Sir John Gielgud
April 14, 1904 - May 21, 2000

On a quiet late-spring Sunday, within the stately surroundings of his Buckinghamshire pavilion near Aylesbury, Sir John Gielgud made his final exit from a stage he'd graced, and not infrequently dominated, for more than three quarters of a century.

According to *The Guardian*, initial reactions to the 96-year-old actor's passing were even "more profound than for his great contemporary and rival Lord Olivier's death eleven years ago." When asked to comment on the triumvirate who'd presided over the growth and development of modern English theatre, Gielgud's "former agent Laurence Evans, who'd also represented Olivier and Sir Ralph Richardson, said: 'Of the three, Sir John was really the greatest actor.'" But director Peter Brook refused to be drawn into a debate that has distracted partisans of the three knights for decades. He insisted that "comparisons 'could not matter less. [Sir John's] one aim was to reach the highest level of quality. And the word went very deep. It was in his blood. This very endearing, lovable man touched everyone by this purity in him, which was reflected in his work.'"

Another eminent director, Sir Peter Hall, likened Gielgud to "mercury – quicksilver in his wit, always ahead of the audience, always reassessing his performance." Meanwhile, recalling Sir John in a eulogy for the *Sunday Times*, actor Paul Scofield said that Gielgud's "gifts have become a legend to anyone connected with the arts anywhere in the world. For the vast majority of actors and actresses, since the late 1930s, he has been the consummate epitome of style in the theatre."

Director Sir Richard Eyre declared Gielgud "the preeminent classical English actor of the 20th century. He was a man of great warmth, wit, and generosity." And Laurence Olivier's widow, actress Joan Plowright, conveyed the sentiments of thousands when she observed that "it feels like the end of an era. We will all remember him with love, admiration, and gratitude."

As a member of the profession he did so much to advance, Arthur John Gielgud could be said to have entered the world with an enviable collection of thespian genes. His father, Frank Gielgud, was a London stockbroker whose mother had enjoyed a successful theatre career in Lithuania and whose Polish grandmother had been a highly regarded Shakespearean actress. From an early age Jack, as Gielgud was known to his parents and to the three siblings with whom he shared a comfortable Kensington childhood, was highly conscious of his Slavic side. In retrospect this portion of his legacy may account for the fact that several of his triumphs would be in roles by Chekhov, a dramatist Gielgud helped introduce to English-speaking audiences through performances as Trofimov and Gaev in *The Cherry Orchard* (1925, 1961), Konstantin and Trigorin in *The Seagull* (1925, 1936), Tuzenbach and Vershinin in *Three Sisters* (1926, 1938), and the title character in *Ivanov* (1966).

But of course it was the heritage Sir John derived from his mother, Kate Terry Lewis, that has usually captured biographers' attention. Mrs. Gielgud was the daughter of an actress, also called Kate, and the niece of two other theatre professionals, a popular actor named Fred Terry and the celebrated actress Ellen Terry. The free-spirited Ellen was a full-fledged luminary in her own right, but it would prove fitting that she'd done her most ambitious work, and achieved her lasting fame, as the leading lady of Sir Henry Irving, the first actor to be honored with a British knighthood. Along the way she'd also given birth to Gordon Craig, a gifted director and stage designer.

In light of this background, it comes as no surprise that a teen-aged Gielgud made his debut at the legendary Old Vic in 1921 as the English Herald in *Henry V*. A graduate of the prestigious Westminster School and of Lady Benson's private Dramatic Academy, he then enrolled with a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, where he flourished until he concluded that he was ready to get on with his career and joined the Oxford Playhouse Company in 1924. Within four years he was back in London, and commanding marquee status for the first time, when he took the starring role in *Holding Out the Apple* at the Globe Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue, a venue that was destined to be renamed the Gielgud a few months after Sir John turned 90 in 1994.

