



John Gielgud.

## Gielgud, Sir John (1904-2000)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Sir John Gielgud has long been acknowledged as one of the greatest British actors of the twentieth century. A highly versatile performer, he played leading and character roles on both stage and screen, in every genre from classical tragedy to low comedy. While in many ways reticent about his sexuality, his experiences illustrate the significant changes in public attitude towards homosexuality over the decades.

Arthur John Gielgud was born in London on April 14, 1904 to a family with theatrical backgrounds on both sides. His father was the son of a Lithuanian actress, and, through his mother, he was the great-nephew of Dame Ellen Terry, the most renowned British actress of the nineteenth century.

Gielgud began acting in his teens, joining the Old Vic theater company in 1921, and making his film debut in the silent picture *Who Is That Man?* (1923). Soon thereafter, Gielgud became Noël Coward's understudy, eventually taking over the lead roles in Coward's play *The Vortex* (1924) and Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924).

Other successes followed quickly, as Gielgud began to play major Shakespearean roles at the Old Vic, beginning with *Romeo*, and, before he was thirty, the more mature lead roles in *Richard II*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*.

During this time, he began his first major relationship. Actor John Perry lived with him until their separation in the early 1940s.

By the 1930s, Gielgud was a box-office idol--a rather unlikely one, given his bulbous nose and unprepossessing figure; indeed, his detractors thought his *Romeo* "feminine." His great gifts were his cat-like mobility and, most notably, his expressive voice, which fellow actor Sir Alec Guinness described as being "like a silver trumpet muffled in silk."

Gielgud also became a respected stage director, launching his own distinguished company in 1937 at the Queen's Theatre. He directed and often performed in productions of Shakespeare and such classics as *School for Scandal*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In 1953, Gielgud was named in Queen Elizabeth's Coronation Honors List as the recipient of a rather belated knighthood. That this honor came about at all was a result of two of his colleagues, Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Ralph Richardson, pleading with Prime Minister Winston Churchill to remedy the grievous oversight.

As Gielgud's homosexuality was generally known if not publicly acknowledged in a time when sexual acts between men were still a criminal offense in Britain (and remained so until 1967), the government had been reluctant to bestow its approval on him.

Given the controversy over his knighthood, it was cruelly ironic that within months of receiving the honor, Gielgud was involved in an embarrassing incident that might have been fatally damaging to his career.

During the early 1950s, British legal authorities conducted a veritable persecution of gay men that resulted in criminal charges against a number of prominent figures. Gielgud was arrested outside a public lavatory in Chelsea for "importuning for an immoral purpose," and the press conducted a vitriolic campaign against him.

Gielgud nonetheless received a standing ovation upon his next stage appearance, and his arrest is thought to have been instrumental in starting the process of decriminalization. (The incident did not, moreover, prevent the Queen from granting him two further distinctions, the Companion of Honour [1977] and the Order of Merit [1996].)

But, having been so deeply humiliated, Sir John never spoke publicly about the matter or his sexuality again, and he was banned from entering the United States for the next four years.

After World War II, Gielgud's career shifted, as he began to appear with greater frequency in the character roles for which he is now best remembered. With the advent of the "Angry Young Men" of the 1950s, Gielgud's acting style was greatly out of fashion on the British stage, and, accordingly, he appeared more frequently in motion pictures.

He acted in more than 130 films in his long career, the greater portion of which were made between the 1960s and the 1980s; and in 1982 he received the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his portrayal of the sardonic butler in *Arthur*.

Finding it increasingly difficult to commit lengthy dialogue to memory, Gielgud retired from the stage in 1988, but continued to perform in films, nearly until the end of his life. At the age of eighty-six, he had his first nude scene in *Prospero's Books* (1991), and he subsequently appeared in *Shine* (1996), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), and *Elizabeth* (1998).

In 1999, he was deeply bereaved by the death of his partner Martin Hensler, with whom he had lived for nearly forty years. Within months, on May 21, 2000, Gielgud himself passed away quietly at his home in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, at age ninety-six.

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