

London Assurance

by Dion Boucicault

Background pack

The National's production	2
Synopsis	3
Boucicault and Victorian Theatre	5
Interview: Nicholas Hytner, director	9
Interview: Simon Russell Beale, actor	13
Staff Director's insight	16
Notes and tasks	20
References and bibliography	21

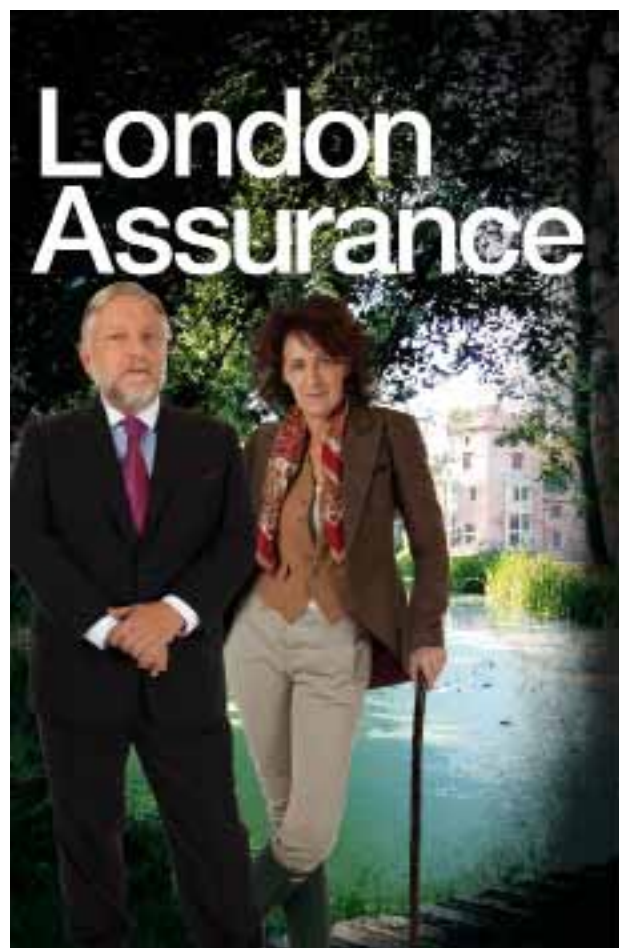


Photo (Simon Russell Beale and Fiona Shaw)
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Further production details
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The National's production

This production of *London Assurance* opened in the National's Olivier Theatre on 10 March 2010

London Assurance

by **DION BOUCICAULT**

Cool, <i>Sir Harcourt's Valet</i>	NICK SAMPSON
Martin, <i>a manservant</i>	RICHARD FRAME
Charles Courtly, <i>Sir Harcourt's son</i>	PAUL READY
Richard Dazzle, <i>his friend</i>	MATT CROSS
Sir Harcourt Courtly, Bart	SIMON RUSSELL BEALE
Squire Max Harkaway	MARK ADDY
Pert, <i>servant to the Harkaways</i>	MAGGIE SERVICE
James, <i>servant to the Harkaways</i>	SIMON MARKEY
Grace Harkaway, <i>Max Harkaway's niece</i>	MICHELLE TERRY
Mark Meddle, <i>attorney at law</i>	TONY JAYAWARDENA
Lady Gay Spanker	FIONA SHAW
Mr Adolphus Spanker, <i>her husband</i>	RICHARD BRIERS
Mr Solomon Isaacs	JUNIX INOCIAN
Doctor	DAVID WHITWORTH
Servants	MARK EXTANCE PRASANNA PUWANARAJAH
Doctor's daughters	FIONA DRUMMOND LAURA MATTHEWS
Music Director, accordion	IAN WATSON
Fiddle	SOPHIE SOLOMON
Double bass, tuba	DAVID BERRY
Director	NICHOLAS HYTNER
Designer	MARK THOMPSON
Lighting Designer	NEIL AUSTIN
Music	RACHEL PORTMAN
Choreographer	SCARLETT MACKMIN
Sound Designer	JOHN LEONARD
Company Voice Work	JEANNETTE NELSON
Staff Director	DAN BIRD



Simon Russell Beale (Sir Harcourt Courtly) and Fiona Shaw (Lady Gay Spanker)
Photo by Catherine Ashmore

Synopsis of *London Assurance*

Shortly before her nineteenth birthday, Grace Harkaway's uncle, Max, visits his old friend, the vain and pompous Sir Harcourt Courtly. Max is to bring Sir Harcourt from London to his country house in Gloucestershire in order to marry Grace. The marriage has been on the cards for the past eight years since Grace's father, and the mortgage holder of Sir Harcourt's estate, died, leaving a remarkable will. This will states that if, when she reaches nineteen, she agrees to marry Sir Harcourt, he will inherit the deeds to both his land and the Harkaway estate; however, if she refuses, the land will be inherited by Sir Harcourt's son, Charles.

Sir Harcourt has been living on the continent for the past seven years, and so has a distanced relationship with Charles, believing him to be a studious, sober boy. Charles has been very keen to maintain the illusion as it's the perfect smokescreen to hide his actual lifestyle of drinking, seducing, gambling and general dissolution. On the morning of Max's visit, Charles is escorted home by a young chancer, Richard Dazzle, who accidentally bumps into Max, and through his charm gets invited to the wedding. As a hung-over Charles tries to get rid of Dazzle, the imminent arrival of a debt collector, Solomon Isaacs, persuades him to accept Dazzle's extended invitation to Gloucestershire, and so Charles and Dazzle, and Max and Sir Harcourt each in turn make their way to the country.

When Charles and Dazzle arrive they meet Grace, a 'rural Venus' who has entirely convinced herself of the stupidity of love and who unwittingly captures Charles' attentions; and Mark Meddle, a lawyer singularly intent on making a legal case and some money at any cost. Sir Harcourt and Max follow shortly behind, and when confronted with his father, Charles denies his identity (he's supposed to be at university) and claims to be called Augustus Hamilton.

