

# London Preview

## by Neil Dowden



As one of the world centres for theatre, London regularly draws top international actors, directors, writers, and others to its many stages. But there are an unusually large number of celebrated veteran performers heading for the capital this spring/early summer.

Now eighty-four, Dame Maggie Smith returns to the stage after a twelve-year gap to appear in Christopher Hampton's new monologue *A German Life* at the Bridge Theatre, directed by Jonathan Kent. The multiple-award-winning actress has focused on her screen career in recent years but she has been tempted back to the theatre by a fascinating role. She plays Brunhilde Pomsel, personal secretary to Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for Nazi Germany, who always claimed she did not know the full horrors perpetrated by the regime she worked for. The play is drawn from testimonies given by Pomsel after she spoke to Austrian filmmakers in the 2016 documentary of the same name shortly before her death, aged 106.

The venerable Smith may have been performing on London stages since 1954, but two American acting seniors will be making their debut here in the spring: Sally Field and Bill Pullman in Arthur Miller's 1947 classic *All My Sons* at The Old Vic. Though they are known for their film and television work (Field having won two Oscars and three Emmys), they are also experienced theatre performers. They actually both appeared in the original Broadway production of Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* in 2002, though not together but after a cast change. Here they play husband and wife Kate and Joe Keller, whose family and business are torn apart after the exposure of a wartime secret, in a co-production with Headlong Theatre directed by their artistic director Jeremy Herrin.

Another American star making his London theatre debut is Matthew Broderick, who is appearing alongside compatriot Elizabeth McGovern in Kenneth Lonergan's *The Starry Messenger* at Wyndham's Theatre, directed by Sam Yates. Broderick may be famous for his Hollywood films, but he has frequently performed in stage plays and musicals (winning two Tonys). Indeed, here he is reprising his leading role in the 2009 Off Broadway premiere of Lonergan's play about an astronomy teacher in the throes of a mid-life crisis. McGovern has appeared on the London stage a number of times before, having moved to Britain twenty-five years ago.

And almost three decades after his last performance here, John Malkovich is returning to star in the world premiere of David Mamet's *Bitter Wheat* at the Garrick Theatre, directed by the playwright himself. Malkovich made his name with Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in the mid-seventies before his film career took off, but surprisingly this will be the first time he has worked with the Chicagoan Mamet either in cinema or theatre. He plays a Hollywood studio head who falls from power into shame. It is inspired by the scandal surrounding Miramax boss Harvey Weinstein who has been accused of sexual assault by over eighty women between the years of 1980 and 2015, giving rise to the #MeToo movement. It promises to be an interesting counterpoint to Mamet's controversial 1992 play *Oleanna*, a fictional story about a university professor falsely accused of sexual harassment by one of his female students.

Indeed, there will be a cornucopia of American drama, both new and

old, for London audiences to see this spring and summer. Steppenwolf itself is in town bringing across the Atlantic its production of Bruce Norris's new play *Downstate* to the National Theatre's Dorfman studio auditorium. It is set in a house shared by a group of men convicted of sex crimes against minors who are confronted by one of the abused victims. Norris had a big hit here in 2010/11 with *Clybourne Park*, another hard-hitting play, dealing with issues of racism.

There is also an unofficial Arthur Miller season. Apart from *All My Sons* (which follows on from *The American Clock* at The Old Vic – see review on page 15), *The Price* is coming to the end of its successful run (with a show-stealing performance from David Suchet) at Wyndham's Theatre, while Miller's masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* will feature an African American family in Marianne Elliott and Miranda Cromwell's production at the Young Vic. There is even a gender-switched version of *The Crucible* at the fringe Yard Theatre.

In addition, Theatre Royal Stratford East artistic director Nadia Fall will present August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, starring Lenny Henry as an ex-con striving for redemption in a decaying Pittsburgh during the Reagan era. And Thornton Wilder's 1938 meta-theatrical classic *Our Town*, in which the inhabitants of a fictitious small town come together to put on a show, will be revived by Ellen McDougall at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre.

Meanwhile the other main London open-air venue the Globe Theatre is concentrating on English history, or rather the mythologized version created by William Shakespeare in *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* and *Henry V*. As with the first two shows of the season last year, co-directors Sarah Bedi and Federay Holmes will marshal a 50/50 gender-equal Globe Ensemble, this time with female leads playing Hotspur (artistic director Michelle Terry), Hal/Henry (Sarah Amankwah), and Falstaff (Helen Schlesinger). They will be followed by the light-hearted Falstaff sequel *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, (directed by Nicole Charles and Elle While) often cited as a forerunner of the modern TV sitcom.

Though an all-round man of the theatre, as a commercially savvy artist and unabashed audience-pleaser Shakespeare would no doubt recognize the international reach of online streaming and would probably be the showrunner for a long-running series on Netflix today. But, like the actors mentioned in this preview, he would surely always keep wanting to return to the unique experience of live performance on stage – especially in his adopted city of London.

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