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Sir John Gielgud: A Life in Letters

By John Gielgud

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Here is a remarkable autobiography of one of the greatest actors of the twentieth century, seen through his frank, mesmerizing, and intimate letters. Sir John Gielgud, best known to audiences for his Academy Award-winning turn in the hit comedy *Arthur*, as well as starring roles in *Gandhi* and other major movies, was an incomparable actor whose career on stage and screen spanned eight decades, from his 1921 London stage debut to more recent smash films like *Shine* and *Elizabeth*. John Gielgud wrote letters almost every day of his adult life, whether at home in England or abroad. From thousands of letters, beginning with those to his mother when Gielgud was an aspiring but still unknown actor, the editor has chosen these two hundred gems.

Through them we meet a man of keen mind and astute observation, who met hundreds of luminaries of his day. Gielgud candidly assesses his contemporaries and clearly delights in gossip. He had a lifetime reputation for speaking his mind, and here for the first time are his love letters, which were never available to his biographer, and through his eyes, hundreds of luminaries—Marlon Brando, Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, and Sir Laurence Olivier—in “a book for anyone who cares about the art of theater” (*Show Business*).

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Though Gielgud (1904–2000) remains best known, especially to American audiences, for his Academy Award–winning performance as the butler in *Arthur*, his theatrical career in England and the U.S. spanned eight decades—and if the voluminous correspondence reproduced here is any indication, he wrote to family and friends nearly every day of that career. Mangan, a British theater historian, arranges the letters chronologically, and eschews explanatory text save for minimal bits of biographical data. As with any actor, there are roles that never materialized (e.g., he mentions almost getting Rex Harrison's part in the Broadway production of *My Fair Lady* and turning down the lead in *Bridge on the River Kwai*) and gossip about colleagues (e.g., from the set of *Julius Caesar*, he reports Marlon Brando "seems quite unaware of anything except the development of his own evident talents"). Though sometimes catty about fellow actors, like the "revolting boy who plays Rosencrantz abominably" in a 1930s production of *Hamlet*, Gielgud is equally hard on himself, turning down one movie part by confessing to George Bernard Shaw that he fears performing badly on film. (He eventually beat the fear, though he never entirely warmed to the medium.) The real treasures here, however, are the letters to male lovers, unavailable to previous biographers, which reveal Gielgud's ease with expressing both his sexuality and his affections. This thick volume may overload casual film buffs, but Gielgud's fans will delight in its abundant riches. 16 pages of b&w photos and eight line drawings not seen by PW.

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About the Author

Sir John Gielgud was one of the twentieth century's finest actors of stage and screen and one of the very few to win an Oscar, Tony, Grammy, and Emmy. He died in 2000.

Richard Mangan is an administrator of the Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson Theatre Collection in Greenwich, England. He also edited John Gielgud's *Notes from the Gods*. He lives in England.

From The Washington Post

John Gielgud -- born in 1904, died in 2000 -- was one of the greatest actors of the century that his life almost spanned. He was noted chiefly for his performances in just about all of the major Shakespearean roles, some of which he took on as many as three or four times -- most famously and influentially, he did "Hamlet" five times -- as well as parts created by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, George Bernard Shaw, Anton Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Pinero, Noel Coward and Christopher Fry. For all of this he was fêted, laureled and knighted. He stood with his contemporaries Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson at the very zenith of 20th-century theater.

There is a substantial body of his work available on film and tape, for which his admirers and students of acting must be grateful, but only bits and pieces of it are from the classic repertoire -- and those are mostly quite hard to find. Instead he is best known now for two supporting roles in which his genius for comedy was exploited to the full: Edward Ryder, the elderly father of the protagonist in the television series "Brideshead Revisited," and Hobson, the valet in the movie "Arthur." He played a great many other minor parts in movies, some of them almost indescribably bad -- he did most of them purely for the money -- but these two are the ones for which he is remembered, and with good reason.

More than three decades ago, writing to a friend about a book of theater reminiscences he was working on,

Gielgud wryly noted: "It may amuse you as it is nostalgic for our generation, though I don't suppose it will mean anything to anyone under 40." No doubt he would have said much the same about Sir John Gielgud: A Life in Letters, which gathers material from more than eight decades of his correspondence. To my own taste it is absolutely wonderful stuff, but the reader who is not old enough to remember the people and the plays that fill its pages may be baffled at least as much as entertained.

This is understandable, but it certainly is unfortunate, for like other prominent British actors of his generation -- Olivier and Alec Guinness come immediately to mind -- Gielgud was almost as distinguished a writer as he was a performer. His four books about acting generally and his own career specifically -- Early Stages, Stage Directions, Distinguished Company and An Actor and His Time -- are almost effortlessly evocative of the long time and the many places in which he lived. But as Richard Mangan notes in his brief introduction, in those books "his own inherent modesty, privacy and possibly respect for the libel laws may have had an inhibiting effect." Here, by contrast, "are his views of himself, friends and foes, plays and places given wittily, perceptively, and sometimes painfully."

