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THE Shakespeare GUILD

RSC
ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Sir John Gielgud

The Centenary Gala

REALLY USEFUL THEATRES

Gielgud Theatre

Much Ado About Nothing. John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft. Stratford, 1950

Some memories of Sir John Gielgud

John Miller

Collaborator on his memoirs

The best broadcasting idea I ever had was to suggest taking John Gielgud into a radio studio every day for a fortnight, to capture for the record his unique insight into the elusive art of acting. His comments ranged from Duse and Bernhardt to Brando and Burton, from Granville Barker to Orson Welles, from Fry to Pinter, throwing out illuminating asides as he remembered a telling detail. After painting a vivid picture of Lillian Gish as Ophelia to his Hamlet on Broadway he paused, and I waited for the pay-off line: "She wore a stocking on her arm in the mad scene."

He confessed cheerfully to his many famous "bricks", but admitted that even he was nonplussed by the society hostess who gushed at a reception: "Oh Mr Gielgud, I'm so interested to hear that you're playing Hamlet, the King of Denmark is a very close friend of mine." As Eric Morecambe used to say, "There's no answer to that."

I used to feel both exhilarated and drained at the end of each day's session, from trying to keep up with his quicksilver mind and total recall. One reminiscence would trigger another, and he would suddenly dart off at a tangent, which was always worth pursuing. On the last day as we left Broadcasting House he said half-apologetically, "You will have noticed I couldn't look you in the eye while I was talking, I had to gaze over your shoulder to conjure up in my mind's eye all those people we discussed." I noticed, too, that whenever he spoke of those dear to him who were no longer alive, like his adored great-aunt Ellen Terry, his eyes would glisten with tears. We ended up with 15 half-hours transmitted, and so spellbinding was he that at Programme 3 we had five publishers queuing up to turn *An Actor and his Time* into a book, which included all the other hours of untransmitted material. With his usual directness, Sir John said, "I think we should accept the offer of the most money, don't you?"

We did a second book together, *Acting Shakespeare*, as a consequence of our televised conversations ten years later, and the publishers requested a long Introduction chronicling his Shakespearean career. Gielgud had no time to write this himself as he was fully stretched appearing in *The Best of Friends*, so he asked me to do it instead. When I showed it to him for his approval, he gently chided me, "But you've left out all the worst reviews, you must put them in, I always learnt more from my failures than my successes." So in went the disastrous *Othello* which is described below.

In common with everyone else who has written here, and will be appearing on stage in this Centenary tribute, I consider it an enormous privilege to have known and worked with him. Sir John's unfailing courtesy and generosity, qualities which were part of his genius as an actor and character as a man, helped me to understand his supremacy not just as our First Player, but also as the First Gentleman of the English-speaking stage. He enriched the lives of all who saw him act, or had the good fortune to meet him.

Sir Peter Hall

Director

John Gielgud was a great, indeed a very great actor; for some he was the greatest actor of his generation.

But he was even more. Although nothing could hide the fact that he was a star, he was never a star in the old style of the actor managers. He believed passionately in the idea of the Company – a group of (if possible) similarly talented people who supported each other to serve the needs of the play. He believed that good group work added to the creative strength of each individual. Everybody became better.

So though he was always the first among equals he brought new standards to the British Theatre. Under his guidance, 20th-century theatre served the needs of the play, not the needs of the leading actor. He was always modest in his brilliance.

As Mercutio

Three Sisters by Chekhov. Peggy Ashcroft, John Gielgud, Carol Goodner, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies. Queen's Theatre, 1938

Sheridan Morley

Author of *John G: the authorised biography of John Gielgud*

The greatness of John G is unchallenged and unchallengeable: he had no place in the history of British 20th-century theatre for he was that history. It was John who first brought us the plays of Chekhov, who revolutionised stage lighting and scenery, who first brought Shakespeare to a prime-time radio audience, and who created the first resident classical companies in London, thereby paving the way for the RSC and the National Theatre. He belonged to the greatest generation of classical actors there had ever been; where Garrick and Kean and Irving were loners it was possible in the middle of the last century to see Gielgud share the stage or screen with Olivier, Richardson, Redgrave, Guinness, Scofield and (not to be chauvinist) Peggy Ashcroft, Sybil Thorndike, Edith Evans and Irene Worth. It would be foolish to choose a greatest of the great, but it was the late Laurie Evans, agent to most of these, who once told me that in his mind there was never a moment's doubt – Gielgud was the greatest of them all, and by some distance.

Of his famous "bricks" my favourite is when we encountered Mrs Thatcher outside Hatchards, surrounded by security men. John knew he should know her, but couldn't quite place her. "And where," he enquired politely, hoping for a clue, "are you living now?" "Well, Sir John," she replied in some surprise, "No 10 Downing Street." "Oh God," said John, "you women are always so clever at finding London properties: I never know what to buy."

Long before I wrote his biography, he had been kind enough to write glowing prefaces in that spidery hand to other books of mine, including the life of Noël Coward. He and Noël had a surprising amount in common – both addicted to travel though deeply patriotic, both bleakly uninterested in politics or anything outside the theatre, both with a deep distrust of the movies and television even if money had to be made there. If Noël was Peter Pan, then John was Oberon and Prospero and Lear, and all those other Shakespearean magicians whose great gift was valediction. He also, while appearing craggy and distant, had a wonderfully warm sense of self-mockery; I only wish he could have seen the tabloid headline announcing his decease. It read, in block capitals across the page: BUTLER IN DUDLEY MOORE FILM DEAD.

As for me, I would like to end this, not with the breaking of the staff but with an altogether grittier farewell, the one from Chekhov's *Swan Song* which John filmed for Kenneth Branagh: "Old age? No such thing. Stuff and nonsense... Where you've got art, where you've got talent, there's no room for old age, no room for loneliness or being ill. Even death is only half itself... our song is sung, our race is run. What talent do I have? I'm a squeezed lemon, a melting icicle, a rusty nail... an old theatre rat... off we go, then."

Ian Richardson

Actor

When I was a young actor the stars in the theatrical firmament were John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson. In their different ways, they were all giants. I had seen John Gielgud only rarely before I met him but had already decided that, for me at least, he was my own particular star. The voice, the mercurial intelligence that informed his Shakespearean delivery, the sheer speed at which he could take a soliloquy and still miss none of the thoughts or nuances it contained – all these made me a devotee.