After two days in each other's company, Charles' advances towards Grace start to have more success, and his and Dazzle's presence at the house grates on Sir Harcourt. The tension is broken by the arrival of Grace's cousin, Lady Gay Spanker, a hearty, joyful, country-bred woman, with whom



Fiona Shaw
Photo by Catherine Ashmore

Sir Harcourt becomes instantly infatuated. She is joined by her husband, Adolphus (Dolly)Spanker, many years her senior, and as timid as Lady Gay is buoyant. Charles' pursuit of Grace is threatened when Sir Harcourt, in an attempt to qualify the 'likeness' between Augustus Hamilton and Charles, writes to London demanding his son's attendance at the house. The quick-thinking Dazzle hits upon a plan to divert Sir Harcourt's attention and marriage to Grace by manipulatively fuelling his lust for Lady Gay. Charles finally finds the courage to make a move on Grace, which despite her previous dismissal of love, goes very well, but is inadvertently interrupted by Lady Gay before either of them can entirely confirm the other's feelings. Lady Gay is then enthusiastically recruited into the plan by



Synopsis

Charles who claims he can 'bend the haughty Grace'.

Later that evening Grace receives word that Augustus Hamilton has left the house in a hurry – her panicked reaction revealing her love to an observing Lady Gay. When the gentlemen of the house rejoin the ladies after dinner, Sir Harcourt encourages a drunken Spanker to challenge his wife's authority in an attempt to gain her affections himself. Soon after, Charles arrives at the house, unsurprisingly looking very similar to Augustus Hamilton, but Sir Harcourt is still taken in by Charles' 'disguise'. When Charles and Grace are left alone she subtly calls his bluff and forces him to 'kill off' Augustus Hamilton whilst also confusing him about her true feelings. Sir Harcourt begins his 'seduction' of Lady Gay and she pushes him into agreeing to elope with her. All of which is overheard by Meddle who proceeds to tell Spanker and offers to represent him in a legal case against Sir Harcourt.

Lady Gay discovers that Meddle and Spanker know about the elopement, but it simply enhances her enjoyment of the huge practical joke. The next evening, Sir Harcourt has made all the relevant arrangements for the elopement, and is joined by Lady Gay, who causes a scene to get the attention of Max, Meddle, Spanker and Dazzle in order to expose Sir Harcourt. When Sir Harcourt escapes, Lady Gay, assisted by Dazzle, diverts the planned lawsuit by insisting that Spanker should challenge Sir Harcourt for her honour, confidently convinced that the duel will never actually happen.

Meanwhile Sir Harcourt has a moment of self revelation and vows to discard his self-obsessed attitude. Later Max reveals to Grace that he has saved a small nest-egg for her, releasing her from the necessity of fulfilling the conditions of the will. They are interrupted by Lady Gay who informs them that Sir Harcourt and Spanker are locked in the billiard room and about to duel, which Max sets off to stop.

The newly reformed Sir Harcourt relinquishes Grace from their engagement, but she asks him to pretend that it is still on, as a ruse to catch out Charles. A highly distressed and deeply remorseful Lady Gay returns looking for Dolly whom she presumes dead. Dolly returns and relieves the tension momentarily before Solomon Isaacs arrives from London to arrest Charles for debt. He reveals to everyone that Charles and Augustus Hamilton are the same person, but since a furious Sir Harcourt refuses to bail his deceitful son out, Grace steps in and offers to pay the debt, signalling that she will marry Charles, which Sir Harcourt eventually accepts, thus uniting the two families.

Boucicault

Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot was born in Dublin on 26 December 1820, son of Anne Darley. Like Dazzle in the play, his parentage is questionable, although it's likely that his father was Dionysius Lardner, a lodger at his mother's house at a time when she was recently separated from her husband. After school Boucicault was apprenticed as a civil engineer, but he hated the work and at 17 he ran away to become an actor under the name Lee Moreton, his acting described at the time as 'simply exquisite... very like genius'. In 1841, after pitching his one-act plays around several London theatres, *London Assurance* was finally accepted for production at Covent Garden by its managers Charles Mathews and Madame Vestris. From then on he was writing not for posterity or to achieve literary acclaim, but for the audience.

Over the next 50 years Boucicault was the most commercially successful dramatist of 19th-century British and American theatre.



Dion Boucicault
© V&A Images, Victoria and
Albert Museum

Boucicault was married three times. He married Anne Guiot at St. Mary Lambeth on 9 July 1845, but she died that same year in, he claimed, a Swiss mountaineering accident. In 1853, he eloped with Agnes Kelly Robertson to marry in New York. She was the juvenile lead in Charles Kean's company – for whom Boucicault was the resident dramatist at the time – and an actress of unusual ability. All of their children became distinguished actors in their own right, as did his granddaughter Rene Boucicault. In late 1885, Boucicault toured Australia, where his brother Arthur lived. Towards the end of this tour, he suddenly left Agnes to marry Josephine Louise Thorndyke, another young actress. This aroused scandal on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, as his marriage to Agnes was not finally dissolved until 21 June 1888, by reason of bigamy with adultery. The rights to many of his plays were later sold to finance alimony payments to his second wife. He was an extraordinary person and suffered from a well-defined case of the artistic temperament; he made and squandered fortunes, living like a prince, finally dying in 1890 in New York City.

Boucicault was a true jack-of-all-trades, changing his writing style and genre at any moment it would be commercially popular and financially beneficial. When audiences wanted historical romance, he gave them *Louis XI*; when they wanted domestic plays, he provided *Dot* (an adaptation of Dickens' *The Cricket in the Hearth*); the popularity of Irish plays spawned *Arrah na Pogue*, *The Shaughraun* and *Robert Emmet*; when Americans wanted to see themselves portrayed, he gave them *The Octoroon*; when the sensationalism of horse-racing caught the public's eye, he gave them *The Flying Scud*; when the taste for detective stories took hold, he gave them *Mercy Dodd* and *Presumptive Evidence*; and when the three-act farce was to take centre stage in the 1880s, he wrote *Forbidden Fruit*.

