

perience of some critics now active, helps towards a sketchy definition. We're not to credit Gielgud with emotional convulsion, martial glamour, the power of a Lawson or Wolfitt, or the beefy, extrovert presence of Richardson or Tearle. Confining ourselves to English classics, what does that leave? Well, apart from Shakespeare, there are Congreve, Sheridan and Wilde to be taken into account. Gielgud once defined style as "knowing what kind of play you're in". In the absence of film record, posterity will have to make do with stills and the assurance that success in those three was based on making the dialogue sound natural, oddly enough on the appreciation of *literature*. That's what is meant by an actor measuring himself against the text, and where those classics of comedy are involved Gielgud in this century has done it best. After all, Congreve's diction is baroque, Sheridan's fluently mannered and Wilde's an invention imposed on totally empty people.

Included in these was a devastating later version of his Joseph Surface, accurately in period as usual without over-elaboration in gesture or dress, but recalling the built-in hypocrisy of TV villains in executive suits. In one scene he was profiled on the audience as a tough, plausible manipulator, interviewing his brother while seated behind an elegant desk. But his triumphs extended to Shakespeare comedy too, as Benedick in *Much Ado*. The duels with Beatrice, none too easy to handle because of the abstruse wordplay, came across with sunny fluency. Neither actors nor audience were in need of the modernising touches put into a National Theatre production of the play, admittedly some years later when hearing and speaking were in decline. In the episode where Benedick is subjected to an overheard conversation designed to make him think Beatrice loves him, Gielgud brought off the almost impossible by sharing his surprise with the audience, exhibiting himself to them as deluded victim of the plot, and at the same time conveying more than a hint of detached enjoyment of the total stage effect, a complicity with the audience itself.

Getting back finally to *Hamlet*, it's evident that if

Gielgud's career had ended at the start of the 1939 War, he would have been immortal for that role alone. And it's half a century back, in an unrecognisably different society. When Gielgud, already an experienced actor at the age of twenty-five, joined the Old Vic in 1929, Thomas Hardy had been dead less than a year, D. H. Lawrence was still alive, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* came out in the same year, and Eliot was yet to begin *The Four Quartets*. As to Shakespeare, ham actor-managers were still touring *Hamlet* in sermonising slow tempo with the last entrance of Fortinbras cut. Where Gielgud struck lucky was in having for his director Harcourt Williams, a disciple of Granville Barker committed to the minimum of visuals and aiming to let the words do the work, above all fast. Barker, one of the most literate directors on record, as his *Prefaces* were to prove, insisted on textual integrity, so Gielgud acted a complete version of *Hamlet* which took four-and-a-half hours. At least in a physical sense, the "stomach", the incredible stamina, was developed as early as that.

The interpretation's outlines were set in 1934 in a West End run of 155 performances under Gielgud's own management. Critical descriptions of it abound, and fortunately there are later radio versions to confirm the supreme excellence of the diction, notably where Shakespeare provides the equivalent of arias in opera. Such interplay with a public encouraged to listen was possible before film and TV perspective took over.

It is true that there were cold 1930s overtones to his *Hamlet*. Not, however, in June 1939, when he played it at the Lyceum to mark its imminent conversion to a dance-hall. Then, inspired by the association of his Terry ancestry with the place, he broadened and set fire to his performance in a way that those of us who were present in the 2,800 capacity auditorium will never forget.

What Gielgud had done was to bridge a yawning gap between the 20th-century theatre and Shakespeare's text, no less. He had brought playgoing and dramatic literature together.

