

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Gyorgy Lengyel – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Rosa Sadler**

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Theatre director. Bertold Brecht; Café Lipp; Jacques Copeau; correspondence; criticism; Dom Juan; Hamlet; Hungarian Revolution; Hungary; International Theatre Congress 1963; Jerzy Grotowski; John Gielgud; King Lear; Lawrence Olivier; Mr Puntilla and his man Matti; Peter Brook; Prospero's Books; rivalry; Royal Shakespeare Company; Michel Saint-Denis; Suria Saint-Denis; Shakespeare; Soviet theatre; Stanislavski; The Ages of Man; Wars of the Roses.

This interview has been edited by the interviewee and thus the transcript differs in places from the audio recording.

RS: We are here mainly to talk about your correspondence and your contact with Michel Saint-Denis and John Gielgud, so do you want to start just by saying how you first became, sort of, aware of their work and how you first made contact with them?

GL: Yes, it [goes back to the Hungarian Revolution (23 October 1956 – 4 November 1956)]. That was the year when I was accepted to the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Hungary as a would-be stage director for five years' study. Five weeks after we began the academic year the Hungarian Revolution broke against the Soviet occupation and the cruel Stalinist policy. After the 13 days of the revolution the hardliner Hungarian Communists, with the help of the Soviet invasion, brought a new communist government to power in Hungary again.] The Russian - Soviet - invasion ruined [Budapest, eleven years after the Second World War again] and it was a very... really big fight for their victory, even if, of course, it was a world power and we were a very little country. Anyway, at that time my sister and her family left Hungary. I remained partly because of my parents, partly because I was so happy that I could begin my studies at the theatre department as a would-be stage director. But, the general atmosphere was very, very critical and frozen, if it is a good word. Later the government - the new communist government - realised that it is a very bad [for their international prestige and to keep Hungarians again, in a new dictatorship ] so they promised relative freedom to the people, and one of the things which they promised, and in a way fulfilled, [was] that the cultural situation became [slowly] much better than it was in the hard-line period before the revolution. Anyway, in that period that is the beginning of my correspondence. I had a very distinguished, excellent actor friend – much older than me – and he had an idea [for] a long time, which was unfortunately not realised ever before. He wanted to break out from the situation when the Hungarian theatre people didn't know [well contemporary world theatre since the forties...] The reason for that is that at

the time of the German occupation, which we had during the Second World War and before that, [mainly] German culture and German theatre was [propagated].

[The same things happened after the Second World War, when we were liberated from the Germans and at the same time occupied by the Soviet army, then began the Russian political and general influence, after a short transitional period in 1945 – 1948. In cultural life, the so called 'socialist realism' was the only accepted "style", which I would describe as naturalism plus communist propaganda. That "style" was compulsory in theatre art too. A kind of false distorted Stanislavski system was forced as the only acting method. The real Stanislavski system was distorted by his traitor students, the Soviet "chinovnik" actors and directors. They went back to the old teaching for the psychological and emotional teaching of Stanislavski and the "forgot" about the new, the last phase, which he finished his life, when he worked with Meyerhold and that was physical training, which was much more modern than the previous one] . Anyway, so that [Hungarian] actor [friend of mine] wanted -

RS: What was his name?

GL: István Somló.

RS: OK.

GL: He was a member of the National Theatre...

RS: OK.

GL: - and a very well known, good actor. So, his plan was to edit two volumes in which we will show excerpts from biographies, autobiographies, essays from - not about but from - great actors and directors. In the first volume we planned English and French actors and directors and not Stanislavskian Russian ones.

RS: OK, yes.

GL: Now I had the wonderful task, and you must understand that I was very, very young at that period. [smiling] It was '57 so I was 21 years old.

RS: OK.

GL: And it was a huge task and really a privilege that I could take part in that work and I had the task to translate [from] Sir John Gielgud's first autobiography *Early Stages* and also *Réflexions sur le théâtre* by Jean-Louis Barrault, so fantastic two books. And, I edited, I chose the excerpts and I translated and of course he corrected because he had wonderful English. But, I had another task, that I organised the whole work: the translators, and how can we get the books from the embassy libraries [from abroad] and

so on and so on. So I had to write letters to all living authors asking them to renounce from the copyright fees because we hadn't money.

RS: OK, yeah.

GL: And that is the miracle that, in one or two months, all of them answered and all of them renounced their rights –

RS: Mmm, oh wow!

GL: - so they allowed it. So it was fantastic. Imagine that again: a 21 year old man in his hands has the letters of Sir John Gielgud, of Michel Saint-Denis, of Jean Vilar, of Jean-Louis Barrault, Marcel Marceau and so on and so on –

RS: Wow!

