

I really believe in marriage. I see my three divorces as a sign of failure



POWER HUNGRY, ME? Sir Peter Hall rejects suggestions that he is the great dictator of theatreland

Picture: NIGEL WRIGHT

After 40 years of life with little children, dynamic thespian Sir Peter Hall counts his blessings

IS SIR PETER HALL greedy, dictatorial, obsessive, power hungry and manipulative? Is it true that his marriage to Nicki, 30 years his junior, is floundering after eight years? Does he, Fu Manchu as John Osborne dubbed him, have any Chinese blood in his veins?

And how much does Sir Peter, four times wed, pay in alimony? Would he tell his wife if he were being unfaithful? And what is it like being 61 years older than his youngest child?

Sir Peter, the man who founded the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1958, headed the National Theatre for 15 years and now runs a marvellously innovative Old Vic, answers most questions calmly. He's even laid-back and charming when denying my laundry list of insults. Hardly recognisable, then, as the man whose life has reportedly been one of public feuds, controversies, embittered leading ladies and marriage break-ups.

Perhaps experience breeds equanimity. His entry in his Diaries for January 20, 1974, reads: "Sally Beauman came to interview me for the Telegraph. All the usual questions: 'You have a reputation for being ruthless. You like power. Why do you work so hard?'"

"One person writes something," Sir Peter explains now, in his mahogany voice. "Afterwards it's in the cuttings and breeds like lice."

Next week *Waiting For Godot*, with Ben Kingsley and Alan Howard, opens at the Old Vic. It's the first time Sir Peter has returned to *Godot* since he directed the English-language premiere 42 years ago, creating a seismic shock in postwar drama. "It's even better than I thought then," he says, popping a piece of sushi into his mouth.

He has introduced a novel seven-days-a-week repertory programme at the theatre, staging no fewer than 12 plays in a breath-taking 40 weeks. "You can see four different plays here at the weekend if you're mad enough." And the company — of up to 25, including Michael Pennington and Felicity Kendal — has no understudies. "We either cancel or substitute another play."

Sir Peter is a big man with a sensual face and goatee beard, for whom photos do a disservice, making him look fat and sly. He is wearing a suit and polo neck in habitual black. "I'm not consciously trying to project an image. I don't always wear black. I started the beard in the Sixties because I don't have much of a chin." He has been called Fu Manchu and Genghis Khan. "Both John Osborne being rude." Does he have a drop of Oriental blood? "Not that I know of," he laughs.

Sir Peter is married to Nicki, erstwhile National Theatre Press officer. The marriage was reported to be in trouble after *Mind Millie For Me*, a play they'd worked on, collapsed with massive losses. "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! Rubbish!" he says heatedly. "I swear Nicki and I are as close as ever. There's never even been a hiccup." He pauses. "It really is bloody unpleasant being interviewed."

Sir Peter, 66, chooses progressively younger models. Nicki is 36 years old and before her, American soprano Maria Ewing was 20 years his junior. "I'm very lucky," he says, beaming. Would it be too simplistic to conclude that he prefers to be the dominant partner? "I don't. You could say, 'Look at this poor old man puffing behind while she runs rings round him!'"

His eldest son and daughter are older than Nicki, but he denies this is a problem. "Nicki is extraordinarily wise about them. She's terribly close to them and my son's wife is one of her greatest friends." "Strange," I say. "Umm," he concurs. "But it works."

THE interesting question is why his marriages don't last. He was wed first to actress Leslie Caron. She said he felt "women should be in the kitchen, nursery or garden and as soon as they had a child should stop work." "She knows that's not true," Sir Peter says now. Then there were passing infidelities on both sides. Does he tell his spouses about his indiscretions? "Once the balloon has gone up, yes. I mean, if you're being unfaithful, the marriage is over anyway."

After an acrimonious custody battle with Leslie Caron, he wed his assistant, Jacqu-

WOMEN IN THE HALL OF FAME

No 1: Leslie Caron, 1956 to 1965, two children

No 2: Jacqueline Taylor, 1965 to 1981, two children

No 3: Maria Ewing, 1982 to 1990, one daughter

No 4: Nicki Frei, 1990 to present, one daughter

line Taylor, a marriage which lasted until 1981. Next came Maria, with whom life was reportedly volatile, and within six years he had begun his relationship with Nicki.

"I can't tell you why my marriages went wrong. As a young man, I was particularly driven by work, which didn't help. I really believe in marriage, but it's terribly difficult," he says. "If you don't work at it, it won't survive. I see my divorces as a sign of failure. But if the relationship is sick, it's better to do something about it."

Were the women he married similar? "Totally different." How would he describe them? "I'm not going to do that." Despite his reputation as a womaniser, he's still friendly with his exes: in part, perhaps, because he's talented, funny and clever. How much does

at the ceiling, cupping his chin in his hand. "Last week Emma said to me, 'Now who's God's papa?' I said, 'If I knew I wouldn't be as worried as I am,' he says, laughing contagiously.

Sir Peter himself was an only child. "It made me feel lonely and an outsider." His father Reg was an impoverished station master and Sir Peter was raised in a house without electricity or gas. "I saw people being really miserable because of money. My family was always saving for a rainy day. They had nothing to save and it was always raining! As a result, I'm not very good with money. All I have is a house. I don't have a penny to my name."

AT HOME, education was stressed as the way out and he won a scholarship to Perse School. "I always felt I had to get over the next hurdle." He also feared bullying "because I was the working class git". Then he gained a scholarship to St Catharine's, Cambridge, where he directed plays and nearly jeopardised his degree.

At home his parents were always rowing. "My mother was very active, a storm of ambition, neurotic and full of mood swings and my father was terribly calm, easy going and very unambitious so they irritated one another." His mother Grace turned him against his father. "I didn't appreciate his qualities until I was much older."

From his mother, Sir Peter inherited his manic depressive tendencies. "She was always very up or down. It made for an emotional rollercoaster as a child. At various times in my life, I've felt suicidal. I suspect that I'm driven to work to stay away from myself. An obsessive and interesting job is the best therapy against depression."

He had a nervous breakdown in 1963 and a suspected coronary last year. "It wasn't a heart attack. If I'd had one, I would tell you."

He seems to have a classic addictive personality: in terms of his workaholicism, multiple marriages, depressions and addiction to adrenaline, feuds and confrontations. When he stops or goes on the rare holiday, the doubts and anxieties flood in.

What are the demons he faces when he halts? "The fear of age, death, illness and decay." He pauses. "But I'll never retire unless I am forced to."

The Caroline Phillips
Interview
Sir Peter Hall
THEATRE DIRECTOR

he pay in alimony? "A lot, but I'm not telling you."

Fatherhood, then. He has six children, five working in theatre. "It would be unctuous to say that I've been a good father. But I am very close to all of them." With his punishing schedule and obsessive work, he cannot have been very available to them. "If it was really important I was."

Have the divorces had a terrible effect on any of them? "I don't think anyone is maimed. If they believe everybody loves everyone and there's a certain openness, they come through it."

His youngest is Emma, five, by Nicki. Sir Peter recommends late fatherhood. "It's exhausting but it keeps you young. I've been lucky enough to have had 40 years of little children." It seems unfair on Emma to have such an old father. "I feel sad about that," he admits. "I hope I'll see her hit 20." He looks