Through his remarkable career, he was an innovator.

Boucicault

For example, in *Forbidden Fruit*, he divided the stage into two compartments in Act One, and into two rooms and a corridor in Act Three, to keep the action moving. In *The Flying Scud*, which ran for 200 nights in London, the horse race central to the plot was accomplished by means of what *The Times* described as ‘small profile horses in the background and at the end Nat appears in front, seated on a real, live Flying Scud’. He was always more than willing to please his audience. He even rewrote the ending to *The Octoroon* because London audiences wanted a happy ending for his heroine Zoe. On the back of his American success with *The Poor of New York*, he transferred the play to Britain. Finding it to be significantly less popular with a London audience he then toured it around the country, its title changing to fit the city in which it was playing – *The*



Charles Mathews in the first production of *London Assurance*
© Garrick Club/The Picture Desk

Poor of Newcastle, The Poor of Leeds – but each time being advertised as a totally new play, ending with a hugely triumphant production of *The Poor of London*. Exactly the same play, but with a new title, and now a hit.

London Assurance

The precise details surrounding the genesis of *London Assurance* are uncertain – even Boucicault’s own accounts changed as he got older – but it seems likely that using the support of his actor friend Charles Brougham, Boucicault eventually persuaded Charles Mathews, actor-manager (the equivalent of artistic director) of the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden to take a chance on him as a dramatist. A play called *Out of Town* was written by Boucicault (probably with a lot of help from Brougham) in less than a month, but through extensive alterations and additions by Mathews, Madame Vestris (the other manager of Covent Garden) and the rest of the cast, *London Assurance* opened on 4 March 1841 to great acclaim. Its appeal was immediate: warmth, prodigality of comic invention, vigorous dramatic language and parts to fit an unusually gifted company of comedians: it is about good feeling, what sustains it, what kills it, where to find it, how to lose it.

Written when Boucicault was only 21, it’s no surprise that the plot of *London Assurance* ‘borrows’ countless elements of 18th-century comedy, including improbable disguises, foolish elderly suitors, and a failed duel. Similarly, the stock characters of the play owe a huge amount both to Restoration clichés, but even more so to previous parts played by the Covent Garden company – each of the characters seems to be an opportunistic copy of the actors’ earlier hit roles. This moulding of the play to fit the acting company is abundantly clear in Boucicault’s preface to the first published edition, where he praises at length each actor in turn, and specifically notes the characteristics he expanded on: ‘Mrs Nisbett did not enact – she was Lady Gay Spanker – the substance of my thoughts; she wore the character with grace and ease, divesting



Boucicault

it of any coarseness, yet enjoying all its freedom. She dashed in like a flash of lightning, and was greeted with a thunder of applause. What can I say of this laughing, frolic creature?’ Indeed, he greatly increased the importance of *Lady Gay Spanker* in *London Assurance* because of his infatuation for Mrs Nisbett.

Style

Boucicault has been described as ‘the most conspicuous English dramatist of the 19th century’, ‘the cleverest, raciest, and most theatrically inventive playwright of his age’, but now his work is very seldom seen on the stage. Nicholas Hytner (Director of the National Theatre and this production) suggests that this is because Boucicault regarded himself unashamedly as an entertainer, not a playwright interested in social or moral discourse. Importantly he was a man of his age – amazingly adept at guessing what plays would appeal to his specific audience. The 18th-century theatre had tried rigidly to separate the ‘kinds’ of drama from each other – and failed. Boucicault increasingly abandoned the attempt, settling for plays which mingled song, anguish, laughter and spectacle or anything else that would help them to ‘go’. More than a playwright, Boucicault was a man of the theatre, expert in stage mechanics, stage management and in using that expertise simply to entertain because that was the way to keep the money coming: he had an uncanny knack for anticipating the fickle tastes of his audiences on both sides of the Atlantic and providing them with just the novelty they wanted. This desire to give the audiences exactly what they wanted, but with as little effort as possible, led to his being described as ‘plagiarism incarnate’, something he seems to have had no embarrassment about: ‘I am an emperor, and take what I think best for Art, whether it be a story from a book, a play from the French, an actor from a rival company. I can spin out these

rough-and-tumble dramas as a hen lays eggs. It’s a degrading occupation, but more money has been made out of guano than out of poetry’.

Rose Eyttinge, an actress in his first play described the nature of rewriting in rehearsal:

‘The play was like a child whose growth one can mark from day to day. Boucicault did edit it with a pair of scissors and a paste-pot, but he corrected it with a note-book and a pencil. There were in the company one or two persons who could, on occasion, say some rather bright things. ‘These things to hear’ would Dion Boucicault ‘seriously incline’; but while the company laughed at them at the moment and forgot them the next, not so the astute Dion; he would either pass them by apparently without notice, or with a grave expression of disapproval at our levity in such a serious moment. But the next morning, at a place in the dialogue where one of these quips could be used with profit, our mentor would pause, as if a thought had just struck him, and say, ‘Stop a bit’, and out would come that little note-book, ‘Just say, instead of so-and-so,’ – and then he would read, as a quite fresh thought, some child of wit that had been born at the previous day’s rehearsal. When this first occurred, the quiet coolness of the transaction somewhat took away our breath; but afterward we used rather to await with interest the advent of these little waifs. But never did any one venture to intimate to the great dramatist that this little trick of annexation had been observed.’

