

3. NATIONAL THEATRE LIVE. THE BEGINNING OF A REVOLUTION

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Abstract: *In June 2009 at the initiative of Royal National Theatre in London, National Theatre Live appeared – a revolutionary project through which theatre performances are live streamed. The first one was Phedra⁶⁹ by Racine. The show was live streamed in 73 movie theatres from Great Britain and in 200 others all over the world. The broadcasting was a great success about which The Guardian wrote: „The main lesson is that a theatre production can be made democratically available to a mass audience without any loss of quality. For generations we have been told that the theatre is elitist. Last night it was shown that a supposedly difficult classical tragedy can speak simultaneously to people across the globe.... this is only the beginning of a revolution in making theatre available in ways of which we had never dreamed.”⁷⁰ For more than 13 years, The National Theatre of London has been live streaming its shows, at the moment having over 5.5 million spectators and being present in over 5000 locations all around the world.*

Key words: theatre, live streaming, show, London, NTL

1. How many theatres are in London?

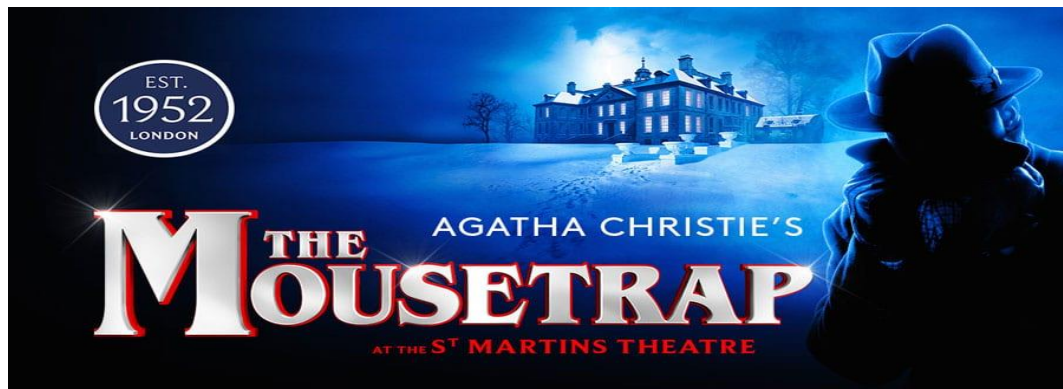
West Theatre End practices a professional theatre, which alongside New York's Broadway represents the highest level of commercial theatre performed in the English language. Seeing a show in one of West End's theatres has become an usual tourist activity, especially for the frequency of finding famous British or international actors on the shows' posters: Ian Mc Kellen, Timothy Hutton, Richard Coyle, Juliet Stevenson. There are 39 theatres in the West Theatre End, and most of them are owned by Ambassador Theatre Group, Delfont Mackintosh Theatres, Nimax Theatres, LW Theatres and the Netherlander Organization. A few examples to be reminded: Apollo Theatre, Ambassadors Theatre, Cambridge Theatre, Duchess Theatre, Harold Pinter Theatre, London Palladium. West End Theatres are a diverse mix of venues, from Apollo Theatre Victoria, with over 2300 seats, to the intimacy of the Arts Theatre, with a capacity of 350.

The period of continuity for the West End's performances depends on the selling of tickets. The most longevous musical of West End's history is *Les Misérables*, produced by Cameron Mackintosh, premiered in October 1985. It has overtaken *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber, that ended in 2002, after surviving for 8.949 performances over the span of 21 years. However, the non-musical play by Agatha Christie, *The Mousetrap*, is the most performed production in the world and has been running continuously since 1952.

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⁶⁹ Directed by Nicholas Hytner, adapted by Ted Hughes, cast: Helen Mirren, Dominic Cooper, Margaret Tyzack, Stanley Townsend, John Shrapnel

⁷⁰https://www.theguardian-com.translate.google/stage/2009/jun/26/national-theatre-live-phedre?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=ro&_x_tr_hl=ro&_x_tr_pto=nui,sc-tr.n



<https://britishtheatre.com/the-mousetrap-re-opens-st-martins-theatre-october/>

The Theatre Royal Drury Lane, one of the oldest theatres in London, is an example for the flourishing history of the city. Its existence dates back to 1812. In 2016 over 19 million tickets have been sold for British performances, with London being the most popular marketplace. The vast majority of box office incomes for London Theatres comes from the West End locations, making approximately 645 million pounds in 2016. Broadway and West End are very similar, the first one refers to New York City, while West End refers to London.

