the offer both out of a desire to play 'in the particular conditions our stage afforded, and also to take part in what he felt to be a pioneering venture of a gallant and unselfish kind'.<sup>147</sup> The Old World's star is cast as the New World's Prince Valiant, selflessly ready to offer himself for the good of the new stage – and, of course, to pull in the punters.

The key role in which Guthrie cast his leading man was that of Shakespeare's Richard III. Again, Guthrie's description of his motives in selecting the play is strategically focused:

Guinness wanted to play it; I agreed that it was a suitable vehicle. We both felt that the complicated genealogy, the rather obscure historical background, were probably drawbacks for Canadian audiences but might be offset by the strong thread of melodrama.<sup>148</sup>

There is no sense, in such phrases, that Guthrie and Guinness are selecting this Shakespearean history in order to edify colonial spectators or to introduce them to the humanizing glories of the classical repertoire. The pros are its suitability for his star actor and its rip-roaring entertainment value, which Guthrie describes neither in Elizabethan nor in modernist terms but in nineteenth-century ones as ‘melodrama’. The cons are its historical minutiae, which Guthrie assumes a Canadian audience will not understand. The Canadian spectator is constructed as star-loving, thrill-seeking, somewhat old-fashioned, and not particularly well-educated; Guthrie is intent upon creating the opening night that will appeal to this demographic.

A glance at the *mise-en-scène* of Guthrie’s Stratford *Richard III* shows this philosophy in action. From the first, the director’s stated goals emerged clearly. The production began with a single spotlight on the figure of Richard; Guthrie’s choice of lighting both celebrated his star player and offered a classic melodramatic focus on the fascinatingly malevolent anti-hero. Guinness’ performance, too, was melodramatic in the sense described by Peter Brooks: an acting style ‘predicated on the plastic figurability of emotion, its shaping as a visible and almost tactile entity’.<sup>149</sup> As his first speech began, he strolled onto the thrust stage’s balcony as if to underline its Elizabethan qualities, then immediately disrupted the smooth integrity of its architecture by swinging a leg over its side. His performance was replete with grand guignol touches: he sloped down from the balcony to the main stage with a walk Hutt remembered as ‘one of the most lascivious things he [had] ever seen’,<sup>150</sup> and when Lady Anne spat in his face in the next scene, he dipped his finger in her spittle and sucked on it with lecherous pleasure.<sup>151</sup> Fifty years later,

William Hutt still remembered ‘things that Alec did that impressed me enormously’, such as pressing his right foot against the ground ‘as if he were squashing a bug’ when he threatened Queen Elizabeth’s brothers.<sup>152</sup> Such gestures were grandiose, but also recalled the detail of cinematic close-ups. Every idea, every emotion, was emphasized, externalized, made palpable. [Fig. 5: Amelia Hall as Lady Anne and Alec Guinness as Richard in Tyrone Guthrie’s production of *Richard III* at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, 1953. Photo by Peter Stackpole, courtesy of the LIFE Picture Collection and Getty Images.]

The same melodramatic principles—gestural storytelling, spectacle, sensationalism, constant movement, a liberal dose of violence, and an element of shock—dominated the entire production. The corpse of Henry VI, laid out between Lady Anne and Richard during their confrontation, oozed pus and blood; those who opposed Richard were ‘kicked in the head and the crotch’ before being flung through one of the new stage’s quasi-Elizabeth trapdoors.<sup>153</sup> Guinness’ crimson velvet coronation robe ‘flowed across the stage like a river of blood’.<sup>154</sup> The climactic scene of the Battle of Bosworth Field, preserved on celluloid via the National Film Board of Canada documentary *The Stratford Adventure*, began with a slow procession of soldiers onto the stage from all sides, accompanied by the steady beat of a single drum. Once they were all in place, Guthrie’s direction ensured maximum suspense for the audience by holding the two armies in tense stand-off against one another, the drum suddenly silenced, before one soldier broke with a war cry and raised his sword against another. All hell then broke loose, with a bravura show of stage combat on the crowded stage. At the height of the battle, one soldier tried to scale the balcony and was flung off it into the arms of his comrades.<sup>155</sup> Seated up close to the rapidly flashing swords, the audience, reported William Hawkins in the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, ‘was dodging as none ever did at the most startling 3-D movie’.<sup>156</sup>

Though they can be read as squaring with Salter's view of Guthrie as a 'patriarch' who treated his colonial audiences with condescension,<sup>157</sup> the director's approach to *Richard III* had strategic value within the Canadian context of the 1950s, where the rise of talking pictures after WW1 had dealt a death blow to a well-established professional theatre network. Many theatre buildings, especially in smaller towns like Stratford, had been converted into cinemas; hence, cinema had become the representational lingua franca of most audience members, especially those outside the 'dominant elite' Knowles connects with Stratford.<sup>158</sup> With *Richard III*, Guthrie set out to speak to precisely these audience members. He used the language of melodrama: a theatrical vocabulary that would surely have appealed both to older audience members who associated it with the touring companies of their theatregoing youth and to younger spectators for whom it was the currency of many popular Hollywood movies. He offered them a film star they would recognize, and directed in a manner guaranteed to appeal to those habituated to the vocabulary of film: the constant swirl of movement onstage approximating a montage of cinematic shots, the lavish costumes and choreographed fight scenes presenting delights to equal those of Eastman Kodak's colour film processes and Hollywood 3-D cinema, both in vogue in the early 1950s.