He also spoke at length about the nature of acting and theatre. As a theorist, Boucicault was ever the pragmatist. Dramaturgy seemed to him a matter of instinct, but he had words of advice to his fellow actors. They should choose their line of business according to the gifts that nature had given them and stick to it. ‘Nature knows best. If you happen to have a short sharp face, a hard voice, an angular figure, you are suited for the intellectual characters

Boucicault

of the drama, such as Hamlet and so forth. If you are of a soft, passionate nature, if you have a soft voice and that sort of sensuous disposition which seems to lubricate your entire form, your limbs, so that your movements are gentle and softer than others, then this character is fitted for a Romeo or an Othello'.

Money and Royalties

As well as writing plays, acting, and producing work on both sides of the Atlantic, he also fundamentally changed the nature of theatre – first in a bizarre turn he invented fireproofing for theatre sets, but more importantly he campaigned rigorously for the power (financial of course) of writers, and he was the first English playwright to collect royalties for his work. Shortly after his arrival in America, he

joined with Robert Montgomery Bird and George Henry Boker to push for dramatic copyright laws in America, which was successful in 1856. At the time it was customary for the management to give the dramatist a small fee, and none of the profits. Boucicault insisted that the playwright should receive a percentage of the receipts, and won his point – in 1852 he was paid \$300 for his play *The Corsican Brothers*, and in 1866 for *The Flying Scud* he received \$32,500. This commitment to defending the authorship of plays seems somewhat out of keeping with a man who would steal from whatever source he fancied, but as he noted at the time, 'In business, he never knew the value of a contract, and prided himself upon never keeping his word unless he liked'.

THEATRE ROYAL
COVENT GARDEN
 UNDER THE MANAGEMENT OF
Madame VESTRIS.

The FREE LIST (the Public Press excepted) will
 will be suspended This Evening.

This Evening, THURSDAY, March 4th, 1841.
 WILL BE PRODUCED, FOR THE FIRST TIME,
A NEW COMEDY
 IN FIVE ACTS,
ENTITLED
LONDON
ASSURANCE

The Scenery by Mr. GRIEVE, Mr. T. GRIEVE, and Mr. W. GRIEVE
 The Decorations and Appointments by Mr. W. BRADWELL.

Sir Harcourt Courtly, Bart.	Mr. W. FARREN,
Max Harkaway, Esq.	Mr. BARTLEY,
Mr. Charles Courtly,	Mr. ANDERSON,
Mr. Adolphus Spunker,	Mr. KEELLY,
Mr. Dumie,	Mr. CHARLES MATHEWS,
Mark Middle,	Mr. HARLEY,
Cool, Mr. BRINDAL,	Isaac, Mr. W. H. PAYNE,
Martin, Mr. AVLIFFE,	Simpson, Mr. MONNER,
James, Mr. COLLETT,	Servants, Messrs. IRELAND & GARDINER.

Grace Harkaway, .. Madame VESTRIS,
 Lady Gay Spunker, .. Mrs. HIBBERT,
 Feet, Mrs. HURRY.

The first night of *London Assurance*, 4 March 1841. It was followed
 by the Christmas Pantomime, *The Castle of Otranto*. Reported as
 being by Lee Moreton, it was not until 27 March that the bills
 announced 'by D. L. Boucicault Esq'.

Interview: director, Nicholas Hytner

How and when did you come across *London Assurance*?

I saw the famous production with Donald Sinden and Elizabeth Spriggs – I think I must have seen it in 1972, so I would have been a teenager – and there's not that many shows that have lodged so vividly with me, but I remember howling with laughter. But there's no way that I read or saw it since then, until I started as Director here at the National, when I read all sorts of plays which I vaguely remembered, or hadn't ever read but knew about, or thought might be good at some point for the repertoire here. So I would have read it again in 2002 and realised what a good job they must have done on it in '72, because it's got great bits. But there's a lot that needs help. It's been there, front and centre, for quite a few years as a play that has the kind of spirit, the brio, the largeness of heart to fill the Olivier, because occupying that stage is something a great many plays can't and won't do. I wasn't initially going to direct it myself. I asked two or three people who happened not to be free before I thought, I really enjoy this kind of stuff. And Simon [Russell Beale, playing Sir Harcourt Courtly] obviously has an instinctive feel for it. I wouldn't have done it without Simon, or someone of his stature – it's not something you decide to do without knowing who's going to play Sir Harcourt Courtly – and Simon and I get on terribly well, so I thought I'd direct it myself.

What considerations do you have in staging a play like this on the Olivier?

There's a challenge: it's a play written for a conventional Victorian proscenium arch theatre so it presupposes a degree of intimacy that the Olivier doesn't have. A lot of what I've been doing is taming the Olivier. Most of the play is acted from on or near the 'Michael Bryant spot': he famously, if he was ever in a show, without it ever seeming obvious, would gravitate to a spot either upstage of front centre or two or three feet to either side. Just the placing, in the interior scenes, of the sofa and the chair, is arranged so everybody is between them. The placing of the breakfast table, the pile of manure, the garden table. I hope nobody notices



Photo (Nicholas Hytner in rehearsals for a previous 2010 National Theatre production, *The Habit of Art*) by Johan Persson

but the play basically gets acted from a very small part of the stage. Now that's not what you *have* to do in the Olivier – in fact by and large I think the Olivier works best with a kind of oscillation between stuff focused in the place where it works and sounds best, and then opened out, and then focused, and then opened out again. The way the Olivier never works is if it's just treated as a prairie. You need to tame that. Now to tame a play like this is about having actors who are confident occupants of it. Mark Thompson [the designer] and I have worked in the Olivier so often that neither of us feels the need to show off our mastery of the entire space. What you then get for free is this big public event, the audience aware of itself and, I hope, an easy conversation between actors and audience.

In relation to that easy conversation, how do you approach the business of asides?

