

Play of the week

Nye

Written by Tim Price;
directed by Rufus Norris
National Theatre, till 11 May

If asked who has most changed Britain, you might think first of the radical prime ministers – Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair. Yet lower-ranked politicians have managed to effect big reforms, even though they never made it to the top job – or even a senior role such as chancellor or foreign secretary. One such was Aneurin “Nye” Bevan, who was instrumental in creating the National Health Service, one of the few parts of the postwar welfare state that has survived almost completely intact. The National Theatre’s *Nye* tells his story.

The quest for the NHS

It’s December 1959 and Bevan, played by Michael Sheen, is wheeled out of surgery onto a hospital ward after what was supposed to have been a routine operation to remove an ulcer. The procedure has gone on for much longer than it was supposed to. The doctor (Tony Jayawardena) makes reassuring noises, but it’s clear he’s not telling the full truth. Soon Bevan is in a morphine-induced coma while his wife Jennie Lee (Sharon Small) and agent and best friend Archie Lush (Roger Evans) debate whether to break the bad news – he has stomach cancer – when he recovers. While struggling for his life, Bevan experiences a series of flashbacks.

These flashbacks, which make up the core of the



Michael Sheen as Nye Bevan: a movingly sad and nightmarish performance

play, tell the story of Bevan’s life, from his childhood struggles with his stammer to his achievements as a councillor through to the final negotiations with the British Medical Association that enabled the creation of the NHS. These vignettes appear in a variety of forms, from straight theatre to pantomime, a musical number and video projections of the great and the good of the medical profession. One moment stands out – the death of Bevan’s father (Rhodri Meilir) from lung disease, a death that is referenced several times, and which Price clearly sees as the motivating factor behind Bevan’s quest for universal healthcare.

It’s a movingly sad play, and the interplay between

the medical setting and the vignettes gives it a surreal, even nightmarish quality in parts. Yet the play also does a remarkably good job of picking out the key moments in Bevan’s long career. It is fascinating to watch his evolution from self-indulgent parliamentary gadfly to reluctant supporter of the wartime coalition, through to the savvy politician who outmanoeuvres both Herbert Morrison and Winston Churchill to push his measures through. The play sticks in the memory and is a worthy celebration of the value of public service at a time when the NHS is under unprecedented pressure.

Reviewed by
Matthew Partridge

Once Upon Tomorrow

Harnessing the New Opportunities the Metaverse Creates
Shurick Agapitov
Worth, £20



In 2021 Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced he was rebranding his social-media company as Meta, and

refocusing it on a virtual-reality world known as the metaverse. This was met with derision, and Meta’s share price plunged. Though the shares are now hitting new highs, critics still think the billions he has injected into these ideas are unlikely to pay off, and could have been better spent elsewhere. Tech guru Shurick Agapitov begs to differ.

Agapitov argues that, just like the creation of the world wide web itself, and then the social-media revolution, virtual reality will change the way we interact with the internet, upending everything from online commerce to our very concept of possessions. He also thinks that the end result will be a more decentralised phenomenon than Zuckerberg has in mind.

Agapitov argues his corner with passion, detailing how advances in everything from artificial intelligence to non-fungible tokens and the blockchain will work together to make his vision a reality. He also has some advice for entrepreneurs looking to take advantage of these opportunities. Even if you are more sceptical than he is about the economic potential of the metaverse, it is worth reading the book to get an idea of how things could well end up developing.

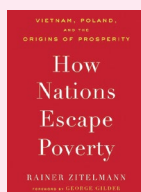
Book in the news... the miracle of capitalism

How Nations Escape Poverty

Vietnam, Poland and the Origins of Prosperity

Rainer Zitelmann

Encounter Books, £21.99



The issue of inequality and relative poverty in developed countries has shot up the agenda in recent years, and some commentators have even wondered whether democracy will survive the

subsequent rise of populism. For many emerging countries, however, the main problem is still growing the pie, rather than deciding how to divide it up in a fairer way. In *How Nations Escape Poverty*,

businessman and historian Rainer Zitelmann looks at two countries, Poland and Vietnam, that transformed their economies, vastly improving living standards and eliminating absolute poverty, by ditching their command economies and embracing the market.

Both countries’ experiments with communism proved disastrous. Like many other Eastern bloc countries, Poland’s economy stagnated, there were chronic shortages of consumer goods, and living standards fell far behind those in the West. In the case of Vietnam, which was already a poor country, the consequences of embracing communism were even worse. Millions had to endure near-starvation conditions. The regimes in both countries responded by either blaming outside forces or trying to make modest tweaks to

the system. By the late 1980s, however, both countries were forced to make more radical changes, which unleashed a wave of economic growth.

Zitelmann’s book is a quick read, and it would have benefited from more detail or case studies. It would have been good to hear more about the institutional aspects of creating a market economy, for example, such as property rights, the rule of law and the absence of corruption. Still, the author is good at critically examining prevalent attitudes towards capitalism and wealth creation, and the book is an excellent starting point for those interested in the Polish and Vietnamese economic miracles. It also serves as a timely reminder that ditching communism and embracing capitalism has brought prosperity for billions of people around the globe.