

PREFACE

by Sir John Gielgud

I have never really believed that acting can be taught. Yet, when I remember what a clumsy beginner I was myself and how greatly I have been influenced, all through my long stage career, by the fine directors and players with whom I have been fortunate enough to be associated, I cannot deny the advantage of teaching, provided it can be followed up by hard personal experience. Let nobody imagine, however, that he can learn to act from reading books, however intelligent or profound they may be, about the art of acting.

All creative art can be studied, of course. When one is young, one imitates the players one most admires—as artists copy great pictures in the galleries. But, as the theater is an imitation of life, it is as ephemeral and intangible as life itself (in a way that music, painting, and literature are not), and it changes in every decade and generation. One cannot copy acting, or even what seems to be the method of acting. One has to experiment and discover one's own way of expression for oneself, and one never ceases to be dissatisfied. The quality and development of one's work changes with the degree of responsiveness and sureness of technique which one has acquired over the years. One is affected, too, by the style and quality of the work in hand, the respect or dissat-

isfaction one may have with one's material, and by one's own personal reactions to directors and fellow players, to the author, to the play itself.

There are so many lessons in the theater to be learned: application, concentration, self-discipline, the use of the voice and body, imagination, observation, simplification, self-criticism. Often the "tradition" of the theater seems to be at odds with the modern expression of original contemporary acting. I believe that one is as important as the other and that one should study and learn from both. One's basic technical equipment should be perfected in order to enable one to relax, to simplify, to cut away dead wood.

Just as one moves, in real life, from one phase to another, experiencing almost imperceptible developments along the road as one gets older and one's personal and professional experiences lead one to make new discoveries about oneself and life in general, so it is hard to pin down on paper any practical guide to help an individual actor to select the best means of discovering the wellsprings of his art—how he can draw from his own sensitivity the power to command an audience and fascinate them by his interpretation of emotions given him in a particular form by the playwright and presented by him with the guidance of the director. Since he is not the sole creator, but only an instrument working in an uncertain medium (gloriously flexible yet desperately fallible), he needs all the more to have his physical and vocal means under strict control. He must think about his work in the many hours when he is not actually practicing it, about how to cherish his powers of imagination so that he can summon them at will just at the time he needs them. He has to perform before a living audience eight times a week, after achieving a more or less finished performance in the three or four short weeks at his disposal for rehearsal, working perhaps with a director and actors with whom he may not be in sympathy. Even before this he may have had to convince a director, in a few short minutes, that he is competent to play a role for which many others are also being considered.

This book is full of good and useful observations on the study and practice of acting. It says, simply and clearly, many wise things about the art of the theater. Stanislavski's two great books are complicated and sometimes difficult—at any rate for a young actor—to digest in full. Here is an admirable précis of some of his practical wisdom; a still further proof, if one is needed, of the legacy he has left behind to carry on his own example and devotion to the theater which he served so greatly.