

...thin because his food, which slips away without being chewed, translates into pure energy in a spasm of digestive osmosis. He is of average height, quick, mercurial, short-haired and dressed with a quietly pronounced and less modishness.

Who is his favourite playwright? Alan Bennett, because I'm directing his new play at the moment. That play, *The Madness of George III*, which Hytner says is about the madness of George III, was popped through his letter box in April by Bennett, with the characteristic proviso that the author did not know if it was any good. Hytner thinks it is reasonably all right, and his production opens at the Royal National Theatre on Thursday.

A child of the self-help 1960s, Hytner's flight to the top has been arrow-swift. Born into a comfortably-off Mancunian Jewish family, he is probably the only person whose parents (now divorced) are both in *Dereet's People of Today*. Bennet Hytner is a prominent Manchester QC, and Joyce Hytner, an inveterate first-nighter and number one fan, the public relations manager of Granada Television.

Nicholas, the eldest of three sons, attended Manchester Grammar School and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he read English and made his name as the new Trevor Nunn in a generation that also included Declan Donnellan, Steven Pimlott and Jeremy Sams, all of whom remain close friends.

He lives in Primrose Hill in a large house bought from his earnings on the West End and Broadway productions of *Miss Saigon*. Alan Bennett lives round the corner in Camden Town. They forged a working

side of the table and explains why he rarely does new plays by young authors who require nurturing. 'I need to sniff the chance of anything I do becoming a monster hit. He likes big plays, big theatres, big actors.'

Audiences, he feels, should get their teeth into something. 'Composers are so unworriedly that, when I've done contemporary music, it's taken me the six-week rehearsal period to understand it. I've got to the stage now where I simply prefer *Gypsy*'.

Is he therefore fed up with opera? He rarely said so much on television earlier this year, and elaborated in *Opera magazine*, suggesting that style

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was winning out over content at the English National Opera. His own ENO productions of Handel's *Xerxes* (returning to the Coliseum in January) and *The Magic Flute* were certainly stylish. I cannot readily think of two more richly enjoyable London theatre nights in the past few years.

'In interviews I just shoot my mouth off and then get very depressed. But every time I do an opera now, I think that's it. One of the reasons I do two or three shows a year is in order not to have time to dwell on what was wrong with the last one.'

So he does have more opera plans, starting with Verdi's *The Force of Destiny* for the

succeeding Peter Hall at Glyndebourne because he is too restless and impatient to want to run anything. Not even the RSC or the National? 'No, there's too much hassle. What about the regional theatres? There's no money to run the Bristol Old Vic, everyone knows that. Might want to do. I'd be hopeless. I like the power over my work, but having power over other people's destiny I've always found the harder aspect of a director's job.'


Hytner made his name because of other people's commitment to regional theatre: his first major work after

lastly faced versions of *As You Like It*, Marlowe's *Edward II*, Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Schiller's *Don Carlos*.

The success of *Miss Saigon* led to charges of 'selling out', but Hytner is proud of it and keen as a result to have a crack at Puccini. He is doing to do *La Bohème*. 'We are at our best in the British theatre when we find a way of reconciling art and showbiz. I was in the theatre because of the RSC's work at the end of the 1960s and in the early Seventies, when they created, under Trevor Nunn, an intellectually watertight showbiz style, showbiz with emotional depth.'

Thus Hytner distances himself from the great European socialist, humanist and 'serious' theatre tradition: 'There is in our temperament, as artists and audiences, a sensible resistance to unstructured European self-indulgence in the arts.' No one who directed, so well and so joyously, that old pot-boiler *The Soviet Pimpernel* could possibly be accused of selling out in *Miss Saigon*.

He's an unrepentant pleasure-spreader and, like Nunn, brings the same hedonistic imperatives to Shakespeare as he does to Mozart and melodrama. His RSC debut in 1984, *Measure For Measure* with Josette Simon as Isabella, conveyed the full luxuriant blast of financial and moral collapse in inter-war Europe, just as a new age of great exhibitions and grand tours was implied in the neo-classical splendours of the ENO *Xerxes*. Hytner's subsequent RSC collaborations with the quickly brilliant John Wood as Prospero and *King Lear* have added a special brand of humour and a scrupulous



Pleasure-spreader: Nicholas Hytner/Photograph by Neil Libbert

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Madness of George III, Michael Coveney

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