

THE WHIRLWIND

How Kenneth Tynan reinvented theatre criticism—and himself.

BY JOHN LAHR

At Oxford, where he became a post-war legend, Kenneth Tynan cut a gaunt romantic figure. He liked to characterize himself to the *Bright Young Things* as a kind of meteor who would blaze across the English scene only to be extinguished before his thirtieth year. “By then,” he said, “I will have said everything I have to say.” In fact, Tynan’s skyrocketing crash-and-burn scenario took nearly twice as long to play itself out. With his reputation for brilliance more or less intact, he died too young, of emphysema, in July, 1980, at the age of fifty-three. At the memorial service, Tom Stoppard turned to Tynan’s three children, Tracy, Roxana, and Matthew. “For those of us who were working in the English-speaking theatre during those years,” he said, referring to the period between 1950 and 1963, when Tynan’s drama criticism was as much an event as the plays he reviewed, “for those of us who shared his time, your father was part of the luck we had.”

Critics do not make theatre; they are made by it. Tynan’s luck was to be in the right place at the right age with the right credentials, the right vocabulary, and the right impudent temperament to savor the new British theatrical resurgence—certainly the greatest flowering of dramatic talent in England since Elizabeth I. With his hard-won intellectual precocity and his rebellious instincts (“Rouse tempers, goad and lacerate, raise whirlwinds” was the quotation—his own, as it happens—pinned above his writing desk), Tynan was the old Brit and the new rolled into one lanky, well-tailored package. Of the many qualities that made him an outstanding critic—qualities of wit, language, knowledge, style, and fun—perhaps the most important and the most surprising was his

profound awareness of death. It fed both his voracity for pleasure—for food, for drink, for sex, for talk (“Talking to gifted and/or funny people,” he wrote, is “evidence both of intense curiosity and of jaded palate”)—and his desire to memorialize it. “I remember about thirty times between waking and sleeping and always while I’m asleep that I am going to die,” he said. “And the more scared I am, the more pleasure and enlightenment I want to squeeze from every moment.” For Tynan, writing was a hedge against loss, a way of keeping the consoling dramatic pleasures alive inside himself by making them live for others. “I mummify transience,” he announced, at the age of twenty-three, in the epilogue to his first book, “He That Plays the King” (1950), an almost delusional rant, intended as an exercise in what he called “the athletics of personality,” with which he launched himself from Oxford into the waiting world.

Tynan fancied himself *sui generis*. He was his own greatest invention, and he loved his maker. When he told his life story, he downplayed his humdrum provincial Midland origins. “In any real sense of the word I was born at Oxford,” he said. “I have no more connection with my early life and with Birmingham”—the city where he was born, in 1927—“than I have with Timbuctoo.” He wanted glamour, which was not easy to excavate in the threadbare blandness of postwar England. “No cafés. No good restaurants. Clothes were still ‘austerity’ from the war, dismal and ugly. Everyone was indoors by ten,” Doris Lessing wrote—and that was raffish London, not baggy Birmingham.

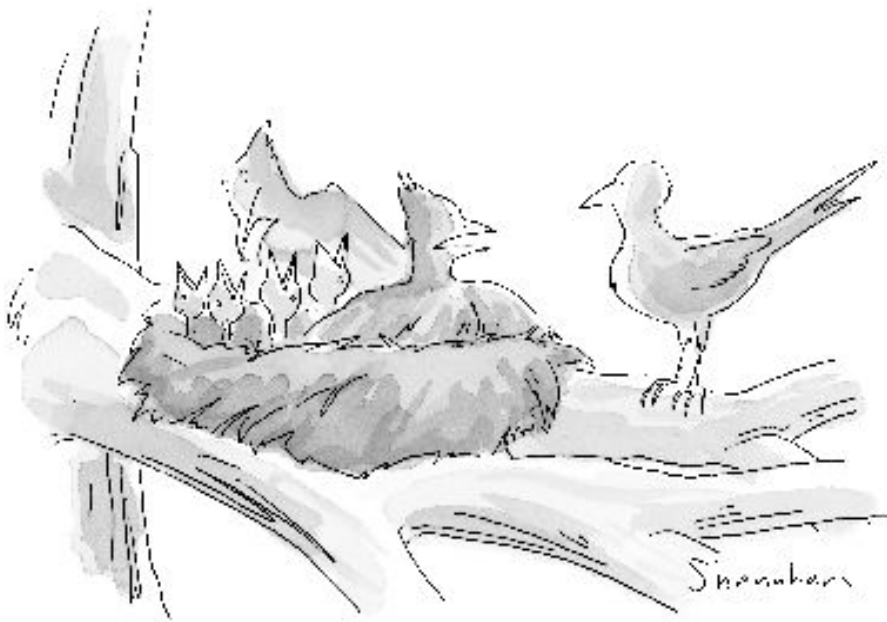
The deadliness leached into Tynan’s childhood, where the unsolid ground of