I first met him in 1961, in Stratford-upon-Avon, when he had joined the company towards the end of the season in order to play Othello. Franco Zeffirelli directed. The first night was a disaster from beginning to end: the huge operatic sets were unsuited to the Stratford stage, especially as the sets for five other plays had to be accommodated in the flies, and the first scene change took forty-five minutes in a blackout. The audience started to slow handclap. When the lights came up again, a huge pillar occupied one side of the stage, swaying slightly, the bolt which should have held it to the stage being unfastened. John, ignorant of this, leant on it. It swayed away from him and he almost lost his footing, turned to glare into the wings and was struck by the pillar on its return swing; at which point his beard fell off, revealing a neat little white triangle against the dark of his face. Added to this, Iago had calmed his nerves during the long wait with the help of a little tincture and announced at one moment, "Cassio's dead..." which was not, of course, the case. Things went from bad to worse and come the dawn everyone knew, without looking at the papers, that the play was dead in the water.

I was not in this production but was in the plays with which it ran in repertoire. So, on this fateful morning after, I came into the Green room, hoping to bludgeon Gladys behind the bar into giving me a cup of coffee even though it was not yet ten o'clock, as I had an understudy rehearsal about to start. Apart from Gladys, the room was deserted except for Peggy Ashcroft (who had played Emilia) and John, sitting together looking out of the window at the river. Peggy I knew already, but not John, and they looked as if they were having a quiet wake, so I quickly said, "Oh, sorry!" and made to go. "No, no...," said Peggy, "come and sit down." "Yes," said John, "come and sit down, and" (with exquisite melancholy) "tell us where the swans go to die..."

Later, I appeared with him in an adaptation of *The Master of Ballantrae* where he played the laird of Drurie. During the long waits, when we all sat around waiting for lights to be set, he would suddenly decide that things were getting a bit dull and he would get up and regale us with theatre stories, sometimes for hours. We sat at his feet, enraptured. The laird of Drurie dies early on in the piece and, as a corpse, he lay on a stone table out in the cold for hours and hours, in spite of being told that they could equally well use a dummy. "No, no," he said, "I'm rehearsing for the real thing." The real thing. I'm sure he's playing it beautifully.

The Winter's Tale. John Gielgud, Michael Goodliffe, Robert Anderson. Phoenix Theatre, 1951

Sir David Hare

Playwright

It's hard to believe that there's anyone interested in the British theatre who doesn't already know the story of John Gielgud. Born in 1904 – the year of Chekhov's death and of the first performance of *Peter Pan* – he began in the days of his pre-war glory as an actor in the West End to create the kind of repertory which would be broadly adopted thirty years later by a nascent National Theatre, though under the leadership of his resilient colleague Laurence Olivier. With the help of directors like Komisarjevsky (popularly known as Come and Seduce Me), and actresses like Peggy Ashcroft and Edith Evans (whom he thanked in a curtain speech as "two leading ladies the like of whom I hope I shall never meet again"), and producers like Binkie Beaumont (who told him that if he wanted a decent company and reasonable décor, he couldn't expect to be properly paid), he set standards of classical ensemble playing which have rarely been bettered. After the war he went on to refine his previously Shakespearean talent to a point where it dazzled in the work of modern authors as diverse and brilliant as Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, David Storey, Edward Bond, Charles Wood and Alan Bennett. By the time he died four years ago, at the age of 96, he had become not only one of the most admired British actors of his day, but someone whose fitness of character made him the best loved. Over and over he successfully re-invented himself in a profession where re-birth is difficult.

However, anyone wanting to go beyond the familiar outline of Gielgud's achievements and make more testing inquiry about his means and methods will face a paradox. You cannot recollect any of his countless self-deprecating remarks: "My friends tell me I have no real interest in anyone but myself. I hope this is not the exact truth, but I rather fear it may be." "I merely act in these plays; I am not supposed to understand them" – nor any of the resonant complaints of his friends: "John regarded private life as something of an interruption to the rehearsing day." "Sometimes I talk about diesel engines just to see the horrified look in John's eyes" – without asking a question which this self-described "emotional gubbins" plainly pondered himself: how could someone who knew so little of the world outside the theatre be able to access and illuminate such a wide range of human experience?

The critic Harold Hobson explained the contradiction by suggesting that John gave himself to the theatre just as, in the Middle Ages, men and women gave themselves to monasteries and nunneries. When young, he was a gifted impresario. But in later years he seemed happier surrendering to the tide rather than trying to channel it. "One of the great things about growing old is that you suddenly dare to stand on stage and do nothing, and people start to listen and to understand." Increasingly, Gielgud found his place sitting "at the side of the set trying to complete my *Times* crossword and waiting to be told what to do next." "I am sure," he said, making an unexpected comparison, "Picasso must know so much and have all the wisdom I lack." The more completely Gielgud allowed himself to become a vessel, the more memorable his acting became. Narrowness brought depth. The apparent frivolity of his interests ("Theatre... is a safe place, it's like going home") transmuted, in the last years of his life, into an unforgettable, haunting gravity, which never seemed one scrap less intelligent than that of the most formidable authors whose works he played.

Like everyone else, I loved his company. At first, I was awed. But who, finally, is not going to feel close to a man who greeted his first sight of the Pope with the observation "Funny. His Holiness looks just like Harry Andrews"? Listening to him – and listen is what you did, mostly – you could contemplate the mystery of an actor who excelled playing statesmen and intellectuals, and yet who came back from a newspaper shop in 1939, responding to the anxious enquiry "Have they declared war yet?" with an impatient wave of his hand and the reply: "Oh I don't know anything about that, but Gladys Cooper has just got the most terrible reviews."

Meryl Streep

Actress

Sir John came to the foot of the rickety steps leading to the door of my tiny caravan on the set of *Plenty* and asked if he might be admitted. We had only just met that morning in rehearsal for an explosive dinner party, and I was still palpitating with the presumption and nerve it took to stand in front of him and "act". I felt like an American ass, inept and over the top. I opened the door for what I assumed would be an advisory ("listen my dear, one must never"...) chat. But he (lithe, elegant) refused to sit. He sort of happily propped himself against the cooker and proceeded to roll cigarettes for us both, and told naughty and amusingly nasty stories on all the greats of the English stage and screen with whom he'd worked. He was hilarious: scathing and loving, both. And it was only months later that I realised he had come in for an advisory chat – he'd just put me at ease in a completely indirect but effective way, with a few laughs. What a gent. What a lovely man.