In 1929, shunning opportunities for more lucrative employment as a matinee idol in the West End, Gielgud returned to the Old Vic as part of the remarkable ensemble he'd soon be anchoring under the auspices of producer Lilian Baylis. Over "the next nineteen months," according to Nicholas de Jongh of *The Guardian*, a 25-year-old virtuoso "took on more Shakespeare leads [a dozen] than any subsequent actor has attempted in twice the time. He was all ages and all types – Romeo and Lear, Orlando and Prospero, Antony and Benedick. One of these roles, his Richard II – 'A tall willowy figure in black velvet . . . the pale agonised face set beneath a glittering crown' – was the making of him."

Over the decades to come Gielgud would return to this ineffectual but eloquent monarch several times – in 1936, 1937, 1952, and 1953 – for renderings that were each considered to be, in their varying ways, definitive. Eventually, in 1979, when the BBC produced a television version of *Richard II* with a young Derek Jacobi as the title figure, Sir John had a chance to put his indelible stamp on another key role, John of Gaunt. As he departed from the set after completing the work's opening scenes, he bestowed his copy of the shooting script on the production's rising star. With characteristic magnanimity, its inscription read, "To a worthy successor in a wonderful part."

It was during his 1929-31 seasons at the Old Vic that Gielgud presented the first of his more than 500 renderings of the Prince of Denmark. Taking his measure of Gielgud's early approaches to what is widely viewed as the most demanding challenge in the entire dramatic repertory, a formidable critic, James Agate, called his Hamlet "a noble conception. It has been thought out in the study and is lived upon the stage, with the result that you feel these things are actually happening to Hamlet for the

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Sir John Gielgud

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first time and that he is here and now creating words to express new-felt emotion." Agate went on to commend Gielgud's portrayal of the melancholy Dane as "the high-water mark of English Shakespearean acting in our time." Ten years later, when a 35-year-old Gielgud took the role to Elsinore in 1939, another reviewer declared that "Never has English sounded more beautiful from the human mouth." The *Times* of London may well have been recalling this statement when the author of its obituary for Sir John proclaimed that "If marble could speak, it would have sounded like Gielgud."

According to Charles Spencer, theatre critic for *The Daily Telegraph*, many have attempted to come up with apt similes for what Alec McCowen labeled "the best voice of the century." Olivier called it "the voice that wooed the world." But "Sir Alec Guinness's description is surely the most beautiful and accurate: 'A superb tenor voice, like a silver trumpet muffled in silk'."

Sir John himself could be quite scathing about the verbal music with which his persona became synonymous, and in a recent appreciation of Gielgud for *The New York Times* critic Benedict Nightingale recalls that he once "remarked in his self-deprecating way that from the very start he 'spoke well but rather too well and fell in love with my own voice.'" In all likelihood as Sir John uttered these words he was acknowledging the appropriateness of a notorious quip by Kenneth Tynan, who asserted that Gielgud's solo evening devoted to the *Ages of Man* – an anthology with which Sir John toured several countries on different occasions between 1957 and 1967 – provided a continual reminder that he was "the finest actor on earth from the neck up."

Tynan was alluding, of course, to what Gielgud knew himself to lack: the athleticism and aggressive masculinity that could render Olivier so charismatic a presence in roles – such as Coriolanus, Macbeth, Othello, and Richard III – to which Gielgud's slender physique and refined temperament were not naturally suited. This distinction had become evident to a young Peggy Ashcroft when she'd played Juliet to the Romeos of both actors in 1935 during an experimental production, directed by Gielgud, in which he and Olivier alternated between Romeo and Mercutio on successive evenings. Dame Peggy agreed with most critics in awarding the palm to Gielgud's Mercutio, but for the role of Romeo she preferred Olivier's earthy passion to his elder's poetic polish.