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

Portrait of an iconoclast: Tynan was poised, knowledgeable, and spoiling for a fight. Entries from Tynan’s previously unpublished journals start on page 48.







"Working at home has been a mixed blessing."

his family life had a habit of shifting. An older sister had died at birth. His father, the taciturn, successful Sir Peter Peacock, who was fifty-four when Tynan was born, spent two days a week up the road in Warrington, where he was the mayor for six terms, and where, unbeknownst to his son, he kept another family. Peacock had never married Tynan's mother, Rose, a kindly, depressed, modestly educated former laundress, who had aspirations to respectability, and from whose tastes and personality Tynan felt increasingly estranged. In 1958, Rose, unkempt and confused, was picked up by the Yorkshire police carrying a suitcase on which was written, "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm going to those who love me." She ended her life in a mental institution. Tynan, however, wasn't the type to feel shame and self-loathing about having abandoned her there. "I could have postponed her death at the expense of my own absorption in self advancement," he wrote. "I chose not to." As a teenager, he turned to the wall the family's déclassé oil paintings of cows in pasture, but his sense of parental detachment was born out of issues deeper than taste. "A cesarean, a bastard and a contemptible object" is how Tynan characterized himself in infancy, in notes he made in 1962, during his psychoanalysis. "A

bedwetter, I soiled my mother and she punished me by refusing to feed me."

In the end, like all narcissists, Tynan fed himself. His passion for intellectual distraction fended off what he called "my old meddlesome bugbear, solitude." And although his astonishing intelligence bewildered his parents, they indulged his eclectic enthusiasms. Tynan's mother introduced him to music hall and the "high-definition performance." Together, they travelled to London to see Ivor Novello, the Crazy Gang, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, Donald Wolfit's hectoring Shakespearean performances. For his ninth Christmas, Tynan asked for and received a hundred books from his parents; on another occasion, they splurged on a monocle for their little showoff, whose large vocabulary was marred by a permanent stutter.

If it was hard for Tynan to be understood at home, he was compelled to make the rest of the world pay proper attention. As a boy, he collected the autographs of such contemporary heroes as Winston Churchill, Neville Chamberlain, and Joseph Kennedy, but he soon became his own star. "As long as I'm not ignored you know quite well I'm perfectly happy," the teen-age Tynan wrote to a friend. At eleven, he appointed a chum at King Edward's School—which he attended on a scholarship—to be his

Boswell; at fifteen, he addressed the school literary society on "Art and I" ("a history of the Influences that have Gone to the Making of KPT"); at seventeen, he played Hamlet; at twenty-three, he published his first book of criticism; and by twenty-seven he was the famous, iconoclastic drama critic of the *Observer*. Tynan's life was proof of one of his most famous aphorisms: "A man who strives after an effect not infrequently achieves it."