At the same time, Guthrie's and Moiseiwitsch's thrust stage, with its 220-degree perspectives, its aisles through which actors brushed past audience members, and its multiple levels of action, offered its spectators an experience unavailable in any movie palace. Guthrie was showcasing classical theatre as an art form that could offer everything cinema and television could, but could also provide forms of excitement that were quite beyond their ken – all the while assuring the Canadian audience that it could see, on home soil, a spectacle to match the offerings of London, Broadway, or Hollywood. In this, the evidence suggests, he succeeded. As Bruce Swerdfager, who as a young actor formed part of the *Richard III* cast, recalls: 'I don't think Canadians ever



saw anything like this before. They had gone to Broadway, but this was still better than that. [...] [A]t the end, it was instant. They stood and they did not stop applauding'.<sup>159</sup>

Though they can certainly be seen as supporting Nathan Cohen's assertion that the Stratford Festival sought to 'persuade its public that they need not take Shakespeare seriously', Guthrie's decisions in *Richard III* seem to have been less successful when it came to his supposed aims of ennobling the Canadian audience or imposing universalist, liberal humanist values. Indeed, established reviewers complained that the production failed abysmally at such goals. 'Mr. Guinness is fun to watch. Maybe too much fun', sighed Walter Kerr; 'his performance is always interesting, but it still falls short of this monster's full stature'.<sup>160</sup> 'Spectacular production; shallow performance', concurred Brooks Atkinson:

The acting does not get much beyond the surface of this most wild and horrifying play. The performance lacks the rude, elementary, concentrated power of an Elizabethan acting piece. Mr. Guthrie and Miss Moiseiwitsch [...] have concentrated on production. Infatuated with the mechanics of a very original stage and the ominous spectacle of a historical chronicle, they have left the drama loose and superficial.<sup>161</sup>

As spectacle, as melodrama, as entertainment, such critiques suggested, *Richard III* succeeded. As Elizabethan drama, as Shakespeare, as *theatre* in the elite sense, it failed.

If the Stratford *Richard III* and its reception teach us one thing about Guthrie as a director, it may be that we need to mind the gap between his theory and his practice—or rather, to consider the practical contradictions that his theory, by its very nature, tended to create. As a theorist of the performing arts and their cultural meanings, Guthrie espoused an image of the classical repertoire as an improving, ennobling force. In a reflection on the Stratford Festival written a

year after its opening season, he applied this insight to the Canadian context, opining that ‘in Canada the audience [...] needs to be trained for the Theatre. If you never get anything but margarine, you lose the taste for butter’.<sup>162</sup> In practice, Guthrie’s way of dealing with the audience’s taste for ‘margarine’ was by ensuring that butter tasted very much like it. He worked strategically, not to edify his spectators, but to entertain them. If the major New York critics objected that this approach was disedifying, so be it; the key question for Guthrie was whether the Canadian public would applaud, pay for seats, and fund the future of this new institution. When the first night audience rose to its feet and gave *Richard III* a seemingly endless standing ovation, he reportedly declared, ‘All right, people, we just got away with it’.<sup>163</sup>

### **‘Something They Wanted and Were Willing to Buy’: Minneapolis, 1963**

If the founding of the Stratford Festival and the staging of its first production underline Guthrie’s strategic melding of the roles of director and artistic director, the founding of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and the story of its first production take us much further down the same path. Gone are the fairy-tale trappings of Stratford; as Shaughnessy writes, if the ‘Stratford adventure’ emerges from Guthrie’s own writings as ‘good-natured, idealistic and, on occasions, rather whimsical’, the director’s narrative of the Minneapolis project is ‘pragmatic, jaundiced, and brutally honest’.<sup>164</sup> In both his 1964 book *A New Theatre* and his interview for the BBC recorded in the same year, Guthrie stresses the venture’s basis in his disillusionment with America’s established theatrical infrastructure, centred in New York City. His discussion of Broadway in *A New Theatre* is focused almost entirely on the economics of theatre as they shape its artistic possibilities: New York’s lack of space, its exceedingly high rents, and ‘the tyranny of the unions’,<sup>165</sup> Guthrie argues, all work together to ensure sky high ticket prices, which in turn ‘discourage the habit of regular theatregoing’ for all but the wealthy and those determined to see ‘hits’.<sup>166</sup> Such a context leaves no room for experiment, honorable failure, or even ‘moderate

success' – a complaint that may be fuelled by Guthrie's own bitterness about the infamous box office disaster of his 1956 Broadway production of *Candide*.<sup>167</sup>

