

## MICHEL SAINT-DENIS AND THE LONDON THEATRE STUDIO

The opening of the London Theatre Studio in January of 1936 marked the beginning of a profound transformation of British theatre. Although the early twentieth century was a period of experimentation in stagecraft on the continent, the English theatre, with few exceptions, had remained turned inward. A rising generation of brilliant theatre artists, - among them, the well-known director Tyrone Guthrie, the still largely unknown director and actor George Devine, actors John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton, Peggy Ashcroft, the trio of designers designated as Motley, - rallied round the French avant-garde director Michel Saint-Denis to convince him to develop a theatrical institution in London, be it school or company.

This new generation had fallen under the spell of Saint-Denis after seeing him and his troupe the Compagnie des Quinze perform in London. The theatricalist company, whose work exploited mime, movement, music, song, dance, poetry, explored possibilities, as yet undreamed of in English theatre.

Saint-Denis' response was the London Theatre Studio, England's first complete drama school devoted to training practitioners of every discipline - actors, designers, technicians, stage managers - with a view to the eventual formation of directors. Under Saint-Denis was a talented faculty open to new ideas. Before the LTS came into existence, design was the province of art schools. Here, it was supervised by Motley: Margaret Harris taught scene design, Sophia Harris, costume, and Elizabeth Montgomery scene painting. Saint-Denis' ultimate goal was to link the school to an experimental and professional company of his creation, which would incorporate the best of the graduating students.

So many of Saint-Denis' ideas have been absorbed into the teaching of theatre, it is difficult today to see how revolutionary they were at the time. A case in point: he wanted to train actors "to serve contemporary theatre" through developing artists capable of performing all types of classical and modern plays. The idea of service to art, basic to Saint-Denis' vision, was considered high-faluting, even risible to the British critical and commercial theatre establishment. Believing that the theatre had an important role in the functioning of society, Saint-Denis inculcated in his students a sense of the theatre as a vocation of almost religious dimensions.

His approach to theatre was synthetic and organic. Every student participated in all phases of production: acting students sewed costumes, constructed sets, and worked as assistant stage managers under the supervision of the technical faculty and students; technical students played small roles or were supernumeraries in school productions; theatre history and textual study were mandatory for all students. The LTS' acting course taught improvisation, mask work, stage movement, to name only a few of the skills introduced by Saint-Denis. Another of Saint-Denis' innovations was advanced acting classes for professionals, attended by actors of the caliber of Olivier and Alec Guinness.

The LTS' physical plant was equally innovative. Marcel Breuer, the Bauhaus architect and designer, renovated the interior of a chapel in Islington using modernist techniques. Its highlight was the two hundred seat theatre built to Saint-Denis' specifications, suitable for plays of every style.

Plans for further development of the London Theatre Studio were put on hold with the outbreak of World War II and Saint-Denis' return to France. It was reincarnated in new form after the war as part of the Old Vic Theatre Centre, (1947-1952).

*Dr. Jane Baldwin, August 2006*