Tynan's performance of personality—the flamboyant dress (pastel shirts, dove-gray suits, and velvet collars), the mannerisms (cigarette held between the third and fourth finger), and the word horde—embodied the notion of the extraordinary that he'd studied on stage and screen. "Have a new pose: arrogance, bass voice, hanging lower lip. Which reads O-R-S-O-N," he wrote, in a letter to a friend in 1944, just five years before buttonholing the bemused Welles himself to write the preface to his first book. "This sad age needs to be dazzled, shaped and spurred by the spectacle of heroism," Tynan wrote, and certainly he needed it: big magic as an antidote to big hurt. "I was illegitimate and I was made to know it by my father and my family," he later wrote to his first wife, the American writer Elaine Dundy, whom he divorced in 1964, after thirteen tempestuous years of marriage. "I was the boy . . . at whom everyone smiled knowingly and despisingly, and I have pretended ever since to be somebody—anybody—else." Tynan's first published piece of prose, which appeared in the King Edward's School *Chronicle* when he was fourteen, spelled out the credo by which he would more or less live for the rest of his life: "In every community there exists a certain element of the insignificant," he wrote. "The undistinguished person; the person who never argues, never shouts, and whose presence is not immediately noticed. . . . As I watch the useless lives of these people, so foolish, so wasted and so ordinary, I become afraid, and try desperately to forget them."

Tynan arrived at Magdalen College in 1945, and immediately plunged into a whirlwind of public display that included directing, acting, writing, and debating, and only intensified what he

called his “superiority complex.” “Nothing can ever top the sense of privileged exhilaration I felt then,” he said. By his own calculation, his experience at Oxford amounted to seventy-two weeks, three hundred parties, and the equivalent of five full-length volumes of essays. Tynan’s tutor was C. S. Lewis, the writer and professor of medieval and Renaissance literature, who taught him how to deploy paradox and how to make his verbal firepower more accurate. “Keep a strict eye on eulogistic & dyslogistic adjectives—They shd *diag-nose* (not merely blame) & distinguish (not merely praise),” Lewis wrote on a Tynan essay about early English drama. Tynan learned his lessons well. A strip-ling aesthete, he prophesied, “My collected works will bulk small but precious.” (His subsequent dashing and incomparable oeuvre is currently out of print on both sides of the Atlantic.)

By the end of his three years at Oxford, he was already attacking members of the British critical fraternity and their impoverished sensibilities. “A sham necklace of bitter brevities or false, hollow eulogy will not do for criticism,” he brayed, in the first chapter of “He That Plays the King.” “The fixed quiz-zical grin, the bar-fly impressionism, the epicene tartness which most critics affect is no substitute for awe, hate, and rapture.” He went on, “What I am saying is that attack, not apology, passion, not sympathy, should lie behind the decorous columns of our drama critics.” Criticism, he added, “calls for great flexibility of reaction and above all, great flair and cocksureness.” What Tynan was really proposing as the Rx for the parlous state of dramatic criticism was himself.

As a critic, Tynan emerged on the English scene almost fully formed. He was poised; he was knowledgeable. He was also—and always—spoiling for a fight. He inherited a moribund theatrical scene, where, as he wrote, “two out of three London theatres were inhabited by detective stories, Pineroesque melodramas, quarter-witted farces, débutante comedies, overweight musicals and un-reviewable revues.” He wrote as a man of the theatre, not as a man of the reading room, and his style blasted prolix Victorian waffle from critical discourse. Here, for instance, writing on Shakespeare’s

“Henry IV” in 1946, is James Agate, the leading theatre critic of his day, whose style Tynan mocked for its “breathless punch-drunk downrightiness”:

“England,” announces the program. And who is to set the first half of this great play in its country and period. Not, one thinks, the wan and shaken King, nor yet his prig-gish, pragmatist son; and surely the Percys and the Mortimers, Douglases and Glendowers have long been piffle before the wind of time.

Instead of the highfalutin, Tynan developed an artful, pungent, sly tone, which might be called “lowfalutin.” His pomp had a knockdown wink in it. Of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s excursion into contemporary Chinese culture in “Flower Drum Song,” Tynan

wrote, “Perhaps as a riposte to Joshua Logan’s ‘The World of Suzy Wong,’ Rodgers and Hammerstein have given us what, if I had any self control at all, I would refrain from describing as a world of woozy song.”

