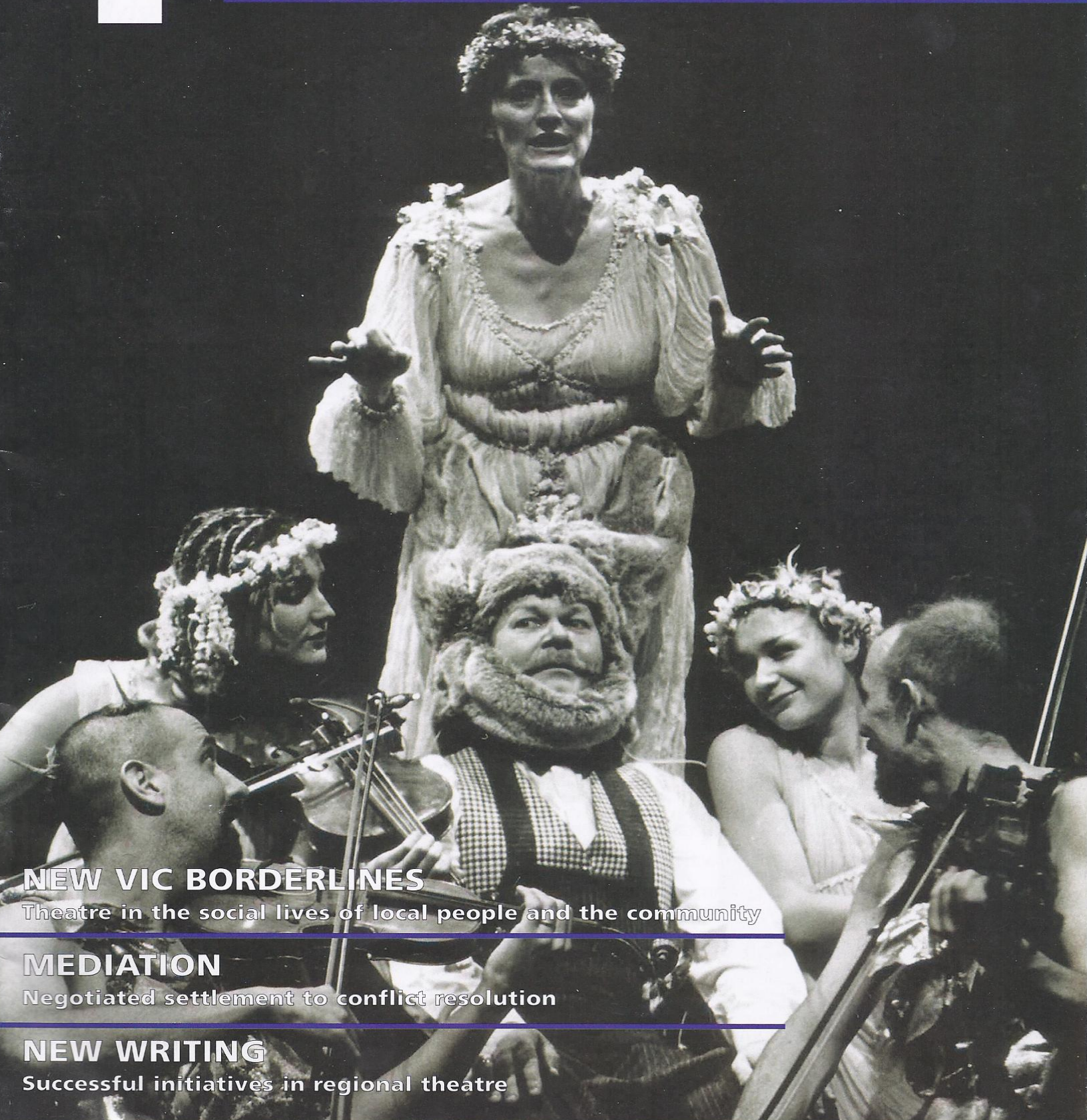


Prompt

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NEW WRITING

Successful initiatives in regional theatre

Sir John Gielgud



On 19 April 2004, Judi Dench, Ian Richardson, and Paul Scofield led an all-star cast in a sprightly salute to the centennial of a great actor's birth. The festivities were presented at the Gielgud Theatre by the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and The Shakespeare Guild in association with producers Thelma Holt and Bill Kenwright, and they raised funds to assist young actors at RADA and to support a recently established Artists' Development Programme at the RSC.

The idea for a centenary gala originated with John F. Andrews, who founded The Shakespeare Guild, and in the paragraphs that follow he describes his organization's commitment to the Gielgud legacy.