As Prospero

Veterans by Charles Wood. John Gielgud and John Mills. Royal Court, 1972

Charles Wood

Playwright

I first met Johnny G when I was still at art school. I called him Johnny G because my father did. He had been stage director at the end of the war for the ENSA tour of the Middle East of *Hamlet* and *Blithe Spirit* headed by John Gielgud, and spoke of him as a colleague, much as any small-time rep actor speaks of those theatrical luminaries he has all too occasionally worked with (for "with" read "for", it being more truthful), the "G" implying familiarity and a non-existent artistic sociability. They all do it, actors. Means nothing. But it helps when you're milling around trying to get a job with some barely respectable weekly rep north of the Home Counties to show you have at least brushed with genius. Dad could do it with the best.

When I went to see a matinee of *Measure for Measure* in Stratford my father insisted that I presented his card at the stage door and visited John Gielgud in his dressing room. In terror, I went. In terror, I met Val Gielgud as well. In terror I sipped a cup of tea and ate a biscuit, and watched in awe how beautifully John Gielgud lit a cigarette and smoked. Breathing in the atmosphere, the delicate smoke, the courtesy, the use of an ashtray rather than the slops of a teacup, the spotless dressing room, I was overwhelmed. That I had just seen a performance of consummate brilliance I knew, even though I didn't understand a word of it. I would, as soon as I could get hold of the text. Father had of course come up trumps, and he did again the next time I met Gielgud, now Sir John. "Ah," he said, filming *The Charge of the Light Brigade* on a hilltop in Turkey, "you're Jolly Jack Wood's son, we've met." And I was, and we had. I was delighted to be working for him. I even started to talk about him as Johnny G, and got to know him better in Turkey. He was only supposed to be out for a few weeks, but he stayed much longer as his part got bigger. He was the only actor who, on sight, seemed to be able to pick his way through my tortured syntax. What a kind, generous, wickedly funny man he was. He took us out one day onto the Aegean in a yacht he'd hired, all of us, Valerie and the children as well, and one of the crew caught some red mullet for lunch. As the fish splashed into the frying pan: "Alas poor mullet, I knew him well!" he said, giving me a line and a name for a future character.

I wrote two plays for him, and one play about him; he did the play that was about him, *Veterans*, and did it with such exquisite circumspection and such courage in the face of ridiculous opposition from old friends as well as the usual suspects, that none of the chicken hearts have since dared try it. I doubt anybody ever will. But do you know, I don't care, I've got him on tape.

Sir Donald Sinden

Actor

I first saw John Gielgud in *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Theatre Royal Brighton and was immediately under his spell. In 1944 I saw him as *Hamlet* at the Haymarket and was bowled over by his towering performance. I was just leaving for India where I would be working for ENSA. Some months later John arrived in Bombay with his company. We were all staying in the same hotel, and I met my hero for the first time and saw eighteen performances of *Hamlet*. In my mind's ear I can still hear the cadence of every line. The wealth of meaning he gave to a mundane sentence – "Let us go in together"—one cannot describe in mere words. The sequence "..... Yorick's skull; the King's jester." "This?" "E'en that." "Let me see. Alas, poor Yorick!" saw our Hamlet crash from haughty aristocrat to a five-year-old boy whose only friend was his father's jester. I cried every time I watched that scene.

In 1987 I directed a production of *The Importance* and I remembered a piece of "business" that John had done: after the "death" of Bunbury, John entered dressed entirely in black, and at a certain moment he produced a large, black-edged handkerchief, which elicited another laugh. We tried to incorporate the same "business" but we could never find the exact moment to take out the handkerchief – it was always in danger of killing someone else's line. Luckily I joined John for lunch and asked him if he could remember the moment; "Oh, yes," cried John, "after the second dead – George Alexander did it and I stole from him." He had remembered the exact moment forty years later!

During another lunch with John at the Garrick I said, "When I saw you and Peggy Ashcroft in *Much Ado About Nothing*, you persuaded me that Benedick was a very witty fellow, but now Judi Dench and I are rehearsing the same play and we find that Beatrice is the witty one, and Benedick has a bar-room sense of humour and is terrified of the wit in Beatrice." "Oh yes, yes," interjected John, "you are absolutely right. I made a great mistake there – Benedick is a very boorish fellow – you'll be much better than I was!"!!

At the opening of the Gielgud Theatre, John said, "Now, when I walk down Shaftesbury Avenue, there will be at least one name I know."

Michael Pennington

Actor

I was taken by a thoughtful friend for a first-ever meeting with John Gielgud in 1978; it turned into an eight-hour lunch for three, and he barely drew breath. Once when he did, it was to ask what I had been doing at the RSC lately; I was glad, as I thought I was having a natty season and he would be impressed. One by one, with magnificent *moues* of distaste, he dismissed each of my parts as unplayable, naming the most notable failures he'd seen in each – including his own. It's typical of him that this seemed to me to be an entirely friendly and companionable thing to do; his acute pride always included a presumption of likely failure for all of us.

What luck to have known him for twenty years thereafter, to have worked with him off and on, and been periodically reminded of this gift of his, both paternal and fraternal, his correct sense of his own consequence balanced by an unforced ability to welcome you. It wasn't so alarming to do one of his old parts in front of him because you knew his interest was genuine; it wasn't hurtful when he resigned as a patron of my English Shakespeare Company after a year, because we both knew how much he disapproved of our modern dress and had only wanted to give us a good start. Later on we filmed in Tuscany, John Mortimer's *Summer's Lease*, and he had to break off to go back to England for surgery. He shouldn't have come back as soon as he did, in days rather than weeks; but he knew we'd run out of things to shoot without him, so back he bustled. He continued working as if he had only paused for thought, despite his evident frailty; as he got going, he literally seemed to puff up with air, the camera rapidly turning him into his old self. It occurred to me, and continued to, that as long as he kept working and talking he would probably live for ever.

However, while we were out there, Laurence Olivier died. When the news broke, John was being slightly upstaged on the set by Fyodor Chaliapin, the son of the legend, then nearly 90, his voice, a shaving off the Great Larynx, singing out in the silent room. In any case, everyone at that moment was trying not to look at John. "AAAAAAGH!" cried Chaliapin, raising his hands before him and clapping them together in dismay. When they separated, a large fly lay horribly crushed in one of his palms. Now, when I think of the passing of Olivier, this crushed fly is what I see; but what I hear is Gielgud's voice later in the day, talking quietly about his relationship with Olivier, his admiration quite untinged with envy, his slightly battered love for him, stressing always the things Olivier could do that he couldn't, never the other way round. Generous, humorous, sad and undeceived, the sound was familiar; I was listening to the voice of Hamlet.

