Sir John Gielgud (1904–2000)

There is a scene in Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, 1981) in which Lindsay Anderson and John Gielgud stand at an upper-storey window of their Oxford college making supercilious comments on athletes engaged in a ritual race around the quadrangle below. It is a good moment to fix John Gielgud in the mind now that, at well over ninety-six, he has died. He was for many people pre-eminently a man of the theatre; not just an actor who had been around for a long time, but one who had hurdled the obstacles raised by the hungry generations which had trodden down lesser colleagues. And he always credited Lindsay Anderson with taking him into the modern theatre of the latter half of the twentieth century. It is also good to remember that, glorious as his theatrical history was, he was also, in his last decades, a consummate film actor as well. Most of the obituaries – and it was interesting to see how widely his death was reported in Australia where he must be known chiefly from film – concentrated on the theatrical achievements and tacked on a bit about the Oscar for Arthur (Steve Gordon, 1981) as a coda.

To call him the actor of the century is not to designate him its greatest, though no doubt a case for this could be mounted, but rather to indicate that he, more perhaps than any other, has accommodated to its shifts. On stage from 1921 after training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, he was well established in the London theatre by 1930, embracing with equal facility classic roles and modern leads, twice succeeding his friend Noel Coward in popular hits: Coward’s own The Vortex (1925) and The Constant Nymph (1926). He joined the Old Vic company in 1929 and played a string of major Shakespearean roles, and his Hamlet was definitive for his generation. He went on to play it well over five hundred times. It exists on disc so that one can hear the mastery of the verse, with Gielgud giving the meaning and the poetry both full weight. He couldn’t play some roles, notably that of Othello, which calls for a physicality that was simply not part of his equipment. Indeed, after his first appearance as Romeo, critic Ivor Brown described him as having ‘the most meaningless legs imaginable’. But he did establish himself, as the critic Kenneth Tynan once wrote, as the best living actor ‘from the neck up’. His kind of Shakespearean delivery went out of fashion to some extent, and his co-rival, Laurence Olivier, provided a more vigorous reading, but no one style of performance can ever be other than a major chapter in an ongoing story.

He was slower than Olivier to embrace the new drama ushered in by Look Back in Anger (Tony Richardson, 1958), but when he did, it was with tremendous éclat. He marked time for a few years, in the late ’50s and early ’60s, polishing his Ages of Man, a one-man recital which drew on Shakespearean characters, and which he toured extensively. He then appeared in plays by Edward Albee, Alan Bennett and David Storey. It was the latter’s Home (1970), directed by Anderson and co-starring Ralph Richardson, which showed conclusively his mastery of the modern idiom, and which was filmed for American TV in 1971.

So, what about films? When I interviewed him in 1994, just seventy years after his film debut, he recalled that he, along with most of his theatre colleagues, ‘rather looked down on films in those days, the 1920s. Although it was better paid than the theatre, people thought of it as a sideline’. Given the state of British cinema at the time, this was probably an understandable attitude. He remembered his early films quite vividly – the clarity of his memory was as legendary as his proclivity for verbal gaffes – and he remembers turning down the Hollywood offer to play Romeo to Norma Shearer’s Juliet. After a couple of false starts in the ’20s, he starred in Victor Saville’s affectationate version of The Good Companions (1933) and Hitchcock’s The Secret Agent (1938), on the latter of which he remembers Peter Lorre’s habit of disappearing to the studio roof to indulge his morphee habit.

But he is not really very interesting in these films. As a leading man, he is too stiff, lacking the romantic charisma of his contemporary Ivor Novello, also flitting with the cinema at this time. Apart from playing Disraeli in Thorold Dickinson’s The Prime Minister (1941), a stylish and sometimes touching performance, he made no more feature films until 1953 when he went to Hollywood to steal the notices in Joseph Manckiewicz’ Julius Caesar, with Brando as Antony. He has no problem in adjusting to the camera’s intimacy here – and he never would again. In 1955, he was an affecting Clarence in Olivier’s knight-studded Richard III, and his career as a screen character actor had begun to gather the momentum that would carry him through until his death. He hinted darkly at the incestuous undertones in the choleric Edward Moulton-Barrett’s devotion to his sickly daughter in The Barretts of Wimpole Street (Sidney Franklin, 1956), though he told me, ‘I didn’t think I could touch Laughton [in the 1934 version directed by Sidney Franklin as old Barrett]’. He could, and did.

It was in the 1960s that his screen career took off in earnest and with no abatement of theatre commitments or television appearances. The riches of the last several decades demand selectivity here in the interests of space. There is some obvious junk: think of Lost Horizon (Charles Jarrott, 1973), Caligula (Tinto Brass, 1980), Appointment With Death
Sir John Gielgud in Prospero's Books

Greenaway's compassionate Prospero, in Peter of a century later, is his wise, performances. So, too, a quarter of him, screen's roar of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

For the record, he also ran theatre companies and directed opera, as well as numerous plays, famously demanding the Covent Garden Orchestra stop 'that dreadful noise' while he went forward to sort out a staging problem. He recorded a great deal of poetry; he wrote several volumes of chatty autobiography (Early Stages, 1939; Stage Directions, 1963; An Actor Remembers, 1977; Acting Shakespeare, 1991); and he did some highly enjoyable television, following his debut in the medium in 1959 in N.C. Hunter's A Day By The Sea, and including Brideshead Revisited (1981) and the star-laden Time After Time (1986).

He was heaped with honours for his work in all the acting media: inter alia, he was knighted in the Birthday Honours in 1953, received honorary doctorates from prestigious universities, and was made Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. The list is awesome. He may well have missed out on a peerage, surely more than deserved, as a result of an early 1950s brush with the authorities when he was accused of soliciting.

It says much for the esteem with which he was regarded by the theatre- and film-going public that this was not held against him, even if it did forfeit him the highest accolade.

Just before he died, he was very annoyed at not being asked to be in a TV production of David Copperfield (1999): 'There were plenty of roles I could have played', he said peevishly, and added, 'I changed my agent as a result'. A man who changes his agent at ninety-six, when he's still in the running for parts, can lay some claim to being 'the actor of the Century', and not just because he outlived most of his peers.