Off West End Theatres are smaller (including pub theatres), the seats capacity being between 40 and 400. London is one of theatre's capitals, with tens of professional theatres scattered all over the city. Many of these theatres are world renowned and they attract some of the greatest names of business. How many theatres does London have? First of all, it depends on how we define a "theatre". If we consider any location that stages professional theatre productions, it is estimated that there are over 200 professional theatres in London. This number changes constantly, as new places are opening and some of the old venues are closing, fact that gives a sense of amplitude, diversity and change to the London's stage.

2. The National Theatre of London



<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/theatres/national-theatre>

The National Theatre Company managed by Laurence Olivier, has had its first show (*Hamlet*, with Peter O'Toole) on the 22nd of October 1963. In the first 13 years of existence, the company has functioned in the Old Vic Theatre, while its new venue was being built. In 1976, the new headquarters of the National Theatre London was being opened, under the management of Peter Hall⁷¹. The building is

⁷¹ Sir Peter Reginald Frederick Hall CBE (22 November 1930 – 11 September 2017) was an English theatre, opera and movie director. *The Times* declared him to be „the most important figure of British theatre for half a century”. In

the creation of the well-known English architect Sir Denys Louis Lasdun, a notable example of brutalist design.⁷² Peter Hall's successors were Richard Eyre from 1988 until 1997, Trevor Nunn from 1997 to 2003, Nicholas Hytner from 2003 until 2015 and Rufus Norris from April 2015.

National Theatre Live

NT Live is the most revolutionary project of London's National Theatre, through which it is live streamed „ the best British theatre directly from the London's stage to movie theatres from Great Britain and all over the world.”⁷³ Located on the southern bank of the River Thames, in London, The National Theatre is one of the most remarkable locations for performing arts that are funded by the public fund of the United Kingdom. Its repertoire consists of about 25 new productions every year. Besides the fact that are broadcasted in movie theatres, these productions often transfer also to the West End Theatre, doing tours all over the country, on Broadway and in the whole wide world. The shows are streamed in over 2000 movie theatres through National Theatre Live and they are also broadcasted for free in Great Britain's schools. The National Theatre is constantly innovating its services for the audiences and it's not afraid to embrace new technologies. For example, it was the first theatre that live streamed a production in 4K and it also runs an Immersive Storytelling Studio dedicated for exploring ways to tell stories using modern emergent digital technologies.

How does National Theatre Live work? It uses the last generations of filming techniques and every show is recorded in front of a live audience. Theatre cameras positions are adapted for every performance, to be certain that we can also have the same view as the audience does. The live theatre show is streamed all over the world through a satellite. Furthermore it would be great to watch the documentary *From Stage to Screen*⁷⁴ for a better understanding of how a performance is being broadcasted live from The National Theatre of London. The positions of the cameras in theatre are adapted for every show. For the audience that cannot be at the actual venue, NT Live is a very special experience. For a live broadcast of a performance, the team starts its day very early in the morning (6.30 AM). The cameras are being set, the transmission lines are being checked, rehearsals are being made with the director, the actors and the technical personnel.

The first live production aired in June 2009 - *Phèdre* with Helen Mirren. The show has been streamed in over 3500 movie theatres from over 60 countries and it reached over 9 million people. Most of the broadcasted performances are from The Royal National Theatre's repertoire, but also there are included some shows from other theatre companies: *A Disappearing Number by Complicite* was live streamed from Theatre Royal, Plymouth, on the 14th of October 2010. Donmar Warehouse's production, *King Lear*, with Derek Jacobi in the leading role, was transmitted live from Covent Garden on the 3rd of February 2011 and in the summer of 2013 *Macbeth* with Kenneth Branagh and Alex Kingston followed. The show was broadcasted from the Manchester's International Festival on the 20th of July 2013.

