



'Actors think they're treated like cattle, producers think that nobody knows what they do, and directors think that everyone will think it's their fault if things go wrong'

Poster ART

Never heard of Kim Poster? Not surprising – she’s an intensely private, passionate and usually silent power behind such stage successes as *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *Brand*

BY JENNIFER SELWAY PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL BIRT

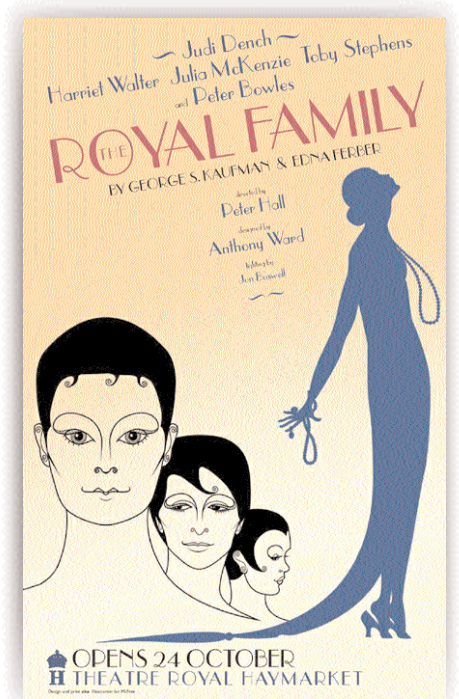
Kim Poster and I meet a few days before the opening night of *Brand*. Though one might think otherwise, this is far from being the most anxious time for a producer. ‘The worst bit is much earlier, when you’re waiting for the phone call from the agent saying yes or no to the talent. I call it the “hurry up and wait” phase. Once you’ve secured that, in my experience, you know it’s going to be alright.’

There was very little waiting in the build-up to *Brand*, which came together with breathtaking speed. For the past few years Poster has enjoyed a rewarding relationship with the Theatre Royal Haymarket, established with chairman Arnold Crook and general manager Nigel Everett, with whom she has co-produced many productions. One of their greatest successes was Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* with Vanessa Redgrave and Joely Richardson. Wilde is always a crowd-pleaser, but surely *Brand* is a riskier endeavour. Ralph Fiennes – who stars – is one of our most popular actors, but *Brand*, originally a five hours plus read, is not one of Ibsen’s larkier plays. ‘It is a daunting proposition,’ agrees Poster, ‘but it has been beautifully cut by Adrian Noble to a little over two hours. It’s definitely the calibre of drama that should be in the West End.’

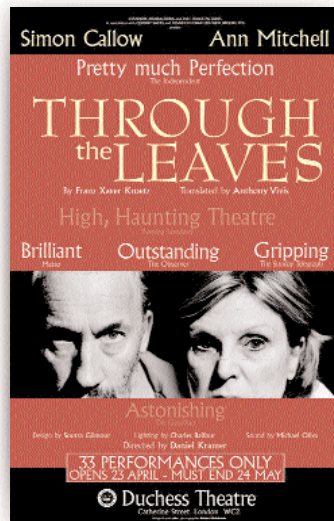
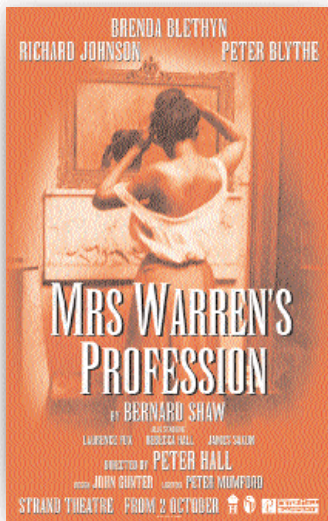
Brand is also an achievement for Poster since it marks the first time that an RSC production has been staged with wholly financial and shared artistic involvement of an

outside commercial producer. ‘Last November,’ says Poster, ‘the RSC approached the Haymarket with a bit of a dilemma. Fiennes and Adrian Noble had wanted to do *Brand* but the RSC didn’t have a place in its schedule that would constitute a proper run. So they came to us and we put some figures together and three weeks later it was announced.’ But – dumb question here – what is it that producers actually do? ‘The producer is the person who usually comes up with the idea,’ says Poster. ‘Or it could be a director or an actor. Beyond that, the producer’s job is to make that idea happen by raising finances, hiring the creative team and the cast until the jigsaw is complete.’ And, although there is clearly a macho element (the producer with the big cigar), it must also be a matter of being able to do many things at the same time. Women are known to be good multi-taskers. ‘It’s a very maternal thing to do,’ agrees Poster. ‘What I love is to stand at the back of the auditorium and watch the show going on, and hear and feel the audience’s response.’

