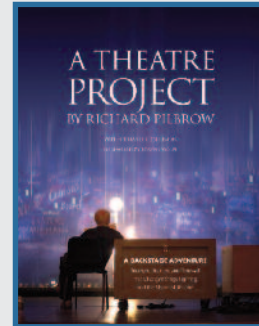


# Adventures in the Lighting Trade

In this exclusive excerpt from his new memoir, *A Theatre Project*, Richard Pilbrow recalls the excitement and tumult of working as a lighting designer and producer in the West End of the 1960s



*(Editor's note: In his new memoir, A Theatre Project, Richard Pilbrow recalls his rich career and the rise, fall, and rise again of his firm, Theatre Projects [TP]. Filled with legendary names and often outrageously funny anecdotes, the book recalls the birth of theatrical lighting and sound design and theatre consulting as legitimate professions. It is also a profoundly cautionary tale of the perils of managing a fast-growing business in this industry. The narrative begins in London during the Blitz and extends up to the day before yesterday, delving into the creation of some of the world's leading performing art centers. In the following excerpt, Pilbrow recalls his early encounters with Laurence Olivier (which led to Theatre Projects' consultation on the National Theatre); his sometimes bizarre experiences as West End producer, working with Harold Prince; and how he helped to foster a generation of British lighting designers.)*

Back in London, the '60s were swinging by in a blur, while I was lighting shows in a frenzy. The most important development at TP was the emergence of the lighting design team. I began with the conviction that if I was contracted to light a show, I personally had to light it—not an assistant. If I was not able to commit 100%, I would do a joint design, with one of my assistants sharing the credit. In this way, they learned the ropes while becoming known, eventually graduating to become full designers.

To earn their keep, the assistants started in the rental shop. Robert Ornbo had quickly made his own reputation as a lighting designer, and was soon joined by Robert Bryan. These senior designers took on their own assistants from a growing pool of talented young hopefuls. This "school" of theatre lighting was unique. TP was the only place providing the opportunity to work in the West End alongside established (albeit newly established) practition-

ers. The team quickly grew to include John B. Read, who was to become renowned for his stunning lighting of ballet for the Royal Ballet and around the world; David Hersey, who went on to light *Cats*, *Evita*, *Les Misérables* and many other major musicals and plays; Andy Bridge, who hit the big time with *Phantom of the Opera*; Nick Chelton; John Harrison; Howard Eldridge; and Michael Wilson. Molly Freidel, Graham Large, Steve Kemp, Durham Marengi, Benny Ball, and even Australian designer Nigel Levings later joined the team.

The excitement among us was infectious. We lived, ate, and drank stage lighting. Sometimes there was too much of the drinking. The Green Man public house on St. Martin's Lane became an extension of the TP offices, which were already spreading across Goodwin's Court. Amazingly, there was little or no jealousy. I remember Broadway lighting designer Jules Fisher, who had become a good friend, once remarking to me that such a team would be impossible in New York. The profession there was simply too competitive.

We all shared opportunities and problems: How to achieve such-and-such an effect? What was the impact of that color? What could you do to cope with that situation? Wow, this director is hopeless. What do I do next? It seemed a Renaissance-like excitement, and the success of the group's later careers is something of which I am very proud. It also reminds me today that a community of designers was a very productive idea, not least because we were lighting a very large proportion of all West End shows and, more often than not, lucrative contracts for rental equipment followed.

Bob Bryan remembers a story from the early '60s: "We were doing a production weekend at the Duke of Yorks: a play called, *Big Fish, Little Fish*, which had come from New York starring Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy.

We got into the theatre as usual on Saturday night, rigged and focused. You lit Sunday afternoon, and we did the technicals Sunday evening. Unfortunately, Hume—an actor of the old school—saw the house footlights, and said to the director, ‘Do you think we could have just a little bit of the footlights?’ And, of course, you [Richard] said, ‘No, because it would light up all the top of the set.’ This went on for some time, with him saying, ‘Can we put the footlights on?’ and you saying, ‘No.’ Finally, you said, ‘Listen, it will not do...It’ll just ruin the lighting,’ to which he replied, ‘If this is lighting, my cock’s a kipper,’ at which moment, Orno and I fled the theatre to the pub next door, howling with laughter.

“We were often all together like that, particularly on projection shows. But it just happened that I had rigged this show and Robert came in on the Sunday night, out of curiosity, and to help out if anything needed to be done. We were a great trio.

