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Sir Peter Hall in rehearsal for Twelfth Night, 2011

THE MAKING OF THEATRICAL HISTORY: SIR PETER HALL & THE HISTORY PLAYS

Dame Janet Suzman

reflects on her role as Joan La Pucelle in Peter Hall's epoch-making Wars of the Roses, and describes how, with his friend John Barton, Hall reinvented Shakespeare for the 20th century and beyond

Between starting to write this memory of Peter Hall and finishing it, my memories sustained a blow: John Barton died. He died just two days ago as I write this, and I find I cannot write about Peter without including him, since it was their combined genius which launched the great cycle about English kings which has made theatrical history. So his presence is still strongly in my mind, and I am greatly saddened by his sudden absence. Peter's demise has already been absorbed into that subliminal place where past presences reside, but John still has to travel there. I feel

his lack; I owe him everything I know about acting in Shakespeare.

So now, onwards. Or rather, backwards.

Long, long ago, 1962 it was, and fresh-ish out of drama school, I was just about to go onstage at the Manchester Library Theatre (it doesn't exist any more, but has morphed into the fine modern playhouse called HOME) in a Beverley Nichols farce. It was a matinee, and the prompt corner where I stood quietly was dark except for a small blue spotlight for the stage manager on the prompt-book. She hissed at me as I stood

there all wired up for my entrance: 'Guess who's in the audience?' 'I don't want to know', I hissed back, somewhat shaken, and sailed off into the lights. One never wants to know who is out there.

To cut a long story short, it turned out to be John Barton, scouting the length and breadth of the country, I was later told, looking for likely talents for the season that he and Peter Hall were about to launch. The newly warranted Royal Shakespeare Company was to open with an all-day marathon, to be called the *Wars of the Roses*. John's editorial genius had been to compress the uneven

and youthful three parts of *Henry VI* into two and then sweep the whole gory story along into the achieved brilliance of *Richard III*: Part I in the morning, called 'Henry VI', Part II in the afternoon, called 'Edward IV' and *Richard III* in the evening. A full day of gore and politics.

The Sunday a week after that matinee I was in Stratford when I was summoned to an audition at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The huge empty auditorium was quite dark, only a working light puddling the centre of the vast stage with a little visibility. I stood there in that half-light, oddly calm, and heard a voice from the darkened stalls saying, 'Start when you're ready', and I thought I was, so I did. I had chosen the shortest passage I could find: Julia's letter from *Two Gents*. Silly little piece really, but it tells a funny story. I must have been calm due to ignorance: I simply had no idea what a huge project was being plotted for this house.

When I was done, I stood there and heard fierce whisperings coming from the stalls. Two voices, maybe even – yikes! – three? I thought I'd just disappear while they debated my fate, so I tiptoed into the wings and roamed about in the blackness trying not to crack my shins on bits of set. Then I heard a voice calling 'Jaanet, Jaanet – where are you ...?' A nice voice, a warm, nice voice. I mewed 'Here ... I'm here'. 'Where?', slightly annoyed now. 'I'm coming ...', I bleated, holding my arms robotically ahead of me to avoid crashing into things. A hand took my arm, and the voice said, 'We want you to play La Pucelle'. 'Who?', I asked, such was my ignorance. 'Shakespeare's version of Joan of Arc, silly', said he. He steered me back onto the lit stage and I saw the big grin on his nice friendly face. No beard then. Clean-shaven, baby-cheeked. 'And Lady Anne', said he. I knew who she was, at least. I smiled ear to ear like I was eating watermelon. It turned out I was the luckiest girl in the world, and it turned out the warm voice was Peter's. I was in his thrall from then on.

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What a piece of good fortune had come my way, to be a part of his Grand Projet. What a stunning introduction to the Shakespearian world he lived with, by and from. His love of structured language was obsessive and profound, his concentration on meaning and sense a revelation. He and John Barton were letting Shakespearian verse out of its rhetorical, pastoral, musical strait-jacket and kicking it into the rough and tumble highways of human beings speaking what they feel, not what they 'ought to say'. Finding the *meaning* of verse instead of the *sound* of verse, with stresses and rhythms that revealed intentions instead of obscuring them under poetical cadences, that was the new way, certainly to me. Good actors will always and instinctively make their own very individual sense, and not many of them will have taken lessons from Hall or Barton, but the lessons in finding clues in the text as if you were a detective solving a murder raised the standard of the huge company – 76 at first count – no end.

I was a *tabula rasa* with only two attempts at Shakespeare: the entire English faculty as 'the blocks, the stones, the worse than senseless things' production of *Julius Caesar* at my alma mater, the University of the Witwatersrand; and a Manchester Library Theatre production of *Twelfth Night*, with Patrick Stewart as Antonio. I am much relieved that the recording of stage productions for film had not yet evolved – some things should not be revisited years

after the live event. I still have doubts about archiving every production of note, but let that pass.