This is true, though the reader in search of scandal will mostly come up empty. Gielgud had strong opinions and was given in his private life to unconventional behavior -- he was an unapologetic and by his own testimony promiscuous homosexual at a time when closet doors were still closed -- but he was also a gentleman. In private as in public he mostly displayed, in Mangan's description, "the qualities that characterize his correspondence over the years: a passionate interest in the theater and very little outside it, politeness, gratitude for kindnesses, flashes of wit, a flowing, conversational style, an unabashed appreciation or criticism of the work of friends and colleagues, and that openness and generosity which endeared him to his friends throughout his life."

He knew everybody -- everybody, that is, in the world of theater and, later, movies -- and loved almost everybody. Indeed, he was so good-hearted and tolerant that it is almost a joy to find him sniping and/or carping, as when, in 1936, he came out on top in New York against Leslie Howard playing the title role in a competing production of "Hamlet" -- "the bon mot for the unfortunate Howard came from one of the critics, who said I could now drop the GIEL out of my name, and be known simply as the GUD Hamlet" -- or as when, in Oslo in 1955, he notes that "there is a very disagreeable smell in the theatre which I thought was probably Ibsen's unpublished plays," or as when he deftly dismisses Kenneth Tynan as "a brilliant but rather odious young fellow, who is good when he is enthusiastic, but cheap and personal when he dislikes anyone's work (he hates mine)."

Mainly, though, he simply took unending delight at being right at the center of the world that was to him the only world that mattered. Acting and actors, the stages and screens on which they plied their craft, were all he really cared about. Here, as he attends the premiere of "Lawrence of Arabia" in New York in 1962, he positively overflows:

"The weekend was great fun -- huge party on the St. Regis roof, masses of people I knew. I never stopped being kissed by gentlemen! Peter O'Toole, Jason Robards, Tennessee, Quintero etc. -- and a few ladies too! Maggie [Leighton] was hysterical all the evening -- late, no taxis, trouble with her dress, tired, sitting so long at the picture -- 4 hours etc. etc., but she was, as usual, very sweet. Alec Guinness is not very good, rather like a benevolent old lady. It is a great pity I didn't play it -- it would have been a marvelous part for me. Never mind. O'Toole is wonderful -- and dishy too -- and the whole picture is superb, except that it is really two films -- one the story and the other the spectacle. But it is dignified, breathtakingly beautiful to look at, moving, exciting and everything. Only some common pseudo Rachmaninoff music which is vulgar and the only blot, I thought. All the other men wonderfully good, even [Donald] Wolfit! Mad audience -- wigs, rocks, stars, the lot. I did enjoy the evening."

Almost everything comes together in that passage: Gielgud's joy at being among his friends and surrounded by glamour; his eye for and amusement at human frailty and eccentricity; his competitive streak; his delight in work well done, delight undiminished by his understanding of its shortcomings; and, by no means least, his homosexuality. This letter was written to a man with whom for many years he had a complicated physical and emotional relationship, and even the uninitiated hetero can decipher its code: "I never stopped being kissed by gentlemen!," O'Toole is "dishy," "All the other men wonderfully good." There can be no doubt that he grasped the movie's strong homoerotic undertones and responded strongly to them.

He seems never to have questioned or resisted his homosexuality. His parents, to whom he was close, apparently figured it out early on and accepted it. He went through a period of deep embarrassment in 1953, when he was arrested for soliciting; he was shamed by his response to "the most idiotic and momentary impulse," and "unfortunately the press got hold of it, and blew it up to terrifying proportions," but his friends rallied around him, and the public soon lost interest. He remained discreet in public -- "I have strictly forbidden myself the queer bars while I am playing [in New York]. So many people seem to know me now, and talk to me in streets and in restaurants, it really seems important to behave very circumspectly indeed" -- but in private he was ever more candid: German "young men are certainly attractive, and of course they are mad costume and uniform fetishists, so my eye was continually titillated with corduroy, breeches, jackboots et cetera!" Or: "I have a strange Hungarian now, whom I picked up rather shamelessly at the Kokoschka exhibition, who is mysterious, intensely shy, and highly demonstrative -- an agreeable once a week diversion."

It turned out to be the diversion of a lifetime. Gielgud stayed with Martin Hensler -- to whom he once wrote, "You have given me your life, and I only pray you do not feel you have wasted it" -- until Hensler's death in 1998. In the mid-1970s he and Hensler settled into a country house in Buckinghamshire that became his refuge from the larger world that he found ever more clamorous and unnerving, and it was there, fittingly enough, that his own life ended. It was, as these letters make clear, one hell of a life.

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