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PLAGUE OVER ENGLAND

“... a witty social panorama of the homophobic 1950s ... what makes this an engrossing play is (his) expert recreation of an unlovely period in English life.” Michael Billington, *Guardian*

“With great aplomb de Jongh’s play whisks us from courtroom to gay club, from the heart of the political establishment to murky public conveniences ... it constantly proves touching and entertaining, with a sharp period flavour ... There are moments ... that come close to the emotional depth of Rattigan at his finest, others that equal the gamey period flavour of the undervalued Rodney Ackland.” Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*

“Britain has changed, if a little bit too late for the Gielgud generation. All credit to de Jongh for telling us this in so lively, arresting a play.” Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*

“Entertainingly old-fashioned, poignant and often very funny ... It would be unfair if *Plague Over England* were to be pigeon-holed as a gay play. It’s really a richly characterized study of human foibles around gay themes ... it’s cheerfully combative, kind-hearted and optimistic, with these “artistic gentlemen” using all their wit and courage to triumph over the grey, dour forces of conformity.” Charles Hart, *Sunday Times*

“*Plague Over England* is funny, angry, moving, refreshing and fantastically entertaining. One looks forward to the next work from this highly original pen.” Lloyd Evans, *Spectator*

“In his terrific first play he sensitively traces a lost world.” Johann Hari, *Evening Standard*



Plague Over England

A play

Nicholas de Jongh

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk



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PLAGUE OVER ENGLAND

First produced by Chantelle Staynings and Neil McPherson at the Finborough Theatre on 29th February 2008 with the following cast:

Detective Chief Inspector Bellinger	Steve Hansell
Rayner, Lord Goddard/	
Dr Ambrose Quentin	David Barnaby
Mr Justice Percival Lightbourne/	
Binkie Beaumont	Simon Dutton
Peter Munroe	Steve Hansell
Police Constable Terry Fordham	Leon Ockenden
Matthew Barnsbury	Timothy Watson
Dame Sybil Thorndike/	
Vera Dromgoole	Nichola McAuliffe
Sir John Gielgud	Jasper Britton
Gregory Lightbourne	Robin Whiting
Chiltern Moncreiffe/	
Sir David Maxwell Fyfe	John Warnaby
Brian Mandeville/Bert/Fred/	
Douglas Witherby	David Burt

Directed by Tamara Harvey
Designed by Alex Marker
Lighting by James Farncombe
Sound design by Colin Pink
Costume design by Penn O’Gara

Subsequently transferred to the Duchess Theatre, London on 19th February 2009, with the following changes in cast:

Rayner, Lord Goddard/	
Dr Ambrose Quentin	Hugh Ross
Gregory Lightbourne	Sam Heughan
Matthew Barnsbury	Michael Brown
Dame Sybil Thorndike/Vera Dromgoole	Celia Imrie
Sir John Gielgud	Michael Feast

Sound design by Theo Holloway
Costume design by Trish Wilkinson
Original music by Alexander S. Bermange with lyrics
by Nicholas de Jongh

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CHARACTERS

The name of Peter Munroe from the Finborough and West End productions has been changed to Daniel Arlington in this Acting Edition.

Detective Chief Inspector Bellinger, about 36

Rayner, Lord Goddard, Lord Chief Justice of

England and Wales

Mr Justice Percival Lightbourne, a High Court

Judge

Daniel Arlington, 40ish, American

Police Constable Terry Fordham, early/mid twenties

Matthew Barnsbury, civil servant

Dame Sybil Thorndike, actress

Sir John Gielgud, 49, later 71

Dr Ambrose Quentin

Gregory Lightbourne, 19, later 41

Douglas Witherby, manager, Dudmaston Mews

public lavatory; waiter at the Polynaeum

Vera Dromgoole, retired actress, owner of Queen Mab's

Brian Mandeville, Vera's partner at Queen Mab's

Chiltern Moncreiffe, theatre critic

Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, Home Secretary

Bert, news vendor

Binkie Beaumont, Managing Director of H.M.

