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by

National Theatre

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Written by Marina McIntyre
Illustrated by RUDE – www.thisisrude.com

Project team for the National Theatre:
Alice King-Farlow, Kate Bone, Emma Gosden, Sarah Corke

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Director of the National Theatre, Rufus Norris
Executive Director, Lisa Burger

This book was inspired by the many extraordinary productions programmed by Nicholas Hytner, Director of the National Theatre from 2003–2015, and Nick Starr, Executive Director from 2002–2014.
For more information on theatre-making visit us at www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/allaboutheatre

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THEATRE'S NOT JUST ABOUT ACTING



Dear Theatre-Lover,

Theatre is an amazing way to tell stories.

Every night people come to the National Theatre to watch other worlds being created, on stage and in the imaginations of the audience. A play might have been written over 2,000 years ago or devised in the days before the first performance. Theatre brings people together to experience a story.

But theatre isn't just about what you see on stage. The work begins long before the first night. It takes many different people and different skills to put on a play. This book tells the story of how we do it at the National Theatre, in our building by the River Thames in London. Everything happens under one roof, from the very earliest idea for a play to the lights fading at the end of the last performance. We make scenery, costumes, wigs and props. We have departments for lighting, sound, music and video.

You don't need to be the National Theatre to put on plays. Plays happen in theatres all across the country and the world. And in schools, village halls and churches, in tents, in old warehouses, even outdoors. The idea of this book is to inspire you to get involved. Theatre is not just about acting. You could write a play. You could design sets or make costumes. You could use make-up to help create characters. You could be a producer, organizing how a play is put on.

We hope you enjoy discovering some of the ways we make theatre. But most of all we hope you will join in – go and see a play and tell some stories yourself.

Rufus Norris
Director of the National Theatre

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THE MAGIC OF THEATRE

Telling a story through people pretending to be other people dates back thousands of years. In Ancient Greece one or two actors and a chorus performed a play, using only their voices and bodies to create an imaginary world. Today actors wear costumes and carry props, and their performances are often accompanied by elaborate sets and sound and lighting effects. But making theatre has always been about storytelling through speech, movement, space, light and sound. A play must use these to create an illusion for the audience and explore big ideas.

The theatre is magical because it makes the audience forget that what they are watching isn't real. This is called the suspension of disbelief. Your brain might know that the actor dying on stage in front of you is pretending to die, but the power of the storytelling makes you forget, so that you believe what you are seeing. A good play will always inspire the audience's imagination, taking them far beyond the theatre itself and into other worlds.

And it's not just up to the actors to tell the story. Everything on stage happens for a reason and all kinds of decisions are made behind the scenes before opening night. From what the stage looks like to the music you hear and the kind of costumes the actors wear, it all makes the imaginary world of the play believable, moving and entertaining for the audience.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

Making a play is a complicated process. This book will show you how a play is made at the National Theatre, from the first idea to the final curtain. Throughout and in the glossary at the back are interesting theatre words. You will meet different experts and explore different National Theatre productions from the NT's 50-year history and see through them how theatre can be made. There are many other ways to make theatre, though. With clever tricks of the trade and ideas to try at home, you can get involved too.



James Corden in
ONE MAN, TWO GUVNORS

"The National Theatre's building is important, but the human raw material matters most – the administrators, directors, playwrights, actors, stage managers, designers, painters, technicians and musicians."

LAURENCE OLIVIER, 1962

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THEATRE

People have been putting on plays all around the world for thousands of years. Here are some important moments in the history of Western theatre that influence the way the National Theatre makes plays today.



THE ORESTEIA, a Greek tragedy

ANCIENT GREECE Around 500 BC

More than 2,000 years ago the Ancient Greeks came up with the idea of acting. Theatre started as a way of honouring their god Dionysus, but became a way to explore human nature. Some of their types of storytelling are still used today, like comedy (a happy or funny play) and tragedy (a sad play).



500 BC

SHAKESPEARE AND CO. Around 1599

The Rose and The Curtain were two of the first theatres in London. They were built about ten years before Shakespeare, considered to be the world's greatest playwright, wrote his first play. Theatres could charge entrance fees, so being part of a theatre company became a way to make money and theatres competed to attract audiences. Only men were allowed to act on stage so boys played the female parts. Theatres like the Globe became very popular, but in 1642 the Puritan Parliament closed them all down.



1400



1599

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE Around 1600

Commedia dell'arte started in Venice and was a form of street theatre. Actors improvised comic scenarios, which meant the action of the play was made up in the moment. All the characters represented certain types of people, like masters, servants, heroes or villains. These 'stock' characters had a specific personality trait, mask, costume and physical gesture that the audience would recognize instantly.