In response to this situation, Guthrie – along with stage manager Peter Zeisler and producer Oliver Rea – took the unusual step of advertising in the *New York Times* their interest in offering 'a classical programme' to 'any city which felt deprived of live theatre and would take us under its wing'.<sup>168</sup> They met with interest from a number of mid-sized American cities, including Cleveland, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Minneapolis / St. Paul; in the end, their choice alighted upon the Twin Cities. In his 1964 interview for the BBC, Guthrie contrasts this home for a new theatre with the cities of the Old World in revealing terms:

A great many, it seems to me, of our big cities are very complacent and satisfied with things as they are, and you would never get them to regard it as other than a reckless extravagance to spend money on a theatre, whereas in Minneapolis, they felt deprived without one, possibly not entirely for the right reasons but again possibly rightly, I think from our point of view, it was something they wanted to have and were willing to buy.<sup>169</sup>

The new theatrical organization appears here very explicitly as a commodity: one desired, according to Guthrie, by a group of businessmen and university professors due in large part to the benefits of revenue, community development, and student enrolment they saw as likely to accrue from it. If these were not ideally 'right reasons' to build a theatre, Guthrie was nonetheless willing to seize upon them. Guthrie's rhetoric in describing these negotiations is unabashedly colonialist: he and his collaborators sallied forth, he writes, 'equipped with spears and blowpipes, with pretty beads, bright shells, and jews' harps to bribe the native chieftans'.<sup>170</sup> Like so many settlers before him, Guthrie sought to trade his skills for a foothold on the 'frontier' outside New York City.

As for what those skills might be, by this point in Guthrie's career he seems to have placed relatively little emphasis on his abilities as a director of specific plays. Instead, he underlined his role as an Artistic Director with an established facility for creating a lasting theatrical institution with a fully planned and coherent mandate or 'policy'. Early in *A New Theatre*, he emphasizes the notion that a theatre's policy, its audience, and its longevity are closely intertwined, arguing that '[p]olicy in the theatre demands continuity of aim and consistency of style. Without a policy, no theatre can possibly create its own public'.<sup>171</sup> The right spectators will be attracted to the right commodity, as long as they understand what it is. Guthrie lives up to his own requirements by defining the policy he imagines for the planned theatre in Minneapolis:

Our programme would be classical; only those plays would be chosen which had seemed, to discriminating people for several generations, to have serious merit; which had, in fact, withstood the test of time. [...] We would each season offer not merely a series of classics, but of classics which in origin, style and content would contrast interestingly with one another, would pose the implicit question: what is a classic and what has made it so?<sup>172</sup>

This was more or less the same policy that had arisen at the Stratford Festival in Ontario in the years since Guthrie had left it: a programme designed to attract audiences already invested in the notion of 'classic' drama, as well as to educate those unfamiliar with the established repertoire.

In Stratford, such programming had given rise to vociferous criticism over the lack of new Canadian plays on the docket. At Minneapolis, Guthrie declared himself anxious to avoid 'appear[ing] as if once again Britain were trying to instruct the colonists'.<sup>173</sup> Although he was convinced America had not yet had time to develop an unimpeachably classic dramatist, he

deemed it ‘essential to include each season one American play of what we considered to be potential classical status; and to let it take its place in a programme of established classics’.<sup>174</sup> In other words, Guthrie understood this provincial theatre, not as a marginal institution, but as one that would perform a very central role within North American culture: that of establishing and sustaining a dramatic canon to which new American works might aspire. The new theatre would be a performative institution in all senses of the word; by playing the classics, it would sustain their shaping power for generations to come.

Guthrie knew that such aims were riven with potential pitfalls. He was sharply aware that many Americans were ‘exasperated’ by Europeans’ tendency ‘to give maddening little lectures intended of course for the betterment and instruction of a crude, young and, of course, totally materialistic society’.<sup>175</sup> If Minneapolis had ‘bought’ Guthrie’s theatre because it was a commodity they wanted, it ill behoved him to impugn their taste. He was faced, then, with a yet more difficult task than he had encountered as an invited guest at Stratford. If he were to start this new theatre off on the right foot, he had simultaneously to convince Minnesota audiences that they needed education in the classics *and* that this education was being offered to them in a spirit of equality rather than of condescension. The directorial convolutions required to achieve this objective proved challenging, even for the elder statesman of the transatlantic stage.

