

## FOREWORD

MICHEL SAINT-DENIS' LIFE was a quest for truth in the theatre. In this book, you will find the patterns of his life as they reflect this quest, not as high principles but as sometimes contradictory responses to different circumstances. For Michel, his own contradictions were signs of his own renewal and continuing growth.

Who was this man really? An intellectual who was instinctive; a "paysan" who was an aristocrat; a radical who was careful to conserve the past; a man of control who fought recklessly for his beliefs; sceptical and responsible; ironic and dedicated—I can hear Michel laugh at my inability to categorise him.

He was a Frenchman whose influence on British theatre has directly touched and changed all of us over the age of thirty-five and indirectly the generations to come. Four major theatres—the Royal Court, the National Theatre, the English National Opera and the Royal Shakespeare Company—all owe part of their way of working to him.

Remembering the man of the theatre, I also remember the man who in the war years turned to what was then more important than the theatre. He was head of the French Section of the BBC and, as the legendary Jacques Duchesne, spoke almost every evening to his countrymen in the name of Free France with that combination of perception, civilization and sense of the value of human communication which, they will still tell you in France, gave courage, hope and human dignity.

My own personal debt to Michel is enormous. In 1961, at my request, he joined the directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was young, messy, bustling, adventurous—all over the place—and he, a man of great wisdom, decided to join the adventure. I was a very lucky young man. He gave me ballast and direction when it was critically needed.

Perhaps English pragmatism, our "openness"—a favorite word of Michel's—attracted him to us. Our "openness" also made us love to remain amateurs, using dislike of theory as an excuse for avoiding craft, a danger of which Michel never failed to remind us. What he did for the Royal Shakespeare Company and for me, its young director, is quite incalculable. He spoke to a new generation of young actors about the European heritage, about Stanislavski, Copeau, Brecht. He had known these men and worked with them. But he did not give us cold theory. Michel hated dogma. He knew well how quickly yesterday's truth becomes today's comfortable convention, imitated unthinkingly and without effect.

He was a superb teacher who loved the young. For him, the young were instinctive and giving; he took from them as much as he gave. They were also dogmatic and obstinate; but not for long with Michel. And theory was always subjected to his sceptical (and very Gallic!) challenge. He believed, of course, in craft, in technique, but only as *means*. Acting was not a trick to be learned and then performed; it was not imitation, but rather revelation of the whole human personality. He had a deep-rooted suspicion of any "method"—old or new—of anything which stopped questions or inhibited change. *His* method was challenge and change.

It was from these years with Michel that I began to understand the responsibility of the theatre. If you invite an audience to surrender two or three hours of their lives to you, you must offer something considerable in return. It is better to fail than to repeat an empty pattern.

Michel felt that all of us in the theatre are responsible in our work not just for displaying our talents to their best advantage, but also for being at our best as people. For him, the two qualities were one, indistinguishable. Talent did not excuse unbalanced or selfish behaviour: talent was only diminished by it.

His favorite question about a colleague with whom he was about to work was: "Is he in a good state?" If he was in a good state he would do good work. If not, then he should be persuaded to have a holiday or a rest. He ought not risk wasting the time of the theatre or the theatre's audience. Michel was very careful of people.

When I think of Michel, I think also of Suria, his wife. They were inseparable—collaborators (and arguers) in everything. So this preface is a tribute to her also; for her work, for editing this book, and for her dedication in handing on what I believe to be a great tradition to a new generation at the Juilliard School in New York.

The reasons why any of us work in the theatre are complex. Many use it like the childhood nursery—an easy place to enter the world of fantasy, to hide. For Michel, the theatre was not a place to hide: it was a place to *be*. Its purpose is to reveal the man.

Michel Saint-Denis was a great man. Because of this he was a great man of the theatre. His work was based on cherishing the quality of the human being. His career is a testament to his own quality, his own integrity. He was the sworn enemy of dead convention. For Michel, the truth was something which changes as our lives change; the search for truth, never-ending. It is not a comfortable conclusion, but it is alive.

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