

## TRIBUTE TO JOHN GIELGUD

The Theatre Royal Drury Lane is currently hosting the amplified musical *Frozen*, but in 1957 John Gielgud played *The Tempest* there for a seven-week season of what Ralph Richardson called ‘the best Shakespearian acting I have seen in my life.’ Almost alone in the company, without the appearance of effort, Gielgud could be heard clearly in every one of Drury Lane’s over 2000 seats.

The previous year, the Berliner Ensemble had come to London for an influential visit which would have a revolutionary impact on the formation of both the Royal Shakespeare Company, and then later the National Theatre. Before the trip, Bertolt Brecht had some useful advice for his company before their opening. Brecht told them that if they wanted to understand what acting was all about, they should go and see John Gielgud in *Nude with Violin*.

Fame, said Rilke, is the sum of all the misunderstandings which grow up around a name. Two misunderstandings about Gielgud prevail today. The young are taught that he sung the text musically. In fact, if you listen to recordings, he did the very opposite. He had a searching intelligence, a radical discernment which laid bare a play’s meanings so you felt you were understanding them for the first time. The tendons, the sinews of text mapped themselves out and were laid before you. But the second myth, still perpetuated by idiots, is that because he was born an Edwardian, Gielgud was, and remains, old-fashioned.

Is old-fashioned the word for an actor who appeared in new plays by Edward Albee, Alan Bennett, Peter Shaffer, Edward Bond, Harold Pinter, David Storey, Julian Mitchell and Charles Wood? Are those the dramatists the old-fashioned would choose? By my count, between 1968 and 1977 alone, Gielgud created seven original leading roles in nine years. How many living actors come close, either in commitment or in modernity? When he did his greatest film work, it

was in Alain Resnais' Providence, which, remember, had a script by another notable living playwright, David Mercer.

John Gielgud was loved by audiences as much for his character – for who he was - as for the brilliance of his acting. When we were filming, I loved to sit in a canvas chair next to him and shoot the breeze. On Plenty, so beautifully directed by Fred Schepisi, the house we were working in was one of those Edwardian mansions in a row whose most famous residents are now the Beckhams. Gielgud turned to me and asked me if I knew this part of town, Holland Park. I admitted I did. I lived just up the road. “Rather squalid, isn't it,” he said. Together we watched Meryl Streep nail a daunting speech. At the end, Gielgud, moved, just muttered to me ‘Frightfully good, isn't she?’ Years later, when I told Streep, she said there was no-one in the world she would rather be thought frightfully good by than John Gielgud.

Poets Corner is the ultimate members' club, its red ropes patrolled by the toughest bouncers in town. The principal disincentive for wannabees is that you have to be dead to enter. Shame there's no waiting room – a half-way house – where the great can assemble while they're still alive. John Gielgud would have cheered things up. I fancy he would have got on with Byron as well as he got on with Garrick. Who would not warm to an actor who came back from the village newspaper shop in September 1939 and responded to the anxious inquiry “Have they declared war yet?” with an impatient wave of the hand: “Oh I don't know anything about that, but Gladys Cooper has just got the most terrible reviews.”

I love that cheerfulness, I love that insouciance, I love that honesty. His special affinity with the work of Charles Wood produced for me some of his most memorable moments, both in the play Veterans and in the Tony Richardson film The Charge of the Light Brigade. Wood tailored perfect couture dialogue for Gielgud, because he understood that a certain wry self-deprecation, genuine, humorous and affecting, served only to underline Gielgud's mastery. As Kenneth Tynan said, Gielgud was not so much an actor, he was the actor.

To its immense credit, Westminster Abbey admits to Poets Corner interpretive artists as freely as it admits the supposedly creative. It knows there's no difference between the two. In God's eyes, after all, everyone's a secondary creator. But when John Gielgud acted, the thoughts and the feelings became new. No-one who saw him ever forgot him. And now we have a place, a stone in the floor, where we can go and say thank you.

DAVID HARE