### **‘You Can Stop Depending on Me’: *Hamlet*, 1963**

In creating the *Hamlet* that opened the Guthrie Theater on May 7, 1963, Guthrie was characteristically strategic, calling upon many of the tactics he had accrued over the course of his career to meet the needs of the audience and the moment. As he had with Guinness in 1938, he staged a ‘modern dress’ interpretation of the play – though in fact, as Shaughnessy notes of the earlier production, the costumes mixed Ruritanian military uniforms and evening gowns with more up-to-the-moment elements such as the umbrellas that appeared at both versions of

Ophelia's funeral.<sup>176</sup> Such an approach had become habitual to Guthrie; it had also marked, for example, his well-received 1956 *Troilus and Cressida* at the Old Vic, which had transferred successfully to New York. Even in small-town Stratford, Guthrie and Moiseiwitsch had drawn upon similar design principles for their 1953 *All's Well That Ends Well* and met with very few objections. In writing about the Minneapolis *Hamlet*, however, Guthrie constructed his design decisions very explicitly as a concession to the American context. He opined that modern clothes would make the story clearer for spectators unfamiliar with *Hamlet*, since they render it 'possible at a glance to infer a number of things about the characters of the play, which are not apparent in period dress; the time of day, for instance, and the weather'.<sup>177</sup> He also suggested that modern dress would 'better suit an American cast, less at home with 'period' plays than British actors who get more opportunities to appear in them'.<sup>178</sup> Such rationales imply that neither American audiences nor American actors are experienced enough to handle *Hamlet* without the designer's assistance.

At the same time, Guthrie devotes several pages of *A New Theatre* to arguing that modern dress helps to 'protect Shakespeare, [...] and all of us, from our passionate addiction to Romance and to Stereotype'.<sup>179</sup> 'Theatre audiences', he suggests, 'have an almost incurable tendency to romanticize': 'our natural inclination' is to see Hamlet as the sensitive, darkly poet Prince of Eugène Delacroix and Ophelia as the pure, pathetic heroine of the John Everett Millais.<sup>180</sup> Modern dress ruptures 'our' sentimental tendencies, encouraging us to see these well-known characters with fresh eyes. It helps 'us' to resist the dulling influence of culturally dominant notions of Shakespeare: notions that 'we' could scarcely espouse if we were bumbling colonials with little conception of the Bard's reputation or achievement.

As Aune argues, Guthrie's view of the Minneapolis audience is 'paradoxical': they are simultaneously 'intelligent, experienced theatregoers' and 'naïve auditors'.<sup>181</sup> In another example

of this paradox, Aune mentions Guthrie's choice to play the text of *Hamlet* with very few cuts. This decision, Guthrie believed, would serve as an indication 'that the audience was being regarded as fully adult and willing to make a considerable effort of concentration, was not being condescended to'.<sup>182</sup> Here again, the effort to avoid any perception of patronizing colonial attitudes appears as a driving force behind Guthrie's directorial choices. A few pages later, however, the director is complaining that the show's first-night audience would have vastly preferred the excitement of 'a bullfight, or a belly dancer' to the uncut *Hamlet's* demand for 'four hours of solid, concentrated attention'.<sup>183</sup>

Aune explains this contradiction by suggesting that Guthrie must have wanted to maintain a 'complete Shakespeare' even at the cost of a gruelling running time, because the bard's 'authority and [...] cultural capital lay in the words more than the costumes or sets' (434). Yet Guthrie had never gone out of his way to present Shakespearean texts uncut at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, where he had stressed the Bard's authority and cultural capital for all they were worth. On Stratford's first night, he had cheerfully treated the Canadian spectators to a barnstorming melodrama; after all, they were self-admitted innocents who had asked for theatrical 'help' from their adopted Papa. The Minneapolis audience, by contrast, were customers who had paid good money for a theatre meant at once to supply their cultural deficits and to symbolize their cultural maturity. Guthrie directed accordingly, with choices that worked simultaneously to accommodate the audience's perceived shortcomings and to recognize its 'adult' competencies. Paradoxes were inevitable, for the production was designed around a construction of its audience as both 'them' and 'us': as the director's other, and as his other self.

Strikingly, the same tensions and contradictions informed Guthrie's work with his actors on the Minneapolis *Hamlet*, especially with his leading man. For the opening night at Stratford, Guthrie had gone to great lengths to cast Guinness, who carried with him both the cultural capital of the

English stage and the instant iconicity of movie stardom. For the opening night at Minneapolis, he chose a 35-year-old American actor, George Grizzard (1928-2007), who had recently had a success in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but had never before played Shakespeare professionally. In *A New Theatre*, Grizzard appears – like the Minneapolis audience to which he was to play – as a strange mixture of innate capability and utter ignorance. 'He was intelligent. He was witty. He was modest. He could suggest a prince', writes Guthrie, but his 'voice was weak, harsh, and pitched too high. He had no idea of how, or when, or why to breathe'.<sup>184</sup> 'It seemed to us', concludes the director, 'that he had many of the assets needed for Hamlet, which are inborn and cannot be acquired; and that the assets which he lacked were of the kind which can be achieved by work'.<sup>185</sup> The very presence of Grizzard thus seemed to affirm that although the American theatre needed training from old hands like Guthrie, it nevertheless possessed within itself the qualities necessary for a thriving classical tradition. Grizzard was native here, but he was *also* to the manner born.