For a critic like Tynan, to whom nothing mattered so much as being *au courant*, the Gielgud of the late '50s and early '60s was beginning to look and sound like something of a relic, indulging in a diversionary retreat to the safe, treasured past while Olivier and many of Sir John's younger contemporaries were embracing the hard-edged drama that emerging playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and John Osborne were bringing to receptive audiences at the Royal Court and other *avant-garde* theatres. In due course Sir John demonstrated that he was more than capable of the kind of adaptation his detractors were implicitly demanding of him. And in a series of what must have seemed like terrifying risks, he subjected his skills to the tutelage of directors like Lindsay Anderson, Peter Brook, Patrick Garland, and Peter Hall. In the process he reinvented himself as an astonishingly versatile character actor in vehicles such as Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On* (1968), David Storey's *Home* (1970), Charles Wood's *Veterans* (1972), Edward Bond's *Bingo* (1974), and Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* (1975-77).

At the same time, Gielgud found himself increasingly in demand for film and television roles. His first movie had been a 1924 silent picture, *Who is the Man?* But he'd also brought his talents to such screen classics as Alfred Hitchcock's *The Secret Agent* (1936), Joseph Mankiewicz and John Houseman's *Julius Caesar* (1953), Laurence Olivier's *Richard III* (1955), and, perhaps most memorably, Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (1966). In 1977 he played an embittered author in what many regard as his finest film, Alain Resnais's *Providence.* And in 1981 – in the aftermath of an embarrassing appearance in Bob Guccione's orgiastic *Caligula* in 1979 – he endeared himself to a new generation of admirers as the fastidious valet Hobson in *Arthur*, a tour de force that garnered him an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. He went on to small but perfectly nuanced parts in films such as *Plenty* (1984), *The Shooting Party* (1984), and *Shine* (1996), not to mention the bizarre ventriloquist-like magus he became as the only speaking character in Peter Greenaway's phantasmagoric *Prospero's Books* (1990). In the interim Sir John was earning plaudits for television performances in such features as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and *War and Remembrance* (1986).

In his *New York Times* obituary for Sir John, Mel Gussow quotes Sir Alec Guinness' remark that "Gielgud did more to liberate the English theatre from the fustian attitudes of the '20s and early '30s than any other man and paved the way for what is best in London today." A similar refrain is to be heard in the eulogy by Michael Billington in *The Guardian.* "Everyone acknowledges John Gielgud was a great actor. But his contribution to modern British theatre has been seriously underrated. As a producer he was a radical visionary who, long before the era of subsidy, saw the need for semi-permanent classical companies."

Billington argues that "Gielgud's greatest legacy was his now largely forgotten work as an actor-manager in the 1930s and 1940s. At a time when West End theatre was relentlessly frivolous and ephemeral, Gielgud had the vision and foresight to create classical companies. At the New Theatre in 1935, where he and Olivier famously alternated as Romeo and Mercutio, at the Queen's Theatre in 1937-8 and at the Haymarket in 1944, he laid the foundations for post-war British theatre." By doing so he "erected a signpost to the future: one that led to the founding of the RSC and the National Theatre. As 'Percy' Harris, part of the Motley design team who herself died only a week ago, once told me: 'I think he singlehandedly 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.'"

My own experience of that disarming modesty occurred for the first time in a letter that accompanied the manuscript I received from Sir John in November of 1983, after he had generously consented to do an article on "Shakespeare and the Modern Actor" for *William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence* (Scribners, 1985). He began by apologizing for several insertions, "which I don't quite know how to fit in," and went on to say, "Anyhow here it all is for you to piece together if you can, and if you can decipher my wretchedly minute handwriting!" At the bottom of the page, below his signature, was a tiny postscript: "I am so sorry I can't type."

During the next decade Sir John was kind enough to supply elegant forewords to two plays, *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*, in the editions that now appear in a paperback collection known as *The Everyman Shakespeare*. Then in November of 1993, to my immense delight, he agreed to allow The Shakespeare Guild to establish a new award in his name. A few months later, during an April 1994 reception at the Folger Shakespeare Library to mark Sir John's 90th birthday and unveil the gleaming John Safer trophy that would be presented annually to recipients of *The Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts*, NPR correspondent Susan Stamberg read a message he'd prepared for the occasion:

Dear Mr. Andrews,

> I need hardly say how gratified and flattered I am to know that I am so happily remembered by so many American friends. . . . Please give my love and greetings to all who are at the celebration you are so kindly sponsoring. . . . My times in America have brought me so many cherished memories, and I always feel it is my second country.
>
> John Gielgud

During the years of his remarkable life that remained, Sir John could always be counted upon for a warm congratulatory greeting to recipients of *The Golden Quill*. And they, in turn, would each respond with reminiscences about the incomparable artist who had meant so much to them at crucial points in their careers. Unfortunately, space does not permit me to quote from all of the ceremonies that were blessed with these touching

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exchanges, so I'll conclude with the most recent one, a gathering that took place on January 16th at Middle Temple Hall in London.