Tennent, the dominant play-producing company
during the 1950s

Fred, doorman

The characters of Douglas, Bert and Fred should all be played by the same actor.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The basic setting is of a Victorian lavatory and its framework remains in view throughout. There should be no attempt at detailed realism or laborious changes of setting. This is not quite a realistic play and it's essential that scenes flow into each other, with the dissolves between scenes rendered with music and characters from the end of one scene either remaining *in situ* until those for the next arrive. The lavatory's back or side walls can revolve to disclose Queen Mab's cocktail cabinet, the Home Secretary's office, the Polynaeum and other locations. Back projections must be used for the external scenes, such as St James's Park, Hyde Park and the Haymarket. This should help to give a strong, atmospheric or period sense of London. Such a device may be used for other scenes too.

In Act II, Scene 5, asterixes between dialogue indicate the shifts in focus between the two scenes taking place simultaneously on opposite sides of the stage. It is left to the individual director to decide how he or she wishes to make this distinction.

Where voices, singing and shouting are heard off stage (for example from the Piano Bar at Queen Mab's or during the gay activists' demonstration in the final scene) these may be spoken by actors who are not on stage or by stage management, unless otherwise indicated in the effects plot.

The music for the songs "I'm Pretty" in Act I, Scene 8, "Hi There..." in Act I, Scene 8, "I'm Katie the Cook" in Act I, Scene 8", "Miss Jessica Tandy" in Act I, Scene 10 and "Seeker" in Act II, Scenes 3 and 13 was written by Alexander S. Bermange, lyrics by Nicholas de Jongh. It is available on hire from Samuel French Ltd and there will be an additional performance fee for it use (see page iv). Alexander S. Bermange also has optional backing tracks and incidental music for the play which would be the subject of a separate arrangement between Mr Bermange and producing companies. Contact details are available from the Editorial Department at Samuel French.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The productions of *Plague Over England* at the Finborough Theatre in 2008 and Duchess Theatre in 2009 came about as the result of the help and practical assistance of a large number of people, apart, of course, from those directly involved in bringing the play to the stage.

The author would like to express his gratitude to:

Keith Baxter, Sam Beazley, Colin Bell, Susan Black, Todd Boyce, Jack Bradley, Nica Burns, Matthew Byam Shaw, Ned Chaillet, Julian Cole, Jeremy Connor, Dominic Cooke, Kathy Dacre, Don Davidson, Gary Davy, Jean Diamond, David Eldridge, Sonia Friedman, Michael Grandage, Thelma Holt, Lucy Hume, Lord Hutchinson, Angela Hyde Courtney, Sue Hyman, Cliff Johannou, Jeremy Kingston, Peter Lantos, Andrew Lumsden, Sean Mathias, Simon McDermott, Wendy Moffat, Daniel Novelli, Howard Panter, Paul Rhys, Ian Rickson, James Roose-Evans, David Roper, Lady Rothermere, Brian Sewell, Timothy Sheader, Amanda Smith, Rosemary Squire, Matthew Todd, *Watsonstage*, and all those who were involved in two rehearsed readings, first in the bar of the Duchess Theatre and then on the main stage of the Royal Court.

For Bill Kenwright and Neil McPherson
and in loving memory of
Adrian Ffooks (1955 - 1996)
— beautiful, brave and beset by
homophobia.

