For some fortunate, resilient children, the eight hours and forty minutes of *Nicholas Nickleby* was their first experience of live theatre. For whatever socio-economic reasons, we saw few children in any of the New York audiences, even though we played across the Christmas holidays, but in London it was different. Someone told me about a little girl who clung to the brass rail on the front of the gallery at the end of the full 2 p.m. to 11.40 p.m. marathon one Saturday (an hour's break for dinner and two twenty-minute intervals), protesting, a little tearfully, that she didn't want to go home. Not everyone felt like that, of course. Peter Hall and his teenage daughter sat in two of the best stalls one Saturday matinée, near the little gantry which enabled us to walk out into the audience, our feet at seatback height, but their two places were conspicuously empty in the evening. I think it was in one of those same seats, on another Saturday, we spotted Alan Bennett, who may well have loved the whole event but who certainly couldn't help wearing an *oh please don't come and talk to me* expression when the actors did their perambulations about the auditorium. The seventy-three-year-old Laurence Olivier, looking so much older and frailer than when I'd last worked with him in his television *Lear*, sat through the entire thing one Saturday on the prompt-side end seat of the dress circle's front row. Shouldn't there be a little brass plaque in remembrance? Peter Barkworth was there that same afternoon with Wyn Jones, who has since become Director of Drama at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. When the two of them came round after Part Two, Wyn reminds me, they had to walk round the block three times before entering the stage door to see Emily and me because each time they had burst into tears on the threshold.

We were always aware of who was out front because of our attempt to break down the respected, time-honoured *them-and-us* great divide of the Victorian picture- frame stage. I used to make it my business to go up into the gallery during the interval of the second half. ‘Twenty-three years ago,’ someone said to me recently, ‘I was so impressed you had troubled to come up to us there.’ They were talking to someone who, as a child, had watched enviously from the gallery at the Bradford Alhambra as the fairies of Kirby’s Flying Ballet flew out into the auditorium, tossing bunches of violets into the orchestra stalls and dress circle, and the pantomime dog cavorted on the wide upholstered curve of the dress circle’s ledge below ours. During *Nickleby* in London, though always a little abashed at the idea, I tried to bring a touch of all that to the upper reaches of the Aldwych: I knew from experience that those seats could feel a little remote. In 1970 I’d seen Peter Brook’s RSC production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (better known as *Brook’s Dream)* from the Aldwych Gallery, and this may be part of the reason why my opinion of that hallowed production is a heretical one. In fact, you could get the Brechtian Alienation Effect up there, even in romantic productions. In those days, it was partly to do with the noise of the ventilation system, which literally and metaphorically disturbed the atmosphere. I suspect some *Nickleby* galleryites may not have realized that breaking the barrier between stage and auditorium was part of the show. They often looked askance at me as, spilling out to get to the bar, they met me coming the other way to give a little touch of Newman Noggs to those still occupying the steep terraces of seats.

I know now that I signed the young Alex Jennings’s programme at the

back of the stalls one night – at his mother's request he tells me, but he's kept the trophy. For so many people I meet, the show remains a precious memory. It was in 1999 (I can work out the year because it was at Ian McKellen's 60th birthday party) that the perfectly sane, steady producer and sometime director of the Edinburgh International Festival, John Drummond, said to me: 'But don't you remember we met on the stairs at the side of the stalls during an interval in *Nickleby* and you said, "What are you doing here?", and I burst into tears?'

In New York, when I spotted Andy Warhol during an interval, I didn't indulge in such familiar levity. I was just about to walk the plank out into the audience and there he was, with his unmistakably fixed and flyaway ash-blonde hair, sitting in the stalls of the Plymouth Theatre on 44th St, about seven rows back and maybe six seats from the end, ravaged and wraith-like, though he was only fifty-three at that time. Well, one of his starlets had taken a pot shot at him in 1968. Such was the creative strain in The Factory.

Warhol was in placid, or rather constrained, interval mode, dressed in a nondescript dark suit, sitting below me on the right, perhaps fifteen feet away, amongst a few empty seats, the people around him not having yet returned. He was quite out of the celebrity-studded context in which he had been so frequently photographed, and remote from the goings on in his Factory bedecked in silver foil. For a moment I doubted my own eyes. There were no sense of a party, no movie camera, no adjacent teenagers in and, half or entirely, out of denim, nobody screenprinting, composing music or filming the proceedings. He looked astonishingly alone.

CHARLES DICKENS MEETS ANDY WARHOL. Could there be a more

unlikely encounter? I sit here aghast at the lost opportunity because Newman Noggs *could* have met him. Was it timidity on my part? Actually, he was the one who looked timid and vulnerable sitting there, so much so that I felt as if it would be invasive, exploitative to take advantage of my opportunity. It was as if the time had come for him to experience his fifteen minutes of anonymity.

He wasn't even reading the programme (which contained my excellent little essay on Dickens's theatre), always a useful theatregoing activity to defend oneself from looking friendless or at a loose end when alone in a theatre seat. There can be a special security, a dignity even, in sitting alone in a church pew, where one can elect to be in the Presence and not alone at all. Similarly, as a playgoer, I rather like to be alone at the theatre. It heightens my sense of the seriousness of theatregoing, my sense of mission. These days I have a sense that I am less often recognized and, from this state of incognito-by-default, I get a heightened, slightly martyred sense of humility as well. Every time too, when the play begins, I rediscover how exposed the actor is on stage, and how nothing less than utter dedication to the moment will do. If ever I feel pride in the actor's calling, it is in witnessing how actors can miraculously survive our scrutiny as they turn up to present their head-to-toe living portraits in real time. Conversely, I sometimes feel tinges of regret for my betrayals of the demanding task, the forever-lost opportunities to transcend the inevitable limitations of theatrical circumstance. Time is what actors deal in – timing, yes – but also the subtle interplay of past, present and future. Only the other day I saw an actor make his first entrance through a door – so this is what you have become, I thought, having learnt a tantalizing little about his young self from another character. A few moments later he

experienced one of those fleeting, inadvertent transformations of his state of being, the kind of thing we experience in our lives when, without warning, the past we have been so ably managing to carry assumes quite a different weight. It was the slightest thing you understand, a fleeting silent moment, the unwritten un-writable part; what the playwright had so sensitively implied in what he did write.

Carefully bearing his burden of being Andy Warhol, Andy didn't disturb his ever so slightly uneasy gaze to take me in; so I left him there alone, looking like a piece of flotsam that had floated away from its jetsam, when I could so easily have sat quietly beside him and said … what? In my make-up and aged, tattered Victorian clothes, selected from an obscure rail at Nathan's back home in Camden Town, I don't think I could have worked out what to say, or who to be, in relation to this fragile contemporary icon, whom the press and whose own publicity machine had made public property. In this context he seemed delicate and entirely private property. In what capacity would I have introduced myself? He was an artist and I one of the artistes, to give the term the French spelling I remember from notices bearing lists of backstage rules in the days when I played the kind of theatres where Variety was usually performed.