2018, the *Laurence Olivier Awards* have changed the name of the award for the best director to Sir Peter Hall Award.

⁷² Brutalist Architecture is an architectural style that appeared in the 1950's in the United Kingdom. Brutalist buildings are characterized by minimalist constructions.

⁷³ <https://thirdrailrep.org/nt-live/tr.n>

⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3t1rj8g6yg>

At the moment NT Live is at its 12th theatrical season, from which we need to mention the following performances: *Henric V* by William Shakespeare – directed by Max Webster, with Kit Harington, *The seagull* by A. P. Chekov – version by Anya Reiss, directed by Jamie Lloyd, with Emilia Clarke, *Frankenstein* – directed by Danny Boyle, with Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller. The pioneers of the live cinema events are Robert and Julie Borchard-Young and their company (BY Experience) is the most important international distributor of alternative events for the cinematic screens. Since 2003 *BY Experience* has offered for audiences all around the world hundreds of unique events. The company with its headquarters in New York presents cultural, entertaining and educational events in over 3000 movie theatres and art centers from over 75 countries, moreover it is the sole distributor of National Theatre Live. Before facing the pandemic in 2020, that also came with a lock down for all theatres, we have the proof of an already existing *from stage to screen* that has been functioning for a long time at a high level of performance and professionalism.



<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/national-theatre-live>

It is obvious that this new concept has had its fair shares of objections from some theatre people. In 2014 Sir Alan Ayckbourn⁷⁵ expressed his concerns regarding theatre streaming; „in the end we and our theatres will stop from performing shows in theatres. All of them will be broadcasted from these excellency centres. Directly from RSC, the National or the Royal Court. But theatre is alive!“⁷⁶ The producer David Sabel, the director of the digital department of National Theatre Live affirmed in an interview for *The Guardian*: „NT Live has built its own audience that can watch 8 productions a year without stepping foot in this building. We believe that the supreme success is when someone sees NT Live and then comes to the theatre. Our audience is not only the one from theatre venues. It is much, much larger than that. And that is a success.“⁷⁷

David Sabel created National Theatre Live, this revolutionary programme of live cinema transmissions, and he also led the first *Broadcast and Digital* department of National Theatre (during 2008-2015). Over this period of time he produced 48 NT Live shows, 4 television documentaries (2 BAFTA nominations

⁷⁵ Writer, director, was the manager of Stephen Joseph Theatre from Scarborough for 37 years.

⁷⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27761568>, tr.n

⁷⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jun/09/nt-live-success>, tr.n

and a Royal Television Society Award), the 50th anniversary of National Theatre live streamed from BBC2. In 2020 he founded *Sabel Productions* that had a mandatory part in the distribution strategy of National Theatre during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is how the streaming platform National Theatre at Home has come to life.

3. Conclusions - National Theatre at Home

The theatre industry has been forced to innovate and adapt more than ever during the pandemic. Theatres all around the world had to find new ways to reach the surface. Closing or reducing the capacity of theatre and movie venues has determined the explosive appearance of online streaming services. A theatre that has done this successfully is National Theatre at Home. The performances on this platform are mainly from National Theatre Live but there also is an Archive section where some important shows of The National Theatre of London can be found. The recordings from the Archives have a lower image quality than the ones from NT Live, for the filming has been done with fewer cameras and the image has not been optimized for viewing it on this kind of platform. Nonetheless, this section is very important because we can find many great shows such as *Death of England*, *Mosquitoes*, *'Master Harold'...and the boys*, *Antigone*, *Three Sisters*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and many more. The platform runs just like other popular film channels, on paid subscriptions for “renting” the performances. Although there was some sort of skepticism about this type of broadcasting plays, it had a major impact and it is still running to this day.



<https://www.facebook.com/nationaltheatreathome/photos/101353708355297>

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us something, is that people like stories to be told in unique ways. Theatre on a screen is not TV, it has its own shape and aesthetic. Simon Baker- sound designer, technical director and producer at Wise Children

Web resources

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27761568>
2. <https://thirdrailrep.org/nt-live/>

3. <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/live-streaming-for-theaters/>
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