Well I don't think they're asides any more – that's another thing I've been kind of working on without ever explicitly saying it. I'm always encouraging the actors to take time, encouraging them to assume that the house [auditorium] is filled with a thousand friends particular to them. They are involved whole-



Interview: director, Nicholas Hytner

heartedly in a real situation which happens to be observed by a thousand people just like them. So they're not really asides, it's almost as if the play is permanently under their observation. You can't mutter an aside in the Olivier the way you could in a West End theatre where you can just toss something over your shoulder. But you do have the advantage of an audience absolutely aware that they're being put in the position of being your friends. You can't toss something out into the dark, you have to pull them in. It's a very public affair. So I do think that because of the largeness of spirit of the time, and because of Boucicault's writerly flamboyance, it's an Olivier play.

The journey we've been on seems to have been very similar to the original production in that it's been shaped by the actors because those actors have an instinctive theatricality and stagecraft.

Yes, that's exactly what it's about. It's a play that cannot exist independently of the actors who are going to play the parts – he wrote it for particular actors. You need high definition acting, you need actors confident about discovering who they are, why they're there, what their very urgent wants and needs are, scene by scene, and then delivering them with very sharp outlines. There are people who are confident partly because they are so experienced, and there are also those who instinctively understand the business of putting themselves up for display. Matt Cross [playing Dazzle] is not experienced in this kind of stuff but he has an instinctive dancer's confidence. To Matt, it seems to me, there's no conflict between acting and being available for display. Now there are a lot of actors who can't negotiate their way round that conflict. Then Paul [Ready, playing Charles] is someone who passes very easily between the kind of show where he's not remotely on display, he's there to be discovered, and this kind of show where he's absolutely up for display.

Boucicault is now a very disregarded playwright, often considered as falling in a chasm between Wilde and Restoration. Why do you think that is?

I'm going to use a modish word. His project was to entertain. He wrote about his work very often and everything he wrote about his plays acknowledges and builds from an assumption that the Victorian public didn't want a theatre which challenged, analysed, provoked, dug deep. Boucicault had a conviction that some ages are fortunate enough to be blessed with a Shakespeare or a Homer, but his age was only interested in entertainment. Now what I think is interesting is that it doesn't mean he was merely an entertainer. I can think of several current playwrights who simply refuse to talk about their work except insofar as it engages a public. They won't allow their work to be discussed in a way that forces them to make claims for their work as literature – that doesn't mean the work isn't literature. I don't think that the Elizabethan playwrights would have claimed that they were engaged in an investigation – as profound and as complex as has ever been undertaken – of the human condition. They would have said 'we're story tellers, we're anxious about the box office'. Boucicault is not of the first rank, but I think maybe there has been an unconscious tendency to take him at his own estimation, and his own estimation of himself was not low, but he regarded himself as an entertainer. As it happens, as you do this play, you realise it's full of comic poignancy, sharp, touching, intelligent insights into the way people interact with each other. Is it a philosophical enquiry to rank with some novels of the same period? No, it's not *Middlemarch*, no way. It doesn't have the savagery or the dismay about social injustice of Dickens. Does it have the satirical edge, the desire to change society, that Restoration comedy has? No it doesn't. It's compared to Restoration comedy complacently, but that doesn't mean that it's negligible. So, where does he fit between Sheridan and Wilde? Sheridan wrote two very perfect plays – there are no loose

Interview: director, Nicholas Hytner



ends. Wilde wrote one great play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which has a sophistication and a finish and a wit which is beyond Boucicault. *The School for Scandal* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are in a different league but they're part of a continuum. The other reason he's neglected is that he's a jack-of-all-trades which, unless you're Shakespeare, never goes down well – he wrote Irish melodrama, he wrote out-and-out tragic melodrama, he wrote big sensation plays, he railed against social injustice when he thought it would set the box office tills ringing. So yes, it'd be nice to see a little bit more, but probably, you don't need to see *London Assurance* more than once every fifteen years.

Above: Mark Thompson's set design in model box form.
Courtesy of the National Theatre's production department

What were the main considerations that influenced your preparation and design process with Mark?

I think we approached this play in its spirit, which was 'We have a play, we have a cast, we have a theatre which we both know very well. How do we best unlock its comic spirit, and do it as truthfully and honestly as possible?' There's a strong, simple idea at the centre of the play which is that London and the country are very different, and if you bring the two into comic conflict you can make dramatic capital out of it. The second consideration is that it's set in 1841. It's worth finding a version of 1841 that feels at the same time true to its period and true to now, recognisable. This is something you can do with a whole swathe of English comedy. So I can only go on my instincts here, I'm not sure I could articulate the rules: obviously it's set in period, but also I'm not being fanatically meticulous about keeping it in period at every point. There are certain anachronisms which seem to me to fit easily and anachronisms which I wouldn't allow because they would take an audience out of the play. So there's

Interview: director, Nicholas Hytner

no high concept, but it needs a strong sense of what it's about and a strong sense of how it's going to occupy that stage.

What's the most important job of a director on a play like this?

To communicate it moment by moment, to keep it buoyant moment by moment. Why are we doing it? Because it is funny and truthful and a missing link. It's obviously part of the National Theatre's job to be constantly reinvestigating the English canon. The 18th and 19th centuries are, for good reasons, under-represented on our stages because less of interest comes from the 18th and 19th centuries than comes from the 17th and 20th. But that's a very good reason to find out what was going on. It's not a play which should be radically turned inside out, because I think it's better to give an audience a real sense of what its predecessors 160-odd years ago would have been responding to. I think my job is to make the audience in 2010 respond to this as spontaneously and as warmly and as honestly as its audience in 1841 would have done – that's the job. I could have taken the decision to set the play now, but I think that decision would have resulted in a less spontaneous, less

warm, less honest response to the play than finding a way of immersing the 2010 audience into the world of 1841. But day by day my job is to make it funny and truthful, to find not just the world but the style. And in the end I'm not interested in too many deviations from it because there are certain stylistic virtues and stylistic requirements that this kind of English comedy of manners stands or falls by.



