

Gielgud and Wilde

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I

On the third of January, 1995, Sir John Gielgud, at that time ninety years old, unveiled a plaque in memory of Oscar Wilde at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, where Wilde's play, *An Ideal Husband*, had been first presented one hundred years ago.⁽¹⁾

Only several weeks after this memorable event in the history of Oscaliana, on the fourteenth of February, exactly one hundred years after the first performance of his best comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was commemorated as part of a stained-glass window in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey. On this momentous occasion, "most moving was a reading by Sir John from Wilde's letter from Reading Gaol."⁽²⁾

These two events have become the substantive starting points in the revaluation of Wilde's literature and the celebration of the Oscar Wilde centennial in 2000.

In the following, I have undertaken to trace Sir John Gielgud's prodigious contribution to the Oscar Wilde revival on page, stage and screen.

II

John Gielgud's father, Arthur John Gielgud, married Kate Terry Lewis, the daughter of Kate Terry, the eldest sister to Ellen and Marion Terry. The Terry family was a celebrated theatrical family whose beautiful voices and gift for drama John Gielgud inherited.⁽³⁾

Gielgud's great-aunt, Marion Terry, created the part of Mrs. Eryllynne under Sir George Alexander's management with Alexander himself performing the role of Lord Windermere. Marion was recognized in her day as a brilliant actress, reputed for her refined demeanor and alluring in her sympathetic and emotional performances.

With her brown hair powdered with bronze dust, she was enormously successful in the part, not only over-awing Oscar Wilde, the author of the play, but also the public.

Gielgud's other great-aunt Ellen Terry, the most famous member of the family, enchanted Oscar Wilde with her beauty and brilliant acting. Oscar dedicated his sonnet, "Queen Henrietta Maria" to her, in which he described her "like some wan lily overdrenched with rain." Two more of Oscar's sonnets, "Portia" and "Camma", were also dedicated to Ellen Terry. In September 1888, he presented her with a privately printed copy of his first play, *Vera, or The Nihilists*, bound in dark red leather with her name in gold letters.

John Gielgud's first appearance as Jack Worthing in Wilde's best comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was directed by Nigel Playfair, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in July, 1930. Gielgud's performance of the two great roles, one tragic, one comic, in the same 1929/1930 London theatre season made it one of the most stupendous and monumental of Gielgud's life. He first performed Hamlet under the direction of Harcourt Williams; the play opened at the Old Vic Theatre on Monday, April 18th. The production of *Hamlet* was in its entirety so successful that it was revived at the Queen's Theatre in June, 1930. Since that time until his final appearance in 1945, Gielgud performed the title role over five hundred times. Following *Hamlet* in the same 1929/1930 theatre season, he played the role of Jack Worthing. Once again Gielgud achieved immediate success. He continued to play the Jack Worthing role until 1947, performing it almost as many times as his remarkable Hamlet.

Nigel Playfair offered Gielgud the part of Jack Worthing in a stylized black and white Aubrey Beardsley production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Without hesitation Gielgud accepted the role because he had played the part in an amateur production and he knew the play almost by heart. It was the kind of comedy part he had always fancied and made an ideal foil to Hamlet. His aunt, Mabel Terry Lewis, was to be Lady Blacknell.

With his slim, straight back, his meticulous elegance and air of nobility, Gielgud easily projected all the qualities of lordly languor inherent in Wilde's comedy of manners. Adjusting the angle of his hat with arrogant affectation, shooting a cuff as if he were playing an ace, dabbing fastidiously at his crocodile tears with an immaculate black-edged handkerchief from his breast pocket, Gielgud, speaking fast, flippantly, and with exquisite precision, was the perfect incarnation of Jack Worthing; Gielgud had an instinctive grasp of Wilde's wit and his times. As in Hamlet, he conveyed the

impression that he spontaneously invented by himself the lines he was given from the dramatist. In his newspaper article at that time, "Notes on the Acting of Comedy," Charles Morgan pronounced that John Gielgud and Mabel Terry Lewis "stand out as models for the true interpretation of Wilde."⁽⁴⁾

For more than two decades spanning from 1930 into the 1950's, the name of John Gielgud and Wilde comedy were synonymous. In January, 1939, he twice performed the role and directed the play at the same time at the Globe Theatre. He performed the same feat again, simultaneously acting and directing the play, at the Phoenix Theatre in October, 1942⁽⁵⁾. In January, 1947, he performed the play in a tour throughout the United States and Canada. In March, 1947, he starred in the play at the Royale Theatre, New York.

He wrote an essay on *The Importance of Being Earnest* based upon his experiences as an actor and director of the play. This essay is printed in his book, *Stage Directions* published in 1963. He knows as well as any critic of the past or present the exact quality of how the characters should be performed, expressing this ideal admirably in his essay, to wit: "The pace of the comedy must be leisurely, mannered; and everybody must, of course, speak beautifully — but the wit must appear spontaneous, though self-conscious. The text must be studied and spoken so as to arouse a cumulative effect of laughter from the audience."⁽⁶⁾ He expresses it once again thus: "The performance needs to be correct though not dry, leisurely but not dragged, solemn yet full of sparkle. ...The girls conduct their elegant quarrel with the highest good breeding. No one must ever lose their tempers or their poise. The movement throughout must be smooth, stylish, and the more elegantly the actors give and take, the more will the intrinsic quality of the wit emerge, as the grave puppet characters utter their delicate cadences and spin their web of preposterously elegant sophistication."