Macbeth. John Gielgud and Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies. Piccadilly Theatre, 1942

Jonathan Croall

Author of *Gielgud: A Theatrical Life*

It is all too easy to forget what a radical innovator John Gielgud was in his early career. During the 1930s he achieved greatness in a staggering range of parts, most notably Richard of Bordeaux, Hamlet, Noah, Romeo, Mercutio, Trigorin, Joseph Surface, Vershinin, Shylock, Richard II and John Worthing. But he also established himself as a great man of the theatre, setting up a series of high-class ensemble companies which eventually provided the blueprint for the present-day National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company.

His desire to do so sprang from three sources. Two exhilarating seasons as a member of Lilian Baylis's Old Vic Company had convinced him that the star system had had its day, and that the public now wanted to see plays staged by well-balanced companies accustomed to working together for long periods. He was influenced by the radical European tradition exemplified by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, Jacques Copeau's Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and Max Reinhardt's company in Germany, where permanent ensembles were the norm. He was also following his mentor Harley Granville Barker, who believed such companies would give "far sounder performances of any play than the most brilliant scratch company that can be got together."

Between 1934 and 1936 at the New, under the management of Bronson Albery, Gielgud invited the cream of the profession to work alongside him. The roll-call of established and proven talent was an astonishing one, and included George Devine, Jack Hawkins, Glen Byam Shaw, Jessica Tandy, Anthony Quayle, Alec Guinness, Frith Banbury, Dennis Price, Leon Quartermaine, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Laurence Olivier, Marius Goring, Edith Evans, Harry Andrews, Peggy Ashcroft and Martita Hunt.

In his determination to create productions of the highest quality, Gielgud was prepared, often to the consternation of his public, to take on an unexpected role. Komisarjevsky's production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* was a classic example: Gielgud could have played the romantic part of Konstantin, but gave it instead to the young Stephen Haggard, opting himself for the vain, weak and selfish writer Trigorin.

Gielgud's pioneering work reached its zenith in 1937, when he set up in management at the Queen's, presenting a nine-month season that included *Richard II*, *The School for Scandal*, *Three Sisters* and *The Merchant of Venice*. He brought Michael Redgrave into his starry company and engaged Tyrone Guthrie and Michel Saint-Denis as directors of the Sheridan and Chekhov, while he himself directed the two Shakespeare plays. It was the first time for more than thirty years that an actor-manager had risked a classical repertoire in the West End. "Mr Gielgud's programme already looks like a counterblast to the National Theatre," one writer observed.

The season was a huge artistic success: Gielgud had proved brilliantly the value of keeping a top-class company together for an extended period. The critic Harold Hobson later called it "one of the rarest blazes of theatrical light of the century." At the time Saint-Denis wrote: "In this last season Gielgud has taken an initiative which will, I believe, have many consequences in the future." Prophetic words indeed.

Sir Richard Eyre

Director

When he was 95 I interviewed John Gielgud for a television series about the theatre. The crew who assembled on the stage of the Haymarket Theatre to film our conversation perhaps expected an august patriarch bent double by age, an antique relic of a bygone culture. If so, they were surprised to encounter a dapper, alert and droll man for whom no concessions were asked and none were given. He was the quintessential *actor*, and as knowledgeable about himself as he was about the theatre. Every good actor has to find the balance between being conscious of their self and avoiding self-consciousness and he found that perfect balance – but not without struggle. "I suffered so dreadfully for many years by being told I had a beautiful voice," he said, "and I rather made use of it as much as I could until after I worked with Olivier, who was very scathing about my voice. I had a feeling that he rather thought I was showing off, which indeed I was," At this point I protested that Olivier was certainly showing off. "Yes," replied Gielgud with a marvellously impish chuckle, "but his showing off was always so dazzling. My showing off was more technical and was more soft and, oh effeminate, I suppose."

By his mid-thirties Gielgud was a matinee idol, established as Britain's leading classical actor and, odd though it seems to say now, had 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 Gielgud 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 jealously. "I'm not, funnily enough, very jealous. I never have been," he said, "I had great ambitions but I was never jealous."

Gielgud could have stayed a "West End actor", but he consistently took risks and accepted challenges. In 1950, leading the company at Stratford, he played Angelo in *Measure for Measure* with great success, directed by the young and iconoclastic Peter Brook, in which he dared to be ascetic, unsympathetic and unromantic. He also consistently championed the trio of young designers who called themselves "Motley": the sisters Margaret and Sophie Harris, and Elizabeth Montgomery. They introduced a spare and elegant approach to stage design in which meaning took precedence over decoration – a revolutionary approach in the British theatre of their day.

And no one could accuse him of timidity when he acted and co-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. But Peter Brook said that he would never have arrived at his production of *King Lear* with Paul Scofield in 1962 if Gielgud had not paved the way for him.

"I've always thought that we were the reverses of the same coin," said Olivier of Gielgud "the top half John, all spirituality, all beauty, all abstract things; and myself as all earth, blood, humanity; if you like, the baser part of humanity without the beauty."

It might be tempting to take Olivier's judgement at face value. His Shakespeare performances had great glamour, bravura, energy and virtuosity, but their brilliant luminosity shouldn't be allowed to blind us to the intelligence, the detail, the humanity, the insight and the sheer beauty that Gielgud brought to Shakespeare.

Those who only saw Gielgud's 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 the word of those who saw him. John Gielgud was a great theatre actor – in fact the greatest English classical actor of the last century. In his letters he says, perceptively, that "the British never imagine any other country has history." But I hope that our history, however solipsistic, will always have room to acknowledge the greatness of John Gielgud.

Martin Jarvis

Actor

More than twenty-five years ago I was lucky enough to appear alongside Sir John Gielgud in a somewhat bizarre stage recital of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. We played a variety of dates including Chichester, the Old Vic and the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Keith Michell was Satan. Peter Jeffrey, Julian Glover and I were unlikely Archangels. Robert Lang was a Devil. Ronald Pickup played Adam with Hannah Gordon, kitted out by Harvey Nicks, as Eve. Sir John was Milton himself.

