

2004

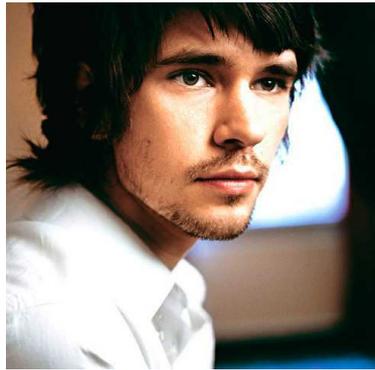
THE YEAR OF THREE HAMLETS

Another hit for Alan Bennett

2004: Alan Bennett's latest play, "The History Boys" has been an enormous success at the Lyttleton Theatre. Its limited run was extended several times, and plans have been made for a revival at the RNT next year, to be followed by a UK tour. Discussions are underway for a Broadway transfer. It is yet another triumph for the RNT's new artistic director, Nicholas Hytner.

Knight nothing like a Dame

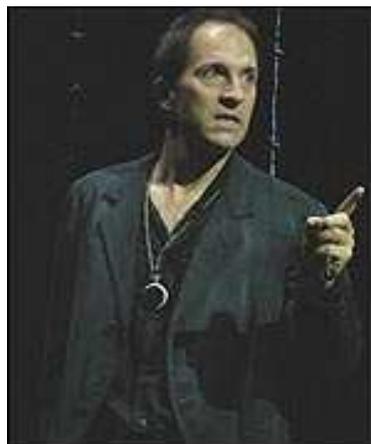
Kevin Spacey, the new artistic director at the Old Vic, decided to celebrate Christmas with a good old British standby, the pantomime "Aladdin". Somewhat bizarrely, his choice for Panto Dame was Sir Ian McKellen. In spite of this blatant mis-casting the "arty" critics loved "slumming it" at what turned out to be a condescending and somewhat woeful example of what "legit" theatre directors think of the ordinary public's taste. The world of true panto was horrified. The Billy Daintys, Jack Tripps and John Inmans of this world never attempted to play Edward II, Richard II or Macbeth, so it was respectfully suggested that Sir Ian, one of the greatest ever classical actors, should hang up his skirts, and stick to what he does so brilliantly (which is NOT Pantomime!)



Ben Whishaw



Toby Stephens



Michael Maloney

2004: Just like London buses, they said: you wait for one for ages, and then suddenly along comes three. The "Year of the Hamlets" began with the revitalised Old Vic offering a new Hamlet directed by Sir Trevor Nunn. The Hamlet was 23 year old Ben Whishaw, until a year ago, a student at RADA. This Hamlet was far from being a robust young man haunted by anger, revenge and uncertainty. This was a skinny, frail, raw and idealistic youth of simple, openhearted honesty. "The sudden shock of his father's death, mother's adultery and uncle's crime turns his world inside out. Lost and adrift, questioning the value of everything he once held dear, we watch as he wrestles the ghosts that haunt him, ghosts far more real than that of his recently murdered father's apparition."

"When he sits with pills and a penknife considering suicide, one senses his frailty not through any melodramatic gestures, but in the simple expressive manner of his voice and the haunting look in his eyes. . . He makes you realise that Claudius not only murdered Hamlet's father, but also Hamlet's innocence." The production, set in the present day, was highly praised, with rave reviews for both Trevor Nunn and Ben Whishaw. "It will surely be one of the most talked-about Hamlets for many a decade".

Then came the RSC's Stratford production by Michael Boyd, starring the 35 year old Toby Stephens, returning to the RSC after a triumphant Coriolanus nine years ago,

Toby Stephens' Hamlet was rude, violent and utterly contemptuous of women, a "perfect hero for the rap generation" according to the Guardian critic. His roughness and aggressive swagger harmonised with a court full of contemptible women—a Gertrude who commits adultery with her brother-in-law, an Ophelia who rejects Hamlet for no discernible reason and then acts as bait to trap him - and a world ruled over by a "smiling, damned villain".

The third Hamlet was at the Barbican, directed by the legendary Yukio Ninagawa with Michael Maloney as Hamlet. Set in a black box, bordered by barbed wire and bare light-bulbs, Michael Maloney portrayed Hamlet as a fast-talking rebel, definitely unbalanced. As one critic pointed out, Maloney is more than twice the age of Ben Whishaw, and this maturity didn't really help. Generally the production was condemned for poor verse-speaking, and unhelpful designs, but Maloney himself brought a depth of understanding to the play that impressed several of the critics.

By way of a coda, the year ended with a fringe production of "Hamlet" at the Rosemary Branch, where Leigh Acton played Hamlet in a cut-down version by Helen Tennison, - a version specially aimed at the MTV generation. It was described as noisy, with some half-baked ideas, but mildly entertaining.

So that's what happened to Fay Wray. . .

"Whatever happened to Fay Wray?" croons Dr Frank'n'Furter in the everlasting successful run of "The Rocky Horror Show" - which has been on an almost continuous tour of the UK for decades. Fay Wray, famous for screaming non-stop in the arms of the giant gorilla, King Kong, in the 1933 film of the same name, has just died at the age of 96.