

Honest Ed restores Old Vic



Photo Sidney Harris

The Queen Mother is greeted by Ed Mirvish at the gala opening of the refurbished Old Vic. With them is the theatre's administrator, Andrew Leigh.

London's Old Vic Theatre began a new lease on life after having been closed for almost two years, when it opened its doors to the public on 8 November 1983 thanks to its new owner, Canadian businessman Edwin Mirvish. Sparing no expense in refurbishing the theatre, Ed Mirvish unveiled his richly decorated possession a few days prior to the première gala performance of the Tim Rice-Stephen Oliver musical *Blondel* attended by the Queen Mother.

The Old Vic, originally opened in 1818, was purchased sight unseen by 'Honest Ed', as he likes to be known, in August 1982 for £550 000. Initially it was thought that the theatre's restoration would be mainly cosmetic but the architects soon discovered that the structure was unsafe and structural repairs were required. No expense was spared in redecorating: carpets were specially woven; wallpaper hand printed; gold and silver leaf applied; and marble bar counters imported from Italy. From the initial projected budget of £1 million, final expenditure amounted to almost £2 million.

The interior of the theatre has been refurbished to its intimate Victorian look of 1871. The proscenium arch has been moved back to allow the stage boxes to be re-installed. Both the arch and the boxes have been remoulded in fibrous plaster with designs based on the many extant illustrations. Inside the overall colours are ivory, coral, apricot, pewter, gold and silver. The house curtain is decorated with 63 small mirrors – a reflection of the famous 'mirror curtain', a solid glass house curtain which hung in the theatre in 1822. In the foyer, the maze of stairways have been replaced with one central staircase that connects all the foyer levels and emphasizes space and circulating areas.

Restoration of the theatre had been completed by the workmen in only ten months and Honest Ed ensured that those most responsible for its transformation would be rewarded. In his typical flamboyant style, he had a banner placed across the proscenium for the workmen which read: 'You're all invited to the first night but we've got to finish it first'. On October 29, the workmen filled the reborn theatre and became its first audience.

The six-show season is being sold as a subscription series, offering substantial price saving, easy booking and the guarantee of the best seats for all six shows. The subscription system is new for London and there are many sceptics who claim that about 60 per cent of London audiences are visitors and subscription series need a resident audience. Honest Ed, however, wants to restore the Old Vic as a neighbourhood theatre with a regular following which comes to see a new play every six weeks and he plans to present a variety of shows including musicals, dramas and mysteries. In addition to *Blondel*, this season's productions include David Pownall's *Master Class* with Timothy West as Stalin, the Stratford, Ontario production of *The Mikado*, a revival of *The Boyfriend*, Albert Finney in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* and Paul Slobalopszy's *Saturday Night at the Palace* from Johannesburg.

Honest Ed has a talent for filling empty seats. Twenty years ago he bought the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto. At the time it was dilapidated

The Old Vic at night



Stunning Canadian spectacle to play at Old Vic

Music has always been an important element in the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Stratford, Ontario. From 1955 to 1969 some form of musical theme was presented in one of the theatres there every year. More recently the tradition was revived by artistic director John Hirsch and productions of *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers* have been staged with sell-out box office success during the 1982 and 1983 Festival seasons.

The Stratford Festival's lavish and striking production of Gilbert and Sullivan's famous and best-loved operetta *The Mikado* will be presented at London's Old Vic Theatre for six weeks commencing with the première on February 29. The production, directed and choreographed by Brian Macdonald with designs by Susan Benson and Douglas McLean has been filmed for Canadian television audiences and has toured extensively in North America where it has been applauded and acclaimed by critics and audiences.

With fabulous costumes and settings, the Stratford production has been described by one critic in the *Guardian* as: 'ravishingly beautiful'. Set in the court of Japan, the madcap adventures of Nanki-Poo played by John Keane, are presented in spectacular style. Other characters include Eric Donkin as Ko-Ko, Marie Baron as Yum-Yum and Avo Kittask as the Mikado.

and surrounded by urban desolation: today the Royal Alex is regarded by many as the best-run theatre in North America. It has 50 000 subscribers and regularly takes \$6.5 million at the start of every season. In addition, Honest Ed owns four restaurants next door that are only open seven hours a day but with 2500 seats they still serve some 1 200 000 meals a year.

Contemporary Canadian theatre owes much to Britain. It is refreshing to see that the flow can also be in the other direction and that the inspiration and flair of a Canadian entrepreneur is helping to restore a part of our shared theatrical tradition. ♣