Our first performance was a charity gala at the Theatre Royal, York. We all wore dinner jackets. Mine was off the peg from Lipmans. Sir John, elegant in lustrous black velvet, led us onto the stage to the sonorous strains of Wagner. All very po-faced. No laughs. The only touch of colour was the scarlet bow-ties that our adaptor Gordon Honeycombe (the nation's favourite newsreader) had thought appropriate for Satan and his fiends. Gielgud had a lectern to himself, downstage right. We angels posed further upstage, ranged in a semi-circle. At appropriate moments, we arose in a dignified manner and approached a central lectern to deliver our tidings. As Archangel Michael, I was parked most of the time on the end of our row, at Milton's elbow.

During the afternoon dress rehearsal I was privy to many of Sir John's observations as he rehearsed. He worried constantly over the fact that we were performing with scripts, though there was no way, without weeks of rehearsal, we could have committed the text to memory. At one point, after pouring a sublime cascade of Miltonic verse from that golden throat and moving us all to tears, he immediately turned to me, and murmured, eyes streaming, "It's all wrong, you know. It's all wrong. I shouldn't be *reading*. Milton was *blind*." He was concerned too, at director Martin Jenkins' detailed notes. Sometimes, after Martin had come scurrying down from the rear of the auditorium to request more emphasis here, more pace there, Gielgud would turn to me and twinkle, "Ah, yes, but *he* doesn't have to say it." Once, when Gordon Honeycombe suggested he endow a particular passage with more of a rising inflection, John remarked, raising an eyebrow in my direction, "Well, I suppose I might say it like that if I were reading the nine o'clock news."

Five years later when I was about to tackle the role of Jack Worthing in Peter Hall's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the National, I dared to ask Sir John if he had any tips on how I might approach the part. He told me, "Oh yes, you must play Wilde as if you were participating in an elaborate practical joke. Really you know, if you play with as much solemnity as we did in that peculiar *Paradise Lost* it should be almost as funny."

David Storey

Playwright

I first met John Gielgud at the Royal Court Theatre in the Artistic Director's office. Behind the desk sat Lindsay Anderson, I to one side, John seated nervously in front: a curiously formal occasion with which none of us appeared to be at ease. In the end, reassured that he wasn't disliked by Lindsay ("I was sure you disliked me." "Oh, no, John, not at all."), the great actor's decision to do the play *Home* (which he didn't "understand") was determined, evidently, by my smile. I was unaware of it at the time, distracted entirely by John's modesty and apprehension. It was further "decided" that Ralph Richardson should be approached to play the second of the two "gentlemen" in the play.

Rehearsals were characterised initially by great uncertainty on everyone's part, the eminent knights rattling through the text at breakneck speed – creating the curious sensation that the director and I were imprisoned in a carriage pulled by two runaway horses. "I suppose we'll just have to let them go," Lindsay remarked, "until they run out of steam."

What was also observable was that the text was effortlessly absorbed by the actors' natural conversation – a discussion between them about where they bought their shoes flowing in and out of the dialogue of the play, during a break, without any apparent disruption. Much later, when the play had transferred to the West End, I was standing in the wings one evening when, shortly after the beginning of the performance, a man had a heart attack a few rows back in the stalls. He was eventually carried out, the curtain lowered in order that the play might begin again. I wondered how this dramatic interruption would affect the two knights, both of them seated at a table in the centre of the stage. "Was it you who missed a cue?" John tactfully enquired, "or was it me?"

On another occasion, in John's dressing room, I endeavoured to introduce him to my father, a seventy-odd year old ex-miner. I have rarely if ever seen such an event characterised by such a degree of mutual incomprehension, speechlessness on either side.

Memorably, at a party at Ralph's one evening, the Burtons present, John remarked loudly on the (latest) news that Michael Wilding had re-married. "What strange wives that man always chooses," observed our intrepid knight. "I know, John dear," Elizabeth Taylor remarked, seated beside him. "I was one of them!" "Oh, dear. Another brick to add to my not inconsiderable pile..."

What John and Ralph brought to the stage in that particular play was a dynamism created by the fusion of an Edwardian theatrical convention (that the actors were there "to entertain") and a puritanical convention, certainly a moral one, which characterised a theatre (the Royal Court) where the audience, to some degree, were there to be "instructed". The vibrancy between these two conventions fired their performances in an unexpected way: both actors had expressed themselves as "mystified" by the text: "I can't possibly sit for twenty-five minutes without moving," John remarked to the director, early on. "Then move, John," the director immediately responded – this followed, several days later, by, "I don't think I will move, Lindsay, if that's all right with you."

It was a wonderful privilege and, indeed, a revelation to meet and work with two such remarkable men, both, allegedly, "beyond their prime" but in fact merely prolonging it.

Clive Francis

Actor and caricaturist

Without a doubt the two great stars of the stage when I first started were Olivier and John Gielgud, whom I first saw in 1964 in *The Ages of Man*. I can remember being captivated by the lyricism and perfection of his phrasing, the power and beauty of his voice – "never has English sounded more beautiful from the human mouth." In full evening dress, with only the aid of a lectern and a potted plant, he was able to conjure up all the great Shakespearean speeches with blistering emotion. I was mesmerised.

I first met him in 1967 when I auditioned for *Halfway up the Tree*, a Ustinov play he was about to direct at the Queen's Theatre. Shaking with nerves I gave an atrocious reading and quite simply fled the stage, scarlet with embarrassment. I was appalled at having made such an asinine fool of myself and in front of the one person I admired most in the theatre. To my utter astonishment, though, Tennent's rang two days later to say they wanted to see me again, in fact that very afternoon. Armed with confidence and a certain smugness that I was not as dreadful as I had previously thought, I marched onto the Queen's Theatre stage beaming with plausible hope. What followed was a penetrating silence, followed by a loud rustling of papers and a lot of coughing. The tall lean figure of Sir John could vaguely be seen disentangling itself from an aisle seat. Swiftly he moved towards the side of the stage, a cigarette stylishly hanging from his lips, and stared up at me in bewilderment. "Oh my God, no. I'm quite certain I never asked for you back again."

Over the years I had the good fortune to work with Gielgud on a number of projects, not only as an actor but also as a caricaturist – "I had no idea that my tired old features could be rearranged with such glowing amusement."—apart from a brief moment in Sheridan's *The Critic* for the BBC, in which John was cast, wonderfully and extravagantly, as Lord Burleigh, a non-speaking cameo turn – can you imagine it, the most mellifluous voice in the English-speaking theatre, and not a single word was heard, except, as I remember, a cough! Apart from that, it was sixteen years before our paths crossed again, this time in India, filming *The Far Pavilions*, in which JG had a slight contretemps with a camel. "Strange, smelly beasts, aren't they? Edith had occasion to remark that she always thought me the spitting image of one!" In 1986 I worked with him on a film of Simon Gray's *Quartermaine's Terms*, in which he was quite superb. We all stayed in a delightful hotel in the Cotswolds, which had the names of different flowers depicted on all the bedroom doors. Edward Fox's was Rose; mine (I presume to keep me in my place) was Weed, and John's was Daffodil.