ACT I

The framework of a Victorian lavatory remains in view throughout the play. It should resemble a relic. There are flickers of lamplight from outside — an orange glow and impression of 1950s evening mist/smog. This antique urinal is full of faint lavatorial murmurs, drips and gushes of water. The urinals, where you piss on to china and whose pipes are polished to a leering, come-hitherish gleam, stand in two rows. The Victorian wash basins are equipped with ancient taps. There is a small cubicle with frosted-glass windows by the entrance, from which Witherby will appear and into which he retreats

SCENE 1

Hyde Park. 1953, twilight

A back projection shows a timeless view of Hyde Park — as it is now, so it was in 1953, though bushes, trees and shrubs loomed smaller. A second film projection gives a distant aspect of a cruising area in the park. We can see shadowy figures, some standing under trees, one or two moving

Two men, Lord Goddard and Chief Inspector Bellinger, stand in the reflected glow of Bellinger's torchlight that faintly illuminates them. Goddard has an opulent pair of binoculars hanging from his neck. In the distance can be seen a dozen tiny illuminations — lit cigarettes — which flicker around

Bellinger You know how they attract each other's attention in the dark, my Lord?

Goddard (*humorously*) I shudder to think.

Bellinger They flash a cigarette, sir. Sometimes they ask to be lit up.

Goddard (*jovially*) It sounds almost civilized. (*He raises the binoculars to his eyes*) I suppose I ought to take a look.

Bellinger I wouldn't recommend it, sir. You won't like it.

Goddard Like it? I'm not here for pleasure, Bellinger. The still, small voice of duty. It drives me on.

Bellinger Naturally, sir.

Goddard (*letting the binoculars fall*) Bellinger. Do my eyes deceive me? Two of them. Kissing. Does it happen often? (*He hands the binoculars to Bellinger*)

Bellinger takes a cursory look and returns the binoculars to Goddard

Bellinger We do come across it, my Lord. But it's not a usual practice at all.

A cigarette light flares

Goddard Thank God for that. To think the friendly Woodbine can be so misused! Imagine an innocent, courting couple! Stumbling on a scene like this.

Bellinger No danger, sir. These days normal folk give Hyde Park a wide berth once twilight falls.

Goddard I didn't realize the place was infested.

Bellinger We'll clear them out in the end, my Lord. We've got the park under regular watch.

A sound of human, not police whistles, then the cigarette lights are extinguished. Torch lights gleam

Goddard Bellinger! That whistling?

Bellinger Yes, my Lord. Our boys. Operation Everest. (*He looks at his watch*) Dead on time. We're hoping for quite a big catch tonight.

Goddard That's the spirit!

An owl hoots

Such an ominous warble! The owl's!

Bellinger I think you'll find it's one of our men, my Lord, imitating nature. They develop a flair for sniffing out your lurkers.

Police whistles. Big lights begin to circle. A magnified voice: "Stop. Police. Don't move."

Goddard Such reassuring words!

Bellinger We're raiding St James's Park tonight as well, my Lord. Always a few guardsmen peddling their wares.

Goddard It beggars belief. In my young day guardsmen wouldn't have dreamed of putting their vital body parts out to rent.

Shouts and cries. More police whistles. A concentration of lights and suddenly a howl of fear

Bellinger gazes raptly. Goddard's eyes are not up to it. He pants with excitement

Bellinger? What's happening? Have they caught someone in the act? *(Breathing heavily)* Yes? Well? Yes? Bellinger!

Bellinger *(chuckling)* I'll be blown. Cheeky bugger! One of them's making a run for it. Tearing away like a stag. Three of ours giving chase. Yes, yes. Come on, lads. Yes — gotcha!

Goddard *(thrilled, an exultant gasp of excitement emanating from him)* Aah!

Bellinger They've brought him down my Lord. Terrific tackle. Look at him struggle. Like a wild cat.

Goddard *(still breathing unevenly)* Yes — I've seen enough, Bellinger. Yes. It's high time I left the playing fields of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Bellinger Of course, my Lord. It's no place for a gentleman.

Goddard I feel a little faint. There's brandy in the Bentley for succour and my manservant's made us roast beef sandwiches ... Do join me. *(He moves away)*

Bellinger Very kind, my Lord ...

