

DAME EILEEN ATKINS Receives the 2015 *GIELGUD AWARD* in London

On Sunday, October 18, at a festive **UK THEATRE AWARDS** luncheon in London's historic **GUILDHALL**, one of our era's most versatile dramatic artists received the 2015 *GIELGUD AWARD* from an actor who'd been saluted with the same laurel in 2008 at the **NATIONAL ARTS CLUB** in Manhattan.

Building on arrangements that had been launched in October 2014, when the **SHAKESPEARE GUILD** honored **SIR DONALD SINDEN** with a posthumous *GIELGUD*, this presentation took place in the Grand Hall of a landmark building that dates back to the 12th century, a venue in which the Lord Mayor of London and a ruling merchant class held court and fine-tuned the regulations that helped a thriving city grow and prosper.

Under the leadership of **JULIAN BIRD**, who presides over both the national **UK THEATRE** association and the West End's **SOCIETY OF LONDON THEATRE**, an organization that is best known to playgoers for each spring's *OLIVIER AWARDS*, this year's festivities were hosted by **MICHAEL XAVIER**, a popular star of musical theatre who served as compère for the occasion. Award categories included Best Director, Best New Play, Best Design, Best Touring Production, and Most Welcoming Theatre. **IMELDA STAUNTON** won the coveted prize for Best Performance in a Musical for a **CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE** revival of *Gypsy*. But the highlights of a varied program were the *GIELGUD AWARD*, which was bestowed on **DAME EILEEN ATKINS**, and the *STAGE AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO BRITISH THEATRE*, which went to director and choreographer **MATTHEW BOURNE**.

In his prefatory remarks for the earlier of these presentations, **JOHN ANDREWS** said, "It's now time to salute an extraordinary artist whose accomplishments, both as an acclaimed performer and as a gifted scriptwriter, have become legendary. But first a bit of background for those who may not be familiar with the *SIR JOHN GIELGUD AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE DRAMATIC ARTS*. When we announced the establishment of this honor, at a 1994 reception in Washington's **FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY**, we little imagined that its trophy, which originated as a John Safer sculpture known as 'The Golden Quill,' would one day be presented in a setting that figures in *Richard III*. But now that we're in this venerable edifice, I'm disposed to imagine that Shakespeare, who of course knew everything, recognized that the Guildhall with which he was so familiar would be the ideal setting for a later guild bearing his name to celebrate the artists who are keeping an incomparable legacy vibrant. Nor do I have any doubt that Sir John would have concurred with this sentiment. It was with an event like this in mind, I suspect, that he gave his blessing to an Award that would perpetuate his own commitment to a noble profession's highest standards. It was also with something like this in mind, I think, that Sir John inscribed the charming **CLIVE FRANCIS** prints that now serve as resonant trophies for the *GIELGUD AWARD*. Clive is not only a multifaceted man of the thea-



tre. He is also a remarkable visual artist, so brilliant that I now refer to the immortal Al Hirschfeld as 'The American Francis.' Over the years Clive's inspired, loving caricatures have benefited causes like the **ACTORS CHARITABLE TRUST** and the **GIELGUD THEATRE**, which, thanks in no small part to Clive's portraits of Sir John in various roles, is now an exquisite shrine. So it's altogether appropriate that Clive's rendering of Sir John now graces the **UK THEATRE AWARDS** luncheon."

Shifting now to the occasion at hand, Mr. Andrews noted that "The wonderful actor who will bestow today's trophy received his own *GIELGUD* in 2008. I first met **PATRICK STEWART** in the mid-'70s, when he was captivating audiences in some of the most challenging roles at the RSC. What I soon realized was that when he happened to be free of engagements in Stratford and London, Patrick could often be found either in Santa Barbara or in other university centers on my side of the Atlantic, where an imaginative professor named **HOMER SWANDER**, known to his many friends as 'Murph,' was helping performers like Patrick discover that they could also be inspiring teachers. Patrick soon emerged as one of the key participants in an endeavor that became known as *ACTORS FROM THE LONDON STAGE*. And before long he and colleagues such as **TONY CHURCH**, **LISA HARROW**, **BEN KINGSLEY**, **BERNIE LLOYD**, **IAN RICHARDSON**, **EUNICE ROBERTS**, and **DAVID SUCHET** were dramatically transforming the way educators, not only in the United States but throughout the English-speaking world, approached Shakespeare and other classics. The program Patrick helped create is now celebrating its 40th anniversary. And I'm sure that his contribution to that effort was one of the many factors that led Her Majesty in 2010 to designate him a Knight of the British Empire."

To the accompaniment of flashing cameras and fervent applause **SIR PATRICK** now ascended the stage. He commenced with three messages that had been sent by previous honorees.



One was from **SIR IAN MCKELLEN**, who'd received the inaugural *GIELGUD* at a 1996 **GUILD** ceremony in the **FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY**. "You know that list of favourite people it would be most fun to spend the evening with? Well, Eileen is at the top of mine. Her stories! The wise take on the world! The hilarity! How lucky you are to be with her this afternoon. She's been sharing her talent since she was a child in Tottenham. I think she is the only Dame of the British Empire who can tap-dance. Maybe this afternoon, if you're lucky, she'll give you some ball tap, brush, and drag. As for her acting, on television, on film, on Broadway, in the West End, in theatres large and small, in plays new or old, Eileen Atkins is one of the greats. And beyond all that achievement, she can write as well — how appropriate that the *Gielgud Award* began with a Quill as its trophy. Please send her my congratulations and my love."

