

# A small stage where giants play

Michael Attenborough tells Mary-Jane Wiltsher about his ten exhilarating years at the Almeida Theatre



**T**he luckiest man in British theatre'. That was what the press dubbed Michael Attenborough in 2002 when he inherited the Almeida, a small playhouse with gargantuan credentials. Following 12 illustrious years as Principal Associate Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Michael found himself at the helm of the most exciting theatre in the country. Known for its superior casting and adventurous international programme, the Almeida couldn't be adopted by just anyone. The candidate needed to be capable of sustaining, even surpassing, Jonathan Kent and Ian McDiarmid's directorial legacy. Ten years on, with the wisdom of experience, what is it like to look back on such an undertaking?

"I think it's fair to say I felt apprehensive; it's much easier to go into a theatre that's languishing and pull it up by its boot straps," articulates Michael, with the effortless manner you expect of someone from Attenborough stock. He wears a slate grey suit, dressed down with a pair of Converse. Rain patters against the windows of the Almeida's café. "I hadn't actually applied for the job; I'd pretty much decided not to run another theatre. Following my predecessors was an awesome task."

Headhunted into a position that was swamped by expectation, there wasn't time for Michael to doubt himself for long. Several points were high on the agenda: thinking in the long-term, creating the right working atmosphere and sustaining a challenging repertoire suited to the space. "I thought, 'I just have to trust myself'. A friend said, 'Running a theatre is a marathon, not a sprint, think of the long game'."

Being a community hub, actors and theatre-goers often comment on the Almeida's family

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atmosphere. This is no happy accident – Michael had precise goals when he took over. "I wanted to create a place that I would want to work in," he states. "People need to come because they feel they're looked after and respected. That's why theatres and other arts organisations, in my humble opinion, need to be run by artists. What you need is a vision, and with the best will in the world, an administrator doesn't provide that."

Along with its relaxed ambience, the Almeida's space is synonymous with its success. It's a site that transcends its own perimeters, an unpretentious venue capable of accommodating plays of real magnitude. Quizzing Michael on the subject prompts a sudden change in tempo – his energy lifts just talking about it: "Sometimes you walk into a space and the configuration of it feels electric. It has what I call an epic scale. The stage is almost as big as the auditorium, so I can do intimate two-handers, but I can also do Shakespeare. There's something exciting about doing epic theatre in an intimate space. Something big is happening, there's real truth, but you don't have to shout."

The Almeida's two-fold personality makes it the perfect platform for a diverse repertoire – something Michael was determined to build on. "I'd come from the largest theatre company in the world »



to a place that only does six shows a year, albeit with a focus that is very intense. The Royal Court is governed by new plays; the RSC has to play classics. Here, I can do classics and whatever else I want."

So, what about personal favourites? When it comes to naming names, Michael finds it tough to wage one play against another. "Inevitably many of them are the shows you direct – your passion is behind them," he pauses diplomatically. "I just did what I thought was Neil LaBute's best play, *Reasons To Be Pretty*, a beautiful piece with four wonderful parts. David Eldridge's play about drugs, *The Knot of the Heart*, was astonishing, and contained at its centre a mind-blowing performance from Lisa Dillon. Another particular favourite was Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. We did it six months before Harold died, he was very involved."

Aside from his directorial work, Michael's unwavering commitment to the Almeida's youth education programme should not be overlooked. Responding to a community exhibiting vast disparities in wage earning, he launched Almeida Projects, an enterprise that has grown to encompass work with local partner schools, Young Friends of the Almeida (500 members strong, with its own elected board) and countless other mentored projects. "Everything we do is inspired by our inner house," he explains. "It harnesses their creativity. Giving our young friends a sense of self-worth is really important. We frequently do what we call our spin-off plays with young casts too."

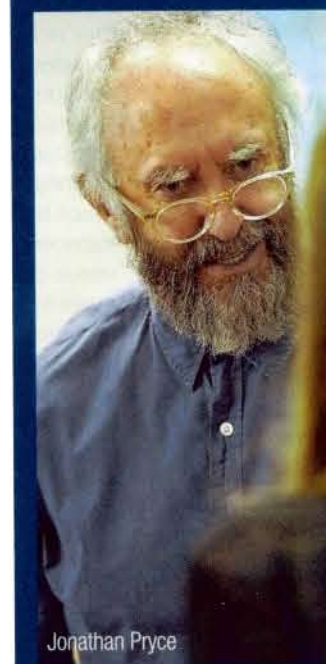
Asked the inevitable question of what he would do differently, Michael is reticent, having enjoyed the learning curve. "I don't look back with many regrets to be honest. There were one or two rich language plays in the early years that played to bad houses – I sat there and purred, but they weren't to everyone's taste. You learn about the expectations of the place; we got into our stride."

Looking ahead, Michael's vision for the Almeida is assuredly ambitious, but his own residency is something he's quietly matter-of-fact about. "I want to bend back the boundaries while holding on to our audience and production standards, do bigger scale work and take more risks. But I don't think I'll

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be here long term. I haven't put a date on going, I'm very happy – but when I feel too old, I'll hang up my boots." There's a break in his calm assessment, and I'm struck by a parallel between Attenborough and the Almeida: real truth, but no shouting. "And no, I wouldn't run another theatre after this." Why would he? The Almeida is a tough act to follow. |

## KING LEAR



Jonathan Pryce

Michael's next play waiting in the Almeida's wings is Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Starring award-winning actor Jonathan Pryce, the production has spurred a sister youth project, currently in rehearsal at Shoreditch Town Hall. "Lear is an Everest of a play," he enthuses. "Tackling Shakespeare is awesome and frightening, but we've got a fantastic cast for *Lear*. Obviously, some of the issues it looks at are not the concerns of a 14-year-old kid – with our spin-off, we've taken hold of certain ideas."

*King Lear*, 31 August–3 November, [almeida.co.uk](http://almeida.co.uk)