Witch-Hunt

Walking in yew-tree dawn is
bloody, knowing immediately
enemies are there; night has
temporarily only hidden them
and, as those kitchen cockroaches,
the cracks show they still thrive

there. With nervy heart pulsings
they're assessed bleakly, no need
to communicate with self before
they conform in ranks. At least a
something moves there; somewhere
is living. Or is that spot on

the move merely an optic fault?
The cockroach scuttle is ugly
but not dangerous—is that what
being is—to be crushed underfoot?
Stop the questions there are no
answers . . . get to the door as quick

as time; do not hesitate, do not
look back. A smear does not die,
like myth, it's for ever-after.
Is passed on, part of a portrayal,
biography; it is as well to say
your friends are also your enemies.

Madge Hales

Stage & Screen

An Intellectual in the Theatre

On Jonathan Miller—By JOHN WEIGHTMAN



THE THEATRE, although it may occasionally accommodate “the drama of ideas”, is not, by and large, an intellectual institution. On the contrary, its basic stock-in-trade is emotion and, even in its commercial manifestations, it stands in a passionate relationship to society. Great theatrical successes correspond to mysterious currents of collective excitement, and are always unpredictable. Most actors may have a university education nowadays, but they are still primarily exhibitionists, bending the whole of their personalities to the manic end of displaying themselves in the guise of the Other. The last half-century, it is true, has seen the dawn of a new, quasi-theoretical seriousness in the theatre, but its gurus have tended to promote numinous, rather than definable, concepts of their craft; hence those teasing entities, the Theatre of Cruelty, the Living Theatre, the Poor Theatre, the Empty Space. . . .

Against this background, Jonathan Miller stands out as a remarkable exception. As we know from his appearances on television, he is first and foremost an encyclopaedic intellectual who, but for the unexpected amateur triumph of *Beyond the Fringe*, would probably have continued his academic career in medical (and allied) research. But, since 1961, when the *Fringe* quartet shot to fame like a theatrical preliminary to the Beatles, he has found himself tied to a theatre-obsessed *alter ego*, from whom he has struggled occasionally, though in vain, to escape. It is significant, however, that—almost immediately—he switched from performing to directing, since the director’s function, as he understands it, is precisely to ensure the intellectual relevance and coherence of the waves of emotion emanating from the stage. Or perhaps, reversing the angle of vision, we could say that, within the theatre, he has found his particular

performing role: that of the indefatigable academic, maintaining a flow of knowledge and ideas in the thespian hurly-burly—a sort of intellectual missionary *in partibus*.

Subsequent Performances,¹ an expanded and generously illustrated version of the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures given in the University of Kent and of the Clark Lectures delivered in Cambridge, is the fruit of a temporary return to academe, during which Mr Miller distilled some of the conclusions suggested by his 25 years of practical experience. It is essentially a defence and illustration of the function of the director. Mr Miller is justifying his own career but, in doing so, he subjects the theatrical process to a rational analysis which relates it to the philosophy of art and the history of culture.

HE BEGINS BY ASKING FRANKLY: are people like myself really necessary? He is referring, of course, to the relatively new phenomenon of the director as a separate entity, and also to the director who is mainly concerned with revivals of works from the past (hence his title), since this is the area in which he himself has chiefly operated. The putting on of new plays is a rather different matter; the author can usually make his presence felt, and the nature of the performance will be determined by the collaboration, or the battle of wills, between him and the director, or between him, the director, and the actors. Traditionally, the author often was—and may still be today—his own director or actor-manager (cf. Shakespeare, Molière, Sacha Guitry, Noël Coward, Alan Ayckbourn, etc.), in which case there is no immediate problem, since the performance presumably corresponds, as far as is humanly possible, to the intentions of its original begetter.

But there is, or will be, a problem, once the author is dead and his plays are floating free in the cultural heritage. It is a sad fact, of course, that the great majority of them die almost at once, together with the ephemeral social situation, of which, in retrospect, they often appear to have been a strangely conventional, collective and almost anonymous, emanation. The mortality rate among dramatic works must be higher than any other form of art; and nothing produces a bleaker awareness of human transience than the perusal of

¹ *Subsequent Performances*. By JONATHAN MILLER. Faber and Faber, £14.95.