

1989

DEATH OF LAURENCE OLIVIER

1989: Lord Olivier, the colossus of British theatre, has died at the age of 82. No single actor of this century has matched him for status, reputation or popular appeal. As Laurence Olivier he dominated the West End in a series of Shakespeare performances throughout the Thirties, and became an international star with his Hollywood triumphs.

In the Forties he was Sir Laurence Olivier, a theatrical knight whose filmed Shakespeare won Oscars and universal acclaim and whose continued theatre career established him as the leading actor of our times. In the Fifties he lent his support to the new wave of British dramatists and the experiments of the Theatre of the Absurd, and in the Sixties he became the founding director of the Chichester Festival and then, for ten years, head of the first National Theatre Company. He crowned his lifetime achievement in Shakespeare with a definitive King Lear for television and by becoming the first actor to become a Life Peer.

For the last fifteen years of his life he was a very sick man. He suffered from cancer of the prostate, appendicitis, an obstructed kidney, thrombosis, pneumonia and polymyositis - a muscle wasting disease. He gave up performing onstage because of his ill health, and yet he continued working in films. By the time of his death he had appeared in 122 films - a large number of them in recent years, and his recent films were mostly mediocre, and some were downright dreadful. He was driven by a determination to raise as much money as he possibly could for his wife, Joan Plowright and their three children (plus a son from his first marriage). He said "When you know what poverty is about, as I did with my father, you don't want it ever to happen again". He also was driven by a feeling that if he ever stopped working, he would die. A month before his death he sent a recorded message to the 2,000 people campaigning to save the Rose Theatre. And six months before that he made his very last film, a version of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem.

However, the last few years of second-rate films are as nothing compared to six decades of the most brilliant work. Sir Peter Hall said "He was perhaps the greatest man of the theatre ever. His genius shaped the last 50 years". Richard Eyre said he was "the greatest actor of this century". Sir Alec Guinness called him "a giant among actors, and a proud ornament to the whole profession".

West End and Broadway lights were dimmed for an hour. Every play performance in the West End either opened or closed with a tribute from the stage. Flags flew at half-mast at Stratford's Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the National Theatre. The Prime Minister paid a tribute. The Queen sent a message of condolence to his family. This was, indeed, a moment in history.



The Salvador Dalí painting of Laurence Olivier as Richard III

The Laurence Olivier Family Estate

Cameron does it again! Rose remains discovered - 400 years on

1989: With his latest smash-hit success at Drury Lane, "Miss Saigon", and with the unparalleled world-wide success of productions of "Cats", "Les Miserables" and "Phantom of the Opera", producer Cameron Mackintosh has become the most widely known and most successful theatre producer of all times. Mr Mackintosh has just announced that he will provide funds for a Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University. The first Professor will be Stephen Sondheim, who is felt by many to be the most important composer and lyricist currently writing for the musical theatre.

1989: In the space of a few months the sites of the original Rose and Globe Theatres have been unearthed. The Elizabethan theatres have been discovered close to each other just south of Southwark Bridge. The discovery of the Rose was made when developers were digging foundations for an office block on the site. Their initial plan to cover over the site and to continue with the office building were greeted with outrage by the theatrical profession.

Equity members launched a vigil at the site, lying down in the path of lorries to prevent any further building. The Theatrical Management Association organised a march to the site to show solidarity with the Equity Campaign.

The Globe site does not seem to have any remains of the original theatre in evidence, but the Rose site is a spectacular find. The original layout of 1587 and the revised building arrangement when the Rose was enlarged in 1592 are evident from the remains of the site. Archaeologists even uncovered some hazelnut shells dropped in the auditorium nearly 400 years ago. Theatre supporters unanimously believe this site must be preserved and that any attempt to build on it would be act of unprecedented cultural vandalism. A major campaign to enlist support of the general public has been launched. The fight is on to Save the Rose!