Shouts of "Make a run for it." Police whistles again

Goddard *(as they begin to leave)* How many did you net last year, Bellinger?

Bellinger More than a hundred sir. Here in Hyde Park.

Goddard Terrifying — such numbers!

Bellinger It's the youngsters I worry about, my Lord. I've a couple of teenage lads myself. I want them to grow up proper, in a better class of England.

Goddard Admirable! We'll drink a toast to the new Queen and England — reborn — where men are men!

They walk out, Bellinger helping Goddard

SCENE 2

The High Court

Music — “Zadok the Priest” by Handel plays, then fades out

Mr Justice Percival Lightbourne walks through the urinal to the front of stage to deliver his speech to the audience. He is a grand, bewigged figure, dressed in the scarlet robing of the High Court. He speaks in the judicial mode, quietly without a shred of emotion or rhetoric — he must not sound theatrical

Lightbourne I simply do not understand what is happening to this great nation of ours. An epidemic of male vice is spreading through the land. Each year more and more young men are brought to the courts, having been irrevocably seduced into indecent practices by their elders, fated never to achieve normal, happy married life or father children.

Tunbridge Wells is just the latest city to succumb to this epidemic. The jury by its findings has corroborated the prosecution’s case that a single invert can coax scores of young men into the homosexual life. The judiciary’s supreme duty is to protect the moral values of our realm. Those values are now gravely beset by stress and strain. Crimes of violence, juvenile delinquency and sexual laxity increase annually ... It seems as if we are running adrift on a rising tide of fornication and drunkenness. Even our cultural glory is besmirched by novels and drama that regard adultery as a joke and homosexuality as a fit subject for discussion.

Charles Applethwaite, as Managing Director of a leading toiletry company, lay magistrate and Chairman of Tunbridge Wells Conservative Association, you were regarded as a pillar of the community. Today that pillar falls. You have been found guilty of grave and unnatural offences. A soldier, electrician, dustman, plumber, fireman, chauffeur and pest control officer all succumbed to your advances. On the pretext of offering these young men the chance to view your newly acquired television set — one of the few in Tunbridge Wells — you organized a school of instruction in homosexual vice.

Sadly there are no available facilities that would afford you the medical and psychiatric treatment which might lead to a cure. You will go to prison for three years.

The music of “Zadok the Priest” returns, then fades

SCENE 3

The Serpentine. Night

A back projection of the shimmering, moonlit expanse of the Serpentine, on which lamplight plays as well. On the other side of the waters can be dimly glimpsed an evening landscape of trees against a moody sky-line

There are two park benches

A man, Daniel, fortyish, a bit the better for alcohol, sits on one of the benches. He has a silver flask from which he sometimes drinks. It is getting dark. We hear the distant cries and whistles of the police raid of the first scene

A handsome, muscular young man in his early twenties, Terry Fordham, stands by the waterfront, his body not quite facing it. He smokes, is placed to be able to see the other night visitor and glances back at him a couple of times

Daniel Nice night.

Terry (*not looking round*) Yeah.

Daniel Sounds like trouble over there.

Terry Want to watch yourself here, mate. Hunting queers, that's what they do at night.

Daniel Yeah. Same where I come from.

Terry (*turning round*) Yeah? Nothing against them myself. The poofs. But —

Daniel Some of them are OK guys.

Terry Could be. (*He moves over towards Daniel and the bench*) You a Yank then?

Daniel Sure. (*He drinks from the flask, offers it to Terry*)

Terry shakes his head

Daniel You live around here?

Terry In Kensington? Must be joking!

Daniel I'm down Holland Park way. Cigarette?

Terry Nah, mate, I'm in training, aren't I. (*He looks at his watch*) Gotta get going. Sorry.

Daniel See you again?

Terry Yeah. Why not ...?