GL: So it was a fabulous feeling. Now – and here comes the first great personality, Michel Saint-Denis - he wrote to me from the boat –

RS: OK.

GL - on which he sailed to the United States where he went to found the Juilliard School of Drama.

RS: Yes.

GL: And he wrote a very... it was a postcard with a big ship and he wrote that when he will be back or when he will arrive he will answer me and he answered and then it went on about 'what is the contents of the book?', 'who will translate it?' and then he put questions about myself: 'who are you?', 'what are you doing?', 'you are a student?'. Then he asked me about different things about my teaching and studies and so on and so on.

RS: So this began in 1962, is that?

GL: No, no in '57.

RS: '57. OK.

GL: '57. And it went on from '57 until '62 –

RS: OK.

GL: - when I had the first opportunity to go to 'the West' –

RS: And visit.

GL: - we called it 'the West' –

RS: Mmm, yes.

GL: - that was the paradise! [laughs] Anyway... but I didn't get passport because of my so-called dissident sister's emigration without passport.

RS: Right, yeah.

GL: Anyway, so that [for five years our correspondence went on with further questions, practical problems. Meanwhile the first volume (Actors, Roles) was published in 1959 and we immediately began to prepare the second volume – Actors, Directors, which was published in 1964. The third volume, Theatre Today, edited by me was published in 1970. When I planned my trip to Paris in '62 – it was a two month trip, which I got from my sister – and first I went to Paris and then I went to England.

RS: Mmm-hmm.

GL: I wrote [to Michel Saint-Denis]; would it be possible to meet him? He very kindly answered and then we met in '62 in the summer at the Quartier Latin at the Café Lipp.

RS: OK.

GL: It began as a bridge to the future, that he explained: what does it mean, Café Lipp, for them - for the young generation. That was a very famous café house where all the Copiaus –

RS: OK.

GL: - the students of Jacques Copeau –

RS: OK.

GL: - met always and discussed the performances, and even Jacques Copeau was present. I must add that we didn't ask from Michel Saint-Denis only his essay on Jacques Copeau, his uncle, but also Jacques Copeau's excerpts from his essays. So it was together the great ancestor and he who followed his great tradition. Anyway, so we met in the Quartier Latin and then we made a walk and during the walk he showed me very different historical monuments and houses and so on and so on. During that walk he asked about myself and it was very interesting, because he had a special affinity, a special talent, a genuine interest in the person with whom he is talking. That first time of course I felt myself so privileged because any of my other teachers didn't show that genuine interest in the person with whom you meet [for the] first time in your life. He asked about, for example, about the Stanislavski tradition in Hungary, that 'how is it?'. And, of course, I told him that it is very forced and it is a kind of propaganda in the Hungarian theatre and all about the distortions of the Stanislavski heritage. And also he asked about: 'do you have permanent companies or do you have that system what we have in the West and in England?' and then I told him that only, and only permanent companies are existing. Then he asked very personal things about me and then he went to the Hungarian politics, from the nineteenth century, from our first revolution what we lost in the middle of nineteenth century and then we went to the [1956] revolution. So, step-by-step, in [two] hours, he got to know me.

RS: Mmm.

GL: So, it is really a fantastic thing what happened with me. It was magic.

RS: Mmm.

GL: At the end he invited me for the evening, the same day. [It was] in Montmartre, a little theatre where a company of Saint-Étienne performed – no - it was a general rehearsal of *Dom Juan* by Molière.

RS: OK.

GL: In the evening I went there and only a few people were present. Among them there was Suria Saint-Denis who was, again, one of the greatest persons in my whole life – not only theatre life, but my personal life because she was a wonderful lady, a very, very, very special person. She was a White - so-called White Russian - who left after the Soviet Revolution with her family. She was partly a musician and once she herself played on the drum, [in a] little orchestra what she had and also she was a dancer and she also became a very excellent choreographer. So she was a very, very talented theatre personality and for her whole life she was the other self of Michel Saint-Denis so it was a fantastic couple because they worked together, and for example the second great book: *Training for the Theatre* by Saint-Denis [was] compiled by Suria. Because then he was not alive and also she went on with the Juilliard School of Drama and she was a consultant director because they followed the Saint-Denis tradition and she was a kind of consultant how to do it. Anyway, so I got to know her and we saw the rehearsal.

RS: What was that like? Do you remember?

GL: [smiling] I remember quite well because it was a very funny experience and that is one of his characteristics, which happened after the rehearsal. The play was well done. It was a good Molière production: not too comic, quite serious, a very sharp tradition because the man who directed it and played also Sganarelle, Jean Dasté, came from the Copeau tradition also. So, the Copeau tradition which gave a new shape to the Molière acting that not a farce only, not a joke only but a kind of commedia dell'arte but with serious contents.