After the Guild's fifth Gielgud honoree, Kenneth Branagh, had received accolades from a number of distinguished colleagues, among them the four performers who'd preceded him as Gielgud laureates – Sir Ian McKellen (1996), Sir Derek Jacobi (1997), Miss Zoe Caldwell (1998), and Dame Judi Dench (1999) – actor Keith Baxter, who had played Prince Hal in the Orson Welles film that had featured Sir John as King Henry IV, talked about a telephone conversation he'd had with Gielgud the previous evening. He then read the following words:

> I first played the part of Hamlet in 1930, and again in 1934 when I was to direct it. So I became very familiar with the play as a result of seven productions. I was not surprised at all to learn that Kenneth Branagh was setting out to do just what I had done. I know how pleasant it is to work with him, having taken some other small parts in some other of his Shakespearean films. And I'm not surprised that he managed to marshal so many other splendid players and to attack so boldly. He is a man of prodigious talent. I do congratulate him on his success.
>
> John Gielgud

At the end of the program, Mr. Branagh replied with a lovely acceptance speech in which he singled out the trophy's namesake as "a shining example of the classical tradition, a model of humility and generosity, and a blazing talent whose encouragement to this young actor was beyond the call of duty." A few months later, when he learned of Gielgud's death, Branagh went on to say that "His unique and effortless command of poetry made Shakespeare vivid, passionate, and real for millions of people. In person he was unfailingly kind and an inspiring example to all who followed."

John F. Andrews
President of The Shakespeare Guild

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Brode's *Shakespeare*

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responsibility for the quality of what it offers to the public for sale, and it is Oxford that spectacularly failed to realize that Douglas Brode is incompetent and that his book perpetrates literally scores of errors. The level of editorial failure in this case is appalling, and it is not just that Oxford should have ascertained, and didn't, that Brode was simply unqualified to discuss his topic. Beyond this, there certainly should have been someone at Oxford who realized that Brode's "paeon" (13, 86) is a poetic foot, not a "paean," a song of praise, and that when he said that "television as a storytelling form was complimentary of [sic], rather than similar to, movies" (73-74), he meant "complementary." There should have been someone at Oxford whose job, to borrow from Brode himself, was "reigning him in" (113).

Oxford's release of Brode's book corresponds very interestingly with the release by Cambridge University Press of Kenneth S. Rothwell's *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, which updates and presents in discursive critical form much of the information in the Rothwell-Melzer bibliography. The Rothwell *History* will be reviewed in a future issue of *The Shakespeare Newsletter;* for the moment, it is enough to recognize that it is a serious contribution to the study of Shakespeare on film. What Brode and Oxford have produced to rival it is a disgrace—unprofessional, shoddily made, incompetent, and so seriously unreliable that a responsible publisher cannot in good conscience offer it to the buying public. Oxford has done its own reputation a considerable injury; it has in fact done Douglas Brode a disservice by publishing so inept a work, and it has insulted and misled the public by peddling substandard goods. What Oxford should do at this time is to say I'm sorry; I take it back. Literally. [TAP]

Shakespeare Quiz

David Bruce

To take this not very serious quiz, simply place the appropriate number next to the name.

Sir John Gielgud	James J. Davis
Laurence Olivier	Sydney Smith
Herbert Beerbohm Tree	Orson Welles
Henry Irving	George Lyman Kittredge
Joe E. Brown	John Chapman

1. This famous actor was to appear in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII.* During rehearsal, he inspected the actresses playing the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, then requested, "Ladies, just a little more virginity, if you please."