Daniel stands up. They shake hands

Terry leaves

Daniel walks down to the water, stands there listening, turns and comes back to the bench, sits down

Another young man, Matthew, dressed in corduroy trousers, suede shoes and a dark jacket comes walking quite slowly along the walk-way by the water. He shimmers with nerves. He cruises Daniel, darting a quick look at him as he passes. He walks on a little and then turns round to look back for a moment, then sits down at the other bench. He casts another furtive glance at Daniel

Daniel watches this exercise

Daniel Hey, man! Could I trouble you to light me up?

Matthew (*flustered*) Sorry? I didn't quite hear that ...

Daniel Matches?

Matthew I'm so sorry. I don't smoke.

Daniel (*finding matches in a back pocket*) Ah, one more box! How you doing, Buddy.

Matthew You're American! What a relief!

Daniel Yeah. I give relief. And get it. (*He lights a cigarette*)

Matthew (*uncomprehending but enthralled*) You see — I thought you might be one of them —

Daniel One of which?

Matthew Agent provocateur. Queer basher.

Daniel No. I try to be friendly to queers.

Matthew How fascinating! One meets so few Americans. Except round Piccadilly Circus.

Daniel Why don't you come over?

Matthew (*looking around*) Would it be safe?

Daniel You could sit eighteen inches away — if you're worried. Or even two feet.

Matthew Suppose a police car drives up?

Daniel They don't come down here ... Anyway we could always pretend to be friends.

Matthew Oh, really? (*He goes to Daniel; hesitant*) I'm mad about Americans. Marlon Brando — *Streetcar Named Desire*. (*He stands poised*) James Dean — you know.

Daniel Yeah — I get your taste. Hey! Be daring. Sit down.

Matthew Well I do rather want to.

Daniel You're OK with me. (*He puts out a hand*) Dan.

Matthew (*shaking his hand*) Matthew. I really shouldn't be doing this.

Daniel Why? You haven't done anything —

Matthew Well not exactly. (*He sits down*)

Daniel That's swell. (*He offers the flask to Matthew*)

Matthew shakes his head

Matthew What d'you do?

Daniel I guess you could find out —

Matthew You an actor? You over here in a musical?

Daniel (*amused*) Hell no! I seem theatrical?

Matthew On no — no. You look — awfully athletic.

Daniel What about you?

Matthew Oh I'm not very interesting at all.

Daniel You want to come back?

Matthew Are you near?

Daniel Kensington.

Matthew That sounds respectable. You live alone?

Daniel Sure. Be my guest.

Matthew Oh yes please. It's hard to resist. (*He looks at Daniel; flirtatious*) And I won't. I'd be mad to refuse.

Daniel (*standing up*) Sure you'd be mad. Come. You can be crazy with me.

SCENE 4

The Haymarket theatre

John Gielgud and Sybil Thorndike are rehearsing "A Day by the Sea". They sometimes refer to scripts. Sybil stands at a tiny table and arranges flowers in a vase. She speaks to a present but unseen character. She is a bit nervous. Quotation marks are used where Gielgud and Sybil speak as characters in their play — the elderly middle-class mother, Laura, and her unmarried, diplomat son

Sybil "Of course he's absurdly single-minded. (*Calling out*) Julian! If only I could have persuaded him to marry, I'm sure it would have given him more balance. Some cheerful, young person. It would have made him ... (*Calling more loudly*) Julian! (*Calling*) Julian, do come out."

Pause

Gielgud “I’d forgotten we had all those azaleas.” (*He shakes his head*)
 Sorry, Sybil. I’ll try that again. I sounded so affected. “I’d forgotten we had all those azaleas. When was I last here in May?”

Sybil (*with too much vehemence*) “You may well ask. (*Speaking to another unseen character*) He’s never at home now. Never! He’s always organizing Europe.”

Gielgud Wonderful, darling, but perhaps a little less hectic. It’s so difficult. I’m putting you off with all this azalea nonsense ... Would my character even notice such suburban flowers? Let’s chop it out. I should come on all aquiver with tension and nerves.