No actor or director is better equipped to do this than John Gielgud himself.

III

Gielgud directed *Lady Windermere's Fan* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in August 1945. He wrote an introduction to "The Limited Editions Club" version of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, published in 1973. There he expressed his basic view of the

play as follows:

It is hardly necessary to say that all Oscar Wilde's plays owe their lasting reputation to his brilliant wit. Their innate snobbishness, unfortunately, will always limit their appeal. They demand a sophisticated city audience, and a certain appreciation from that audience of the class-conscious period in which Wilde wrote. One must remember that he wrote only four comedies, and these in the course of just three years, 1892-1895. ...*An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance* are both saddled with wretched melodramatic plots, probably borrowed from Scribe and Sardou; and the dénouement on which *Lady Windermere's Fan* is built is little better, though the latter play has the advantage of a brilliantly witty third act which ends in the famous sentimental 'big' scene between mother and daughter. Mrs. Erlynne is still a most effective acting part, though it is exceedingly difficult for a modern actress to succeed in conveying both sides of the character—the wicked mocking adventuress who can capture society, and the emotional, tender mother of the two final scenes. ...The characters of Lady Windermere and her priggish husband are equally difficult to make convincing for a modern audience, and Lord Darlington is only lifted from mediocrity by a few good epigrams scattered about his part from time to time. However, as has been proved by several successful revivals of the play in the last two decades, both in London and in New York, *Lady Windermere's Fan* remains the most popular of the melodramatic comedies. (7)

On the opening night of this comedy, Gielgud noticed a figure in the front row of the stalls. It was Lady Alexander, the wife of Sir George Alexander who played the part of Lord Windermere in the original production in 1892. According to Gielgud:

She did not move during the intervals, but a number of people went up to her and she seemed to talk with animation. When the play was over and the auditorium began to empty, two men suddenly appeared from nowhere. They lifted Lady Alexander from her seat, wrapping her cloak round her as if she were a doll about to be packed into a box for Christmas, and carried her bodily past the rows of empty seats. Then, pushing open the door which led

from the stalls to the box where I was still sitting, they rushed past me with their burden up the steps leading to the anteroom. The incident was over in a flash but it was a strange farewell appearance for such a sensational personality, and it haunted me for days after. (8)

IV

Sir John Gielgud's Wildeana appears in various media: acting, directing, writing, recording, films, radio and television. Here I have assembled the wide variety of Sir John Gielgud's activities in the performing arts. (9)

His television appearances include the BBC's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, dramatised by John Osborne, and directed by John Gorrie in 1976. He played the part of Lord Henry Wotton. In 1987, Gielgud played the part of Sir Simon de Canterville in HTV's *The Canterville Ghost*, directed by Paul Bogart.

His BBC radio appearances are: *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1939, 1940, 1951, and "The missing scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*" in 1954.

He has produced two impeccable recordings: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, produced by Angel Records, (10) and *The Happy Prince*, produced by Nimbus Records. (11) The former was produced by John Gielgud, whose choice and practiced cast included Sir John himself, as Jack Worthing, Dame Edith Evans as Lady Blacknell, Pamela Brown as Gwendolen, Celia Johnson as Cecily, and Ronald Culver as Algernon. All of them speak in the manner of the mid-nineties, beautifully, gravely, and with the all-essential tone of languid elegance from the time of Oscar Wilde.

The latter recording is Sir John's complete readings of five fairy tales from Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. In 1985, Frank Granville Barker wrote about this CD recordings:

The prose has a rhythm that transforms it into music. We should remember that Wilde always found talking more attractive than writing, so that this music is appreciated to the full only when the stories are read aloud. And who could be better fitted to read these little masterpieces to us than Sir John Gielgud, whose voice is as eloquent a musical instrument as any Stradivarius?"

V

In 1995, Sir John became the honorary president of the Oscar Wilde Society of Japan, while I was the 5th president of the Society. The Society was established in Tokyo on December 6th, 1975; it was the first society of its type in the world. Since that time, lecture sessions, seminars, and academic paper presentations on Oscar Wilde have been held twice a year. The *Wilde Newsletter* has been published annually by the Society since 1984.