There have been so many wonderful stories about him and his various gaffes, which would leap out spontaneously without a glimmer of malice, like the time he was at a Hollywood party surrounded by a number of keen admirers. On being asked whether he was enjoying his stay in Los Angeles he replied that he was, apart from some of the film personalities whom he found rather tedious. "I was cornered at dinner the other evening by that insufferable Fred MacMurray. Do any of you know him?" There was a slight pause. "Well, Sir John... I'm, er... I'm Fred MacMurray." "Really! I say, what a coincidence."

The last time I saw John was at the Garrick Club only a few months before he died. He was very frail and seriously in charge of a stick, and had come to view a collection of valuable porcelain figures of actors in their famous roles. He sat patiently in a chair listening as each piece was shown to him, Henry Irving as Faust, Laurence Olivier as Othello, Ralph Richardson as Falstaff etc. until Gielgud could restrain himself no more. "Yes, I'm sure they are all very lovely, but where's *me*!?"

Measure for Measure. John Gielgud. Stratford, 1950

James Roose-Evans

Director

Although in life John Gielgud was a great storyteller, on stage he was a great listener, and most especially in his final stage appearance in Hugh Whitemore's *The Best of Friends*, which I directed. He was always totally absorbed in what his fellow actors were saying and doing. It was this generosity which contributed so much to the production, and which was also so typical of Sir Sydney Cockerell, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, who assiduously cultivated his friends. Towards the end of the play Cockerell says, "I declare friendship to be the most precious thing in life. But it is like a plant that withers if it is not beautifully fostered and tended. It is only by constant thought, by visits, by little services and by abounding sympathy at all times that friends can be kept."

That Gielgud returned to the stage, having retired from it ten years previously, took everyone by surprise. He was very conscious that one of the reasons the run was sold out was that everyone sensed this would be his last performance on the stage, and he gained an especial amusement from the closing line of the play: "The Angel of Death seems quite to have forgotten me." He would pause and then add, with an insouciant twinkle, "On the other hand I might pop off tomorrow. Who knows!"

After the last matinee, and before the final performance, as he came off stage, he said to Ray McAnally, who played Bernard Shaw, "Tonight is my last night", meaning that he would not return to the stage. He had returned in triumph and that was enough. The audience that night sensed all this for, at the final curtain call, as Ray McAnally and Rosemary Harris (who played the Abbess of Stanbrook) deliberately stepped to one side, leaving Gielgud alone in the centre of the stage, the entire audience rose to its feet, from the stalls to the circle and above to the gallery, cheering, drumming the floor, pouring out its gratitude for this "most parfait and gentil knight", for his lifetime of work in the theatre. And it was not only the actor they were saluting but the man himself. Acting, as David Hare once observed, is a judgement of character in that we respond to the actor's inner qualities rather than to the trappings of technique. Michael Billington, referring to this in his review for *The Guardian*, added, "We were moved, not simply by the sight of a great actor returning to the stage at 83. Gielgud's own qualities of grace, charity, humour and pathos, touch us to the heart. When, at the end, as Cockerell he declares friendship to be the most precious thing in life, we go beyond the artifice of impersonation to touch something real and true. I believe this happens with all truly great actors in their last years; an essential nobility of spirit shines through the mask of characterisation."

We who worked with him on the production, from our producer Michael Redington, who had first conceived the idea of such a play, and commissioned it from Hugh Whitemore, to everyone involved, we knew that we should not look upon his like again.

Rosemary Harris

Actress

Sir John was one of the judges at the RADA Public Show of 1952. The RADA theatre had been bombed during the war, so we students got to perform that afternoon on the stage of the Apollo Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue. He gave me my first job in London as Sasha to his Ivanov in a radio version of the play. Two years later he was to direct *The Cherry Orchard* at the Haymarket Theatre and cast me as Anya, but to my huge disappointment fired me on the very first morning. A gentle and beautifully expressed letter followed, explaining his reason. It seemed he thought I was too mature for the part, but he took all the blame for casting me on himself, which relieved the pain. However, the whirligig of Time brings in some wonderful gifts. Little did I know then that I was to have the joy of being on the very same Public Show Apollo stage with him in Hugh Whitemore's lovely play *The Best of Friends* in 1988, thirty-six years later.

Sadly, it was his "Farewell to the theatre", and on the very last night, after he had received a rousing standing ovation that went on and on and on, the like of which the Apollo Theatre had never before, or I'm sure since, heard, he turned to me and said, "I hope next time we meet it'll be under happier circumstances."

We did indeed meet again, and the next time we worked together was in J B Priestley's play *Summer Day's Dream* for BBC TV. He would be driven to rehearsal every day from the country, as punctual as clockwork, in a primrose yellow Rolls Royce, immaculately dressed, smoking like a chimney, and of course during our lunch breaks loved joining us in the canteen for a really good gossip.

His ability to learn his lines was phenomenal. Long complicated speeches never seemed to faze him. He wrote to me while he was studying his lines for *The Best of Friends* and said, "Every morning I sit down at my desk, and a very beautiful desk it is too, and I learn three or four or five pages, then I have a very dry sherry, and then I have lunch."

The last time I saw him, Keith Baxter drove me down to his beautiful house in the country. We had a hilarious lunch. He was full of gossip and complaints about not working enough, and hoped that we would work together again soon. Alas, we never did.

Credits

There are a large number of people that we would like to thank for this evening, including the performers, the stage crew, the theatre management and staff, and the contributors to this souvenir programme. Everyone has given an enormous amount of time to prepare for tonight and to raise funds for the bursaries for young actors at RADA and for the new voice and verse programme for actors in Stratford-upon-Avon, and we would like to take this opportunity to say a huge 'thank you'!

Thank you to Thelma Holt and Bill Kenwright for their generosity towards this special evening, to Really Useful Theatres for their help and support, and for letting us use the Gielgud Theatre, to Clive Francis for his wonderful illustrations, to the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection for lending us the photographs of Sir John, and to John Good Holbrook for their huge support in printing the souvenir programme.

We hope that tonight will be the start of further fund-raising partnerships which will support the work of RADA, the RSC, the Shakespeare Guild and also the Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust.

