

2002

WEST END THEATRE MANAGER QUILTS:

"Madonna is driving me mad"

Noble Resigns from RSC

2002: The Royal Shakespeare Company is in crisis following the sudden resignation of Adrian Noble. During his 22 years with the company, eleven of them as its Artistic Director, he has increased the RSC's international profile and won the Queen's Award for Export. He founded a classical Academy in Stratford to train actors to speak Shakespeare and continued the company's reputation for developing talent: Kenneth Branagh, Simon Russell Beale and Sam Mendes are all Noble's protégés.

However, his more recent and radical changes to the Company have caused much criticism. He has pulled the company out of its London home at the Barbican and plans to demolish the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, replacing it with a more intimate venue and a "theatre village". He has also changed the company ethos with shorter contracts for actors and altered its ensemble basis. With no London home, he is gambling on West End theatres and other venues, such as the Roundhouse, taking RSC productions.

This led to a storm of complaints with his actions being described variously as "disturbing", "disastrous" and "downright madness". He has also been heavily criticised for taking a three month sabbatical from the RSC to produce "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" at the London Palladium.

His resignation statement claims that after such a long time with the RSC he wants to "seek new artistic challenges," but it is clear that he has finally had enough of the most sustained criticism in the history of the RSC. His successor will be Michael Boyd, an associate director with the company.

3 Theatre Knights

2002: Outgoing director of the Royal National Theatre Trevor Nunn, the opera director Jonathan Miller and the actor Ben Kingsley have all been honoured with knighthoods this year.

2002: There were problems even before the play "Up for Grabs" opened at Wyndham's Theatre. It was a 10 week limited run, starring Madonna in her first stage role for thirteen years. The theatre announced a complete sell out from the word go— and then Madonna announced she would not play any of the scheduled matinees because of her recording commitments.

The show's producer, Sonia Friedman, said she understood the problem and was backing the singer's decision, and said they would offer ticket holders a complete refund or alternative dates for evening performances.

But if it was a "complete sell out" how were they able to offer seats for evening shows? The rumour mills suggested the matinees were not selling well, and Madonna refused to play to any house that was not completely full. This was furiously denied by the star's agent.

Then Madonna demanded the presence of bouncers on either side of the stage whenever she was performing; a complete refurbishment of her dressing room; large areas of the auditorium being declared off limits to staff during shows; and the raising of the stage by several feet to deter over-eager fans.

It was all too much for theatre manager, William Ingre, who resigned in protest. In his 27 years as manager, he said, he had never experienced anyone so difficult to work with. The audiences were ecstatic throughout the run, the critics less so.



Sonia Friedman Productions

Sam Mendes leaves Donmar Warehouse

2002: Sam Mendes is to quit the Donmar Warehouse after 10 years as artistic director. During this time he has turned the Donmar into one of the most exciting, dynamic, successful theatres in the country, overseeing more than 70 productions, a third of which have been world, UK or London premieres.

The 35-year-old's departure was expected after he took a two-year break to make the film American Beauty, which won five Oscars in March 2000, including one for best director. Instead, he returned with a £350,000-a-year deal from Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks company, thus securing the Donmar's future and enabling him to set up a new company, Donmar Films.

His most commercially successful Donmar production has been the revival of "Cabaret" (1994) which transferred to the West End and to Broadway, but other acclaimed Donmar production have included Sondheim's "Assassins" (1992) and "Company" (1995) and the sensational production of David Hare's "The Blue Room" (1998) with Nicole Kidman. His final season included much praised productions of "Uncle Vanya" and "Twelfth Night".

Outside the Donmar he directed Lionel Bart's "Oliver" at the London Palladium (1994) and is scheduled to revive "Gypsy" in New York next year.

Joan Littlewood dies, age 87



2002: Joan Littlewood has died at the age of 87. In 1953 she took over the Theatre Royal, Stratford, with her Theatre Workshop Company, and gained international fame, taking the company on tour across Europe and the Soviet Union.

One of her most famous productions was the British premiere of Brecht's "Mother Courage" which she directed and starred in the lead role. Other notable Theatre Workshop successes were "A Taste of Honey", "Oh What a Lovely War" and the plays of Brendan Behan. In 1975 she left Stratford and gave up her work in theatre. She wrote her autobiography in 1994. Critically she was always acclaimed as a powerful actress. As a director she was lavishly praised or roundly condemned—she was a genius to some and a fraud to others. However, in her early days she was one of the great forces in British Theatre.