

Proposed National Theatre Issue

1971-74

The first suggestion of a stamp to mark the opening of the National Theatre (NT) dates back to 1969, when work on new purpose-built premises began on the South Bank site. The National Theatre Company had been playing at the Old Vic since October 1963; Viscount Chandos, Chairman of the NT, suggested a stamp to mark the opening of the new building, expected to take place in 1973. In 1971 a similar proposal was received from the architects, Denys Lasdun & Partners.

On 26 May 1971 the Post Office's Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC) heard a proposal from its Chairman, G R Downes, that the printers Bradbury Wilkinson should produce a line-engraved issue in 1973 to mark the event. This was provisionally agreed, subject to a decision on the precise theme – suggestions included 'pictorial views of the new theatre; a series to recall great days of the English theatre; or designs to symbolise the world of theatre in general'. Consideration continued at the meeting on 7 July; the idea of using architects' designs of the building itself was found attractive, but it was now felt that 'a national rather than a merely London solution was needed'. The 'pictorial views' suggestion could be expanded to include other theatres, 'preferably outside London'; other themes proposed were: 'great events in the Theatre, past and present'; theatre interiors showing evolution from Shakespeare's stage via the proscenium arch to modern theatre in the round; British playwrights of the various periods of theatrical development, for example, Elizabethan, Restoration or Victorian.

FIRST DECISIONS BY SAC

Over the next two months a Post Office paper was drawn up and seen by members of the SAC: this accepted that the new theatre should be depicted, but argued that the issue should not simply be another 'British Architecture' set that had become an annual feature. At the meeting of 8 September the SAC agreed that alternative sets of four designs each should be commissioned; both would feature exteriors of the National Theatre and the Globe of Shakespeare's day, but the set would be completed in one case by interiors of the Chichester Festival Theatre and the Bristol Theatre Royal, and in the other by scenes from Shakespeare and Shaw. It was also agreed that these sets would be better reproduced by photogravure than line-engraved as first proposed. No immediate action was taken, however, as Downes announced at the meeting on 20 October that the National Theatre was not expected to open before the end of 1973, and it was not now proposed to issue stamps before February 1974.

Further developments took place in 1972 – it appears that discussions were held between the Post Office Design Adviser, Stuart Rose, and Josephine Ranken of the Garden Studio shortly before the beginning of June, and on 2 June Miss Ranken was formally commissioned to submit four designs. The outcome was that the idea of scenes from Shaw or Shakespeare was dropped in favour of a wider range of interior and exterior theatrical studies. Two months later Rose spoke again to Miss Ranken about the progress of her designs: the artist had opted to concentrate on stylised theatrical interiors with much detail of audiences and actors in period dress. Following this Robert Micklewright of Saxon Artists was briefed by Rose, and formally commissioned on 15 August; working in a more naturalistic style than Ranken's, the artist went on to produce a set of exterior studies which also included two theatrical interiors as decided by the SAC the previous year. Ranken and Micklewright submitted their artwork in early October, as follows:

R Micklewright –

National Theatre London
The Globe Theatre
Theatre Royal Bristol
Theatre Royal Bristol (interior)
Chichester Festival Theatre
Chichester Festival Theatre (interior)
The Old Vic Theatre

J Ranken –

Globe Theatre
Upper Theatre South Bank
Dorset Gardens Theatre
Drury Lane Theatre.

Josephine Ranken's designs were 150mm across by 105mm down, without captions, values, or the Queen's head. Micklewright's designs were supplied as pencil sketches in double stamp size (82mm across by 60mm down) and bear captions as given above; all include the Queen's head and the 5p denomination. The exception is the design showing the exterior of the Theatre Royal Bristol, bearing the 4p value, which was not in the production file listing of work received by the agreed deadline of 2 October (on which basis payment was made to artists) and was possibly an 'afterthought'.

FINISHED DESIGNS PRODUCED

A finished set of Micklewright's designs was produced for showing to the SAC; these were the same size as before but in colour, and incorporated minor variations of caption and value. A set of Ranken's designs was also produced in stamp size, incorporating values and the Queen's head. Both sets bore identical silhouettes of the Queen's profile in gold. Details are as follows:

R Micklewright –

- 3p - National Theatre London
- 3p - Globe Theatre London 1644
- 5p - Theatre Royal, Bristol
- 7½p - Chichester Festival Theatre
- 9p - Chichester Festival Theatre (interior)
- 9p - Old Vic Theatre, London

J Ranken –

- 2½p - National Theatre 1974, Drury Lane Theatre
- 3p - National Theatre 1974, The Globe Theatre
- 5p - National Theatre 1974, Dorset Gardens Theatre
- 7½p - National Theatre 1974, Upper Theatre South Bank.

The two finished sets of designs were shown to the SAC meeting on 19 October; Stuart Rose's accompanying notes (included with the artwork in the British Postal Museum & Archive albums) lent heavily in favour of Micklewright's set without the Chichester Festival theatre interior and Globe Theatre designs – he possibly felt that Ranken's designs were too minutely detailed to be effective at stamp size, although this is not stated. Rose now felt that the Globe should be excluded as it had been demolished in 1644, while the other theatres were still in existence. The accuracy of the contemporary sketch of the Globe by Hollar, on which the design was based, was open to question, and no other authentic source was known.