“Do you remember the strike? Robert and I had gone to The Green Man Pub, and on this particular day we returned to the office about a quarter of an hour late. I put the key in the door, but it was locked. We stood about in the court for a few minutes, then you put your head out the window above and shouted down, ‘This is a lockout,’ at which point Robert said, ‘Well, fuck you. We’re going back to the pub.’

We were incredibly busy, and you took umbrage that we were late back. We did, in fact, go back to the pub and you joined us. We had a drink, and then you said, ‘Well, I think it’s time we had a staff outing,’ and you took us to the cinema. I remember clearly that you paid for the tickets, and, when we returned to the office, you gave the receipts to Viki [Pilbrow’s then wife and office manager] and took the money out of the petty cash tin. We then worked until God knows what time the following morning.”

*(Returning from his summer retreat on the Isle of Coll, had the first of what would be a series of fateful encounters with Laurence Olivier, then in the throes of establishing the National Theatre.)*

The key stuck in the lock.

“Bugger.”

Inside, the telephone was ringing. How could any idiot expect an answer when I was meant to be light years away in the Isle of Coll?

Boxes under my right arm dropped; the key fiddled. I burst in and grabbed the phone...

“Hullo,” I yelled quietly but louder than necessary.

“Is Dickie Pilbrow there?”

“Yes.” (Exasperated—I loathed being called Dickie.)

“May I speak to him, please?”

“You are.”

“Dickie, this is Larry Olivier.”

“Oh, yes,” leaving unsaid, “Pull the other one.”

“I am calling you from Chichester. Where have you been?”

“On holiday . . . the Isle of Coll . . . the Hebrides . . . Sir!”—the last word added because, although I was skeptical, that voice did have an exceptional sonority about it.

“I’ve been trying to find you. Can you come to Chichester?”

“When?”

“Right away.”

“Sir . . . I’ve just driven over 500 miles.”

“Dickie, it’s very urgent. Won’t you come, please?”

Well, now it was obvious. It was He. I had only met him twice before, and then very fleetingly, but that especially persuasive note of pleading was famous and quite irresistible.



The author as a young designer.

“Well, I think I could come in the morning. I’ll try.”

“Please do, dear boy, as early as possible. I’ll be rehearsing.”

I put the phone down, rather awestruck. A voice yelled somewhat stridently, “Come and get these bloody bags!” “Yes, dear.” I settled in, basset hound and cat fed, whiskey at hand, to fend off the rigors of miles down traffic-laden roads. Reality, after four weeks in the most isolated, peace-pervaded Hebrides, began to surface.

“Who on earth was that?” asked Viki.

“Laurence Olivier.”

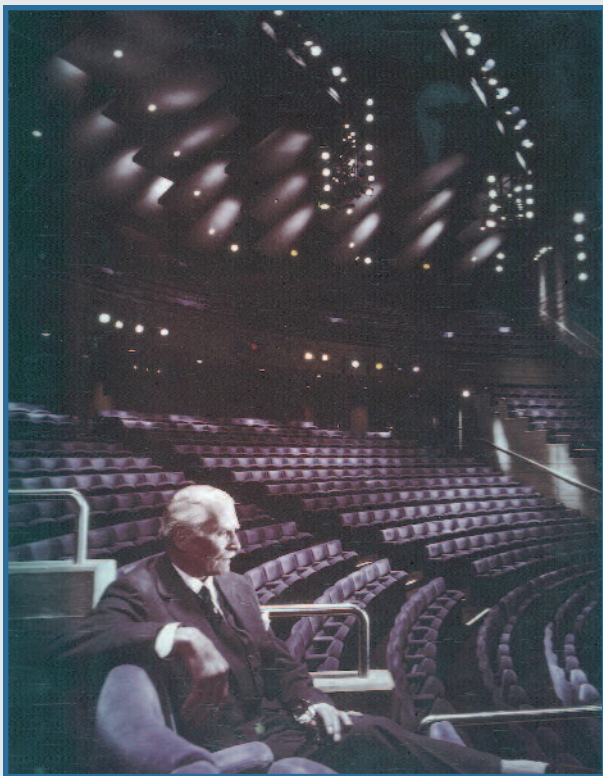
“You’re joking.”

“No, I think it was him. It sounded like him, anyway.”

“How the hell would you know?”

“Well, it was sort of regal . . . like God . . . you know.”