RS: OK.

GL: So, it was very interesting. Anyway, the main actor, who was a so-called [guest] star - I forget his name - was very bad, terribly bad. He was a kind of narcissistic, very feminine gentleman who was always occupied with himself and not with the colleagues. After the rehearsal it was announced that Michel Saint-Denis will have a meeting after the performance and he will tell his observations. At that moment that actor, Dom Juan, swooned on the stage but he did it very theatrically because maybe he felt - or surely he felt - that he was very bad and he wanted to avoid criticism.

RS: Yeah.

GL: Anyway, we went to the buffet and there was a long - very long - meeting and Suria tried sometimes softly to remind him that the time is passing but he was a very... in a way stubborn gentleman, and he went on and on and he told all his observations that he wanted and at the very end he told, very sharply, his opinion on that terrible actor and that was very, very cruel how he did it. Not as a personal cruelty but he didn't allow him to believe that he is good.

RS: OK, yeah.

GL: So, another thing happened a few years later, which was exactly the same situation when he came to Hungary in '63. It happened just a few months after the Royal Shakespeare Company came to Budapest with the King Lear, the famous Brook King Lear, and the Comedy of Errors and in the theatre called Madách was a very famous and very successful performance of Hamlet.

RS: OK.

GL: I was his guide during his few Budapest days and I showed him the Hamlet performance but when the director got to know that he is there they invited him and asked him that after the performance 'Let's have a meeting and please tell us your opinion'. Now it happened he invited the company to his hotel and in the foyer we sat

down and it was approximately at eleven o'clock in the evening - the Hungarian performances are beginning at seven.

RS: OK.

GL: So, it was after a four hour or three and a half hour performance and they were quite fatigued but again he was again very, very, very alive and very, very strong and he told all his observations again and again and it was very interesting because he told very frankly that 'that style what you are performing doesn't exist now. It's not for the middle of the twentieth century, you are performing in a nineteenth century tradition, it's old fashioned: the scenery is old fashioned, these costumes are old fashioned, the way how - it's a kind of romanticism - what you put into the characters - they are more, they are bigger than they must be, so, not real characters'. [He acknowledged the talents of the actors, especially the excellent actor, who played Hamlet. He understood well what Saint-Denis criticised.] He frankly told that: after Jan Kott, the famous Polish critic, wrote his wonderful book Shakespeare, Our Contemporary, 'you can't play in that way' because that Jan Kott book influenced the Royal Shakespeare Company's many performances, for example the King Lear. Anyway, so, the company was absolutely disturbed because in Hungary it was a success: they got all praises, you know? It was a curious situation. There was only one actor who was an exception - because he thought that he has the feeling for modern acting, he has the feeling for a kind of new vision - who played Hamlet and he very bitterly acknowledged what he said. So, it was very interesting.

RS: Hmm.

GL: But, these two examples are showing how stubborn - it's a little negative I know...

RS: Mmm.

GL: But, "determined" - that's much better - how determined he was: when he was asked, then he did it.

RS: Mmm, and committed to his view.

GL: Yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely and very frank, no pardon -

RS: Mmm.

GL: No pardon: 'if you ask me, I tell it'.

RS: Yeah, yeah.

GL: Now, the third very interesting event was that, also in '63, there was an ITI Congress – an International Theatre [Institute] Congress - in Warsaw and he told me: 'try to come and take part on my workshop'. It was a conference and workshop on theatre education. And I went privately to there, and each day to his meetings and conference and discussion and I remember very well that on the first day – first or second day – there was a storm because the old-ish, conservative, Russian and East German and Romanian professors attacked very sharply every style – every teaching method – which is not Stanislavskian -

RS: OK.

GL: -[I mean] the distorted Stanislavskian again. Saint-Denis was very – again - determined to say: 'that is one style, but Stanislavski had another style and also there are very many other styles in the world'. He tried to open [the conception] and the imagination [of the socialist delegates on style and method and acting but their whole conception of theatre was very narrow].

RS: OK.

GL: Now, something happened which was really very, very interesting moment: a young Polish director asked for an opportunity to tell his conception, and he attacked very, very sharply everybody –

RS: OK.

GL: - even Saint-Denis. He told that everything is old fashioned, everything is, only Grotowski, only Grotowski is the only real modern, contemporary director and all the others – whatever Stanislavski, whatever somebody else, Elia Kazan of Actors Studio in the United States, everything is old fashioned, only Grotowski.

RS: What was his name?