On the advice of Sir Paul Reilly, Director of the Design Council and a member of the SAC, Rose was also now opposed to combining theatrical façades and interiors in the same set; if interiors were included, it would clearly be more effective to show a play in progress with the house lights down than closed curtains with the lights up, but any such stamp would dominate and unbalance a set that also featured external façades. He considered that façades of the Bristol Theatre Royal, Chichester Festival Theatre, Old Vic and National Theatre would make a thematically unified set; as well as balancing two old and two modern buildings, there were links between all four theatres. The Old Vic dated back to 1818 and had been connected with the concept of the National Theatre since 1946; the Theatre Royal in

Bristol was the oldest in the country (it had been open almost continually since 1766) and was itself linked with the Old Vic, again since 1946; the Chichester Festival Theatre had opened in 1962 and provided the nucleus of the first National Theatre company the following year.

DESIGNS REJECTED BY SAC

Despite Stuart Rose's arguments, neither set of designs was found acceptable by the SAC. Discussion as to the best method of treating the subject in stamp form was now revived; it was recommended that the issue should look to the present and future rather than the past, and that drawings of both the National Theatre's interior and exterior as they might be expected to appear could be produced. The Committee agreed that such ideas should be pursued; a year was to pass, however, before any further action was taken. At the SAC meeting on 30 November the issue was mentioned only to confirm that it remained part of the 1974 stamp programme; on 14 December Stuart Rose visited the architect Denys Lasdun to discuss ideas for the stamps and was confidentially told that the National Theatre would not now be completed before late 1974, and would open officially early the following year. Rose's view, expressed in a letter to Derek Barker of Postal Marketing the following day, was that it would be best to issue the stamps to coincide with the Queen's official opening in 1975. On 18 January 1973 the SAC's new Chairman, E G White, informed the Committee that the theatre's opening had been postponed, and the proposed issue accordingly put back to the 1975 programme. Meanwhile Josephine Ranken and Robert Micklewright were each paid £600 in December 1972, on the basis of £150 for each of the four designs commissioned from both artists.

The proposed National Theatre issue was next mentioned at the SAC meeting of 27 September 1973, when White described it as an 'almost inescapable' subject for the stamp programme for 1975; at the following meeting on 25 October the Chairman repeated that the Post Office was 'virtually committed' to the proposal. The October meeting also reached a tentative agreement that, to avoid thematic overlap with the architectural issue already envisaged for European Architectural Heritage Year, the National Theatre set should be devoted to theatrical interiors. This was directly against the advice given by Rose and Sir Paul Reilly a year earlier; it should be noted that Sir Paul, a personal acquaintance of the architect Denys Lasdun and a keen proponent of both his design for the National Theatre and a stamp issue that would show it to advantage, was not present at this meeting. No final decision was reached, however, and at the next meeting on 6 December Rose succeeded in deferring commitment to the 'theatrical interiors' proposal. Finally, on 16 January 1974, SAC member Sir Brian Batsford suggested that the National Theatre and European Architectural Heritage Year issues should be merged to create more scope in the 1975 programme, still undecided, for which there were a number of pressing candidates. Sir

Paul Reilly at once supported this, and the SAC as a body agreed. Henceforth plans to commemorate the National Theatre's opening would be merged into those for European Architectural Heritage Year. The set was issued in April 1975, the Theatre being amongst the subjects depicted in the series, which featured exteriors rather than interiors of buildings. The building itself was not finally opened, however, until March 1976, after further delays.

THE FINAL OUTCOME

It seems apparent that Sir Paul Reilly and Stuart Rose willingly sacrificed the concept of a separate issue commemorating the National Theatre, in order to ensure its appearance, in a form they considered suitable, on a single stamp of a wider series. Elsewhere within the SAC there was a persistent vagueness from beginning to end about how the Theatre's opening might ideally be commemorated. Also, as late as October 1973, some opposition to the whole proposal had been voiced by regions, on the grounds that its commercial appeal was strictly limited - Miss D J Fothergill, Director of the London Postal Region, doubted on 12 October whether the issue had any particular marketing potential, while on 15 October K E F Gowen, Director of the South West Postal Region, lumped it in with other proposed issues dismissed as 'unlikely to be best sellers'. On 19 February 1974, however, Stuart Rose wrote of the abandoned issue with some regret:

'As being the culmination of a generation's work to establish a permanent national centre for the theatre, the subject really justifies a set on its own. Architecturally the Denys Lasdun building is one of the most significant to have been built in this country since the war and as such is worthy of commemoration.'

GILES ALLEN
30 May 1996

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive files:

- Post 54 SAC minutes 1971-72, 1973-75
- MKD/BS/191 (Special series, National Theatre - instructions to artists)
- MKD/BS/215 (Special series 1974 - National Theatre, payment record)
- MKD/BS/565 (European Architectural Heritage Year - instructions to artists)
- MKD/BS/1028 (1975 special stamps - regional correspondence)
- MKD/BS/1029 (1975 special stamps - background research)
- MKD/CJ/206 (European Architectural Heritage Year promotion 1975)