A second message came from **ZOE CALDWELL**, who had been saluted with a *GIELGUD* at the **FOLGER** in 1998, and who'd begun her career, along with Miss Atkins, at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1957. "Darling Eileen," she began, "I realize now that I've been rather boastful in saying you are my old friend. I mean, it makes you seem as though you're in your 80s. {Pause} You *are* in your 80s! And so am I! We're friends, and I guess we're old. Old friends. And now we are old friends and proud recipients of the

Gielgud Award. There seems to be no end to our accomplishments! Or to our friendship. The fact is I've known you most of your life, and you've known me most of mine. I loved your mum, and you loved mine. And now we both have the Gielgud Award, upon which to contemplate when next we rendezvous. All told, I wouldn't have it any other way. Congratulations, dearest Eileen. I love you! I love you!! I love you!!! Zoe."

A third message had arrived the previous day from **DAME JUDI DENCH**, who was getting ready for her initial performance as



Paulina in an eagerly anticipated **KENNETH BRANAGH** production of *The Winter's Tale* at the **GARRICK THEATRE**. Dame Judi had received her own **GIELGUD** in 1999 at Broadway's **BARRYMORE THEATRE**, and she had helped bestow the 2000 award on **SIR KENNETH** at London's **MIDDLE TEMPLE HALL**. "Dearest Eileen," her witty tribute began, "I would have *Willed* you this Award years ago. How

lucky Shakespeare is to have you. I am so sorry that I am not there. With much love and admiration, Jude."

Sir Patrick now shared a note from **GREGORY DORAN**, Artistic Director of the **ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY**. He began by noting that Eileen Atkins was responsible for his coming to the **RSC** in the first place. "In 1973," he recalled, "as a young teenager I saw her play Rosalind at Stratford-upon-Avon. At the end I left the theatre dancing with joy, and knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So it was my great pleasure finally to direct Eileen as Mother Sawyer, *The Witch of Edmonton*, in the Swan Theatre last autumn. She gave a glorious, multifaceted performance as an old crone, determined that if she is to be treated as a witch she might as well become one. Her presence on the stage was electric, expertly mingling comedy and pathos. Her Mother Sawyer had a glittering, beady-eyed intelligence, radiating a savage skepticism at the wickedness of the world around her. And her sardonic interplay with a grinning, near-naked devil Dog was disturbingly erotic. But then the attraction younger men seem to have for Eileen, Colin Farrell included, is of course legendary. Eileen Atkins is simply one of the greats, and her generosity with the younger members of the acting company, in passing on the precision and the discipline required by her level of craftsmanship, was a joy to witness. I can think of no one better suited to receive this distinguished award."

At this point Sir Patrick confessed, with regret, that he'd never had an opportunity to work with Dame Eileen. So he drew upon one more message, this time from **BERNIE LLOYD**, whose associations with the honoree went back four decades. One of Mr. Lloyd's memories was of a performance at the Old Vic in which she had portrayed Shaw's *St. Joan*. "She told me that Sir Laurence Olivier was in at a Saturday matinee, so I hung around in her dressing room and for the first time had an opportunity to meet the great man. He entered, diminished with illness, embraced her, and said, 'You naughty girl, you made me cry.' What praise! Later in that run, as she was engaged in Shavian debate with her antagonists in the play, a gentleman suddenly appeared, walked up to the stage, and tried to join the fray. Everyone was stunned speechless except Eil. She recognized the man, a director who had connections with the Royal Court and had walked out of a psychiatric establishment that afternoon to see a play. Eil, gently in character, encouraged him to be taken to her dressing room. She then returned to the stage, and the play continued. Unfazed, natural, and true, a lass unparalleled."

Dame Eileen smiled glowingly as she heard these tributes, and when Sir Patrick called her to the stage to receive her **GIELGUD** trophy, she made it clear that she felt privileged to be inducted into a select company of artists who'd been honored in Sir John's name. Her first encounter with Gielgud, she recalled, had been during a 1957 *Tempest*, directed in Stratford by Peter



Brook with Sir John as Prospero, when she had finagled her way into a non-speaking part. A couple of years later, when she enjoyed her first tremulous conversation with Gielgud, she was surprised to learn that he had noticed her. But her initial delight was dampened by his recollection that her costume had made her resemble "a pregnant penguin." The audience relished this and other theatrical anecdotes, and when Dame Eileen concluded her brief remarks she was treated to a standing ovation.

Following the **GIELGUD** presentation, she and her husband, film producer **BILL SHEPHERD**, departed for another commitment. But before doing so, she posed for a few photographs, and responded



to queries from reporters who write for the **BBC** and other media outlets. Sir Patrick was also compelled to take his leave during a short program interval. But he too

was willing to respond to a few press inquiries and pose for several photographs, among them one with **GUILD** president **JOHN ANDREWS** and actress **EUNICE ROBERTS**, shown here displaying a certificate to commemorate the 40th anniversary of **ACTORS FROM**

THE LONDON STAGE, a program now housed at the **UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME**, and the 94th birthday of its progenitor, **PROFESSOR HOMER SWANDER** of the **UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA BARBARA**.



For their many contributions to this occasion, the **GUILD** is grateful to **STEPHEN AND JULIA BROWNING**, **CLIVE AND NATALIE FRANCIS**, **SUE JENNINGS**, **JOHN AND JONAIL MILLER**, and a splendid **UK THEATRE** team that included not only CEO **JULIAN BIRD**, but such key personnel as photographer **MATT HUMPHREY** (whose images adorn this narrative), general manager **KATIE KERRY**, and staff members **DANIEL AUSTIN** and **ANTHONY MCNEILL**.