GL: Grotowski, Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish avant-garde – great avant-garde - theatre director and teacher. Everybody who was a student of Grotowski was a kind of fanatic, enthusiastic follower, because he had a kind of magic with which he did theatre – unfortunately not very long because later he finished his practical theatre work and he began to teach, and so on and so. Anyway, the shock was [shocked intake of breath] full in the auditorium and you can imagine what they said – the old conservatives and Michel Saint-Denis wanted to help the situation and said 'it's the end'. Then, I saw that he, at the end of the meeting went to that young man –

RS: OK.

GL: - and they talked to each other and next day I was invited to them in the afternoon – we met in the foyer – and when I arrived I saw that young Polish gentleman - and they were together and they were in a talk. Then he left and Michel Saint-Denis very slowly trying to understand everything what happened with him and he told us: 'you must understand that man. He went through the Polish war' – you know: when the Soviets and the Germans nearly killed the nation –

RS: Yeah. Yeah.

GL: And, [he said] 'you know that man comes from that period. He was a child. He went through the tortures. Also, that man is fanatic of Grotowski. You must understand: I don't mind that he attacked me, maybe he has right.' and for the next day the whole congress made a decision for his suggestion – proposal - and they went to see Grotowski - to a nearby little city called - I think it was Wrocław or it was another city.

RS: OK.

GL: We all went there and we saw the first Grotowski performance in our life, which was really, really an extremely interesting experience. So, he was an open man –

RS: Yeah

GL: - very, very open and at that time he was more than 50, between 50 and 60, but a young man in his spirit, in his behaviour - a genuine interest and a genuine open heart. I don't want to say that he was a soft man in his kindness – no – he was very strong. You could rely upon him. So, for me he was a kind of Father –

RS: OK.

GL: - theatre Father – and because I learnt so much from him; not only in these opportunities but also he invited me, a few years later between '64 and '65, he directed Mr Puntila and his Man Matti by Bertold Brecht and I went to the rehearsals.

RS: Where was that staged?

GL: It was in the Aldwych Theatre -

RS: OK.

GL: - and it was the Royal Shakespeare Company -

RS: Right

GL: - where he directed it. It was again an unusual experience because he mixed the Brechtian didactic, rigid structure and sort with commedia dell'arte of the French – market comedy – and it was very, very funny.

RS: OK.

GL: [The play] has a lot of songs and the songs became – again - like when somebody is singing in a market. So, the whole play became very popular –

RS: OK.

GL: - very funny and very popular and he really retuned the whole play. Now [the next] day, after the first night, I was invited to them and I went and I, of course, didn't know anything about the press and anything else and I arrived and it was a curious silence in the house. He sat in one room - in the living room - and on the floor there were all the English newspapers, which was published on that morning –

RS: OK.

GL: - and they were very bad, the criticisms were terribly bad and the main argument was that 'he is not Brechtian in his approach'. That was a period when the English theatre really copied the original Brecht productions. The directors went to Berlin and they saw the productions of the Berliner Ensemble and with copy paper they made the... because that was the rigid and very, very cruel situation with the Brecht family – Helena Weigel and the others – that they wanted only to copy the original Berliner Ensemble performances so they didn't allow any liberty to them. Now, Saint-Denis was free. He did what he thought and it was very good but the English newspapers were also very conservative in that way - that they wanted the original - so he got bad reviews.

RS: Do you know how that made him feel?

GL: He said to me: 'I am not sad. I am very bitter because it happens with me the second time in my life.' The first time was - and that was one of his greatest disappointments - I think it was in '51, when he directed Lawrence Olivier in Macbeth and it was a huge success and one of the greatest performances that they write about Olivier. He wanted to go on. And then, as he said on that morning, 'the English Shakespearians didn't want to allow anybody else to approach Shakespeare, only English directors.'

RS: Mmm.

GL: And that was very painful for him. So, the same pain came back - that if you don't want to copy, if you want to break out from a tradition and renew a tradition – that was the essence of Jacques Copeau and of him – that was not accepted at that time in England.

RS: Yeah.

GL: So, that was quite sad. Not long after that premier and our meeting he got his first stroke.

RS: Mmm.

GL: One of the reasons of the stroke - as his wife told us in a letter - his best friend George Devine, the father of new English drama, died.

RS: OK.

GL: They were very close to each other. But after a few years he got much, much better and we met again. Oh yes, that meeting was also very interesting because it was the first time that I introduced my wife to them. It was in '66.

RS: OK.

GL: No, '67. After our talk a lady arrived who was a movement teacher in the Juilliard and they said to us 'you are welcome to take part on our little conference, little meeting'. They prepared the next year with that movement teacher.

RS: OK.