Barton was Hall's bosom friend from university days. He was indisputably tied to Peter's project, and without his brilliant editorship and perspicacity, the adventure could never have launched so mightily. Between them they stopped actors singing their lines, and thus Shakespeare was kicked into the 20th century. Their rigorous attention to meaning changed the speaking of verse radically. John's famous rule, 'text IS character', nailed the way good actors have probably always worked, but it became an indispensable road sign for those travelling towards their character. This 'mining' of the verse had started at Cambridge under George (Dadie) Rylands, founder of Argo recordings, all of them strongly influenced by Downing College's famous literary pragmatist F.R. Leavis.

It's worth recalling that golden decade – 1963 onwards – was not hamstrung by unionized hours; we worked like maniacs, sometimes throughout the nights and into grey dawns over the Avon. No one seemed to mind much – the play's always the thing. I remember tiptoeing through the stage-door in fear of being summoned into John Barton's running verse class. He kept a sharp eye out for anyone with 20 minutes of free time, otherwise spent rehearsing or memorizing lines and, if you were La Pucelle, learning to handle a humungously heavy two-hander sword she could not otherwise have been able to pick up with one. John liked the clang and sparkle of iron in his stage fights, and demanded of the RSC's armourer that the mixture of metals should have the right amount of iron in the steel to get the sparks flying. He once famously knocked himself out with an overly energetic overhead swipe which caught the back of his head. But if the actors were hard worked, Peter Hall was harder worked than all of us put together, for it was his vision of the architecture of the trilogy that was

shaping a stunning spectacle that no one but he would see clearly until it was ready for the world. Ready it was one morning, sent off with sips of champagne at a 10am curtain-up, and 11 hours later came the cheers of an excited audience.

There were two unforgettable performances which carried the plays along: the gangly vulnerability of the young David Warner as King Henry and the mischievous power of Ian Holm's York. David used to blush sometimes on the stage, visibly flush with feeling, touchingly open to weakness and agony of mind, while Ian's nimble wit won the day – and then chillingly lost it – as murderous Richard. An unforgettable image stays in my retina of Ian sitting in a hunch-backed bunch on a bench to the side of the stage, watching his newly crowned king-brother Edward IV proclaim everlasting peace, and then turning his head with a bad-boy grin towards the audience. He takes them in and a knowing 'Hah!' explodes quietly from him, just as the lights are fading. A huge laugh burst from an audience who knew very well what mayhem this mischievous Richard of York would wreak with the evening's play, *Richard III*.

Peter's designer John Bury had devised a set of iron-clad magic for the three plays: a lowering glinting set in dull metal and a floor of steel mesh, so that swords screeched and boots clanged and battlements shone metallic in the cross-lights. The two gigantic periaktoi on stage left and stage right swung slowly inwards and outwards, revolving as they went, describing the space for each unfolding scene, and a huge shield-shaped metal table rose from the floor for iron-clad men to sit in council for the king. And the queen, incomparable Dame Peggy Ashcroft rolling her Gallic 'r's as Margaret of Anjou, sexy and dangerous. During the first full dress rehearsal of *Henry VI, 1* – now clad in a heavy silvered string version of chain-mail as Joan La Pucelle – peered through the gloomy light backstage and saw a young girl sitting straight-backed on

a skip, a small crown atop her long hair, very still, just waiting. 'Who's that?', I whispered to a friend. 'It's Peggy, you nit', said she. Dame Peggy in her 60s, suddenly like a teenager. Mysteries. First dress rehearsals, when the actor at last changes into the costume that transforms them into the person they will be, can be magical things.

Night and day, night and day, the trilogy unfurled from Peter's mind, but he had overworked himself to such a point that one day he collapsed with exhaustion and had to be removed on a Lancastrian iron bier to his own softer bed. The work in creating this standard of company work had poleaxed him. But it had raised the standard higher than it had ever been, perhaps since Shakespeare in his Globe, creating an ensemble of acting power not heard since. Peter's dream was a European one of shared long-term work, with star actors alternating their major roles with supporting parts in repertoire, and a core company of actors to keep the bar high.

During those early years at Stratford and The Aldwych, the RSC's London base, the power was potent. Peter went on from that

stupendous beginning to many great things – getting the National Theatre going, for one and, besides, some great opera productions and, germane to this publication, his memorable be-masked *Oresteia* in the theatre of Epidaurus. But for me, perhaps because Peter shaped my thinking about acting in Shakespeare so profoundly, and perhaps because he convinced the cultural tumult of the 60s to embrace a 400-year-old mode of speech that resonates with it – none was so fine as the seven history plays which lit up his first incumbency at Stratford. Ironically, it was John Barton and his passion for ancient Greek myths staged and rewritten and reworked and made cogent – remember *The Greeks* at The Aldwych in 1980? – whose classical legacy might be the more powerful. Who knows? We are such stuff as dreams are made on ... maybe it hardly matters.

Sir Peter Hall
22 November 1930 to
11 September 2017

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Sir Peter Hall rehearsing The Oresteia, 1981