Very early next morning I was on the road. The beauties



Lord Olivier in the Olivier Theatre.

of Sussex flashed past as I wondered what on earth might have led to this summons. Chichester. I knew it was a new theatre with a thrust stage, based on Guthrie's Shakespeare Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, and was soon going to open under Sir Laurence's direction as a "preview" for his National Theatre Company, which would later be launched at the Old Vic Theatre. But that was about all I knew. Four weeks in the islands was good insulation from the gossip of showbiz.

Well, the theatre was easy to find. It was impressive from the outside, sitting in rolling parkland, still surrounded by motley builders' huts. I wondered when the place was meant to open. I should have checked.

Picking my way through frantic activity, I walked up a scaffold board right on to the back of the stage. Rehearsal was in progress. So was everything else: hammering, sawing, fixing seats, shouting, piercing beams of light. It was the usual chaos of construction—only worse: An all-too-typical new theatre pre-opening.

The stage manager, Diana Boddington, soon spotted me and escorted me to The Presence. His image—on stage, on film, and in my memory—had been awesome. The reality was surprisingly scruffy, unshaven . . . and . . . real.

"Dickie," (instantly, but with charm), "I've a desperate problem with the bloody lighting; you can't see anyone. Fellow lights garages, I think. Wait a minute." At that

moment, all the lights came up—and the light dawned on me: It was not good.

I had never worked a thrust stage, where the audience sits around three sides, but this lighting problem was obvious. All of the lighting came from positions all round the stage, and all of those positions were above the audience, pointing at the stage—like lighting in a football stadium. But light for actors has to surround them in three dimensions. They must be clothed in light, as in nature. Most particularly, for the audience to see them, actors' faces must be lit. If the audience sits all around them, then light must reveal the actors' face from every angle.

Here, light came from all around the edges of the stage, pointing toward it. Actors facing outward were well-illuminated, but, as soon as they turned inward, their faces were in darkness. The only way to light their faces would be to re-angle the lights on the other side of the theatre, which then would shine straight into the eyes of the audience in the front rows. To light actors on any three-dimensional stage, one surrounded by an audience, half of the lighting has to be above the stage, shining down at a steep—but not too steep—angle. This is the only way to light the faces of the actors when they are standing at the edge of a thrust stage facing toward the center, without blinding the audience beyond.

"Sir Laurence, there's a straight answer: The lights are in the wrong place."

"I knew it," he exclaimed, with some glee. "Where should they go?"

"Well, about half of them should be rehung over the stage, to light actors facing onstage."

"Right, we'll do it." And orders were issued.

I retired to the bowels of the theatre to consult with the chief electrician. "Fucking impossible," came his response. "There's no way to mount them, no way to plug them in. The fire people will not allow anything temporary, anyway." (That seemed likely, as new types of theatre do give fire authorities apoplexy.)

"Well, how long will it take?" I asked.

"At least three days."

"So what's the problem?"

"We bloody open tomorrow!"

Straightway, my heart nosedived. That was news—the one piece of information that I had not had. I knew that, with the best will in the world, the essential changes would take days. The building roof had no lighting bridges overhead. There was no means of hanging anything over the stage, and moving half of the lighting rig was a huge task. Gloomily, I anticipated "Sir's" next question.

"So, what else can we damn well do?"

"I'm sorry, sir; I don't believe there is any alternative. You can't have a light hit an actor's face at the right angle unless it's in the right position to start with."

Well, that conversation went on for a long time. Finally, I left. Sir Laurence was somewhat less than gracious, clearly bitterly disappointed with his new (very temporary) lighting consultant. Driving back through the surrealistically beautiful countryside, my thoughts were black: abject failure. It seemed like the whole world had come to an end. Never again . . . I would probably never work again.

*(Of course Pilbrow did work again, lighting show after show and building a considerable reputation as a designer, leading to further involvement with Olivier and the nascent National Theatre.)*

The following January after my Chichester debacle, the telephone rang again. This time it was clearly “Sir:” “Dickie, dear boy, it’s January. We open Chichester again in June. Does that give you enough fucking time?”

He invited me to lunch at the Dorchester. Director John Dexter, whom I knew from Central School, was there, too. We talked, and I was hired to be lighting director for the New National Theatre Company, starting in Chichester in June and then transferring to the Old Vic in September. Wow!