The Gala Steering Group:

Jeremy Adams
John Andrews
Nick Barter
Stephen Browning
Philippa Harland
Joe Harmston
Thelma Holt
Maggie Mackay
John Miller

As Hamlet

John F Andrews

President of The Shakespeare Guild

Ten years ago, at an April 1994 reception in Washington's Folger Shakespeare Library, film and television star Tony Randall, NPR radio correspondent Susan Stamberg, and more than two hundred of their fellow theatre-lovers gathered for the unveiling of a new trophy. Created by sculptor John Safer, this gleaming jewel had been designed to perpetuate an influential actor's "praise" and preserve his "character with golden quill" (Sonnet 85).

The performer whose achievements were being extolled on that beautiful Sunday afternoon was the man whose legacy we salute in tonight's festivities. Noting that the set his son Ian had produced for *An Inspector Calls* had just earned the ultimate laurel in London's West End, news analyst Robert MacNeil observed that it was entirely "fitting that there be awards commemorating Laurence Olivier." He went on to emphasise, however, that it was "just as fitting that there be an award to honour his great contemporary John Gielgud. We cannot hear the great voices of the past, 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 the playwright "could not wish a more noble interpreter", Mr MacNeil concluded that "the Shakespeare Guild does honour to itself by devising this way of honouring Gielgud, now and long into the future."

In a letter he had written to be shared with the audience, Sir John said, "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 now over. 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."

A few months later those who had attended the Guild's Capitol Hill toast to Sir John were pleased to learn about an even more imposing gesture to mark his 90th birthday on Shaftesbury Avenue: a magnanimous decision by theatre owner Janet Holmes à Court to place Gielgud's name on a Globe in which so many of Sir John's triumphs had occurred in decades past.

We are delighted to bring *The Golden Quill* to this storied venue, and we are particularly pleased that among the participants in this evening's tribute to the heritage it embodies will be our 1999 recipient of the Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts, Dame Judi Dench. The Shakespeare Guild was privileged to laud her at Broadway's Barrymore Theatre, and one of the luminaries who sang her praises was the playwright who had crafted the vehicle in which she was appearing, Sir David Hare. He too is with us, and of those who christened the Gielgud Theatre five years earlier with a memorable *Hamlet*, we hope to welcome Sir Peter Hall, Michael Pennington and Sir Donald Sinden.

We are grateful for the opportunity to join RADA, the RSC, and producers Bill Kenwright and Thelma Holt for this special occasion, and as we do so we are keenly mindful, not only of such Gielgud laureates as Kenneth Branagh, Zoe Caldwell, Sir Derek Jacobi, Kevin Kline, Sir Ian McKellen and Lynn Redgrave, but of all the other talents who have contributed so generously to this and to the galas that preceded it in settings such as Lincoln Center, Middle Temple Hall and Manhattan's National Arts Club.

For further information on The Shakespeare Guild, please contact Stephen Browning 020 8748 0400.

The Royal Shakespeare Company

The Royal Shakespeare Company is one of the world's best-known theatre ensembles and is widely regarded as one of the most important interpreters of Shakespeare and other dramatists. Today the RSC is at the leading edge of classical theatre, with an international reputation for artistic excellence, accessibility and high-quality live performance.

Our aim is to create outstanding theatre relevant to our times through the work of Shakespeare, other Renaissance dramatists, international and contemporary writers.

We perform throughout the year at our home in Stratford-upon-Avon and that work is complemented by a presence in other areas of the UK. We play regularly in London and at an annual residency in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and many of our productions visit major regional theatres around Britain. In addition, our mobile auditorium tour sets up in community centres, sports halls and schools in areas throughout the UK with little access to professional theatre.

While the UK is the home of our Company, our audiences are global. We regularly play to theatre-goers in other parts of Europe, across the United States, the Americas, Asia and Australasia, and we are proud of our relationships with partnering organisations throughout the world.

The RSC is at heart an ensemble Company and the continuation of this great tradition informs the work of all members of the Company. Everyone in the company – from directors, actors and writers, to production, administrative, technical and workshop staff – collaborates in the creation of the RSC's distinctive and unmistakable approach to theatre.

The RSC Artists' Development Programme

Beginning in 2004/05 the Royal Shakespeare Company is aiming to develop a new cohesive training and development programme that will provide skills development opportunities across the theatre disciplines.

Building on our public subsidy with private support, we want to be able to offer new opportunities to actors, directors, designers, stage managers and our costume, set and prop makers.

The RSC Artists' Development Programme will extend the classical training of our acting companies through longer rehearsal periods, understudy performance and closer attention to the individual, especially younger artists at the start of their careers. The programme will reinforce and extend our training provision with additional voice, verse, movement and fight training and provide new study opportunities. The programme will also include training and development opportunities in the vital supporting production departments where our sets, props and costumes are designed and made.

The RSC will use its share of the proceeds from tonight's event to support the establishment of this programme. We hope that you agree with our priorities; thank you for your support.

Michael Boyd

Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust

In *Summer's Lease*

The Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust is a UK registered charity which was established by Sir John in 1988. Sir John, through this Charitable Trust, supported many causes and charities which were dear to him.

The present trustees are Lord Attenborough, Janet Suzman, Watcyn Lewis and Ian Bradshaw.