This complicated dialectic between condescension and respect seems to have shaped Guthrie's approach to his cast throughout the rehearsal period of the Minneapolis *Hamlet*. In his record of the production, Alfred Rossi reproduces a letter from Guthrie to Grizzard in which he rebukes his leading actor for suggesting that he would simply defer to his director's guidance when it came to his performance:

You can stop right now depending on me for 98% of the performance. I know you don't mean it and only put it into your letter partly because you thought it was appropriate to neophyte Hamlet writing to elderly director. In fact the performance will be, *must* be almost entirely yours. [...] To put it another way: I shan't try (or anyway not consciously) to change YOU; only to help you to express what is already in you to express.<sup>186</sup>



Guthrie's description of his own directorial process here squares with those of actors like Guinness, who described him as 'enormously free and encouraging'.<sup>187</sup> Yet Rossi's account of the Minneapolis rehearsal process frequently highlights Guthrie's authoritarian directing style. Though Rossi, who served as Guthrie's Assistant on the production, clearly revered his boss, he observes with dismay that the director imposed line readings on his performers from the first rehearsal and that he 'seemed to be unwilling to let the actors discover things for themselves [... which] can't be very encouraging for them'.<sup>188</sup> 'Guthrie's directions to the actors ... were very specific', notes Rossi of a later scene, 'and there seems to be little freedom on the actors' parts – at least they don't seem to have the courage to ask for any'.<sup>189</sup> Despite Guthrie's strong claims for his performers' active role in the creative process, Rossi confessed to 'the feeling that the game is being played with marked cards, and Guthrie, as dealer, is the only one who knows how it will come out'.<sup>190</sup>

Rossi's notion of the play as a game recurs in the published reviews of the production; here, however, the game is one of chance or risk, and Guthrie features as an arch-gambler. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Walter Kerr praised the production, declaring that the 'theater will never get anything done if it isn't willing to take a whack at it, and here are talented and determined people whacking in all directions. The score doesn't have to come out heavily in their favour. It is the game that counts just now'.<sup>191</sup> Brooks Atkinson agreed that 'Guthrie has cast the first stone with his familiar combination of recklessness, confidence and skill'.<sup>192</sup> Though these reviews were penned by the very critics who had attacked the Stratford *Richard III* for infantilizing the play and its audience, none of them accused Guthrie of the surface melodrama they had found in that earlier outing.

Some spectators, however, were less charitable, and their criticisms struck at some of Guthrie's most cherished aims. In the Chicago *Sunday Tribune*, Claudia Cassidy complained that Guthrie's

was a 'singularly cheapened *Hamlet*', describing the show as 'amateurly acted and clumsily directed, with little indication of the freedom within disciplined form that is the basic classic style'.<sup>193</sup> Other reviewers, more circumspect in their criticisms, nevertheless echoed Cassidy's basic charge of a lack of actorly freedom, especially when it came to Grizzard's Hamlet. Henry Hewes found the actor 'disappointingly flat', and suggested that perhaps 'he and his director have concentrated too much on modulating the performance'.<sup>194</sup> Kerr agreed that Grizzard 'is never surprised; he knows the lines too well'.<sup>195</sup> Again and again, critics suggested that Grizzard was somehow constrained and over-cautious, perhaps even caught in Guthrie's shadow: a strong contrast to the free-wheeling English 'star' Hamlet of Olivier earlier in Guthrie's own career. 'A Hamlet who does not take off into space with the wild whirlings of his spirit can do serious damage to the heart's core of the play', opined Herbert Whittaker: 'Still, there is a certain appropriateness to the fact that the first production at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater belongs plainly to Sir Tyrone'.<sup>196</sup>

There, arguably, was the rub. Though Guthrie had declared his intention to respect Minneapolis audiences and actors, granting them the liberty to play in Shakespeare's great drama, it was finally his own personality, rather than theirs, that shaped this *Hamlet*. Hewes could not 'help admiring the way Guthrie has staged Claudius's death with a spectacular backward fall against an overturning couch that seems to break his neck'.<sup>197</sup> Whittaker remembered its 'parade of fine theatrical tricks', among which he counted not only the umbrellas at the funeral and the pistol Laertes carried, but also the fact that Ellen Greer's Ophelia was clearly pregnant and that Graham Brown's Horatio was 'dark-skinned'.<sup>198</sup> Not only character choices, but even actors' racial identities were read as markers of the director's signature thrill-laden style. Perhaps it was with such points in mind that Hewes described Guthrie's 'inventive, sure-handed staging and audacity' as 'cumulatively self-defeating'.<sup>199</sup> Guthrie had encouraged his actors to 'stop depending on me', and had constructed his theatre as a marker of the burgeoning maturity with which they

– and their spectators – might embrace and assimilate the classical tradition. In the end, however, his *Hamlet* spoke to these critics not of the grown-up freedom of American actors and audiences, but of the overpowering personality of Tyrone Guthrie himself.