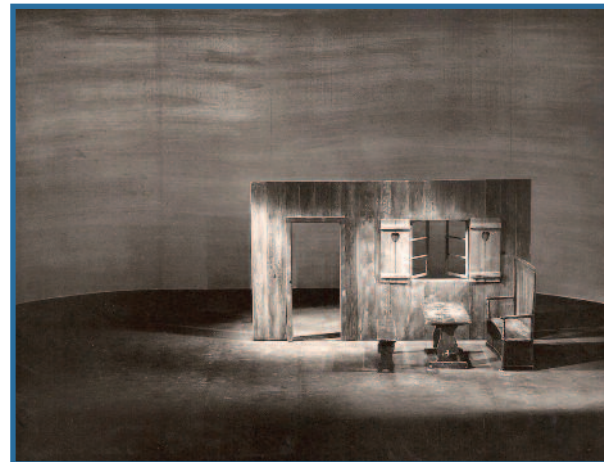
Thanks to my amazing visit to Broadway and the proposal from Hal Prince, I was also going to be a West End producer. But *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* did not start rehearsals until August. What else could I get up to? Run the growing company? Maybe design some lighting?

Set designer Jocelyn Herbert had asked me to light an early Bertolt Brecht play called *Baal* at the Phoenix Theatre, to be directed by Bill Gaskell and starring Peter O’Toole, the new superstar fresh from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. The whole production took place on a wide-open stage in Brechtian style, with only small pieces of scenery in front of a large cyclorama. On this was a series of wonderfully provocative projections designed by Jocelyn. For projections to work, lighting has to be very tightly controlled, even more so in this production where there was no scenery to capture acting area spill light and stop it from washing out the projections. My only recourse was to use a lot of side light and as little as possible from the front. But these were the days before such things had become common and our star did not exactly appreciate this technique. He would have been happier with footlights and several followspots.

We lit through a long technical rehearsal, which began early on a Saturday morning and went on late into the night. There were many, many scenes, and in every one Mr. O’Toole had problems, not the least of which was remembering his lines. The star was very unhappy and his principal peeve was obviously the lighting. Tension mounted. I tried to stay calm behind my production desk. Finally,

he snapped. With a hysterical scream, he advanced to the front of the stage. “Bill,” he yelled, “this lighting is a fucking disgrace. Get this bloody idiot out of here and light me properly.” Everyone froze.

There was a very pregnant silence. Nobody drew breath for about 15 minutes (perhaps it was not quite that long!). Finally, Bill stood up and said, “Richard?” I rose, too. Trying to keep a steady voice, I said, “Bill, if Mr. O’Toole would concentrate on his fine performance and leave the lighting to those who know what they’re doing, we might all be more confident of success.”



Jocelyn Herbert’s setting for *Baal*.



Hal Prince (right) and Pilbrow sporting their ‘60s looks.

There was another pause. Steam could be seen rising. Finally, to his eternal credit, Bill said, in a very loud and masterful tone, “Peter, for Christ’s sake, get on with it!” And he did. By the time the show opened, it looked stunning, but all our efforts could not save it. The newspaper critics were not impressed.

*(As the business of Theatre Projects grew, Pilbrow farmed out an increasing number of design jobs to his young team, in the process establishing the next generation of British lighting designers.)*

The lighting design team had grown. We were all frantically busy, now around the world: Australia, Lebanon, Europe, the Royal Opera, the English National Opera, Glyndebourne, the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare, and across the West End and Broadway.

In 1967, a young American, David Hersey, joined our team. He recalls:

“I was young and brash. I saw *Wise Child* [a Michael Codron production, starring Alec Guinness in drag, directed by John Dexter] without realizing you lit it. You asked me at our meeting what I thought of the lighting, and I said, ‘It was OK.’ I didn’t say it was bad, nor did I say it was wonderful.

“I was engaged for the princely sum of 23 pounds a week, rising after three months to 25 pounds a week. And there was a small percentage of any royalties if I ever happened to get any. I joined Robert Ornbo, Bob Bryan, John B. Read, Nick Chelton, and Howard Eldridge. We had a



David Hersey and Pilbrow, 1987.



The Old Vic, first London home of the National Theatre.

strange and wonderful collaboration. There was so little strife. We just loved—we were all just completely smitten—with what we were doing. We would go to the Green Man Pub and talk lighting for hours. It was a very exciting time. Day after day after day, none of us got bored with it. It was extraordinary. There was really no sense of competition.