In print, Tynan’s wit and limpid style presented him to the world as a specimen of perfect individualism without wound or worry. “I know nothing of ardour and am not dogged: to write, for me, is not *necessary* as gunpowder *needs* to explode,” he wrote in “He That Plays the King.” “I do this because I can, not because I have to.” Tynan protested too much. He did have a need, and that was to align himself, in a kind of symbiotic way, with the extraordinary souls whose work onstage he tried to match with his own literary performance. “The study



of actors should be a full-time task," he wrote, "worthy of the same passionate scholarship which lepidopterists devote to butterflies." His stunning evocations of performers worked a kind of sympathetic magic that bound their glory inextricably to him. Fame, and the celebrated company he kept, gave him legitimacy.

Tynan had a language beyond the usual lit-crit stammer, and it conveyed the subtlety of a craft that was undergoing profound sociological changes. The 1945 Education Act had enabled many talented young people, including Tynan, to get scholarships to universities and acting schools that before the war had been the privilege of the rich. This created a dynamic new pool of working-class talent—actors like Rita Tushingham, Peter O'Toole, Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, and Richard Burton, who came to the stage with different energies, different behaviors, different connections to British experience, and who in a short time would require a different kind of play. Tynan was on their wave-

length. And because he understood glamour and the discipline of planting the idea of self in the public mind and keeping it there, these stars, and others, found themselves deconstructed by him with unusual finesse. "To be famous young and to make fame last—the secret of combining the two is glandular: it depends on energy," Tynan wrote with particular prescience, in an account of Noël Coward's famous night-club *début* at the Café de Paris.

Tynan was never shy about shivering the timbers of the English acting establishment. On Vivien Leigh's Cleopatra, for instance: "Taking a deep breath and resolutely focusing her periwinkle charm, she launches another of her careful readings; ably and passionlessly she picks her way among its great challenges, presenting a glibly mown lawn where her author had imagined a jungle." Still, Tynan, who aspired to be a spellbinder, was at his most compelling when he was under the spell of others: Marlene Dietrich "shows herself to the audience like the Host to the congrega-

tion and delivers the sacred goods"; Katharine Hepburn is "wide open yet with no breaches in her armour"; Judy Garland, at the Palace, "embodies the persistence of youth so completely that we forbid her to develop. . . . Even in young middle age, she must continue to sing about adolescence and all the pain and nostalgia that go with it. When the voice pours out, as rich and pleading as ever, we know where, and how moved, we are—in the presence of a star, and embarrassed by tears."

Tynan never succumbed to what he called "the critic's scourge: atrophy of love." He was passionate, nowhere more so than in his review of John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" (1956). "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see 'Look Back in Anger.' It is the best young play of its decade," he wrote. But theatre is a recalcitrant beast; even with Tynan's prodding, it didn't move quickly in the direction he wanted. At the end of the fifties, he concluded that English theatre was "desperately enfeebled" and that "the strongest and most unmistakable influence on our drama in the last ten years has been transatlantic." In 1958, Tynan took himself off for an infusion of American energy, and was the senior drama critic of this magazine for two years. But, as the sixties wore on, he found himself with less to say about Britain's writers (Pinter, Orton, Bond) and more to say about the establishment of a National Theatre, where the sprouts of their theatrical renaissance could be properly nurtured.

In 1962, having just attacked the newly appointed head of the National Theatre, Sir Laurence Olivier, for his season of plays at the Chichester Festival Theatre, Tynan wrote to Olivier asking to be made the National Theatre's first dramaturge. "How shall we slaughter the little bastard?" Olivier fumed to his wife, the actress Joan Plowright, who nonetheless liked the idea, because young audiences would be "thrilled with the mixture of you and Ken." In a letter inviting Tynan to work as an in-house critic and to help plan the seasons, as well as take charge of all published material, a position Tynan held from 1963 to 1973, Olivier added a postscript: "GOD—ANYthing to get you off that *Observer*."