### **Conclusion: Guthrie's shadow**

After the opening of the Guthrie Theater, Tyrone Guthrie still had almost a decade left to live. In Minneapolis, he would go on to direct a number of projects that were arguably more successful than the much-debated *Hamlet*. His Chekhov productions for the company were greatly applauded, beginning with a gently realist *Three Sisters* (1963) that somewhat gave the lie to the director's avowed disdain for illusionism on the open stage. Also notable was a masked, all-male version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, *The House of Atreus* (1967), which Guthrie revived the following year not only in Minneapolis but at the Billy Rose Theatre in New York and at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. In the *Chicago Tribune*, Clive Barnes complained of the 'wilful and tawdry gimmickry' of the New York outing of *The House of Atreus*, pointedly remarking that 'Sir Tyrone is one of the old school of British directors who have always worked hard for their effects'.<sup>200</sup> In Los Angeles, however, Cecil Smith declared that though Guthrie's *Atreus* initially seemed 'high camp—Aeschylus salted with touches of Disneyland,' by the end the spectator was 'caught in the bloody maelstrom, sucked in, touched, moved, anguished, even exalted by the mighty drama'.<sup>201</sup> At the end of his career, Guthrie still occasioned controversy: to some, the embodiment of old-fashioned, middlebrow conservatism; to others, the master of ever-new and astonishing theatrical effects.

In the immediate aftermath of Guthrie's sudden death at the age of 71, it was to the master that his collaborators paid tribute. The reminiscences recorded by Alfred Rossi return again and again

to Guthrie's invention, energy, and generosity of spirit. 'I always believe in the man who can make you argue, go back to the text, flip over the pages, read speeches aloud', declared J.C. Trewin; 'Even when he maddened me, I did feel: "Thank heaven I've been here tonight"'.<sup>202</sup> George Grizzard remembered that Guthrie's 'rehearsals were joyous. [...] Whenever he would correct or stop someone from doing something, he did it with great love and wit, so that you never felt put down by him'.<sup>203</sup> In the midst of the tributes, however, the voice of John Gielgud sounded a somewhat chilling note, comparing Guthrie to the younger and irresistibly ascendant Peter Brook: 'I would say that Brook is a genius (a pocket genius, perhaps) and Tony Guthrie was only a brilliant man, both remarkable talents and with a certain amount in common. But, to me, Peter has a kind of integrity, a sort of solid quality, that I think Tony lacked'.<sup>204</sup> This, arguably, is the judgement that has stuck: to this day, Guthrie is often perceived as a flashy but somewhat insubstantial director, memorable chiefly for his scenic innovations rather than as a 'genius' to rank with the greatest names of the twentieth-century stage.

When we consider the mainstream Anglo-North American theatre today, however, Guthrie's influence is everywhere visible – and not only in the many stages inspired by his and Moiseiwitsch's work at Stratford and Minneapolis. His approach to 'modern dress' Shakespeare, with its combination of Ruritanian military uniforms, elegant ball gowns, and snappy two-piece suits, is still to be seen on the stages of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and the Metropolitan Opera, as well as in Stratford and at regional theatres across England and North America. His practical willingness – even in the face of his avowed anti-illusionism – to mix the conventions of realism, melodrama, historical pageant, and comedy in order to move and delight audiences has proved an indelible influence on later directors of both classical and musical theatre, such as Trevor Nunn, Nicholas Hytner, and Adrian Noble, Gregory Doran, and Marianne Elliott. His understanding of theatre 'policy' and approach to season programming still dominates subsidized urban and regional stages in Britain and North

America. Perhaps his longest shadow, however, falls in the area of theatrical organisation and infrastructure. If, as we have argued, he was the first great Artistic Director of the twentieth-century stage, his approach to that role has shaped many of the regimes that followed.

During his tenure at the Old Vic, as we have seen, Guthrie devoted a great deal of time and energy to forming a solid and lasting alliance between the theatre and its funders, CEMA foremost among them. This partnership launched the first collaboration between the subsidised and commercial sectors in the UK theatre: the model of production that would subsequently underpin the work of almost all successful directors and producers in Britain. The organizational labour of Peter Hall (1930-2017), who established the pattern of transferring work from the National Theatre to the West End and Broadway, and Cameron Mackintosh, who developed the musical *Les Misérables* with Trevor Nunn and John Caird at the subsidised Royal Shakespeare Company, follows in Guthrie's footsteps at the Old Vic. This model of production finance continues today and underpins arguably the most significant development in theatre production in the twenty-first century to date: the live theatre broadcast.