GL: That was also fantastic: how they went on – point-by-point – how they planned the next teaching year. After that we got to know that he got the second stroke and from that time we didn't meet but I met with his wife Suria until one year before her death. '87 was the last time and she died in '88. I must tell that unfortunately they had a very bad financial situation, because not only they didn't have pension as he partly worked in England, partly worked in France. He founded, I think, three great institutions beside the Juilliard: the National Acting School in Montreal and in Strasbourg - the great Strasbourg L'Ecole Superieure - and also in Colmar, another very famous acting school. So: four. After founding four he hadn't any financial background and poor Suria had to go to smaller and smaller houses and apartments and she really struggled in that way, so it was quite sad but she always, even at our last meeting, she was a grande dame. She was, first of all a beautiful old lady, but in her whole behaviour, her spirit, her eloquence,

her wonderful humour, she remained herself, even against all the serious problems that she had.

RS: Would you mind if we went back and talked more about the times you came to England, when you came to visit them? Did you see any performances when you came over? Particularly when he was with the RSC.

GL: Yes, yes, great pleasure because London was always my so-called 'theatreland'.

RS: OK.

GL: It was a present of my sister.

RS: OK.

GL: They lived in Canada but they helped me to come out in every second or third year.

RS: OK.

GL: Because you could get passport only in every second or third year to come out from the socialist countries. I always came to London, sometimes to Paris. In London I went through a long, long, long procession, if it's a good word, a long way, because I saw the old English theatre and then I got to know the best modern directions so I was very, very happy man in that time because I saw the beginning of the Royal Shakespeare Company –

RS: Yeah.

GL: - with Peter Hall and Saint-Denis and Peter Brook. I saw the first great productions of them -

RS: Yeah.

GL – and also I saw the birth of the National Theatre –

RS: Yeah.

GL: - even when they tried the season in Chichester. I saw the National Theatre and also the Royal Court Theatre, which was one of my favourite ones. So, I didn't see many traditional performances –

RS: OK.

GL: - partly they were very expensive [laughs] –

RS: Mmm. [laughs]

GL: - but I had my interest. I discovered new theatre-

RS: OK.

GL: - in England. I saw here the first Beckett –

RS: OK.

GL: Pinter – the older Pinter plays – the first night of the Pinter plays I saw.

RS: Oh wow!

GL: And many, many Brechts in its original didactic versions, for example in the National Theatre. But, very, many modern English plays: Arden and Osborne and [Wesker]. So, very, very many different styles so I was very rich –

RS: Mmm.

GL: - in that meaning. Each time I could see five, six performances in two weeks so it really was something. Another thing: fantastic, great actors.

RS: Yeah.

GL: For English theatre I think that was really a golden age for the English acting.

RS: OK.

GL: So, great theatre. I remember that first time I met with John Gielgud he told me that 'the most important thing that you must see all the treasures of the English stage because if you don't see, for example, Paul Scofield or you don't see Olivier or Donald Pleasence or very many different personalities that is not correct and it is not giving you

a real picture of the English stage. You must know Peggy Ashcroft; you must know Edith Evans'. So it is very interesting because I had the great luck to see them.

RS: Yeah. Do you have any specific memories of particular performances?

GL: Of the Shakespeare productions?

RS: Any of them. Any of the Pinter or....

GL: Shakespeare productions – of course the greatest pleasure was [Peter Brook's] King Lear -

RS: OK.

GL: - because that really changed the whole Shakespeare style. Also I saw parts of Peter Hall's war plays –

RS: Oh, The Wars of the Roses?

GL: Yes.

RS: That was '63, was it?

GL: Something like that, yes and very, very many and also The Dream by Brook and Brook's Oedipus or his experiments in the...I forgot the name where the [international company] performed in that great space [of the Round House] which was quite empty and he performed that –

RS: The Theatre of Cruelty, is that?

GL: No no, it was just before the Theatre of Cruelty [season]: they performed the Tempest experiments without words. It was only visuals and sounds –

RS: Oh wow!

GL: No words at all. And of course Marat/Sade –

RS: OK.

GL: - from the Theatre of Cruelty. And, of course, again the Royal Court - great performances. Exciting new plays which really gave a new side of British drama and we didn't know them –

RS: Yeah.

GL: So it was really a great discovery of the theatre for me.

RS: Mmm, yeah. You mentioned the Wars of the Roses Sequence.

GL: Yes.

RS: Did you see that in the one big block or did you see bits of it?

GL: I saw them – one live and also in the TV remake.

RS: OK. What was the live performance like? Do you remember?

GL: Very cruel.

RS: Yeah?

GL: Very, very dark, very strong and cruel.

