

Funeral Address given by Sir Alec Guinness

At The Service in Memory
Of SIR TYRONE GUTHRIE
St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London.
16th June 1971.

William Tyrone Guthrie
"A great tree has fallen".

Those were the words used by an old family friend, on the rather Chekhovian Guthrie estate, when it became apparent that death had claimed Tony Guthrie. Tony was found sitting in a wooden chair in his study, his hands folded on his lap.

There are some names - not many - which when they crop up over a dinner table, on a walk, or round a fire, immediately seem to take charge of the conversation. Guthrie has been pre-eminently such a name for over thirty-five or forty years; giving rise to a wealth of anecdote, laughter, admiration, love and speculation. The strength of his personality has been a vitalising influence on all who knew him. And will continue to be so.

That he was a very great man of the theatre, whose ideas and energies have spread across the English-speaking world - and not only the English-speaking - we all know. He was, I suppose, our own, original, home grown 'enfant terrible' of the theatre; galvanising, delighting and shocking a whole generation of performers and spectators long before more recent 'terrible children' were born or thought of. And he showed no signs, even at the age of seventy, of relinquishing his provocative activities.

The range of his achievements in opera and drama is formidable. Who's Who in the Theatre lists 96 productions, not including those he did for the Scottish National Players between 1926-1928, or at the Cambridge Festival Theatre from 1929-1930. Add to that several works for radio, and a handful of books and plays. Everyone will have their own favourite productions: my own list would certainly include

The Anatomist, *Love's Labour's Lost*, the revelation of *Measure for Measure* and *The Cherry Orchard* with Laughton, Flora Robson and the Liveseys, *Henry V* with Olivier, *Peer Gynt* with Richardson and *All's Well* at Stratford, Ontario. He enjoyed huge success at the New York Metropolitan Opera, apart from his achievements at Covent Garden and the Wells, at the Old Vic and in Australia. He has left behind two splendid theatre buildings in Ontario and in Minneapolis and greatly influenced the new Playhouse at Sheffield and the Octagon at Perth, Australia.

He was marvellous with the young, giving them much needed confidence. Sometimes he saw - or thought he saw - talent in unlikely places, but whoever came under the spell of his charm and energy emerged the richer.

But he was not only a great man of the theatre, he was great in himself. Extremely witty - sometimes devastatingly so; generous with money and time to a fault; interested in all men and loving most; of wide ranging imagination and sympathy. I think the clue to his greatness lies in the fact that he was never "all things to all men" but, on the contrary, always totally himself to all men. He never cut his cloth or trimmed his sails to suit other personalities, but gave wholly himself. A man of the greatest integrity. I am sure he was the same to all of us who knew and loved him. We may have slightly different memories of events, or stories, or witticisms, or kindnesses, but basically they are all the same. He had great personal humility, and rather hoped for it in others. And riding above all else was his laughter - rich, ironic, kind and memorable. I have always associated both the Guthries with laughter.

Some eighteen years ago, when the building of the Stratford Ontario Theatre was supposed to be under way, Tony and I visited the site. The eventual theatre was impressive, but what greeted us that morning, a matter of weeks before the first night, was a hole in the ground about six foot deep and ten foot across. I was horrified and expressed my feelings. Tony fixed me with his bright hawk eye, and with the merest

inclination of the head, said, "Rise above it!" It was a phrase he constantly used and it was applied to almost anything irritating from a cup of tepid and revolting canteen coffee to a failed spotlight, or the total disappearance of all costumes and scenery on tour. He was even known to tell an audience to "rise above it" when an evening's entertainment looked like proving unsatisfactory. A clutch of Scandinavian crowned heads, before the war, were similarly advised when hustled, on a night of terrible storm, from Elsinore Castle to the ballroom of the Marienlyst Hotel for the opening of the Olivier *Hamlet*. Incidentally I think it was the excitement, improvisation and experience of that particular night which sparked off his passion for the open stage, and his dismissal of the proscenium arch. "Rise above it" must have been heard all over the United States and Canada, by the Finns in Helsinki where he rather surprisingly coupled productions of *Oedipus* and *The Merry Widow*, in Tel Aviv and Australia, as well as in St. Martins Lane and the Waterloo Road.

Wherever he and Judy found themselves they made a very recognizable home, and dispensed the warmest and most beautifully casual hospitality. It could be a covered punt on the Avon (in which they lived for weeks on end) where a meal would be washed down with brandy swigged from a Heinz Tomato Soup tin, or at Annaghmakerrig, with its fine lake and relaxed air, or the sooty draughty house in Burnley during the latter years of the war, or - and above all and blessed is its memory - the small ramshackle flat in Old Buildings, Lincoln's Inn. It was an oasis for many of us for advice, to discuss plans, or just for sheer pleasure and laughter. And there were not only Tony and Judy, welcoming, but also their beloved and much discussed Myrtle. I fear it was too much, even for the most enchanted guest, to keep pace with Myrtle's vast number of kittens.