Members of the *London Assurance* company
Photo by Catherine Ashmore

Interview: actor, Simon Russell Beale

When did you first discover *London Assurance* and what drew you to the role of Sir Harcourt?

I first heard about the play when I was at school – there was a famous production with Donald Sinden, Elizabeth Spriggs and Judi Dench that the RSC did, and I heard that it was a very funny evening. My personal desire to do the part was actually not helped by that, because it's always rather difficult to follow in great actors' footsteps. But what intrigued me was that years and years ago I did a whole year of Restoration fops for the RSC – which was something I rather dreaded when I was offered it, but which came to be a rather interesting study. I realised after doing a year of them that they're more complex characters than I'd anticipated. I haven't done anything like that for about 20 years, so when Nick asked me to come and do this I thought it would be interesting to see what a much later child of those sort of fops – which Sir Harcourt is – looks like, and there are fundamental differences. Although over the last few days [of rehearsal] perhaps those differences are narrowing.

What were the particular insights or influences which helped you before rehearsal?

I read a book called *Glamour*, which is a history of glamour and a book on taste – I know nothing about that world. I suppose we're all a bit on the periphery of that high society world. I do actually know people like that; I know professional partygoers, but it's not my world. So there weren't any specific people, it was more thinking about those people you read about in the gossip columns. I was very interested to find out what motivates them, or what the engine is for those sorts of people.

What techniques or processes have you found useful in making Sir Harcourt a psychologically true character?

I'm aware that I started rehearsals accessing what I remembered of the fops, who were very much in the camp world. It's funny what we regard as masculine and what we regard as feminine in those famous

fop characters. Now, later on in the rehearsal period, there's something heavier coming in, a sort of muscularity, and probably I'm aware that he's much more of a sexual predator than the fops are. And he's also a man desperate to get money – and those aren't particularly attractive characteristics in anybody. He's become a darker character, and that has been directly linked to trying to find the truth of the situation. I still think it's important not to entirely jettison the earlier thoughts. He should move elegantly and be conscious of his body and space, in a way that we aren't in 21st-century Britain – although we probably have a version of it: I'm sure if you're a fashionista you're absolutely aware of your shape in the world. So that's still there, and



Simon Russell Beale
photo by Catherine Ashmore



Interview: actor, Simon Russell Beale

he still has, I hope, an elegance about him. But as with all these great comic characters, there's a desperation behind him, and the desperation behind Sir Harcourt is that he's actually a rather sad old man. I think it's important to locate that. Technically it means that over the later stages of rehearsal it's been a question of shading those moments when I think we should see that loneliness. Grounding that desperation is the most important thing – technically that means there's a darkness to the voice and it's not just about display.

The Olivier Theatre is notoriously considered a difficult space to play because it's huge. *London Assurance* requires a great deal of sharing with the audience in the form of asides. How do you tackle the business of asides and retain the detail of truth you've just talked about to an audience this large?

The asides are a difficult technical problem – soliloquy is slightly different because you have time. The most useful thing that anyone's ever said about asides is that lords address the audience as lords and servants address the audience as servants – you're casting the audience in a role. Harcourt speaks honestly to the audience and he suffers a classic comic turnaround by admitting that he's an idiot three quarters of the way through the play, and then tries to make some sort of amends. That's actually what makes the play bigger-hearted than the Restoration comedies, and that's directly related to a character's relationship with the audience.

You've played a huge range of characters in the Olivier. Is it easier to play comedy or tragedy?

Comedy like this is probably more difficult, because as you've suggested with the asides, it requires a proscenium really, so you can get that sharp corner between a scene and an aside. With the Olivier, of course, you have to do a slight swing 'round because of the way the audience curl around the stage. I love the Olivier. I suppose I'm used to it. It

is a tough space, but somebody asked me if you can speak quietly in the Olivier, and actually you can, you just need to command that millisecond of concentration from the audience before you speak quietly. You have to engineer the dynamics of the space so you can take it down; you have to prepare people, otherwise unquestionably you do have to speak loudly and clearly. If you're facing upstage you're aware of throwing your voice back over your shoulder. I love turning upstage, I think that's part of the game: your voice should dull a bit so you get the geography in the audience's mind. The real problem is side to side – you have to cheat the voice out. That's why in all my performances I have a funny wonky mouth!

What's your approach to a play like this where the language is dense and complex, but it's not in a formal structure?

That's an interesting question, because this is not great writing. It's a wonderful play, and it's a much better play than I'd imagined because structurally it's so good. But the writing itself is that sort of rather vague Victorian dramatic writing – sometimes there are a lot of nouns in a line and you can actually put the nouns in any different order and it'll still make as much sense as it did the other way 'round. Because there are lots of big words like honour, truth or good feeling, you have to keep your wits about you in terms of actually trying to locate those rather grand words and give them some sort of specificity. That's a process you don't have to do with Shakespeare, because for the most part Shakespeare chooses words which are absolutely accurate. I'm aware that for all our trying to find the truth, the pain, the discomfort of the situation, that actually a lot of these sentences have to be done in one fell swoop – there's no point in breaking them up. It has a sort of speed and an accuracy, and this is to do with its comic rhythm. If you break them [the sentences] up they'll disintegrate in your hands.

Interview: actor, Simon Russell Beale

And technically that's a thought for each sentence and a breath for each thought or clause?

Yes absolutely, and within that you can colour and you can highlight things, but it's a very simple linear journey through each sentence: "Had I been the happy possessor of such a realm of bliss, what a beatific eternity unfolds itself to my extending imagination". Well, I mean, that's bollocks, but it's good bollocks if it's done with élan and simplicity. I think that has a macro effect because then there is a comic rhythm to the whole piece, there's a comic certainty about it. The other thing is, though we talk about the famous characters like Harcourt and Lady Gay Spanker, this is a real company piece – once all the characters have met, there are a couple of duologues, but basically it's a company show.