RS: Mmm. It was quite a reinvention of those plays wasn't it?

GL: Oh yes.

RD: Did you think that that worked?

GL: Oh yes, extremely well and of course the importance of all these new visions and new... renewed my directorial style at home –

RS: OK.

GL: - not exactly in the same place, but I did Richard III -

RS: OK.

GL: - in the style of the King of the Roses.

RS: Oh really?

GL: And also I made As You Like It. I didn't see the Royal Shakespeare's famous production, but I tried to follow their new vision of stagery and acting which was quite... I saw for example, sorry for mentioning it, in the [Old Vic], the Old [Vic company in 1962] -

RS: OK.

GL: Shakespeare what you can't imagine nowadays. It was so pompous and over-pathetic. It was very funny. I said to the International Theatre Institute who gave me the tickets: 'I'm deeply sorry; I can't go each night to the [Old Vic] to see all the Shakespeares' and they said: 'oh, we give it to you as a present, please go!' [laughs]

RS: [laughs] Yeah.

GL: So I had to.

RS: But it was not...

GL: No, it was not my favourite.

RS: No. When was that?

GL: It was my first visit: '62.

RS: Yeah.

GL: Just before the National Theatre was founded and they moved then to the [Old Vic].

RS: But, too old fashioned, too....

GL: Yes, yes, yes.

RS: You mentioned also when the King Lear came to Budapest. Did you see that? Did you see that performance?

GL: Oh, yes. Each evening I was there. You know, in Hungary, they wrote articles 'how can we play Shakespeare after the [visit of the] Royal Shakespeare [Company]?'

RS: OK.

GL: Because, it shocked. It was really a boom, a shock for the Hungarian theatre. Not everybody accepted it because the many conservative directors and essayists didn't accept it but the real [theatre] people were very, very, very happy –

RS: Yeah.

GL: - it was a great event, great event.

RS: It had a big impact then?

GL: Oh, fantastic –

RS: Yeah.

GL: The success was immense.

RS: Yeah. And that was... what year was that? That was '63 wasn't it, when they came to Hungary?

GL: Yes. Just before Michel Saint-Denis came: two months before, yes.

RS: Would you like to talk about John Gielgud?

GL: Oh, with great pleasure.

RS: Yeah?

GL: Yes. Again I must go back to the book –

RS: Mmm.

GL: - because I got his first letter, his consent. The next one came, again like Michel Saint-Denis, he put the questions and... but it was again a very formal correspondence and very many letters were written by his secretary, who was his sister.

RS: OK.

GL: Anyway, he answered and sent photos and I remember I sent both of them [Sir John and Michel Saint-Denis] Hungarian music records. I wanted to give something from Hungary which is good: Bartók and Kodály and the others and they were very grateful. Now in '62 I wrote him also and he very kindly answered and received me in his little house in Cowley Street, which was very near to the Parliament.

RS: Mmm.

GL: He lived, at that time, alone and was very, very, very kind and again very open, very simple. So, if you imagine a star, he was not a star.

RS: Mmm, no.

GL: I knew his art partly from the film Richard III where he played wonderfully Clarence. Also, from Romeo and Juliet when he was a chorus but the greatest pleasure was that a friend of mine had the 78 Long Play records of Hamlet.

RS: Ahh.

GL: I listened to it and of course it was a great thing. So, when I went there I was very, very happy and at the same time I couldn't imagine it, it was so... But you know it is very interesting because in my life, later and in other phases, I experienced that the real great personalities of theatre are mostly very open and very kind and very generous and they have an interest in the other man. Now, John Gielgud was exactly that type. He helped me to make my theatre programme, for example, which was very interesting that he – what I mentioned before – he said to me in '64, my second visit: 'you must go and see The Caretaker because that is a great thing'. Pinter and he: that was a big distance. By the way, his greatest problem was – and he spoke about that very openly to a young man – I would try to solve the riddle of why was he so open in his letters and in discussions - but going back, his greatest problem was that he thought that the modern English authors and directors forgot him.

RS: OK.

GL: Because he performed, he played, [at that time mainly] classic roles. He directed – I saw it just after my arrival – *The School for Scandal*, which was a perfect, excellent performance with Ralph Richardson. But, his great sorrow was that he missed the New Wave. He told me that he and Ralph Richardson refused the opportunity to play together in '57 or '55 in *The Endgame* because they didn't understand Beckett. Again, such a great artist who is acknowledging that he made a mistake –

RS: Yeah.

GL: - to a, basically, foreigner.

RS: Yeah. And he regretted that?