The practice of broadcasting performances live to cinemas, although by no means new, has become an established part of the theatre landscape in the period since 2006.<sup>205</sup> Like the Old Vic/CEMA tours, extracts of which were also broadcast on the radio, live theatre broadcast was designed to broaden audiences for theatre, opera and ballet beyond the metropolitan centres where they have consistently catered to the elite. Principal among the producers of such broadcasts is NT Live, a commercial subsidiary of the National Theatre (NT), which has been shown significantly to extend the geographical reach of NT productions and to have had more modest but significant success in broadening the socio-economic diversity of its audiences.<sup>206</sup> By locating the source of these patterns at the very start of the subsidised theatre movement in the UK, we can see how public funding for the arts has always been justified with paradoxical

rhetoric that is simultaneously elitist and vernacular. Moreover, such a reading corrects any temptation to assume that the subsidised theatre has become tainted by increased association with its commercial cousin over time. The two have, in fact, long been deeply imbricated with each other, if not existentially dependent upon each other's various resources.

Meanwhile, the two key subsidised theatres Guthrie helped to found in Canada and the United States remain among the most powerful, influential, and financially successful theatrical organizations on the continent. In 2017, the Stratford Festival posted its fourth consecutive annual surplus after a 2016 season whose attendance figures surpassed 500,000<sup>207</sup>; it also received a \$20 million pledge from the provincial government of Ontario to help renovate its third stage, the Tom Patterson Theatre.<sup>208</sup> A recent article in *Minnesota Business Magazine* boasted that the Guthrie was not only an 'architectural gem' whose 'theatrical influence' had an 'international reach', but also an 'anchor' for 'residential, commercial, and office development' in the city; in 2016, it played to 84% capacity audiences and reported a budget surplus of \$47,408.<sup>209</sup> From the beginning of his career, Guthrie had longed to create institutions that would help to keep theatre alive in communities beyond the metropolis. In Stratford and Minneapolis, he achieved his goal; in that sense, these theatres were his crowning achievements.

At the same time, Guthrie's work in Stratford and Minneapolis underlines the contradictions and tensions built into his vision of the stage, of directing, and of the role of the Artistic Director that he helped to develop. Always uncomfortable within a dominant order, he was attracted to the 'romance' of the so-called 'New World': its openness, innocence, malleability, and potential. He wished, not to replicate what existed in Britain and Europe, but to create something new. Nevertheless, his own assumptions about theatre, about the creative process, and about his North American audiences led him frequently to replicate in artistic terms precisely the same settler colonial attitudes he criticized in his peers: paternalism, authoritarianism, repetition of

established styles, and a condescending approach to spectators and performers. As John Gielgud remarked, ‘he was a terrific pioneer’ attracted to ‘the idea of a new stage, a new world to conquer’.<sup>210</sup> Because he approached theatres as a conqueror, he risked constructing his collaborators and his audiences as the conquered.

[Fig. 6: Tyrone Guthrie directing, 1950, from an article in *Picture Post*: ‘Where Does the Producer Come In?’]. Photo by Karl Hutton, courtesy of *Picture Post* and Getty Images.]

Both in Britain and in North America, Tyrone Guthrie’s work celebrated his own freedom as an iconoclastic and individualistic director, his actors’ freedom to explore, and his audience’s freedom to affirm both their cultural heritage and their contemporary enthusiasms. William Hutt described this love of ‘freedom’ as one of the quintessential attributes of his work: ‘One felt when working with Tony that he would accept anything you did, however outrageous it might be if it was done with courage and conviction’.<sup>211</sup> Yet Michael Langham, Guthrie’s successor at Stratford, argued that Guthrie gave the actor only ‘the *illusion* of freedom’,<sup>212</sup> adding that when someone ‘thought he was making up his own mind [...]’, the truth often was that Tony had told him not only what to think, but what to do’.<sup>213</sup> Arguably, Guthrie was himself subject to this same cycle of influence. Even when he most believed that he was defying the standards of the West End and Broadway stages from which he longed to escape, he was deeply and irrevocably shaped by them: by their star systems, their commercial imperatives, their spectacle, and their understanding of the dramatic canon. Perhaps, indeed, he was ruefully aware of his own imbrication within the assumptions of the metropolitan establishment he so often criticized. When he heard Langham’s judgment that he gave actors only an illusion of freedom, Rossi tells us that ‘Guthrie paused, a glint coming to his eyes, and said, ‘Freedom *is* an illusion’.<sup>214</sup>

[Fig. 7: Portrait of Tyrone Guthrie passed by visitors to the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis. Photo by Craig Lassig, courtesy of AFP / Getty Images.]