What's been the greatest challenge for you?

Being funny. Whether it will be, who knows yet. It's very easy to talk about pain and real situations and all the rest of it, but it's not very easy being funny.

I half believe this thing about comedy is about being real. But it's not entirely true is it, not entirely. It's a warning against being fake, but there's a heightened thing about comedy: you have to be real but heightened. And it's the heightened bit that's difficult. I'm negotiating my way through that really and I won't know whether it works for another two weeks when there's an audience there.

What do you consider your most important job playing a part like this in a play like this?

To motor the play. It's absolutely linked with that simplicity of attack – a mini example is to not break up the sentence because the energy goes down. You have to keep it going, you're very aware that you're handing over to the next person in that scene.

Simon Russell Beale as Sir Harcourt Courtly
photo by Catherine Ashmore



Staff director insight

Monday 18 January

Today is the first day of rehearsal, which is always a bit daunting, even for members of the company who've been doing it for years – mostly people just want to get it out of the way so it's done. Nick Hytner kicks things off by talking about Boucicault, and the type of man he was – shamelessly and defiantly concerned with making money from theatre, and being as entertaining as possible as a way of achieving it. He lost money as much as he made it, spent it lavishly and generously, and then disappeared backwards and forwards between New York and London when times were tough. He continually stole work from his heroes and predecessors, and even from himself – countless presenting minutely rewritten versions of his previous plays as new works. Rose Eytinge, an actor from his very first production, said: "Dion Boucicault was a great man, great if only in his power to assimilate the work of others, and, clothing it in the graceful garb of his own charming words, make the world forget that it had ever had a previous existence." Also key was his awareness of an actor's skill to invent, and in particular to sell his, at times, clumsy characterisation or plot. The upshot of all this for the National's production is that we'll be playing fairly fast and loose with the text: playwright Richard Bean has been tinkering with it and tightening it up, and throughout the rehearsal process we'll be finding ways of making the play live in the early 19th century, but still be accessible, and most of all funny, to a modern audience.

After reading through the play, simply to get the overall feel of it, in the afternoon we start pulling Act One apart – Nick and the actors stop every so often to check that the meaning of the language and the story is clear, but more importantly that the intention and subtext are starting to be explored. As with most productions, and particularly this one, the design and staging is fluidly changing throughout rehearsals, and when an idea comes up (how much breakfast does Sir Harcourt eat in Act One? And how much does Max eat?), the possible



Matt Cross (Dazzle) in rehearsal
photo by Catherine Ashmore

technical consequences are logged by the stage management team. These details appear in notes that are circulated to the designer and production staff.

Tuesday 19 – Wednesday 27 January

The first week or so has been concerned with negotiating a way through the narrative of the play – checking that the complicated, and at times contrived, plot makes sense to the company; tracing the journey of each character, and making sense of why they do certain things. This has been done act by act, at first reading through the act and checking the meaning of everything, but also clarifying what the characters are doing and the detailed texture of character in each speech, and then putting it on its feet to find a physical shape for the arc of the scene. This has happened fairly quickly – we started staging Act One on the second day of rehearsal – but it's amazing to see how much can be achieved this way, indeed this style of play seems to thrive on being acted rather than over-analysed. It goes back to the idea of Boucicault as a creator of popular theatre, rather than a literary playwright. There are plenty of elements that when first read seem to make no sense, but when played with a full conviction and faith in their validity,

Staff director insight

somehow blossom into both perfect sense, and brilliant comedy. As always, Nick's primary focus is to tighten the detail of the narrative, ensuring that not only does the play make sense in general terms, but that every moment from start to finish tells the same story, is consistent with the essential narrative and character arcs, is psychologically and historically 'true', and will read clearly to each member of the audience in the Olivier.

Thursday 28 January – Friday 5 February

With a play like this – undeniably lacking the rigour of realism of modern playwriting with which we're probably more familiar – it might be a surprise to learn how much time and painstaking thought, trial, and error is put into grounding the reality of the play itself. Whilst we might question the believability of such a convoluted plot, it's of utmost importance that the audience are fully



Actor Richard Frame in front of the research and design display in the rehearsal room
photo by Catherine Ashmore

engrossed in the imagined world of the play, and don't question moments on stage as flights of fancy or, as it's referred to in rehearsal, 'Planet Theatre'. Different members of the company are allocated various areas of research into the world of the early 1840s. Based around themes like London, Gloucestershire, fashion, literature, theatre, food, the law, and foxhunting, each actor feeds their findings back to the company, and it's striking how specifically different revelations relate to events in the play – an account of young men stealing door knockers for sport; the living conditions, the wages and responsibilities of servants; the timings and menus of upper-class dining; or specific calls used during the hunt. This kind of historical detail has been incorporated into the set and costume design process for some time, but it's incredibly useful for the actors to have a tangible connection to historical fact. At the more pragmatic end of the scale, every fraction of a second of stage time is carefully dissected to ensure it rings true – if Grace is performing some kind of gardening task in Act Two, what should this be, considering her social status but also her practical country manner, and what is the real world physical process by which this happens? If a member of the audience is a keen gardener, and anything is out of place with the reality of the tasks Grace is performing, the whole façade of the production's world becomes unstuck. Similarly, if at a given moment of the play someone speaks or moves without a carefully considered reason, the audience's focus starts to jar, and they stop following the production so closely.

Nick often talks about putting himself in the position of an ignorant audience member (ignorant in the sense that they don't have the background, research, analysis and experience of the play that



Staff director insight

we do) and considering whether a certain moment or decision ‘reads’ (ie conveys the sense we’re intending). This is made all the more difficult when you consider that the back row of the Olivier stalls is 13 metres from the stage, so making a moment read at that distance requires an acute attention to the psychological and narrative detail, combined with a fierce understanding of theatrical convention, stagecraft, and the Olivier space itself. As we work through each act for the second time, this detail is getting more and more specific, each ingredient giving a sharpened and convincing texture to the actors. There is still space for invention, indeed the text, blocking and underlying thoughts behind each scene are constantly shifting as more discoveries are made.

