

INTRODUCTION

by

SIR LAURENCE OLIVIER

'I FIND IT GOOD, but a little . . . *short*,' were the first words spoken to me by Michel Saint-Denis. I had just played Romeo for the first time and about that no more need be said; I merely quote words which to me are memorable because they have always represented for me the two most remarkable qualities of this unique 'homme de théâtre'; a rare insight and a shrewd choice of words in their language which many of his English colleagues must have envied.

I did not myself come under his direct influence until 1938. By this time his initial artistic success in this country had been established, and his influence acknowledged through his presentation of the Compagnie des Quinze and his *Noah* of John Gielgud and with his charge of the London Theatre Studio. I myself was delighted to be on the council of this and so won my introduction to the vivid lines of his theatrical imagination, and the peculiarly spell-binding qualities of his teaching. I do not think that his influences in these respects were universal, but I do think that those once fascinated by him remained so. Rightly or wrongly he excited obedience, and in my case, as with many another, with never a flick of rebelliousness. You either believed in the man or you didn't, but something told you instinctively

that you had better do so if you were to get any good out of him. This resulted in a kind of enslavement which, though not at all disagreeable, was apt to make you feel like a donkey enticed by a different carrot at every milepost along a road that kept re-appearing ahead of you just when you thought you had come to the end of it. There seemed to be no limit to the amount of new demands which he made upon his actors in things to do with characterisation, expression or dimension. My first real work with him, as I have said, was in 1938; this was in an ill-fated production of *Macbeth* at the Old Vic. The play was living up to its fateful reputation; Lilian Bayliss died the day of the first night, and this had already had to be postponed owing to the intricate nature of the production which no stage staff could have learnt in the customary time allotted, and the temporary failure of my vocal cords to find any vibratory meeting place. This failure, and that of a later production of *Twelfth Night* promoted the thought that Shakespeare was not his forte, and that the true conductorship of it was not to be found in the Frenchman's cunning (see p. 24. 'Shakespeare is not a classic'). Looking back on it after many years and many talks with him on various occasions, it has occurred to me that his sense of character building might have been too precise for the sometimes wayward tricks exacted by the great magic wand. What would a Coriolanus do if required to speak, 'The Moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle that's curded by the frost from purest snow and hangs on Dian's Temple; dear Valeria' - in character!

However, the chief good and market of his theory has ever been to find the truth *through* the verse, and as time has worn on, his direction has laid more emphasis upon a conception continent within the form, and less upon a consistency of character line which could disturb it.

Howbeit, there was something to me about his theory that provoked an interest and a fascination which no charge of failure could have diminished, and it was with the freshest kind of faith that I again placed myself entirely happily in his hands for his production of *Oedipus*. I have never been an actor who cares much for being extemporised upon by a director, rather fancying that I could do that all right for myself, but I would always respect a plan, and Michel's plans were things of rare precision. If required to move exactly two feet three inches in any direction on a certain word I found it more amusing and stimulating to rest confident that the reason and the truth in the direction would be apparent in two or three days' time, than to question it then and there.

His *Oedipus* was a success, and there is no question that Michel's successes have always been dazzling in their brilliance. His *Three Sisters* for John Gielgud, though it only ran six weeks or so in 1939, has been held to be the definitive production of this play in our profession ever since, and even its recent presentation by the Moscow Arts did nothing to obliterate its memory or in any way surpass it, and this without the unquestionable benefit of having a permanent company under his hands.

Apart from his creative genius, he is a man of extraordinary administrative capabilities. Of his theory and practice in the Arts and Sciences of theatre training, no doubt much will be learnt in the following pages. I will content myself with saying that the breaking up of the Old Vic Theatre School, the Young Vic and the Old Vic Theatre Centre led by those wonderful men Glen Byam Shaw and George Devine under the inspiration and supervision of Michel Saint Denis, was a great and dire tragedy in the life of our theatre.

Our history boasts an unfortunate amount of crass mistakes which it is proud to throw up to reflect our glories, and the decision of the powers that were at the time, that this work was dispensable, was as unimaginatively misguided as Prinny turning his back on Nelson in public, and no doubt will be passed off with the customary apologetic smirk.

Great as his loss has been to the Old Vic Theatre Centre as it was dreamed of in the years ago, and to those of us who dreamed of it, the time has not been lost to himself or to the enterprises on which he has since shed the light of his understanding, and now this seems to be reflected by a manifold and abundant fruition. Strasbourg, the Juilliard School of Music, the Lincoln Theatre Centre and the Inspectorship General of the Theatre in France; all these, and perhaps more, are now to be blest by the marriage of his intuition with his experience. Perhaps too, we early friends of those 'best years of his maturity' can indulge in speculative hopes of again being cast under the rich eloquence of his artistic apprehension, enjoying again the rough blanket of his friendship with that pineapple astringency of personality.