John Gielgud: A life in the theatre (1904-2000)

Paul Bond
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John Gielgud's death on May 21 at the age of 96 has not only robbed the world of one of its finest actors. It has also brought to a close a whole period of British theatrical history. His career of nearly 80 years encompassed the greater part of the century and took in the major media developments of the age. It was not hyperbole for many of the tributes to say that his death marked a belated end to the twentieth century for the British stage.

It also marked the end of a link to an earlier period of British theatre. Gielgud's great aunt was Ellen Terry, the leading lady of the greatest actor of the previous generation, Henry Irving. His great uncle Fred Terry was a huge success as the Scarlet Pimpernel. In his more self-deprecating moments, Gielgud would claim that their greatest legacy to him had been the ability to shed tears at the drop of a hat, but he also reported how impressed he was by their huge athletic voices and their clarity of diction.

Utilising the techniques that they had derived from this earlier period of theatre, Gielgud arrived at his own highly romantic style. A slender, sensitive young man, he had perfected his vocal technique very early in his career. He was to admit in later life that he had been somewhat mannered in his vocal style, at the expense of his physical presence. It was this that led Ivor Brown, reviewing the actor's first leading role as Romeo in 1924, to comment that he had “the most meaningless legs imaginable”. Gielgud later commented that he had had no idea how to move. It was something he was to work on, but his more thoughtful and intelligent characteristics were to make him a success in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Three Sisters*. It was these performances which took him to the Old Vic theatre in the late 1920s and to his great Shakespearean seasons.

There is a tendency to think that what we know of Shakespearean acting on stage is something eternal, something that has been the same since the first performances of the plays in the early sixteenth century. In fact acting styles change with interpretations of the plays, reflecting the concerns of the age—albeit in a diffuse form. The Shakespearean style that was to dominate the major part of the twentieth century owed much of its creation to Gielgud's trailblazing performances at the Old Vic and his filtering of Irving's romanticism with his own fierce intelligence.

The part that brought him recognition as the pre-eminent Shakespearean of his day was *Richard II*. In an introduction he wrote to an edition of the play some 30 years later, Gielgud was to encapsulate his understanding of reading Shakespeare thus: “the actor's vocal efforts must be contrived within the framework of the verse, and not outside it. Too many pauses and striking variations of tempo will tend to hold up the action disastrously and so ruin the pattern and symmetry of the text.” His views arise from a discussion of *Richard II*, but it is, he said, “nearly always the case with Shakespeare.”

This was a cool intelligence at work, a quality that he brought to his outstanding productions of *Hamlet* which were to define the role for two generations of actors. Writing in 1954 Richard Burton (whom Gielgud directed in the part) called Gielgud “probably the greatest Hamlet of the contemporary theatre ... a Hamlet poetical—sensitive—illogical.... This was a definitive performance.” Burton was trying to reclaim the part for other interpretations, but felt that Gielgud's greatness had to be addressed in doing so: “It is still possible for an actor broad of face, wide of shoulder, thick of thigh and robust of voice—in brief, too solid for such a sensitive interpretation as Gielgud's—to advance his own definition.”

What was marking Gielgud out almost as much as his extraordinary performances, though, was his attitude to the theatre. Throughout his career he had a holistic approach to performances, working closely with directors, designers and casts to produce a fully realised theatrical vision. He sought out the finest talent available, and tried to establish resident companies. He saw theatrical production as a group effort.

In his role as actor-manager in the 1930s and 1940s, he tried to build companies by bringing fine young actors like Alec Guinness around the best of his contemporaries. This unselfish approach to the building of a theatrical moment had one of its most astounding results in his 1935 season at the New Theatre. Peggy Ashcroft, one of his closest theatrical friends, played Juliet. Gielgud brought Laurence Olivier into the company and they alternated the parts of Romeo and Mercutio. Olivier was an outstanding success as Romeo, and was catapulted into his triumphant career as a classical actor. Gielgud spoke with hints of regret that Olivier was able to conjure such a magnificent physicality almost effortlessly, compared to his own painful contortions. Gielgud's Mercutio, however, was the better because of what Ashcroft called “John's extraordinary darting imagination”.

Gielgud's pioneering companies of 1935, 1937-38 and 1944 contained many of the great figures who would create resident companies and ultimately a National Theatre—George Devine, who formed the English Stage Company in 1956; Glen Byam Shaw and Anthony Quayle who worked in Stratford throughout the 1950s; and of course Olivier himself, one of the prime movers behind the National building on the South Bank.

The other astonishing thing about Gielgud's work throughout the forties and into the fifties was his continuing ability to recognise the validity of new ideas and try new ways of working. Many actors hit a phase when they are simply producing the same old performances. Gielgud was already being accused of exploiting his magnificent voice and of mining the same seam of romanticism in the late 1940s. His response was the 1950 season at Stratford, working with Peter Brook and Anthony Quayle. Brook, directing him as Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and Leontes in *A Winter's Tale*, brought out a new, harsher dimension to his performances. Quayle discovered a performance of astonishing rage as Cassius in *Julius Caesar* (which he was later to revisit on film with Marlon Brando as Julius).