1600



1660



1881



1963



THE MAGISTRATE, a Victorian farce

VICTORIAN THEATRE Around 1881

During Queen Victoria's reign, tickets became cheaper and theatre became even more popular for rich and poor alike. Most theatres in London's West End were built during this time. The first theatre to have electricity powering all its lighting was the Savoy Theatre in London in 1881.

National Theatre

The National Theatre opens on the South Bank

1976



THE NATIVITY, a Mystery play

MORALITY AND MYSTERY PLAYS Around 1400

Plays in medieval England were based on religious themes. Morality plays were about the struggle between good and evil. Mystery plays told stories from the Bible.

THE RESTORATION Around 1660

The Restoration era began when King Charles II came to the throne. Theatres were allowed to reopen and women appeared on stage as actors for the first time. Plays from this period were often witty and bawdy, and were popular with wealthy society.



HAMLET, the National Theatre's first production

AFTER THE WARS Around 1963

During World Wars I and II, theatre helped to raise the country's spirits. But afterwards, cinema and TV became more popular and theatres had to find new ways to attract their audiences. Many theatres, including the National Theatre, were founded to ensure the grand tradition of theatre-making continued. The first National Theatre Company performance was in 1963.

THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Since the time of Queen Victoria people had said that Britain needed a theatre to celebrate the great traditions of British theatre, especially the plays of William Shakespeare. Even so, it took until the 1960s for the first National Theatre production, **Hamlet**, starring Peter O'Toole and directed by Laurence Olivier, to be staged at the Old Vic theatre. In 1976 the National Theatre moved from the Old Vic to its impressive home on the South Bank of the River Thames.

STATS & FACTS

In total over 1,000 people work at the National Theatre. Since 1963 the National Theatre has presented more than 900 shows and almost 10,000 actors have been in its productions, playing a total of more than 37,000 roles.

It doesn't stop there. Plays from the National Theatre can move to the West End of London, or tour around the country or even as far away as the USA and Japan. Some plays are filmed and screened live in cinemas around the world by National Theatre Live. But what happens at the National Theatre on a big scale is also going on in theatres up and down the country and around the world. It's the same magic, whether the venue is big or small.

THEATRE TALENT

Some of the most famous actors in the world have performed at the National Theatre. Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, Benedict Cumberbatch, Helen Mirren, Adrian Lester, Michael Gambon, Lenny Henry and Maggie Smith are just a few such names. Hundreds of other talented actors and rising stars have followed in their footsteps. Famous playwrights like Alan Bennett and Tom Stoppard have had their plays premiered (first performed) at the National Theatre.

But theatre is not just about the actors and playwrights. Behind the scenes at the National Theatre is a theatre-making factory. Hundreds of people are hard at work creating props, costumes, wigs, scenery, music and lighting to help bring the actors' performances to life.





The National Theatre at the Old Vic in 1963 and on the South Bank today

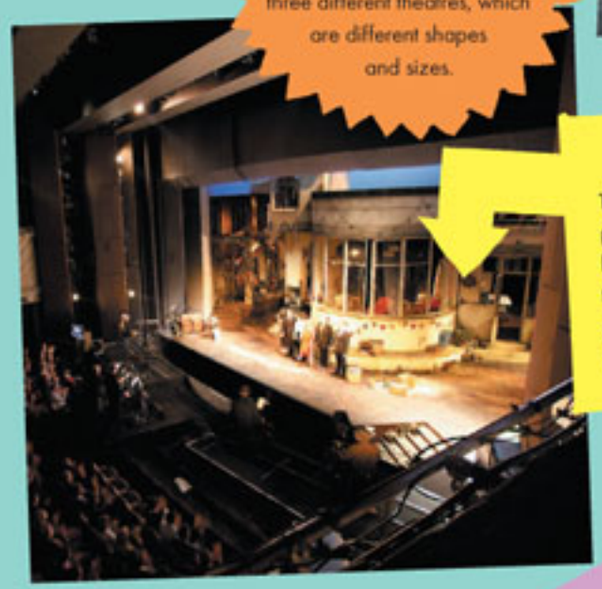
The Olivier

The huge Olivier, named after the famous actor and the National Theatre's first Director, Laurence Olivier, is used for big productions. The stage has a vast revolving section, called the drum revolve, and more than 1,000 people can fit into the auditorium. As in an Ancient Greek amphitheatre, the audience sits in a semi-circle around a circular stage.



THREE THEATRES

The National Theatre has three different theatres, which are different shapes and sizes.



The Lyttelton

The Lyttelton has a traditional stage shape, called proscenium arch. The arch frames the action on the stage, like a picture frame. Unlike most proscenium arch theatres, the Lyttelton's arch can be adjusted so the height and width of the stage can change. The auditorium can seat up to 900 people and the seats have excellent views of the stage.



The Dorfman

The Dorfman is the smallest and most flexible theatre inside the building, where new exciting and experimental plays can be put on. It can seat up to 450 people, and the seats can be raised, lowered or folded away completely to create different stage spaces.