“The very first thing I did with Richard was the *Triple Bill* [designed by Tony Walton] at the National. That was my introduction into projection. I remember staying up all night, programming all these slides in all these carousels. The next day, Sir Laurence came to see what we’d been doing. Then I stayed up the next night, taking most of them out. The first time I saw Olivier was in the rehearsal. One of the company, Victor Spinetti, was sitting in the front row of the Old Vic with his feet up on the stage, looking very relaxed and charming the actors. Sir Laurence spotted him and went all the way down the aisle next to him. With a great shout he thwacked Victor’s ankle, knocking him off the stage, and said, ‘Get your fucking foot off the fucking stage.’ For a moment, everybody froze. He wasn’t angry. It was a joke, but he did such a send-up of himself, everybody in the room was completely petrified for what seemed like half an hour.”

The lighting team continued to expand. A new boy, Andy Bridge, remembers:

“My father was a producer, post-World War II, and he employed Richard as one of the first lighting designers—so it was nice that he offered me a job in the store, coiling cables. [Laughs.] I was the assistant. When Richard had his fingers in too many pies, I was very good at saying, ‘He’s just coming.’

“The danger with Richard was that lighting design was becoming an art and it was sometimes hard to get the crews to do that extra bit. The rigs got to be enormous.

“There was one interesting time when I nearly gave up the game. We were at the Palladium, doing a production

with [the producer] Harold Fielding. A TP designer, Nick Chelton, lit it. He had a bit of a temper. He was really an artist, but in the wrong medium; opera was more his thing. I was his assistant. Anyway, it just wasn't working. It got to the half-hour call in the dress rehearsal, and I was sandwiched in between scrim, focusing something. There was a shout and a big 2K unit fell down, missing me by inches, because Nick was losing his rag with it. I got called to the stage door, and there was Nick, walking out, because he was too stressed out about 'the art.' The dress rehearsal was ready to start. I got to the desk and said to the operator, 'Do you have any cues?'

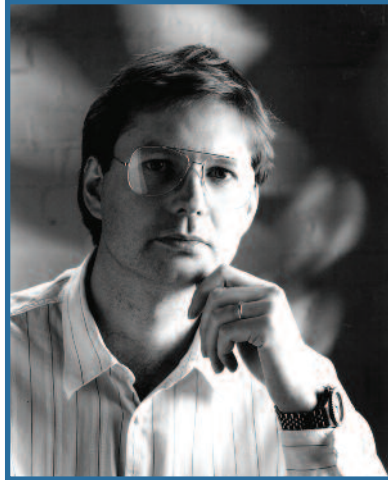
"Halfway through the performance, in slipped Richard, followed by John B. Read, followed by Robert Ornbo and Robert Bryan. It was a family and they sorted it out.

"That's how the Theatre Projects team worked."

*(Simultaneously with the rise of Theatre Projects as a lighting design firm, Pilbrow and his great friend, the production designer Tony Walton, became West End producers, enjoying smash successes with the West End productions of A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, Fiddler on the Roof, and Cabaret, all presented in partnership with Harold Prince. All of these productions had their challenges, but perhaps none more so than Company, in which Pilbrow tangled with the volatile and eccentric American stage star Elaine Stritch.)*

Hal Prince had asked me to light the original production of the Stephen Sondheim musical *Company* on Broadway in 1971. Given the pressure of everything else, I'd declined and recommended Robert Ornbo in my stead. Boris Aronson had designed another extraordinary set—this one made of steel and glass, with back projection and a real elevator that brought all the vibrancy of Manhattan to the stage. Robert, in fine form, did superbly.

Hal and I quickly decided that, for the London production, this



Andrew Bridge.

quintessentially New York musical had to be the genuine article. After months of negotiation with British Actors' Equity, we got permission to bring the entire Broadway cast to London—on the condition that, after six months, we'd replace them with English actors. The Broadway cast included Larry Kert, Elaine Stritch, and Donna McKechnie; Dilys Watling, and Julia McKenzie were replacements later in the run. Choreography was by Michael Bennett.

We obtained my favorite theatre, Her Majesty's, and the cast, scenery, props, and costumes arrived in London.

Our star, Elaine Stritch, flew into Heathrow separately. For several weeks, we'd corresponded about her need to bring her little long-haired dachshund, Bridget, to England. I'd explained (often) that this was absolutely out of the question. British law forbade a dog's importation into the UK without six months' quarantine. Since Elaine was only to be with the show for six months, she'd end up returning to America never having seen the incarcerated Bridget. Elaine refused to come—we could do the show without her! Of course we couldn't, and eventually Hal and I persuaded her to come alone.