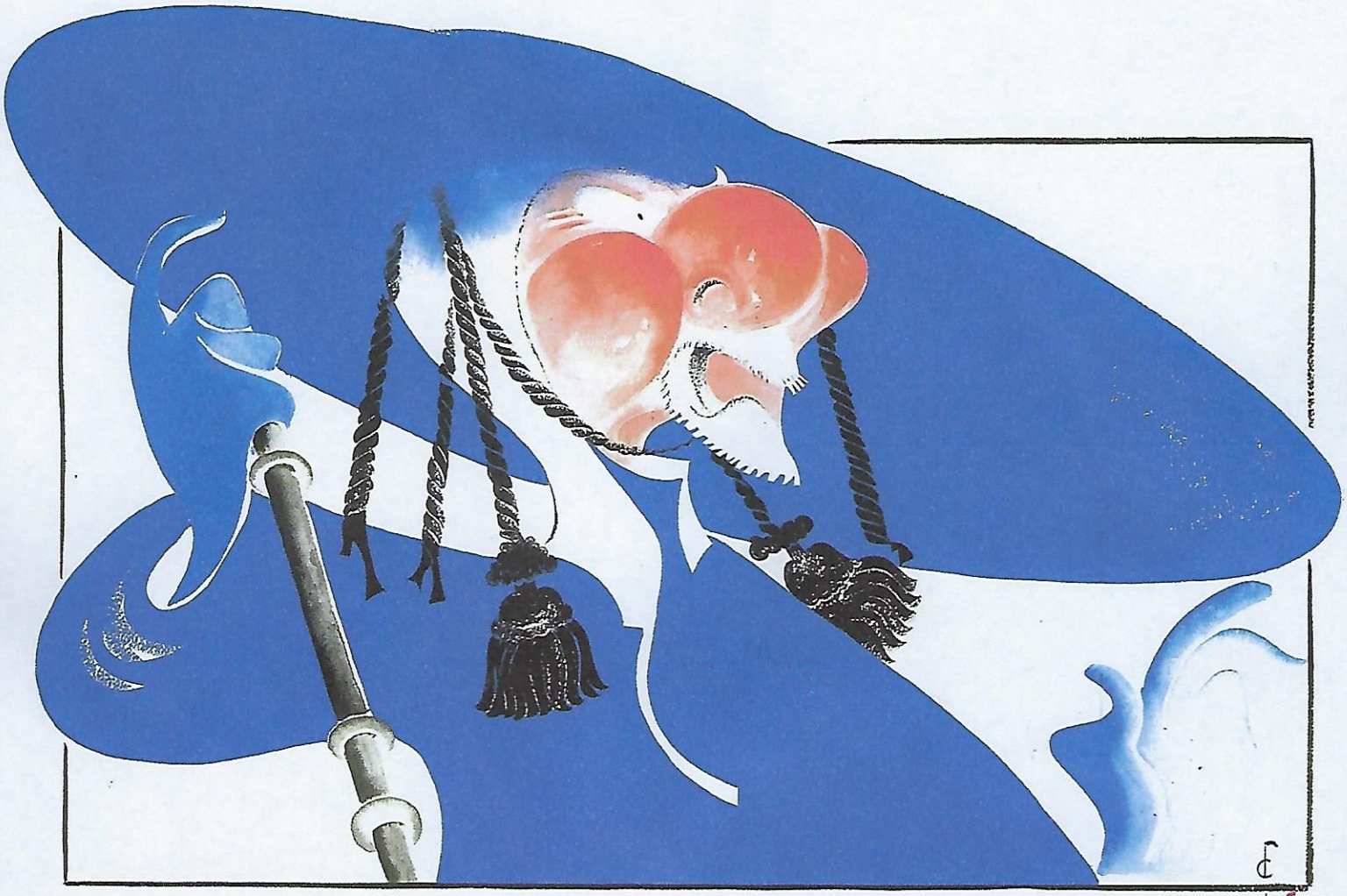
The principal activity the Charitable Trust now undertakes is providing bursaries for third year drama students who have been selected by their respective school or college on the basis of financial hardship and academic achievement.

Sir John, throughout his life, actively supported and encouraged young actors to develop their professional skills, and the trustees are proud to continue this tradition in Sir John's name and in memory of him.

If anyone would like further information about the Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust or wish to make a donation to it, they should write to:

Ian Bradshaw
c/o Goodman Derrick, solicitors,
90 Fetter Lane,
London EC4A 1PT

The Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust is a registered charity.
Charity Registration No: 800045.



The John Gielgud Centenary Gala

Cast List

Alan Bennett

Judi Dench

Clive Francis

Peter Hall

David Hare

Rosemary Harris

Martin Jarvis

Barbara Jefford

Barbara Leigh-Hunt

Ian McKellen

Michael Pennington

Ronald Pickup

Ian Richardson

Paul Scofield

Donald Sinden

and from RADA: Phil Cheadle, Georgina Rich, Daniel Rigby, Michelle Terry and Kevin Trainor.

The RADA choir: Kezia Burrows, Tom Davey, David Dawson, Msimisi Dlamini, Jamie Doyle, Joe Elwood, Ruth Everett, Joel Fry, Amanda Hale, Tom Hiddleston, Leandra Lawrence, Jeremy Legat, Elizabeth Nestor, Olufunlola Olufunwa, Georgina Rich, Charlie Walker-Wise, Lizzie Winkler, and Andrea Wisborough.
Musical Director and Arranger: Andrew Charity.

Hosted by Ned Sherrin

Directed by Joe Harmston

Devised and produced by John Miller

The plays featured in tonight's performance will include *A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Forty Years On, Henry V, Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Richard II, Romeo and Juliet, The Best of Friends, The Importance of Being Earnest, The Lady's Not For Burning* and *The Tempest.*

There will be one interval of 15 minutes

Production Credits

Set Designed by	Stephen Brimson Lewis
Lighting Designed by	Paul Pyant
Company Stage Manager	Maggie Mackay
Deputy Stage Manager	Jo Keating
Assistant Stage Manager	Sarah Lee
Sound Operator	Hannah Reymes-Coles
Lighting Programmer	Alex Fox
Wardrobe	Gordon Hughes
Press	Philippa Harland (RSC Press Office 0207 845 0512)

with the assistance of Nicola Chisholm and Stephen Dann from RADA.

There are a large number of people that we would like to thank for this evening, including the performers, the stage crew, the theatre management and staff, the students from RADA, and the contributors to the souvenir programme. Everyone has given an enormous amount of time to prepare for tonight and to raise funds for bursaries for young actors at RADA and for the new Artists' Development Programme at the RSC, and we would like to take this opportunity to say a huge 'thank you'!

We are immensely grateful to Thelma Holt and Bill Kenwright for their generosity towards this special evening, to Really Useful Theatres for their help and support in letting us use the Gielgud Theatre, to Clive Francis for his wonderful illustrations, to the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection for lending us the photographs of Sir John, and to John Good Holbrook for their help in printing the souvenir programme. We are also grateful to the Garrick Club, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Theatre, and the Theatre Museum for hosting ancillary activities in connection with this event, and to Jonathan Croall, Malcolm Jones, Richard Mangan, Geoffrey Marsh, and others for their kind assistance with these activities.

We hope that tonight's celebrations will initiate further partnerships in support of the work of RADA, the RSC, The Shakespeare Guild and the Sir John Gielgud Charitable Trust.

The Steering Group for the Centenary Gala

Jeremy Adams
John Andrews
Nick Barter
Stephen Browning
Philippa Harland
Joe Harmston
Thelma Holt
Maggie Mackay
John Miller