Monday 8 – Friday 19 February

Although there are still two weeks until we’re in front of an audience, it’s starting to feel like we’re nearing the end of the rehearsal period. It’s very striking that there are still fairly large shifts happening in the production during this time, and even more, the level of detail Nick focuses on gets tighter and tighter. Whereas in the first weeks his principal concern was with grounding the reality of the world (the physical actions of characters, why they might move when they do, where objects on the stage are positioned so they tell a truthful story of characters’ interactions with them), now rehearsals are about finessing the very sturdy structure we’ve created. Having made sure that the plot, text and characterisation are robust, Nick sets about marking every beat of thought or decision so that in most cases we can literally see a character’s thought process, and follow their psychological journey. This always comes back to the text – analysing it as closely as possible to work out what the character and Boucicault are trying to say.

An example of the minutiae of this detail might be

a fleeting moment in Act Three when Sir Harcourt makes a comment about Augustus Hamilton’s likeness to Charles. Rather than just letting Harcourt’s comments tell that story, there is a tiny beat when the focus is pulled by Charles pouring a cup of tea, which then leads into a shared glance between father and ‘disguised’ son, which then leads to their different reactions. Nick often refers to moments like this in filmic terms. If we were making the film of *London Assurance* it would be very easy to film a close-up cut to Charles’ face to underline Sir Harcourt’s speech. Obviously this isn’t possible in so clean a fashion on stage, so Nick has thought through the components that make such a cutaway work, and found a theatrical way of achieving it, beat by beat. We’ve also been doing a bit of improvisation around some offstage or unwritten scenes, so the actors have a clear sense of what they’ve been doing before they enter, and their dynamics at the start of the scene are acutely placed.

And there have been dance rehearsals with Scarlett Mackmin. Early on in rehearsals Nick met with Scarlett and discussed the style of the country dance in the play, but most particularly the story that needed to be told through it. Scarlett creates a very simple but authentic and character-driven choreography, and the rehearsals for it are entirely centred on shaping it to fit the narrative and characterisation, rather than learning steps. This has also been a very fluid process, for example, quite late on it was realised that Sir Harcourt would have no experience of a country dance – he says it would give him a rash – so the story of the dance becomes about teaching Sir Harcourt some moves and encouraging him and the weedy Charles to get involved. It also means that Sir Harcourt’s turn in the dance has to be something from his own background: ballet rather than rustic country dancing.

Staff director insight

Monday 22 – Thursday 25 February

This is the final week in the rehearsal room, so each day we do a full run of the play, followed by Nick's notes and then work scenes that need further tightening. By now almost all of the actual show props are in the room, and there are many bits of costume around. The first run-through is always a bit daunting as the anticipation of having to get through a two and a half hour play often dislodges the detail found during rehearsals. Whilst that happens a bit, actually the play really works – it's incredible to see the skill with which Boucicault has written a non-stop rollercoaster of a play.

Just as one plot thread is explored, someone else comes onstage with a letter, or a secret, or a plan, and another plot thread launches off. This really is a play of action – every line of dialogue, even if it's Boucicault's guilty pleasure of writing slightly flowery poetry, is completely spoken to the purpose and pushes the drive of the play forward.

Putting the play together also offers revelations in terms of the overall structure. When you're looking

at a small scene you can often overlook the effect a moment of detail will have on the understanding of the audience, but when it runs as a whole it is easier to notice the things an audience will understand, and those which need further sharpening. The second run through is partly about polishing Nick's notes to that effect, but also it rediscovers the tiny detail that the first run blurred. Richard Bean is also in attendance and it's fascinating to get his response – he obviously knows the play well through doing the rewrite, but hasn't been involved in any of the rehearsals, so has a fresh pair of eyes. He points out the moments that are unclear, inconsistent, could be funnier, and crucially, the moments when the audience get ahead of the action. With a few text cuts which are then rehearsed in the afternoon the play becomes more and more streamlined.



Richard Briers (Mr Adolphus Spanker) in rehearsal
photo by Catherine Ashmore



Notes and tasks

London Assurance vs. Countryside Alliance

Nick Hytner: "The idea at the centre of the play is that London and the country are very different, and if you bring the two into comic conflict you can make dramatic capital out of it."

- Go through the play and pick out the moments which describe either the town or the country.
- Consider the similarities and differences in the style of the language and intention of the characters from each side of the divide.

Rewriting

Choose a short section from the play and fairly simply write out the main structure, narrative, and ideas of the scene. Using that structure write or improvise your own scene in your own words, making sure that you're sticking to what Boucicault requires the audience to know. Compare your scene with the original and consider how the two might be combined to create a scene which is both true to Boucicault but also accessible to a 21st-century audience.

From Sheridan to Boucicault to Wilde

Read *The School for Scandal* (1777) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) by Oscar Wilde. Consider the similarities and differences between these two plays and *London Assurance*. You might want to consider:

- The plot
- The style of language
- How one play might have influenced the next.

Celebrity and Fashion

Select moments from the play which explore the nature of fashion and celebrity, and then compare them to an article in a modern celebrity magazine like *Heat* or *Hello*. How has the idea of fashion, appearance and fame changed since 1941, and how have they stayed the same?

Publicity

In Act 5 Sir Harcourt writes several letters to London newspapers to publicise his elopement and increase his social status. He is very careful to tailor each letter to the specific style of the relevant newspaper. Consider how modern newspapers and magazines might report Sir Harcourt's elopement in their own particular style. You might want to examine the different styles of *The Daily Mail*, the *Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Hello* etc.

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