Theo Cowan [the press agent] and I went to Heathrow Airport to meet Elaine. We were accompanied by Molly [Pilbrow's second wife], who'd arrived in London only a few months before. Elaine burst through the doors of the customs hall, wearing a long fur coat and carrying a bulky handbag. I stepped forward. "Get me out of here!" she screeched, marching past our reception line. We rushed out after her to point the way to our waiting car. She jumped into the front passenger seat. "Elaine, where's your



Boris Aronson's set for *Company*.

luggage?” I asked. “Get me out of here!” she demanded again. “I’ve left all my damn luggage!”

“But Elaine, you can’t leave your luggage. Customs will only let it through if the owner is there in person.”

“Get me out of here!” With that she opened her purse, and—like a jack-in-a-box—out popped a long-haired dachshund!

“No!” I said pushing Bridget down into the bag—a police constable was standing about ten yards in front of us. “Elaine, dear, this is really serious. I told you. You cannot bring a dog into the country. It’s against the law. You’ll be arrested. You’ll go to jail. The show won’t be able to open!” My mind was racing.

Theo, in one of the back seats, said, “Richard, you and I will have to try and get the luggage. We must get Elaine away from here.”

I turned to Molly, to whom this was all a very new world. “Molly, you’ll have to drive. Take Elaine to the Connaught Hotel, it’s in Mayfair. London.”

“Richard, which way is London?”



Stephen Sondheim, Elaine Stritch, and the company of *Company*.

Molly had hardly ever driven a right-hand-drive vehicle before, and never in London. Her only previous trip to London had been when I had picked her up on her arrival.

Theo and I jumped out of the car. “Sorry, darling . . . it’s that way!”

Molly, the car, Elaine, and Bridget sped off.

It took Theo and me an hour or more to persuade British Customs and Excise that our star—very famous, but quite mad—had left all her luggage, and gone to London. They responded that we should get her back pronto if she wanted her 15 suitcases. But Theo was a masterful publicist and very persuasive. He took the customs man aside, and we finally got custody of Elaine’s pile

of luggage.

At the Connaught, riding up in the elevator, we could hear the dog barking. (Dogs, naturally, were forbidden in the hotel!) Bridget was very happy to be let out of that handbag.

“Elaine, I’m sorry, this is impossible. We open in three days. If anyone finds out about this dog, you will be in serious trouble. It will be taken away and probably you’ll go as well. The whole show is in serious jeopardy.”

We hatched a plan. Molly and I would take the dog. Elaine would go to rehearsal in the morning. Later, Molly would take her to Hyde Park, so she could secretly rendezvous with her animal.

Molly and I were living in a new apartment on Wigmore Street. We had a new water-bed—fashionable at the time. The dog became our guest . . . and peed on the bed whenever we left her.

With Theo we devised another plan: We would call a press conference. The company of *Company* would buy Elaine a dog and present it to her “to cheer her up so far away from her much-beloved pet.”

Well, it did work. Molly picked up Elaine every day at her hotel and took her and Bridget to the park, until we found and bought a likely looking dachshund. The cast presented it to our star. The press was charmed and the show’s publicity benefited.

Later we swapped dogs . . . Elaine was happy. I regretfully must admit I don’t have any idea what happened to Bridget’s understudy.

The show was as fantastic as it had been in New York. Our last preview happened to coincide with the lunchtime presentation of the *Evening Standard* Theatre Awards (the equivalent of the Tony Awards in New York). After the lunch, we invited all the guests to a special preview “for the profession.” It was a riot. At the top of Act Two, as the entire cast entered in line from downstage left in the number “Side by Side by Side,” absolutely every member of the audience rose to their feet—a truly massive standing ovation, a welcome one, that simply stopped the show.

The production opened on January 18, 1972, at Her Majesty’s Theatre, where it ran for 344 performances.

Being the producer could be hard work. After the show at night, Molly and I often picked up Elaine and transported her back to the Savoy Hotel, where she now lived. There she was most hospitable. Drinks and chat flowed. Other inhabitants of the bar, especially wealthy American tourists, would join us and the party could go long into the night. Elaine loved London, and stayed in England long after she left *Company*.

What an extraordinary piece of theatre is *Company*. Hal Prince at his most brilliant . . . Boris and Robert’s work . . . a magnificent cast. A joy! 📶