## Endnotes

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- 1 Tyrone Guthrie, *A Life in the Theatre* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 2-5.
- 2 Harold Hobson, 'Guthrie, Sir (William) Tyrone (1900–1971)', rev. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/view/article/31182>, accessed 4 Sept 2017.
- 3 Guthrie, *A Life*, 10.
- 4 Guthrie, *A Life*, 10.
- 5 See, for instance, Jon Gielgud's comments in Sheridan Morley, *John Gielgud: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 177.
- 6 Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 9.
- 7 Knowles, *Reading*, 19.
- 8 Knowles, *Reading*, 204.
- 9 Guthrie, *A Life*, 16.
- 10 J.T. Grein, 'The World of the Theatre', *Illustrated London News*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1932.
- 11 Rossi, *Astonish Us in the Morning: Tyrone Guthrie Remembered* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1977), 291.
- 12 Rossi, *Astonish Us*, 27.
- 13 Robert Shaughnessy, *The Shakespeare Effect: A History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 89-91.
- 14 Shaughnessy, *Shakespeare Effect*, 83.
- 15 James Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie: A Biography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 32.
- 16 Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie*, p. 94.
- 17 Paul Cornwell, *Only by Failure: The Many Faces of the Impossible Life of Terence Gray* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004), 178.
- 18 Guthrie tells this story directly in 'Conversations with Tyrone Guthrie': BBC Transcription of Conversations Between Guthrie and an Unnamed Interviewer (London: BBC, 1964), Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Archive, Reel 10, p.1. He tells it more indirectly in *A Life in the Theatre*, 181, where Assistant Stage Manager George Chamberlain does the deed of standing up to 'Miss Tempest'. See also Rossi, *Astonish Us*, 87.
- 19 Guthrie, *A Life*, 80.
- 20 Quoted in Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie*, 228.
- 21 Iain Mackintosh, *The Guthrie Thrust Stage: A Living Legacy* (Association of British Theatre Technicians and The Royal Shakespeare Company, 2011), 1.
- 22 Because this series is intended to focus on theatre, we do not address Guthrie's work in radio and other media in any detail. For a comprehensive account of his work across art forms, see Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie*.
- 23 Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 9.
- 24 Shaughnessy, *Shakespeare Effect*, 80.
- 25 Peter Rankin, *Joan Littlewood: Dreams and Realities* (London: Oberon, 2016), 14.
- 26 Peter Brook, *Threads of Time: A Memoir* (London: Methuen, 1998), 29; see also Shaughnessy, 'Tyrone Guthrie', 98.
- 27 Nicholas Wroe, 'Peter Brook: The Magus', *Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2007.
- 28 'Conversations', Reels 7 & 8, 13.
- 29 'Conversations', Reel 6, 12.
- 30 'Conversations', Reels 7 & 8, 9.
- 31 Tyrone Guthrie, *Theatre Prospect* (London: Wishart & Co., 1932), 40.
- 32 'Conversations', Reel 9, 10.
- 33 'Conversations', Reels 10 & 11, 7.
- 34 'Conversations', Reels 10 & 11, 5.
- 35 Forsyth, *Tyrone Guthrie*, 77.
- 36 'Conversations', Reels 10 & 11, 5.
- 37 Dennis Kennedy, 'The Director, the Spectator and the Eiffel Tower', in *Theatre Research International*, 30.1, March 2005, 36-48, 44.
- 38 Simon Shepherd, *Direction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 199, emphasis added.
- 39 Shaughnessy, 'Tyrone Guthrie', 104.
- 40 *Theatre Prospect*, 9, 10.
- 41 *Theatre Prospect*, 16.
- 42 *Theatre Prospect*, 17.
- 43 *Theatre Prospect*, 24.
- 44 'Conversations', Reel 3, 12.
- 45 *Theatre Prospect*, 49.
- 46 *Theatre Prospect*, 51.



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- 47 *Theatre Prospect*, 52, 53, 54, 60.
- 48 *Theatre Prospect*, 61.
- 49 See Tom Cornford, 'Jacques Lecoq and the Studio Tradition' in Mark Evans and Rick Kemp eds., *The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 43-50.
- 50 Rankin, *Joan Littlewood*, 14.
- 51 Shaughnessy, 'Tyrone Guthrie', 101.
- 52 'Conversations with Tyrone Guthrie', Reels 13 & 14, 1.
- 53 Knowles, *Reading*, 19.
- 54 'Conversations', Reel 5, 11.
- 55 Guthrie, *Theatre Prospect*, 43.
- 56 Tyrone Guthrie, *A Life*, 53-61. See also Cornwell, *Only by Failure*, 185-186.
- 57 Knowles, *Reading*, 19.
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