

TRIBUTE TO JOHN GIELGUD

When I was thirteen years old I heard a production of *The Tempest* on the radio. The voice of the actor playing Prospero cast a spell that's lasted a lifetime: his name was John Gielgud. I had read the play but could make little of it, but he made me understand it perfectly: he made me realise that Shakespeare was a living playwright.

I didn't know John Gielgud well but I met him from time to time and he occasionally sent little notes to me, written in small, elegant, square-ish handwriting canted at a sharp angle across the page. His first card to me, congratulating me on my accession to the directorship of the National Theatre, began: "Dear Richard – if I may -" This old-world courtesy was part of his charm and was entirely characteristic. But just as characteristic was his ice-breaking remark - reported to me by Judi Dench - to a bunch of awe-struck and tongue-tied young actors after a long silence: "Has anyone had any obscene phone calls recently?"

When he was 95 I interviewed him for a television series about the theatre. After talking about the Edwardian theatre he had seen as a child, I asked him whether he'd been aware that it was an age where Ibsen had sowed the seed of naturalistic drama about social issues. "Yes," he said, "but I was in great difficulty because all my life I've been so stupid and flippant, and I never cared to think of what was going in the world. I had such a childlike adoration of the theatre." To know him a little and to have read his letters is to know that he was telling only half the truth: "*stupid*" and "*flippant*" were typical of his engaging self-deprecation. No one who had seen him act in the theatre – in Shakespeare or in contemporary plays - or heard him talk about his craft, or had examined his achievements, could have accepted his estimation of himself.

By the age of only 35 he'd established himself as Britain's leading classical actor and – it seems odd to say it now – he'd convinced West End audiences of the greatness of Shakespeare. At this point, master of his universe, he did a remarkable thing: he invited Laurence Olivier to join him in his production of *Romeo and Juliet*, alternating the parts of Romeo and Mercutio. To invite the actor regarded as your closest rival to appear on the same stage is an act of great and daring generosity and self-confidence. It marked him out from generations of actor-managers who had clad the stage with inferior talents in order to illuminate their own. It demonstrated also his lack of jealousy. "I'm not, funnily enough, very jealous, I never have been," he said to me. "I had great ambitions but I was never jealous."

He could have stayed a 'West End actor' - wealthy, complacent and artistically unambitious - but he consistently took risks and accepted challenges. In 1950, at Stratford, he played Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, directed by the young Peter Brook, in which he dared to be ascetic, unsympathetic and unromantic. He also consistently championed the trio of young designers called 'Motley' who introduced a spare, ascetic

and elegant approach to stage design in which meaning took precedence over decoration. It was a revolutionary approach in the British theatre of their day.

And no one could accuse John Gielgud of timidity when he acted and directed *King Lear* at Stratford, designed by the Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The abstract set aimed to portray a timeless world. “His Japanese costumes killed all our efforts to act in them,” he said ruefully later. The production was not a success but Peter Brook said that he would never have arrived at his production of *King Lear* with Paul Scofield if Gielgud's production hadn't paved the way for him. What's more Gielgud established classical repertory companies in the West End with high aims and high achievements. He did more than anyone to create the circumstances which led to the foundation of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.

He knew more or less everything that was going on in the contemporary theatre and he could be a caustic, but unmalicious, critic of productions and performances which he felt paid insufficient attention to the authors' intentions, or were shoddily acted or spoken or presented. He was a marvellously droll raconteur: sharp, lucid, seldom bitchy, affectionate, reticent, and hard-headed about the world in which he earned his living. “I hate any sentimentality about Show Biz,” he said in a letter to me.

Those who only saw his film performances or heard him on his recordings or on the radio will never have appreciated the wit, the bravura and the mercurial lightness of being that he showed on stage. Theatre acting is sculpting in snow – performances survive only in the memory, you have to have been there to have seen them - so when we talk of a “great theatre actor” we can't demonstrate that greatness: you just have to take our word for it. In my view John Gielgud was the greatest English classical actor of the last century. He said once to me that “the British never imagine that any other country has history”. But I hope that however solipsistic our history, we will always have room to acknowledge the greatness of John Gielgud - and I'm glad that today we go some way towards achieving that.

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