

## UNIVERSITY OF LONDON FOUNDATION DAY 2009

Chancellor, in accordance with the Charter, Statutes and Ordinances of the University, I present to you this person on whom we wish you to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature

### Nicholas Hytner

Nicholas Hytner has been director of the (Royal) National Theatre since April 2003.

That London is such a stimulating and attractive city for students to study in has much to do with the broad, cosmopolitan, and rich cultural life which abounds here – besides the unique infrastructure of educational institutions, of which the fountainhead must be this University of London. Of the great cultural institutions, The National Theatre is surely in the front rank. The University is closely engaged in Theatre practice and Theatre research, not only in the specialised resource that is The Central School of Speech and Drama – but also through dedicated work at Queen Mary, Royal Holloway, Goldsmiths, Kings, Birkbeck, and of course in the study of English at other Colleges. But you don't have to be a drama specialist to appreciate the work of The National Theatre, or any other theatre for that matter; the huge Higher Education community in London, its staff, students and researchers draw enormous benefit and enjoyment from the presence of The National. Its presence indeed was in some ways stimulated by the founder of The Central School, Elsie Fogerty. She lobbied for the formation of a national theatre soon after establishing Central in 1906. By 1913 a National Theatre Committee had purchased a site for this purpose to the rear of the British Museum – a site which would have placed the Theatre close to the heart of the University – a stone's throw away from where we are gathered this evening. Other sites came and went, and now is not the time to go into this history – save to say that when the founding director of The National Theatre was eventually appointed in 1962, it was Elsie Fogerty's favourite Central graduate – Laurence Olivier; thus the University can stake some tangential claim to the incubation of this remarkable theatrical establishment. The connections have remained close, and only two years ago Olivier's successor, Sir Peter Hall, was here in this room to receive of an honorary degree of the University.

Nicholas Hytner hails from Manchester – studying at Manchester Grammar School before reading English at Cambridge. Indeed, he recently expressed some quite provocative views on the best route to working in the theatre, which embraced the advantages of progression to specialist conservatoire training via some broader university experience – and it would be nice to think that our funding mechanisms could stretch to such options ... but what Central has created through its integration with the University of London, and the development of its research dimension, goes a long way to meeting the challenges which Nicholas Hytner set out.

After Cambridge he began his professional directing career at the Northcott Theatre in Exeter – incidentally another University based organisation. But he was soon back in Manchester, by way of Leeds Playhouse – becoming Associate Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre in 1985. He was also guest director for the Royal Shakespeare Company with productions of *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest* and *King Lear* and made a number of significant productions for the West End and Broadway – notably *Miss Saigon*. He became Associate Director of the Lincoln Center Theater in New York, where he directed *Carousel* and *Twelfth Night*, as well as *The Sweet Smell of Success* on Broadway. In the West End he directed Alan Bennett's *Lady in the Van* with Maggie Smith, and the relationship with Bennett went forward through his appointment as Associate Director of the National in 1990, with

Bennett's adaptation of *Wind in the Willows*, *The Madness of George III*, *The History Boys* and most recently *The Habit of Art*.

The George III play went on to become a major feature film *The Madness of King George* – winning BAFTA and Evening Standard awards for best film and nominated for four Academy Awards. Film has not been the only diversification, for his work in opera could be marked out as a very distinguished and singular career in its own right – with a series of productions for the much lamented Kent Opera including Tippett's *King Priam*, also a series for English National Opera – with a greatly admired version of Handel's *Xerxes* as well as Wagner's little seen *Rienzi*; Mozart at Glyndebourne – and in Geneva and Munich, more Handel in Paris and Janacek in Geneva ... whilst much of the time running the National Theatre supremely well.

He has fostered much developmental work – of which Central was pleased to be a partner in the Postgraduate Certificate for Directing Text with Young People, whilst the National Theatre Studio – close by the National's original home at The Old Vic – is a vital source of new talent and material probably little known to the wider public. He has however widened that public through various access schemes, notably the Travelex £10 season.

He has enabled the theatre to be a platform for debate, and fostered work which documents our times both socially and politically – particularly in the work of David Hare, although I should say that Nicholas Hytner's old school friend from Manchester days, and our colleague in the University – Sir Howard Davies, the Director of LSE, who prides himself on his lithe fitness, was I think justly miffed at the rather portly casting of his character in Hare's docudrama of the banking crisis – *The Power of Yes*.

As an outspoken advocate for the arts, and for education in the arts – Nick navigates a creative pathway through governmental agendas which might otherwise coerce the leader of such an august establishment as the National Theatre to toe the party line. In an article for *The Observer*, just before he took up his post at the National, Nick Hytner wrote “we mustn't judge the success of an artistic enterprise by its ability to pull in an Officially Approved Crowd. It is as restrictive to justify the performing arts purely as an instrument of social engineering as it is to judge them only by their capacity to improve the balance of payments.” But he also wrote generally about education and every child's right to experience the arts, saying that “We need a fundamental shift in the target-driven culture that is stifling the personal enthusiasm at the heart of great teaching. We are disenfranchising a vast swathe of our future audiences, and it isn't fair on them ... it's not compulsory to like classical music, or theatre, or dance – but unless their mysteries are uncovered, you don't stand a chance of deciding for yourself”. Nicholas Hytner has sustained those beliefs through the subsequent years of his leadership of the National Theatre. I don't imagine he feels that the battle has been won, but we have come a long way nonetheless; we must all feel worried about the implications of looming cuts in public expenditure – but he will undoubtedly be a crucial champion in the case that must be made for the importance of the artistic and broader cultural wellbeing of our nation in the times we face.

Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I ask you to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, on Nicholas Hytner.

**Delivered by Professor Gavin Henderson CBE, Principal, The Central School of Speech and Drama**