Wilde studies in Japan started nearly 100 years ago. Among many forerunners of modern Wilde scholarship in the Meiji Period, Dr. Hisao Honma's work in the study and translation of Wilde was outstanding. Dr. Honma, who was one of the honorary directors of the Oscar Wilde Society of Japan, met Oscar Wilde's second son, Vyvyan Holland, in London in 1928. Vyvyan made to Dr. Honma a present of a lock of his father's "hair cut off by Mr. Robert Ross after his death, 3 p.m., 30th, 1900."⁽¹²⁾ Dr. Honma was moreover so fortunate as to purchase at Dulau & Co. in London a part of the enormous remains of Wilde materials, collected by Walter Hamilton and Stuart Masson. By making use of these materials, Dr. Honma wrote and published his book, *A Study of Modern Aestheticism* in 1934. Dr. Hiroshi Hirai wrote *The Life of Oscar Wilde* in 1960, based on almost all existing books on Wilde. In 1976, Professor Koji Nishimura, the first President of the Society, published the second Japanese version of the complete works of Oscar Wilde. These achievements are just a part of the enormously extensive studies and translations of Wilde in Japan. Since Oscar Wilde was first introduced to Japan in 1883, he has been one of Japan's most popular European writers.

To internationalize our activities and prepare a celebration of the Wilde centenary in the year 2000, the Society invited Sir John Gielgud to be the honorary president. I have received a letter of acceptance from Sir John, dated December 15th, 1992. He writes:

I am most delighted to accept your very flattering offer that I should become Honorary President of your Oscar Wilde Society. It is most flattering and pleasant to know that my recordings of Wilde's work should be so much appreciated in your country and gives me the greatest pleasure. Wishing you and the Society most warm wishes and the season's greetings.

Sir John kindly recorded his readings from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on a cassette tape and sent it to me, as his message for the 17th annual summer convention of the Society.⁽¹³⁾ When I presented a paper on Wilde's charming and touching poem "Requiescat" to the Wilde study convention at Keio University in 1995, Sir John once again very generously made a recording of his poetry reading.⁽¹⁴⁾ His beautiful, artistic reading was a great adornment to my academic study. In October, 1997, when the Hokuseido Press published the *Encyclopaedia of Oscar Wilde*, the first time such an encyclopaedia had ever been published anywhere in the world, Sir John wrote a congratulatory message:

Of course I am delighted to hear of the publishing of the Wilde Encyclopedia and wish it may have great general appeal.⁽¹⁵⁾

VI

Sir John Gielgud once said in 1979 during the BBC Radio Series entitled "An Actor and his Time":

I take some pride in the fact that, after our revival with Edith Evans as Lady Blacknell at the beginning of the War, nobody put on *The Importance* for some ten years. That is one of the tests of a successful production. It shows that you have made a definitive mark with a certain play.

Sir John, born in 1904, four years after the death of Oscar Wilde, is now 95 years old. Looking back over his long life as one of the greatest actors of our time, we see that nearly sixty years have passed since the successful revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1930. His contribution to various activities has stimulated and vitalized the reevaluation of Oscar's works throughout the East and West. What a wonderful life the artist has lived! I would like to say that the current Oscar Wilde revival throughout the world is deeply indebted to Sir John Gielgud's Oscaliana on stage, page, screen, and disk.

POSTSCRIPT

I wrote this article based on the materials vouchsafed to me by Sir John Gielgud. Without Sir John's generous help and kind cooperation, it would have been impossible for a Japanese Oscar Wilde scholar to compose this. My heart-felt thanks to Sir John.

February 1st, 1999

NOTES

- (1) *Daily Telegraph*, 4th January, 1995: *The Japan Times*, 5th January 1995.
- (2) *London Times*, 15th February, 1995. Sir John sent me his original script used for his reading from *De Profundis*.
The two page script starts with "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age." And it concludes with "Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of sorrow, and its beauty. Your affectionate friend, Oscar Wilde."
- (3) Gielgud, John, *Early Stages* (London: Macmillan, 1939) 5-12.
- (4) Hayman, Ronald, *John Gielgud* (London: Heinemann, 1971) 65-66.
- (5) "During one of the London runs of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I met Lord Alfred Douglas, but found him sadly disappointing in giving me details of the original production. He had become an embittered and unattractive old man. But Wilde's son, Vyvyan Holland, whom I met on a number of occasions, was very charming and helpful." (Sir John's letter to me dated July 1993)
- (6) Gielgud, John, *Stage Directions* (New York: Random House, 1963) 78-84.
- (7) Wilde, Oscar, *Lady Windermere's Fan & The Importance of Being Earnest* (London: The Limited Editions Club, 1973) v-x.
- (8) Gielgud, John, *An Actor and His Time* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1979) 18.
- (9) Tanitch, Robert, *Gielgud* (London: Harrap, 1988) 178-191.
- (10) *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Angel Records), 35040- 35041.
- (11) *Happy Prince* (Nimbus Records) NIM 5036-5037.
- (12) *Wilde Newsletter* — Special 20th Anniversary Edition (Tokyo: The Oscar Wilde Society of Japan, 1995) 37.
- (13) "I enclose the tape I have just made of the Credo from *Dorian Gray*. I hope you will think it satisfactory." (July 1993)
- (14) "Here is a cassette of the Wilde poem 'Requiescat.' I hope you are able to use it." (October

27, 1994) Notice: Sir John's readings of the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and 'Requiescat' are available to students of English as well as Wildeans through The Hokuseido Press under the condition of using the English textbook *Oscaliana* (1989), a collection of Oscar's witty epigrams, edited by Yoshio Arai and dedicated to Sir John Gielgud.

(15) From Sir John's letter to me dated on September 10, 1996.