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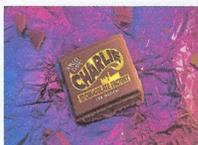
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## John Gielgud: Commemorating one of Britain's great men of the theatre

[ARCHIVE](#) APR 11, 2022 BY [STANLEY WELLS](#)

This month, a plaque will be unveiled in Westminster Abbey to honour John Gielgud. Stanley Wells looks back at the life and work of the great actor – from performing Shakespeare at school, to a monumental stage career and late avant-garde work on film

Soon after Laurence Olivier died in 1989, a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey. Attended by more than 2,000 people, it was an overtly theatrical occasion. Olivier's great contemporary, John Gielgud, was one of the readers and commented in private that it should have been held at Drury Lane. A couple of years later, Olivier's ashes were interred in Poets' Corner and Gielgud unveiled his memorial stone.

Gielgud's own obsequies, in 2000, were, at his request, more modest. He was privately cremated and his ashes given to friends and scattered in his garden. Now, at last, he is to be honoured with the installation in the Abbey of a floor plaque bearing his name.

Designed by the sculptor Wayne Hart it will be unveiled on April 26 – the date, as it happens, of Shakespeare’s baptism in 1564.

The event has been organised on the initiative of the Shakespeare Guild – a US-based organisation founded in 1987 by the scholar John F Andrews – in collaboration with Paul Edmondson, head of research of the UK’s Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

In 1994, the Guild established the John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts and over the years it has recognised numerous men and women of the theatre on both sides of the Atlantic. They include Richard Eyre, David Hare and Ian McKellen, all of whom are expected to take part in the ceremony this month. Among those reading and paying tribute will be Janet Suzman and Judi Dench, who has happy memories of acting with Gielgud in *The Cherry Orchard* at Stratford in 1961.

It is a belated honour for one of the greatest and most versatile men of the theatre of the 20th century. A member – on his mother’s side – of the Terry family, which dominated the English stage for half a century before he was born, Gielgud had theatre in his blood.

An avid playgoer from his early years, he acted leading roles in Shakespeare when he was still at school. Though he had early ambitions to become a stage designer, he took acting lessons from a well-known teacher, Rosina Filippi, who stressed the importance of good speaking.



John Gielgud in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* at London's Aldwych Theatre in 1961. Photo: Houston Rogers

Gielgud was, by nature, fastidious of appearance and gesture, though possessed of exceptional mental energy. One of his early teachers identified a weakness – “You walk,” she said, “exactly like a cat with rickets.” His legs were an abiding source of embarrassment to him: the theatre critic Ivor Brown was to complain that he was “scant of virility” and that he “has the most meaningless legs imaginable”.

On the other hand he was good-looking and was blessed with the famously beautiful ‘Terry voice’. He was highly intelligent and cultured, intensely and creatively self-critical, willing to experiment, and had exceptional powers of imaginative identification with the wide range of characters he played on stage and film throughout a remarkably long career.

Gielgud was essentially a lyrical actor, famous especially for beauty and intelligence of speech. In Shakespeare, he excelled in primarily poetic roles such as Romeo, Richard II, Oberon, Prospero and, above all, Hamlet. His wit and elegance of manner served him well as Benedick and – outside of Shakespeare – in Restoration comedy, in plays by Noël Coward and Christopher Fry, and as an exquisitely stylish Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It is impossible to imagine him in some of the roles, such as Richard III, Titus Andronicus and Coriolanus, in which Olivier excelled, and his *Othello*, directed at Stratford by Franco Zeffirelli, was a disaster. On the other hand, he had the imagination to convey a passionate interiority that made him great as Hamlet, Leontes, King Lear and (on stage at Stratford-upon-Avon as well as in Joseph Mankiewicz’s film) as Cassius in *Julius Caesar*. Intensely, even neurotically self-critical, in later life he developed a capacity to reinvent himself, acting with great success in prose plays by [David Storey](#), [Harold Pinter](#) and Alan Bennett.

Being gay at a time when it was still criminalised, Gielgud survived a personal crisis in 1953, a few months after receiving his knighthood, when he was prosecuted for soliciting a man who turned out to be a plain-clothes police officer. He feared that his career was at an end but survived as the result of moral support from fellow actors valiantly led by Sybil Thorndike.

Gielgud was both consciously witty and often notoriously tactless. Many anecdotes showing him opening his mouth only to put his foot in it are collected by his biographer Jonathan Croall in *Gielgoodies! The Wit and Wisdom (& Gaffes) of John Gielgud* in 2012.

The commemoration in Westminster Abbey, touchingly close to the school where Gielgud was educated, worthily celebrates one of the greatest men of the British theatre.