His interests were wide and very human. He loved and had a knowledge of wild flowers and of trees, and retained a boyhood passion for steam railway engines. He was fond of music and enjoyed singing. He sang charmingly rather loudly, very clearly, and sonorously. He was very caught up with Freudian and Jungian psychology, and greatly influenced by Dr. Ernest Jones, on whose theories he based at least two or three productions. He admired Victoriana, loved cats and travel and talk, and gave his full attention to people - and particularly humble people. It was typical of him, on a very cold night, surreptitiously to push a hotwater bottle across the stage to a shivering Titania.

Rehearsals were always immensely lively, with never a slack or unconcentrated moment. I can hear his fingers snapping up and down the stalls - a sure sign that he was going to call out "Faster, faster!" He was a demon for speed in speech. And there were the inspirational moments of genius. Andrew, Cruickshank reminded me the other day of how, in *Henry VIII* at Stratford with Anthony Quayle, Guthrie told the whole tale of the Reformation, and the break with Rome, in a piece of silent business which took only seconds to act. Of course rehearsals weren't all fun all the time and there were sometimes moments of friction. He could be very school-masterly. Personally I don't think I got through any production with him without a bicker somewhere along the line. But he was always the one who made the gesture of reconciliation - usually by some extravagantly absurd and funny statement. But once we had a row which, through my fault, reached proportions whereby we were non-speakers for two days. It all had to do with the severed head of Hastings in *Richard III*. Tony's gesture of reconciliation was to give me, very solemnly, a small brown paper bag of rather squashed cherries.

He was a firm advocate of decentralisation in almost everything. The present crop of civic theatres, springing up throughout the country, are a direct result, I feel, of his spadework and the voicing of his ideas over the past twenty years. His concern for the high unemployment figures around his home in County Monaghan led to his organising, a few years ago, a jam factory which employed nearly forty people and relieved much hardship in the district. Unfortunately, outside misfortunes forced this

into liquidation earlier this year. Tony lost a considerable amount of his own money in the venture but that didn't disturb him at all - only the distress of the surrounding unemployment again. You can imagine how his memory is revered round and about Annaghmakerrig, where he was very much a father figure. And yet, for all his star quality, and the profound influence he has had on so many diverse characters, I doubt if he thought anything of himself. He gave of his energy and, rather exasperatingly, took too little care of his health. His wife said that if the Ladies Guild of Timbuctoo wrote, suggesting he might give a talk over tea, he would consult his diary and then write back, "Delighted! Can fit you in nicely on Thursday, on my way from Minneapolis to Belfast".

He was an Honorary Doctor of Literature of St. Andrews, and Chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast. He was extremely pleased, I think, with his title of doctor and was known on the other side of the Atlantic as Dr. Guthrie.

On one occasion this led to a minor embarrassment. Some years ago, staying in a vast hotel in Brooklyn, the telephone went in the middle of the night and the operator said "Dr Guthrie, there's a gentleman in Room 204 having a heart attack. Would you go along please?" So, like a flash Tony went along. When I asked him, some days later, what he had done, he said "Made him a strong cup of tea and held his hand. Much better in the morning. Advised him to call in his own doctor." Tony informed the hotel staff that he was not a medical man. But sure enough, at 3 am the following morning, the telephone went "Dr. Guthrie: The lady in Room 903 has got Spanish 'flu!" The conversation from then on is possibly not suitable for St. Paul's Covent Garden.

Those of us who were associated with the first season in Ontario witnessed a heart-warming phenomenon, largely due to Tony Guthrie's personality, and that was the welding together of a rather sharply divided community. These were Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics and Baptists and so on - including also that sect which feels it vanity to wear buttons - and none of them had much to do with each other. With the building of the theatre and Tony's 6 foot 4 inches striding about and smiling on all, strict teetotallers began to keep whiskey and gin in their houses for visiting Anglicans, Baptists - not greatly given to colour - bought and planted geraniums round the theatre and, at the dedication, Catholics deigned to join in the Lord's Prayer with everyone else. A Guthrie triumph.

A great and giving man. Our hearts go out to Judy. She has given me permission to recount the following piece of dialogue, which is totally Guthriesque. When the doctor arrived just after his death, he looked at Tony and said "Surprising humility" Judy replied, "Yes, surprising humility but quite tiresome." The doctor thought for a moment and then said, "Surprising humility, and - yes - quite tiresome!"

William Tyrone Guthrie. May his noble soul rest in happy peace, in the God he trusted.