2. This man was Secretary of Labor in the 20th Century. Previous to going into politics, he worked in an opera house, where he appeared in several Shakespeare plays, including *Richard III.* In the scene in which Richard III says, "A horse, a horse; my kingdom for a horse," he and the other young actors were battling mightily on stage, with many shouts of "Hey! Hey!" A man from the audience shouted, "Don't order so much hay, boys, until you see whether he gets the horse or not!"

3. This famous actor once saw a performance of Richard Burton in *Hamlet*, after which Mr. Burton said he was experiencing a cold. This actor replied that he would see the play again "when you're better — in health I mean, of course."

4. Early in his career, this famous actor was having trouble learning the part of Iago, so Ralph Richardson told him to give up sex for a few days. When this actor asked him why, he replied, "Phosphates in the brain. You shot all yours, and it's phosphates that retain the memory." This actor gave up sex, and in four days had learned the part.

5. In England, actors occasionally perform Shakespeare at matinees for schoolchildren — something many actors loathe. After performing in *Othello* at a school's matinee, this famous actor (and amateur magician) was applauded so heartily that he had to say a few words to the audience. Standing on stage, he said, "I would just like to mention Robert Houdin, who in the eighteenth century invented the vanishing bird-cage trick and the theatre matinee — may he rot and perish. Good afternoon."

6. This man was a vaudeville actor for many years, but he played in a star-studded movie version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a performance for which the movie studio did not want to pay him in money, but instead give him a car. His agent asked, "What would my commission be, a bicycle?"

7. This famous actor and leader of acting troupe wanted always to be the leading attraction. Walter Bentley once made a hit as Clarence in *Richard III*, which starred this actor. This upset the actor, who immediately called a rehearsal, then shredded Mr. Bentley's role by cutting many of the lines of Clarence.

8. Students frequently begin preparing to leave the classroom before the bell for dismissal actually sounds. This habit annoyed this Shakespeare scholar at Harvard, who once told his students, "Just a minute, gentlemen. I still have a few pearls to cast."

9. This drama critic for the New York *Daily News* loved Shakespeare. He once started to attend a new production of *Henry V* at the Shakespeare Theater at Stratford, Connecticut, but he was surprised to see gymnasts performing on stage. Thinking that he was early for the play, he asked an usher what was being performed on stage, and he was again surprised when the usher told him that the performance was *Henry V* and that it opened with gymnasts. The drama critic replied, "The hell it does," then left the theater.

10. A woman asked this clergyman for a motto for her dog. Because he had never liked dogs, he suggested, "Out damned Spot!"

Watch for answers in the next issue!