Ten years ago, at an April 1994 reception in Washington's Folger Shakespeare Library, film and television star Tony Randall, radio correspondent Susan Stamberg, and an audience of more than 200 other theatre-lovers gathered for the unveiling of a new trophy. Created by an eminent sculptor, John Safer, this gleaming jewel had been commissioned to mark an influential actor's 90th birthday and preserve his "character with golden quill" (Sonnet 85).

Noting that his son Ian had just garnered the ultimate distinction for a set he'd designed for the 1993 revival of *An Inspector Calls*, broadcast journalist Robert MacNeil observed that it was entirely fitting that there be prizes to commemorate Laurence Olivier. He went on to emphasize, however, that it was "just as fitting that there be an award to honor his great contemporary John Gielgud. We cannot hear the great voices of the past," Mr. MacNeil acknowledged, "but it is safe to say that in our time no actor has spoken Shakespeare with a finer ear for the poetry, or a voice more perfectly tuned to the music." Proclaiming that Sir John's favourite author "could not wish a more noble interpreter," he concluded that "The Shakespeare Guild does honor to itself by devising this way of honoring Gielgud, now and long into the future."

In a letter he'd composed for an event he was too frail to attend, Sir John said that, "It is a great blessing to me to know that my work has brought me so many dear friends over these long years, and that I am still able to keep on acting, even though I fear my appearances in the live theatre are over now. Please give my love and greetings to all who are at the celebration you are so kindly sponsoring. I only wish I could have been able to join you myself and respond in person to your great warmth and kindness. My times in

America have brought me so many cherished memories, and I always feel it is my second country."

Seven months later, those who'd been on hand for the Guild's proceedings on Capitol Hill were pleased to learn about an even more impressive gesture to memorialize Sir John in his native land: a magnanimous decision by theatre owner Janet Holmes à Court to rename a Shaftesbury Avenue Globe in which so many of the actor's triumphs had occurred in decades past.

Given its own devotion to the heritage this storied venue now embodies, the Guild was delighted to bring *The Golden Quill* to the Gielgud Theatre a few weeks ago, and particularly pleased that among the stars who took part in an unforgettable evening was Dame Judi Dench, our 1999 recipient of the *Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts*. It had been our privilege to laud Dame Judi in another venerable site, Broadway's Barrymore Theatre, and one of the luminaries who sang her praises on that occasion was Sir David Hare, the playwright who'd crafted the drama in which she was earning a Tony Award. We're delighted to report that Sir David was with us at the Gielgud too, and so were three of the artists who'd rechristened its stage in November of 1994 with a compelling *Hamlet*: Sir Peter Hall, the production's director, and performers Michael Pennington and Sir Donald Sinden.

As it happens, 2004 was not the Guild's first visit to London. Four years earlier, during a remarkable January evening at BAFTA and at historic Middle Temple Hall, we'd tipped our hats to Shakespeare as the BBC's "Man of the Millennium" and presented our 2000 Gielgud laurel to Kenneth Branagh as the actor, director, and producer who'd

done so much to turn a 436-year-old has-been into cinema's hottest screenwriter. Thinking back to that and similar revels, we're mindful not only of such *Golden Quill* recipients as Zoe Caldwell (1998), Sir Derek Jacobi (1997), Kevin Kline (2002), Sir Ian McKellen (1996), and Lynn Redgrave (2003), but of all the other figures who've contributed so generously to Guild offerings in settings like the British Embassy and the National Press Club in Washington, Lincoln Center and the National Arts Club in Manhattan, and the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in the Windy City. This august company includes such talents as F. Murray Abraham, Jane Alexander, Keith Baxter, Simon Russell Beale, Samantha Bond, Peter Brook, Helena Bonham Carter, John Cleese, Richard Clifford, Patrick Doyle, Ben Elton, Sir Richard Eyre, Clive Francis, Stephen Fry, Henry Goodman, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Hal Holbrook, Bob Hoskins, Geraldine McEwan, Kelly McGillis, John Miller, Ronald Pickup, George Plimpton, Christopher Plummer, Corin Redgrave, Roger Rees, Dame Diana Rigg, James Roose-Evans, Sir Peter Shaffer, Toby Stephens, and Patrick Stewart.

As it has added *SPEAKING OF SHAKESPEARE* dialogues and other activities, the Guild has benefited from collaboration with a variety of helpful partners, among them such institutions as the Bankside Globe, the English-Speaking Union, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and the Society of London Theatre. We're eager to extend these relationships, and we're now developing an initiative with the Gielgud Charitable Trust that will foster even closer ties among those organizations who are doing the most to ensure that the language of Shakespeare remains a vital instrument of global communication.

John F. Andrews, President
The Shakespeare Guild