



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for more than 30 years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

My journey with *Not About Nightingales* was the paramount adventure of my Alley career. The 1998 co-production between the Alley Theatre, The National Theatre of Great Britain, and Vanessa and Corin Redgrave's Moving Theatre travelled from London to Houston and finally to Broadway. Acting in the world premiere of a previously unproduced Tennessee Williams script, rediscovered by Vanessa Redgrave while doing research on another Williams play, was the kind of experience that actors dream of. It also reminded me of how special my theatre home was. The following is an excerpt from a journal I started at the very beginning. . .

Jan. 4, 1998, Houston

I still haven't digested this. One week from today, I fly to London to perform a lead in a recently discovered Tennessee William's play, under the direction of Trevor Nunn at the Royal National Theater. I can't believe I just wrote that sentence.

My brother collected baseball cards, I followed the British Theater. He had shoeboxes of players, I had stacks of *Plays and Players*. His *Sports Illustrated* and *Baseball Weekly* struggled for shelf space with my *Theater World* and *Playbill*. He had the National League and the American League and I had the National Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company. His signed George Foster rookie card paled alongside my Olivier autographed Old Vic postcard.

I know the detailed resumes of these actors and the minute nuances of their performances, yet I've never experienced the thrill of hearing their voices ring in a British Theater. I only know of their craft vicariously through books, reviews, the

BBC Shakespeare series, the occasional Bravo telecast or RSC video release. I swell with a confidential pride when I see one of them in a small part in a film or TV show, because I know their secret identity. I know that in reality, they're the great ones. The giants. My heroes. And now I'm going to play in their ballpark. I've been called up to the big leagues.

3:25am, Jan. 11, 1998, London

Scratchy-eyed Gatwick touchdown followed by an hour-long drive into cold London town. A drizzly late night stroll to the National from our hotel. I have to see this place before I can sleep. The Royal National Theater sits across the Waterloo Bridge like a sleeping colossus. A giant concrete and glass bunker, not unlike the Alley, dark, menacing, military, and brutal. I want mahogany, red velvet stage curtains, and gas footlights. I want church. Walking back, I pass a pub with "Hey Jude" blaring over a jukebox. I pull the big brass door handles but they are locked-up for the night. Through the leaded glass, I can see, in the yellow glow of the bar light, a man standing on a chair, Guinness held high, and two women twirling together with drunken abandon. The three join in with McCartney's orgasmic scream and start singing the "na na na na" chorus at the top of their lungs. A light mist turns to snow flurries. This is England.

Jan. 12, 1998, London

A day before rehearsals are to begin, the visiting American actors (four of us joining an English cast) meet with Trevor at the theater to help "break the fall" as he put it. The ageless Mr. Nunn bounces in wearing jeans, a blue work shirt and a worn pair of

Converse high tops. He gives a warm yet brief pep-talk and turns us over to Barry, the stage manager, for a building tour. What a foreboding labyrinth this theatre is. Up this flight of stairs and down these. Tiny beads of sweat start to form on my brow as I have a waking actors' nightmare - visions of myself, teary-eyed in prison garb, late for an entrance, dashing frantically thru this rat's maze, looking in vain for the Cottesloe stage. A navigational shorthand slowly reveals itself. The hundreds of production posters and photos on the corridor walls form an effective, albeit intimidating, roadmap. Through the double doors, past Judi Dench in *Absolute Hell*, turn right at Micheal Gambon in *Voltaire*, through these double doors and you'll come face to face with McKellen as Richard III, turn right again, go past *Pygmalion* and *MacBeth*, then left at *The Madness of King George* and you are there. Oh dear God, these hallways. The faces that confront you. There's Olivier in *Dance of Death*. Gielgud and Richardson. Micheal Redgrave, Albert Finney, Diana Rigg, Judi Dench, Simon Callow, Anthony Hopkins. "And you are....who?" their eyes demand.

In the evening, I see a spectacular and moving *Peter Pan* on the Olivier Stage with Jenny Agutter as Mrs. Darling and Ian McKellen as Hook. Leaving the theatre after the performance, I look back as I cross the bridge and see that the brutalist riverfront building is transformed when lit-up and filled with people. It's now a glittering palace with its reflected light dancing off the Thames. It shines and flickers like a great crystal. This is going to be fun.

And fun it was. But more important than the joy and honor of working on such a prestigious project was the unexpected sense of professional validation the experience gave me, not just of myself as an actor, but of my theater and of my hometown.

Working for ten years at the Alley, in a wide variety of roles, had been a dream for me. But there was also a growing feeling of isolation and insecurity fed by being so far removed from the cultural hub of New York. How did our productions measure up on a national level? Were they good, or just good in the limited context of the Houston theatre scene?



Top Photo: James Black in *Not About Nightingales*, 1998. Photo by Nobby Clark. Bottom Photo: The cast of *Not About Nightingales*, 1998. Photo by T Charles Erickson.

But after seeing several acclaimed productions during my time in London, I began to realize that the work we did at the Alley would be equally lauded and sit comfortably on any English stage. It confirmed what I had always hoped, but was only just discovering - a metamorphic theater experience wasn't limited to New York, Chicago or the West End. Nor did a NYC address make you a better actor. It was the execution, not the location, that mattered.

You are about to see a performance of Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* performed by local talent, every one with a Houston address. Or, maybe a better way of putting it, you are about to see a play about the South performed by authentic Southern actors. This is not a choice made out of convenience or cost. These are the best actors for the job. The fact that they originate from Houston's talent pool is a testament to how rich the current theater atmosphere is today in the Bayou City.