"I love that your politics stink."

The job increased both Tynan's public prestige and his private frustration. Of the seventy-nine plays mounted on his watch, according to his second wife, Kathleen Tynan, "thirty-two of these productions were Ken's ideas; twenty were chosen with his collaboration." This kind of defensive scorekeeping is typical of the dramaturge's dilemma; the successes or failures of the theatre may be of his choosing but not of his accomplishing. Neither odium nor glory falls, finally, to him: both inside and outside the theatre, the critic's role, Tynan knew, was one without risk. "I took the safer course and became a full-time critic," he wrote in his journal. "That is why, today, I am everybody's adviser—Roman Polanski's, Larry Olivier's, Michael White's—and no one's boss, not even my own."

"Such is servility," he wrote in 1972, when Olivier had gone behind his back to ask the director Peter Hall his opinion of a play that Tynan had suggested. And when Olivier accepted Hall as his successor, rather than nominating one of his colleagues at the National, Tynan wrote, "He has passed a vote of no confidence in us all. . . . He has hired us, stolen our kudos, and now shows no compunction about discarding us." The National kept Tynan busy but did not allow him to accomplish his mission. In the theatre's tenth-anniversary year, Tynan noted in his journal that it had "discovered one new playwright (Tom Stoppard) and no new directors." He added, "It's a sad reflection on the way in which I've occupied my time for the past decade."

Over the next seven years, Tynan's sense of regret and self-loathing grew. He heard himself described as the greatest English theatre critic since George Bernard Shaw, but, unlike Shaw, he had no other forum in which to express himself. Renown requires deeds, and where were Tynan's? He tried and failed to float the idea of himself as a stage and film director. He could manage the sprint of a newspaper column but not the long-distance run of a sustained piece of work. None of the books for which he took advances got written. (He got halfway through a study of Wilhelm Reich but dropped it.) The routine of review-



"This is where things started getting really weird."

ing had palled, and the anomie it had once kept at bay now filtered deeper into his life: "The sensation of vanishing. Nothing registers on me: I register nothing." He seemed unable to claim new, meaningful territory for himself. There were always causes to debate and to keep him in the middle of things: Vietnam, sexual liberation, censorship (he was the first person to break the BBC sound barrier by saying "fuck"). He produced two West End shows, which failed, and a sex revue, "Oh! Calcutta!," one of the top three longest-running musicals of all time. But, as his journal shows, Tynan's self-lacerating spirit was increasingly channelled into sadomasochistic sexual obsessions (he had an appetite for spanking and whipping). More and more, he smiled at the world with cold teeth.

At the beginning of Tynan's career, when he was still inventing himself in "He That Plays the King," he turned his emptiness into a kind of heroic self-advertisement, depicting himself variously as a "soft blotting-pad," a "shell," a "spying-glass," a "chameleon," an "echo." As a critic, he hitched that emptiness to stars and to productions whose energy he absorbed and reflected back.

Over time, though, the increasing momentum of his fame led to a sort of disintegration. His emphysema compounded a lassitude that he could neither control nor quite understand. "I used to take Dexamyd to give me enough confidence to start work," he wrote in 1971. "Now I take it to give me enough confidence not to." The frequent high spirits in Tynan's sad tale make his journal all the more poignant. "Was Elaine a trial?" the critic Cyril Connolly asks him about his first wife. "No. More of a jury," Tynan answers.

On his deathbed, he whispered the words "a small talent for brilliance." If he was speaking of himself, his judgment is too harsh. The journal he left behind bears witness to his own advice: "Be light, stinging, insolent, and melancholy." It demonstrates both his brilliance and his struggle to find a place in the world for his intelligence to shine. Unwittingly, in its accounts of Tynan's restless and wayward sexual exploits, it also tracks a larger human theme, which "Oh! Calcutta!" tried and failed to dramatize—what one of Tynan's famous friends, Tennessee Williams, once called the "mad pilgrimage of the flesh." ♦