GL: Oh, very much, very much, and he was very sad that 'Nobody is thinking of me, they thought that I am an old fashioned actor/director and I am out of date'. In '62 he went for a world tour with his recital *The Ages of Man* and he had a try-out performance in Malvern and he told me that 'If you are in Stratford at that time' – I was – 'you can come to Malvern because it is very close to each other'. So, I went and I saw that recital. Unforgettable.

RS: Really?

GL: The way that he did it – it's even better, the live production, than the record, because he had the very special invention in there that he stepped in and out from the recital. Before each character or each drama he gave a little introduction and all those roles which were not really suitable for him at that period - for example *Romeo*, all the young roles – he made it with a little irony and that was very funny. And, of course with full enthusiasm and with psychological and deep Shakespearian style he made *Lear* and *Hamlet* and *Richard II* and, his favourite, the *Prospero* monologue. But also he made, for example, *Caliban*, which was very, very interesting. So, it was a beautiful recital. A later step again – I must say step-by-step – he got new roles and the first was *Home* by David Storey and the *Royal Court* and it was again an unforgettable performance. Two lost personalities in an asylum and their timid, very shy and sad fate and their humour - humour mixed with melancholy. It was really wonderful. Then came the great surprise, the Pinter play, *No Man's Land*, which was one of his greatest successes. I brought with me a letter when he is writing about that. [Turning pages] I think it is here somewhere. Yes. 'I will play in the new Pinter play in which I am playing a most unusual role' and so on and so on and so on 'with Richardson and I think it will be' – he is writing about the Richardson character and at the end he says – 'I am sure you would fascinate in it'. So, he saw me in a way a young man –

RS: Yeah.

GL: - who is one of the imaginative youngsters who must see his new phase.

RS: OK, yeah.

GL: He wanted to show that. And the other thing, which I promised, that I thought a lot that: how could it happen that he wrote so many letters? – especially in his late years – and he wrote so openly about very many things which even you can't find these subjects in the huge volume of his correspondence.

RS: Mmm.

GL: He wrote sometimes about things which are not at all - you can't read it because maybe he mentioned these things to his friends or to colleagues. But, to whom he wrote letters either they knew or he didn't want to tell it.

RS: Yeah.

GL: And there was somebody quite far distant [Lengyel] and he wanted to share.

RS: Mmm.

GL: For example here is a letter about Greenaway, the director who did Prospero's Books. It is very, very interesting how he is writing about Greenaway. There is no mention about that in the big book.

RS: Yeah. Yeah.

GL: He wants to share.

RS: Yeah.

GL: Maybe it was good for him to write a half-foreigner -

RS: Yeah, someone far away.

GL: Someone far away – these things or how he wrote about Prospero. So it was very, very touching first of all but also you felt that you played a role -

RS: Hmm, yeah.

GL: - what is important to everybody: to write about myself and to give something from my professional life. Because: the whole correspondence is a professional correspondence. I wrote him always about my productions and then he put questions about it. Even he discussed style. When I did Hamlet, it was in the nineties, then he was very happy with it but the great thing in it was that he suggested 'read immediately Granville-Barker's essay' and Granville-Barker was totally unknown in Hungary.

RS: Oh right.

GL: Only in English. Nobody translated him. It is again a great hole. That essay is fabulous: again something which without, no worth to live.

RS: Yeah.

GL: And then he asked about details: 'how do you do this?', 'how do you do that?'. When I did Caligula by Albert Camus again he asked that and that. Or when I did The School for Scandal very many years after I saw his performance. So, it was always a kind of professional discussion.

RS: Mmm, yeah.

GL: So from very far he taught me.

RS: Mmm, so yeah: an exchange of ideas. Oh, wow!

GL: Yes, yes, yes. So it was really a very great thing. I enjoyed immensely his great modern performances, not only the classics, but the modern ones and also his records which I loved very much. So, it was very, very, very, important and his interest was not only an honouring one but a very, very helpful one.

RS: Yeah.

GL: I wanted to tell you something, which is quite interesting. The last time when I saw him, it was in '98 so very, very old he was, but he was at that time [still] healthy. His secretary – companion and secretary – gave me one and a half hour in the telephone that you can spend and the visit was more than three hours because he did not want to finish it. He enjoyed it and we talked as only theatre people can chat.

RS: Yeah.

GL: We went to the garden and sat there on the bench. It was very interesting because he was interested in the theatre wherever it takes place: in Hungary or he asked me about my other experiences. So, it was very fruitful and very fresh and in his high age again. When he saw me to the gate he was behind me and he asked me 'what is your life purpose?' and the first moment it was such a shock to me that I remained silent because that is such a basic question. Then he repeated it, very softly, 'I asked, what is your life purpose?'. I was 62 then and then I told him what I should like to do in the theatre and what I would like to write and teach and then after a moment he said 'yes, you must have a life purpose while you live' and that sounded very autobiographical, to himself. And, he never gave up it.