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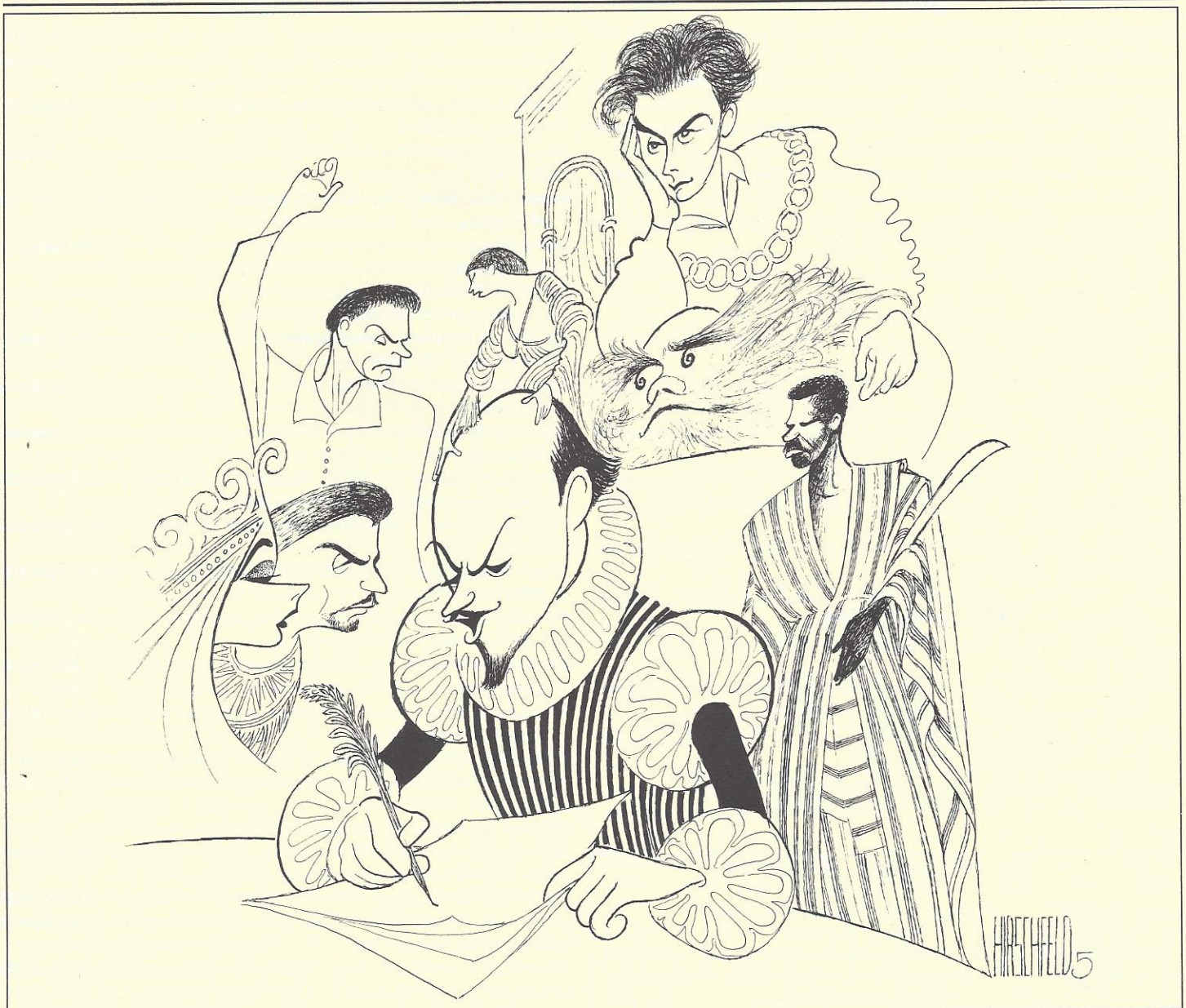
50:1 No. 244 "Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me. . ." Spring 2000



Shakespeare and His Interpreters

Frank Skillern

I have long had a passion for the theater, with special interest in musical theater and Shakespeare. For many years, I have loved the caricatures of Al Hirschfeld and have collected many of them. Visiting the Hirschfeld gallery one day and looking at the index of all his work, I was astounded to find that he had done not one caricature with Shakespeare as the central focus. The closest things were drawings of actors in New York productions of Shakespeare's plays, on very rare occasions with a small figure of Shakespeare in the background (see, for example, *SNL*, Fall 1998). There was also one drawing of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Molière. But I wanted Shakespeare by himself!

An idea was born - a drawing of Shakespeare surrounded by the most famous actors and actresses of the modern theater. So I approached Herschfeld's agent, Margo Feiden, with the proposal that I supply pictures of the scenes I loved, to be developed around the figure of Shakespeare. She said that she thought he would do it, but he would have the exclusive right to place the characters wherever he wanted in the drawing. I said OK, and you see the result. The actors and actresses are (clockwise from the top left): Laurence Olivier as Henry V (from the film); Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet; John Gielgud as Hamlet; Ralph Richardson as Falstaff; Olivier as Othello; and Olivier and Vivien Leigh as Antony and Cleopatra (yes, I am partial to British actors in Shakespeare). I am also delighted with this result and get continuing enjoyment as I view it each day.

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