

Event cinema: bringing global theatre to local screens



By Leigh Andrews

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You no longer have to fork over enough for a hefty return air ticket, a front row theatre seat and top-notch accommodation to absorb the best of British theatre - all you need is popcorn and a seat at your nearest Cinema Nouveau...

Daniel Dericksen [recently wrote](#) about the new season of plays from London's National Theatre hitting the big screen across South Africa. Key among these is *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, a play from renowned British playwright David Hare. It launched the new season from National Theatre Live with four screenings only, at Cinema Nouveau theatres in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. Unfortunately the first two of these have already passed, being screened on 4 and 5 April, with the remaining two still to come on 8 and 9 April at 7.30pm.

To pique your interest, Katherine Boo, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book from which Hare fashioned the play, speaks about spending three years in Annawadi recording the lives of its residents as well as the production in the short documentary embedded below:

But before you bounce away from this article to go [make a booking](#), find out more about the London National Theatre's 'NT Live' offering...

What exactly is event cinema?

Cinema Nouveau and The Fugard Theatre's Bioscope in Cape Town are showing National Theatre Live broadcasts, right from the UK's National Theatre in London, showcasing theatre productions from the National, the West End and, occasionally, Broadway.

There's also Exhibition on Screen, which gives behind-the-scenes access to some of the biggest blockbuster art exhibitions around the world; and Live from The Met, which brings the Metropolitan Opera in New York to South African and international screens. The Fugard also screens National Theatre Live, The Met, the Bolshoi Ballet and a range of others.

Intrigued by the idea of this new form of 'live theatre on a screen', I found out more from David Sabel, director of broadcast and digital as well as executive producer of National Theatre Live at the National Theatre of Great Britain. Sabel was

recently listed as [in The Stage paper's Top 100 players](#) in the arts in the UK earlier this year, in recognition of how important the National's range of live cinema screenings are becoming...



David Sabel

1. What does your day-to-day role as Executive Producer of NT Live in London entail?

Sabel: I oversee the National's Broadcast and Digital department, which encompasses both NT Live and a wide range of digital activity from content creation and distribution to digital publishing, website and app development and new forms of digital R&D. In terms of NT Live, I am very fortunate to have an incredibly skilled production team. Much of my time is spent developing the programme, picking shows and working with partners, and generally overseeing the strategic development and growth of the series.

2. Tell us how you rapidly expanded the National Theatre's range of live cinema screenings and the general response to this...

Sabel: We've been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm with which audiences have greeted NT Live worldwide. We very much benefitted from the pioneering work that [BY Experience](#), our international distributor, built - first with the Met Opera and then through NT Live and other cinema events. We have worked closely together to actively grow the network of cinemas and territories worldwide, and in the UK we deal directly with the cinemas for distribution. We have put a huge amount of effort, research and energy into finding the right partners, but I hope also that it's the quality of the work and the attraction of the National Theatre brand that has helped us to scale so rapidly.

3. What can we expect from the next series of NT Live screenings, which have just started at Cinema Nouveau?

Sabel: We have a really fantastic and varied season coming up with Cinema Nouveau nationwide in SA, starting with *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* on 8 and 9 April, a new play by David Hare based on the best-selling book by Katherine Boo. It tells the true story of a world beyond the luxury hotels of Mumbai airport - a makeshift slum, full of people with plans of their own. You can watch the trailer [here](#).



A scene from *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

It's followed by Arthur Miller's classic play *A View from the Bridge*, with a stellar cast led by Mark Strong, who you might know from *The Imitation Game* and the recent adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. These screenings start from 25 April and are followed by Tom Stoppard's new play, *The Hard Problem* from 16 May and Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, with Academy Award®-nominee Ralph Fiennes of *The English Patient* and *Schindler's List* from 13 June. You can book for all four through the [Cinema Nouveau website](#).

■ **4. Sounds like a great line-up. Tell us how the National acts as a co-producer and distributor, further expanding into the world of broadcast, and the general response to this offering thus far.**

Sabel: Well, we began National Theatre Live as a way to increase access to our work for those audiences who might not otherwise have the opportunity to see it. While this was initially and primarily conceived for audiences across the UK as part of the National Theatre's public remit, we were also excited by the opportunity to take the National's work to a global audience and have been thrilled by the hugely enthusiastic response we have received. The history of filmed theatre doesn't have a great track record, so we went into the series as something of an experiment, but feel we have very successfully captured the productions, honouring the integrity of the work created for our stages.

What particularly excited us about this concept was the fact that it was recorded and broadcast live - as well as the shared experience of watching with an audience on a big screen. While we could never replicate the experience of actually sitting in the theatre, the broadcasts retain something of the feeling of live performance and there is a real sense of 'event', with so many people around the world connected and sharing in the experience. The response has been almost universally positive, from both artists working with us and audiences around the world. Our first broadcast of *Phèdre* in June 2009 was seen by over 50,000 people; as of October 2014 the worldwide audience for National Theatre Live had reached more than 3.5 million people.

■ **5. It's an interesting list of production - what's the process like in deciding what to produce, when?**

Sabel: We aim to select the plays that we feel will translate best to a wide audience on cinema screens worldwide. The National Theatre produces around 25 new productions a year at its home in London, which vary from Shakespeare and classics to new plays, so we aim to programme National Theatre Live as a microcosm of the repertoire, showcasing the diversity of what we do and of the wider ecology of British theatre. Currently we broadcast 8 to 10 plays a season.

■ **6. Screen Africa calls it "live theatre on the big screen" - tell us more of what to expect.**

Sabel: The approach to filming National Theatre Live broadcasts is to prioritise the audience in cinemas for that night. The camera director is given complete flexibility in choosing camera positions, so that the performance can be captured from the best seats in the house and with a sophisticated camera setup, involving tracking shots and, for example, when appropriate, a crane. The audience in the National Theatre pay a reduced ticket price and are aware that cameras will be present, so the theatre is transformed into something of a live studio.



Live London theatre, filmed to be broadcast on local screens

Two full camera rehearsals take place before each broadcast, with time in-between for the stage director and camera director to work together to discuss how best to capture the production. Adjustments are made for lighting, sound and make-up; however, this is all with the aim of preserving the integrity of the original design and transposing the stage picture to work on camera as effectively as possible. The camera choices and set-up vary according to production, usually ranging from five to eight cameras, which are cut live into a single feed.

National Theatre Live is not about turning a stage play into a film. The intention is to faithfully capture the live performance. The use of high definition cameras and the scale of the big screen allow the aesthetic to remain theatrical and offer audiences a dynamic full stage picture. This is matched with the intimacy the camera can offer, taking the audience to the heart of the emotion and the nuances of the actors' performances. The broadcasts also feature live interviews, usually with

members of the creative team, and, sometimes, a pre-show film which offers a look behind the scenes or greater insight into the production.

There you have it. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* can be seen on 8 and 9 April at 19:30, followed by *A View from the Bridge* - only at Cinema Nouveau theatres in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. Click through to the [Cinema Nouveau website](#) for more or follow them on [Twitter](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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