New Yorker Kim Poster has been in Britain since the mid ‘90s. Her company, Stanhope Productions, has been involved in staging some of the most successful and innovative shows in the West End. There was director Stephen Daldry’s extraordinary version of *An Inspector Calls*, which set a new standard for 20th century modern classics at the Playhouse. David Suchet starred in the revival of *Amadeus*, directed by Peter Hall; and Dame Judi played the waspish matriarch in *The Royal* ▶



Eight years ago, Kim Poster and Dame Judi Dench discussed staging a production of *The Royal Family*, and the play finally opened at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in October 2001 with an all-star cast



Kim Poster thrives on bringing a mix of new works and classics, populist and arthouse, to the stage: 'I love to go back and forth between creative endeavours and hardcore financial calculations'

◀ *Family*, George S Kaufman and Edna Ferber's 1927 satire on the off-stage life of a Barrymore-esque theatrical dynasty.

Dench's casting gave Poster particular pleasure. The two women had first talked about staging the production eight years ago, 'which', says Poster 'just goes to prove that some things are worth the wait.' Dench also played a part in shaping Poster's career. In the early '80s, as an 18-year-old theatre student at Northwestern University, Kim Poster arrived at Stratford to see Dench and other luminaries of the RSC perform. She has also acted herself and has always felt that, as a producer, she has a special empathy with actors. 'Actors think they're treated like cattle, producers think that nobody knows what they do, and directors think that everyone will think it's their fault if things go wrong,' observes Poster. She is a handsome woman with a mane of heavy dark hair, an air of watchful calm and a soft voice that has lost almost all trace of Manhattan. She smokes slowly and devotedly. 'I don't think any child dreams of being a producer. Usually you want to be a star or backstage. But it's also true that most producers know at an early age that their lives have to be in the theatre.' As it was with Kim, who grew up in Manhattan. Her father was a businessman and, from a young age, she was taken to almost every Broadway show. After completing her theatre studies course, she embarked on another degree in entertainment law. 'It had been theatre, theatre since I was six years old. I only went to law school to enable myself to become a good producer – I was pretty single-minded about it – and a lot of law school was very tedious.'

She worked for Paramount Pictures and, as an associate producer, persuaded them to invest \$1.5 million in the Broadway show *Grand Hotel: The Musical*, which was, for a beginner, 'a pretty heady experience'. Next, she set up an arthouse division for IRS Media and a decade ago produced *Tom and Viv*, a biopic about TS Eliot and his difficult wife. 'On the day we got two Academy Award nominations, I handed in my resignation and said I was moving to London.'

Poster has been identified as one of a new generation of West End producers, alongside Phil Cameron (*Top Girls*), Matthew Byam Shaw (*Humble Boy*) and Sam Spiegel's son Adam Spiegel (*The Mysteries*). Her approach is perhaps defined by the fact that she is here rather than on Broadway. 'Not only can you stage three shows here for the price of

one in New York, it's possible to maintain a more satisfying balance between artistic integrity and commercial potential.'

Another hallmark of Poster's work is her love of the classics. 'I desperately want to do new work, but every generation needs to see Wilde, Shaw and Shakespeare.' She works in a profession notorious for its egos. Before *Amadeus* opened, there was a big falling out between director Peter Hall and Bill Kenwright, who was originally co-producer. Without wishing to go into details, Posters says, 'I very much stepped to the side of their concerns at that point and quietly carried on producing the play. I don't need drama to do my job. You have to have a healthy ego, which is a true sense of yourself, a true understanding of what you're good at and what you're not. The theatre is a collaborative business and if you are the sort of person who truly needs things your

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way, then you will have a terrible time. One of the most important things is to learn to say "I'm wrong".'

Currently she's in talks with Whoopi Goldberg about bringing in the Broadway production of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Goldberg stars and is co-producer. Wilson wrote another of Poster's hits, the Olivier award-winning *Jitney*. She struggled to bring this to the National, a triumph of her confidence over others' uncertainties.

It's summer and, come August, Poster may take a holiday. It gives her the leisure to read scripts. She has *Hamlet* in her sights, and yes, she does have a Hamlet in mind. But she won't say who. Soon she may be waiting for an agent to get back to her. It might be some young man's big break.

Last year Kim found herself an apartment in the heart of theatreland. How clever: easy access to culture, round-the clock cappuccinos, and no Congestion Charge. But isn't it noisy? Miss Poster admits there's occasionally a bit of a brouhaha when the theatres turn out. But what could be more conducive to a theatrical producer's sweet dreams than the sound of contented theatregoers making their way home? 卍

Brand is at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, 0870 899