RS: Yeah.

GL: He played, you know, many very cameo roles in films, and also very great films. He said 'they discovered me when I am an old man as a film star'. Some of them were really very good. Not only Prospero's Books, which is a miracle as a film and as a performance by him, but also the Alain [Resnais] film and [The Orchestra Conductor by Andrzej Wajda] : great, great films and he is very, very good in [them].

RS: Yeah.

GL: If you want to put somewhere there is something which might be interesting, but not until the end.

RS: OK.

GL: I read a lot and I heard a lot about the so-called rivalry between Olivier and Gielgud.

RS: Mmm.

GL: That is very interesting from the perspective, from the aspect, of Gielgud.

RS: Mmm.

GL: Because he spoke about that.

RS: Oh, really?

GL: Yes.

RS: What did he say?

GL: On the first time when we met, and that is very typical, 'you will experience that everybody is speaking about there is a great rivalry between Olivier and Gielgud' he said. I was surprised of course.

RS: Yeah.

GL: And he said: 'that rivalry exists only from the side of Olivier because he felt that he must have a rival and he chose me'.

RS: OK.

GL: He had a very good humour: very soft but very ironic. As he said, he gave the first great opportunity to Olivier when he played Romeo with him together and then Mercutio: one day they changed the roles. 'Of course', he said, 'he was a much better Romeo: I am not a Romeo type but I was much better as Mercutio'. [laughs]

RS: Yeah.

GL: Also, he spoke all about the different little stories and always he made fun of it. For example he told me that he gave Olivier the sword [Kean had used in Richard III, which had been passed on to Irving later. Gielgud inherited it and he presented it to Olivier when he had his great success with Richard III]

RS: OK.

GL: I think he inherited it from Irving.

RS: OK.

GL: He said: 'I always wanted to express my great acknowledgement but he never wanted to accept it' – [laughs]

RS: Oh.

GL: That was not a serious talk – that was a funny talk - but under the funny talk there was a serious thing.

RS: Yeah.

GL: For example, when they did *Brideshead Revisited* [the director offered two roles to Olivier – Edward Ryder and Lord Marchmont. He chose the Lord. Gielgud said ‘When I made a bigger success with E. Ryder he envied my role. But the role was good because I made from E. Ryder an eccentric crazy creature. So why did he want to play the little role when he had the greater one?’ So, he always made fun of themselves.

RS: Mmm. Yeah.

GL: And he acknowledged him really immensely. He said: ‘rivalry exists when you are the same type, but we were so different’ he said; ‘we were so exactly from the other side of the theatre land’. So, it was much more a social difference – social rivalry – what he mentioned. For example he said that ‘when I saw his *Macbeth*’ – what about we spoke with Michel Saint-Denis, in Michel Saint-Denis’ production with Olivier - ‘I thought: “I can never do it better than Olivier so I never want to play it; even if I like, because he was so good in that”’. So, he was – if it works well – he was a very noble gentleman – a real gentleman. Somebody who was not really in the world: one step up.

RS: Oh.

GL: In a way like an Oberon in *Dream* and that was very curious for me: that type of man who is living only in his imagination, only in his roles, in this other sphere.

RS: Yeah.

GL: If I may say that Michel Saint-Denis was a father and a great teacher he was a very great human [and artistic] experience for me –

RS: OK.

GL: - because of his modestly, for example. He spoke very frankly about – which happened later – that when Olivier was... his funeral was you know in the Westminster Abbey with great pomp and he said ‘I don’t want... I left a [will] that I don’t want that. I don’t deserve that. I am not enough important’.

RS: Yeah.

GL: And that is very typical, again.

RS: Yeah. Well, I think we ought to stop - it’s half past I’m afraid, but thank you so much. That was really wonderful to hear all that.

GL: I am very happy.

## SECOND SECTION

RS: We are just adding one extra bit onto the end of the interview. We are just talking about a letter from September 1964 from Michel Saint-Denis to Mr Lengyel.

GL: It happened that I was very sad about the very many unsuccessful and so-called modernist performances in Hungary, which were basically copies of East German productions: old-ish, conservative Brecht productions and so on. So, I wrote him a letter about my sadness and the answer is the following: 'I am not sad. When I think of the future of art I am worried and disturbed. There is a rebellion against art and this is not sad. It is understandable after the horrors produced by our last civilization. There is a kind of negation, of differentiation, and either our civilization will disappear or they are bound to react. That is why I am so attached to Shakespeare. He has the power, the future, and only the atom bomb could kill him with all of us.'