

The Arts

# John Neville plans to stay in Canada

By John Young

A small and somewhat decrepit Salvation Army hall in Edmonton, Alberta, is hardly the place you would expect to find one of the most distinguished British actors of the 20th Century. But John Neville has made the transition from the West End to western Canada smoothly and, from all appearances, happily.

The metamorphosis from demi-god of Stratford, the Aldwych and the Old Vic to thespian father-figure in an oil-and-cow town of half a million people, whose inhabitants until a few years ago scarcely knew that the live theatre existed, has been eased by his disillusionment with Britain. "Maybe it would be better if people worked, but they haven't worked since the war," he observes. From an actor it seems an unexpected piece of conventional conservative wisdom, but actors are not always as radical and unconventional as is often supposed.

But in another sense Neville is a rebel. He quarrelled with the latter-day sheriffs of Nottingham, where the Playhouse under his direction was an outstanding success. He is equally scathing about the English commercial theatre, which he calls "an artistic sweatshop." Has he no nostalgia for Britain? "No, none at all." He gulps his ice-cold beer in an angry decisive gesture.

Canada, familiar from earlier tours, offered the chance to start afresh. In August 1972 he was invited to direct *The Rivals* at the new National Arts Centre in Ottawa; from there he moved further west to Winnipeg to perform in *Hedda Gabler*, and then returned to the capital to play in *The Tempest* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and to direct *Don Giovanni* at the Opera House.

This was clearly the sort of diversity and challenge he was seeking, after a frustrating period of wondering what the future held. When Edmonton put the word out that it was seeking a top-level director, Neville had no hesitation about making it known that his services were available.

The carrot was a brand-new civic theatre promised for the autumn of 1975 — Nottingham all over again perhaps, but without the "aggro." But he insists that this was not what made him stay; the real challenge was a public which had been reared on the inanities of American television and who deserved something better.

An admirable sentiment, but it was not easy getting the message across. Neville recalled his experience with *The Caretaker*



ten years earlier; half the audience had walked out, and he warned his Canadian cast that in Edmonton they would do the same. They did.

He of course knew his audience, realised that in a temporary theatre seating a mere 290 people the seats were all sold on a subscription basis to people whose idea of *avant garde* was probably *Pygmalion*, and made due allowance. He mollified them with *Much Ado* and an innocuous Broadway musical, *I Do, I Do*, followed up with *How the Other Half Loves*, *Child's Play* and *That Championship Season*, and ended up with a double bill of *Oedipus Rex* and *Scorpio Rising*. When I talked to him earlier this year, he had plans to turn *Scorpio* into a musical and present it in Ottawa. "It should be quite a good evening."

Just in case conventional Edmonton audiences does not appreciate all this, he has started Citadel on Wheels, a summer touring company to travel round the mining towns of the Northwest Territories. Tough frontier settlements like Yellowknife, Hay River, Inuvik and Norman Wells might not seem obvious candidates for *Hamlet* or *As You Like It*, but Neville claims he was

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told that, if the "culture" was there, the audience would buy it. A far tougher assignment was a night of jazz and poetry reading in Fort Saskatchewan jail which was, he says, "a fantastic success."

Neville admits to three main difficulties. Foremost is the problem of guaranteeing professional Equity members full-time employment — hence the long-established flight of top Canadian actors to the United States or to Europe, where they are often mistaken for Americans. Second is the absence of a repertory tradition, which makes it difficult to "slot in" new plays on Friday and Saturday nights when full houses are virtually guaranteed and audiences are in a receptive mood. Third is the difficulty of "selling" new plays by Canadian authors — nationalism in Canada, though often vociferous, has all too obvious limits.

Having returned to England only once, briefly, to collect his wife and children, Neville evinces no doubts about his new home. "I do get depressed at times," he concedes, "but I would never go so far as to say I should be back in England. This is a very exciting country, and Edmonton is a very exciting place. I relish the job I'm doing to a point that is almost alarming." ♦