Conscious of the dangers of slipping into a rut, Gielgud continued to surround himself with the best talents. He recognised theatrical quality wherever he found it, and was not afraid to use the unusual, as in his orientally costumed 1955 *King Lear*. In 1956 he saw *Look Back in Anger*. Unlike Olivier, who plunged into the new theatre with alacrity, Gielgud

was rather more reticent. He recognised the quality of the play, against his own expectations. He understood the new theatrical world that it presaged but, as he later said, could not see where he might fit into it. Again it looked as if he was representing a conservative tradition. Although he stayed outside the new wave for longer than Olivier or Ashcroft, his eventual acceptance of the work was to mark him for greater things.

He had appeared in Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* in 1964, but it was Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On* (1968) that marked the triumph of a new stage in his career. In many ways it was the perfect play for Gielgud, filtering its nostalgia for the past with which he had come to be associated, through the waspish sensibilities that he (privately) also shared. From here he went on to his greatest triumphs in modern writings, David Storey's *Home* and Harold *Pinter's No Man's Land* (both, significantly, with his closest friend and favourite actor Ralph Richardson). This was great acting, and not of the kind which was expected of him. Although his last stage appearance was in 1988, he continued to work right up to his death.

He had made films throughout his career from 1923 onwards. Although he was not happy with his performance in Hitchcock's *The Secret Agent* (1936), it is a strikingly intelligent and cool performance. This perhaps was not what was required. It was one thing to become a sensitive Shakespearean hero, another to become a sensitive tough guy. His movie work increased with the development of the newer, harder aspect to his character-work. Cinema found in his intelligence a cruel streak of detachment: where Olivier could be the all-action Shakespearean, Gielgud used his keen mind to create some memorably aloof and patrician characters. This aloofness also brought out the comic actor in him, deft at playing with cruel seriousness the most pompous and ridiculous characters. He had played Lord Raglan in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, picnicking above the battlefield. On television he was to reduce viewers to tears of despairing hysteria as Charles Ryder's father in *Brideshead Revisited*, taunting his son with synonyms for poverty. It was this withering vein of detachment that was to bring him an Oscar as Dudley Moore's butler in *Arthur* (1981).

In his last decade Gielgud had problems with working. His memory was no longer what it had been. In the early nineties he had complained that film companies were getting reluctant to insure him against finishing a film, but he still continued to work as often as he could. Yes he accepted anything that was offered him, but there were still exceptional performances in exceptional pieces of work— *Shine*, for example. Nor did he ever lose sight of Shakespeare. He had always dreamed of filming *The Tempest* with Ingmar Bergman: he settled for Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*. Whatever the faults and merits of the picture, it was a magnificently bold gesture for an actor of his age. He also continued to work in radio, a medium that afforded him the possibility to return to parts which were physically beyond him on stage, for example *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.

Gielgud was the model actor, for whom every actor had a good word. He was a legendarily tactless person, but every oft-repeated anecdote seems to have some basis in his own artistic standards and appreciation. Telling Elizabeth Taylor that Richard Burton's acting had gone downhill "since he married that terrible woman". Meaning to say to Burton, during his disastrous Hamlet, that they'd have dinner when he was ready, he in fact said, "We'll have dinner when you're better." For Gielgud, his art and craft came first, hence his continued standing amongst his fellow professionals as well as his total knowledge of his job. It was this that enabled him to see the collective effort involved in any production, as well as recognise the immense contributions being made by individuals. He was, for this reason, known as an extraordinarily generous actor. He gave Olivier the sword used by Edmund Kean when he had played *Richard III*, for example, as a tribute to Olivier's performance. He was also a hugely entertaining man, not given to blowing his own trumpet. The designer "Percy" Lewis, who herself died only a few weeks ago, once said that Gielgud had "single-handedly put English theatre back on the map. Larry [Olivier] gets all the credit and John doesn't, which I think is a sign of John's innate modesty."

When asked how he would like to be remembered he answered, "With a kind word—but not too kind."

Gielgud dominated British acting for some 70 years, an outstanding achievement only possible for an artist of the highest calibre. Is it possible that we shall ever see his like again? I find it unlikely. He learned his craft at a time when the theatre reigned supreme. He was part of the most distinguished and innovative group of Shakespearean actors the British stage has ever seen, who had the great good fortune to be around at the birth of the new medium of cinema, which they embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The cinema found performances in them which the stage perhaps could not have (the wonderful Ralph Richardson, for example, managed to give perhaps the lowest key performance of his career as the Divine Being in Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits*). But they were able to continue their great seasons on stage as well. Olivier, the finest cineaste of that group of actors, continued to tour classical seasons with Richardson. They were thus present during simultaneous flourishings of different media, just as they were later able to exploit the growth of television. Sound recordings made available their stage performances, as well as dedicated radio broadcasts.

Even allowing for any possible element of unrealised potential in Gielgud's career—the lack of Shakespeare in his latter years, say—he was able to capitalise on the explosion of different media with all the considerable skill at his disposal. The situation today is somewhat different. Actors tend to learn their skills on television, rather than in theatre. A common complaint about those who have made it on screen and then take up the theatre is that they lack the techniques required to sustain their performances. This is not to say that there will be no great actors, no great verse speakers, no great Shakespeareans in future.

Each age will find artists in every sphere that seek to expand the possibilities of their art. In the career of such a great artist as John Gielgud, we can see that dedication to one's art, the complete openness to new developments that can only come from a thorough knowledge of the form's history, is above all necessary for the renewal of artistic endeavour.