

MICHEL SAINT-DENIS DIED ON 31 JULY 1971 Peter Hall writes:

Michel Saint-Denis was a great man, and because of that he was a great man of the theatre. When he joined the Direction of the RSC in 1962, he brought with him a legendary reputation. But because he was always ready for an adventure, if he believed in the goal, he gave all his wisdom and experience to a young and bustling company. Here was a man who knew the meaning of Stanislavsky, of Copeau, and of Brecht, not from books but from the living experience of work in the theatre. Yet no young actor's problem was ever too small for him to consider. He was very careful of people, realising that acting talent was not the result of a trick easily learned and performed, but the exposure of a whole person.

He was a superb teacher who hated dogma. Any theory had to be flexible; any system capable of withstanding his sceptical and very Gallic challenge. He could stop actors hiding in formulas. So old and young, traditionalists and revolutionaries, had to think for themselves.

His influence on the British theatre is a rich subject for scholars of the future. Everybody over 35 has been changed in some measure by his teaching. And they are certainly passing on his method for the future.

Four major theatres - The Royal Court, The National, Sadler's Wells Opera, and the RSC all owe something of their way of working to him.

My own personal debt to him is so bound up with formative years of the RSC that it must be mentioned here. He gave me ballast and direction at a much needed time. I began to understand from him the full responsibility of the theatre. It is not just to entertain. If you ask people to surrender two or three precious hours of their lives to you, you must offer them something considered, responsible, and rich with human meaning. You may fail, but it is never enough to perform the expected decoration or the expected cliché, however beautifully it is executed.

Michel was the sworn enemy of dead convention. He sought the truth. And the truth was something that changed as our lives change.

He had been ill for a long time. I must be forgiven if I do not mourn for him. Rather, I wish to celebrate on behalf of the RSC and the British theatre the fact that he existed.

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