Sybil John, dear, we open in Liverpool next week. It’s too late for chopping and changing. We’ve done as much as we can to beef up the scene ...

Gielgud Of course — they’re such conventional characters. They never surprise you.

Sybil Well, they’re all sort of English Chekhovian — pining for old times.

Gielgud This country-house melancholia and post-war gloom in the lower depths of Lyme Regis. Who wants it?

Sybil Melancholia goes down very well in the stalls these days, dear. Audiences like a little down-lift. They want to see the middle-classes making do in grand Dorset houses ...

Gielgud It seems to get more old-hat the longer we rehearse.

Sybil Not at all, dear. It’s quite faithful. Middle-aged England after the war and under the weather. Anglo-Saxons secretly turbulent ...

Gielgud I like a little turbulence. Should we carry on, darling?

Sybil We certainly should —

Gielgud (*nodding*) That difficult bit.

Sybil and Gielgud turn the pages of their scripts

“Yes, I’m afraid I’ve been a disappointment to you.”

Sybil (*vehemently*) “It’s for you that I mind, dear. I don’t like to think of you going into middle age unsuccessful and alone — it’s such a bleak outlook. Independence is all very well for a young man, but as you grow older you’ll find it’s just another name for loneliness.”

Gielgud “Mother!”

Sybil “I’m talking, Julian.”

Gielgud “I’m sorry but could we discuss that later, do you mind?”

Sybil “Yes. I do mind. I’m speaking for your own good and I’ll be grateful if you allow me to finish.”

Gielgud “I beg your pardon.” No, no that’s far too lower-middle class. Surely I wouldn’t sound so servile?

Sybil I don’t know, dear. I haven’t had servants for years.

Gielgud Of course you haven’t. Nor I really. Should I try standing? All tense. No. Sitting and shocked by your words? That’s it. Bowed down. Yes? Or very upright in the deckchair. Trying to be poised. No! No! All too artificial. I can’t make my character real.

Sybil Johnnie! You’ve got it all. Don’t worry.

Gielgud (*pleased*) Really? Well, thank you. I suppose I shouldn’t try so hard to be natural. Now when you’re warning me about loneliness — what about trying it cooler, more *piano*?

Sybil Darling, if we don’t get dramatic here, if we don’t bring it up now, when will we? I mean we’re in Act Three. We’ve come to the crisis — I’m afraid you won’t ever get hitched — I’m wondering whether you’re — well — not the marrying sort.

Gielgud That’s a bit near the knuckle, isn’t it?

Sybil The Foreign Office won’t promote you until you’ve a nice wife to show off ...

Gielgud I’ve put all my drive into work.

Sybil John — the audience will understand. Even if they pretend they can’t.

Gielgud But I’ve just asked Frances to marry me.

Sybil Yes, dear. She tried to get you twenty years ago. You’ve never even noticed her before. You only want to marry to save your career. You’re a confirmed bachelor. Surely they’re side-lined in the Diplomatic world ...

Gielgud (*disturbed*) Well I couldn’t possibly make it that obvious —

Sybil Of course, darling. I’d just be yourself if I were you! That’ll be quite enough!

Gielgud (*thoughtful*) Yes. Sybil dear, take it from “Why don’t you let me help you?”

Sybil “But now you’re going to be home for a time I could easily do some entertaining for you. I should enjoy it. And you could meet a few nice people. For instance how long is it since you’ve seen the Comptons? Elizabeth is twenty-six now and she’s grown into such a nice creature.”

Gielgud “Yes, I dare say — but.” (*He captures Julian’s desolation from here on*)

Sybil “Very well. Then I shall arrange it.”

Gielgud “Mother, will you please try to understand that I’m not interested in Elizabeth Clinton. I’m sure she’s extremely attractive as you say, but the fact is that I bore her and she bores me.”

Sybil “What nonsense!”

Hungry for More?

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