

Actor Paul Scofield (January 21, 1922-March 19, 2008): ‘I’m an actor because I’m good at it’

By Paul Bond
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Any consideration of an actor’s legacy must ask: What impact did he or she have on the art and craft? What can younger artists learn from his or her life? Paul Scofield, who has died aged 86, leaves a body of work uncorrupted by anything extraneous. He remained uninterested in anything smacking of celebrity. He wrote no autobiography and appeared on no chat shows. He had little time for after-show parties, preferring to catch the train home to his family. He was a reluctant interviewee, and did not even attend the Oscar ceremony in person to accept his Best Actor award for *A Man For All Seasons* (1966).

He was not particularly ascetic. Personal reminiscences conjure up a warm and funny man. Simon Callow, who starred alongside Scofield in *Amadeus*, wrote, “He had no small talk, but then he had no big talk either.” Rather, these things were not as interesting to him—or as rewarding—as acting. He showed no ambition to direct, nor did he spend much time in theatre administration. His passion, his talent, was acting.

Directing him in *Quiz Show* (1994), Robert Redford noticed that Scofield’s homesickness did not undermine his “complete joy in acting” once on set. He also seems to have felt that becoming a “star personality” and living life in public would interfere with his acting. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to wave personality about like a flag and become labelled,” he once said.

He declined a knighthood at least twice. His reasons were not political, but he was unconvinced by the need for a new title. He accepted a CBE in 1956 on the grounds that this was “an honour with a hint of hard work about it.” He was concerned to maintain “a certain distance and not to lose altogether the gypsy feeling that acting had in the past. Too much respectability can take the edge away.” He was wary of being tied to an “official” theatre for the same reason.

He was not interested in, as one critic put it, trading “fame for money.” Scofield’s best performances have a moral seriousness that puts other, lesser work out of mind. He did do things that were beneath his talent, although not many of them, and he brought the same seriousness to them as to his best work. The theatre critic Michael Billington once remarked, “I can’t think of a single meretricious piece of work Scofield ever did.”

The most astonishing part of Scofield’s career was spent in the theatre. He explained this from his “obsession” for the stage. “A long time ago,” he said, “I realised I should have to choose between films and theatre—and the theatre has always come first. I’m not an actor because I feel the need to say ‘Look at me, aren’t I clever?’ I don’t have an inferiority complex I must disguise. I’m an actor because...oh, because I’m good at it. I can say honestly and, I hope, without self-satisfaction, that I’m happy with my lot.”

He did work in other media. There were several film and television appearances that captured his mesmeric qualities to some extent, although he claimed to find the camera somewhat intrusive. Happily, given his

vocal powers, he also made many radio broadcasts and audio recordings. His film work (and his occasional lapse of judgement in theatre) is overshadowed by his extraordinary work in classical plays, particularly Shakespeare. Film directors appealed to the authority of those performances. Nicholas Hytner cast him as Danforth in *The Crucible* (1996); he played Charles VI of France in Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989); and Franco Zeffirelli cast him as the Ghost in *Hamlet* (1990).

He made fewer than 20 films, not all of them of great merit. The total seems unexpectedly large, given the dominance of his work in theatre. His friend Richard Burton once said that, “Of the ten greatest moments in the theatre, eight are Scofield’s.” Four years ago, a poll of actors at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) voted his *King Lear* of 1962 the greatest Shakespearean performance ever.

Playwright David Hare said he knew “at least three playwrights who will tell you they realised they wanted to make their lives in theatre when they saw Paul Scofield play *King Lear*.” He called it “the greatest classical performance of my lifetime: radical, humane, and incredibly moving.”

Scofield was born in 1922 in Sussex, in southern England, barely 10 miles from where he spent most of his adult life. He was not much of a scholar, but he discovered acting at Varndean School for Boys in Brighton. Playing Juliet, aged 13, was his turning point: “thenceforward there was nothing else I wanted to do,” he said later.

He seems also to have decided then the sort of actor he wanted to be. He was never enthusiastic about discussing the meaning of his acting, but he once explained that he enjoyed “the loss of myself” and the discovery of “a writer’s human creation.” He was not interested in what he called “effective” acting. “I didn’t want to make effects,” he explained, “I wanted...to leave an impression of a particular kind of human being.”

He left school at 17. Exempted from conscription by his crossed toes, he trained at Croydon Repertory Theatre until it closed, when he moved to the London Mask Centre. When the school was evacuated to Devon, he went with the semi-professional company run by tutors Eileen Thorndike and Herbert Scott. He was based in Birmingham for much of the war, working with Basil C. Langton’s Travelling Repertory Company in plays by Shakespeare, Shaw, and Steinbeck. Playing Horatio in *Hamlet* in 1942, he met Joy Parker. They married the following year.

During this period he learned his craft. Great actors who make striking and infrequent cinematic appearances often appear to have emerged fully formed. Scofield’s vocal prowess seemed effortless, but it was the product of hard work. A great admirer of John Gielgud, the other pre-eminent verse speaker of the twentieth century stage, Scofield originally thought that finding the sense of verse was enough. He came to realise that the rhythm of the verse had a vital importance in conveying the meaning to an audience. At his peak, critics have spoken of him

watching to ensure that every syllable was effective.

He treated verse-speaking as a form of making music. "You use the notes of a writer as a musician does," he once said, "but the actor is, in effect, his own instrument. Whereas two violinists will always make the same tune from a row of notes, two actors will make different tunes from the same piece of text. This is not something you can learn in classes. It's actually doing it."

Not a conventionally handsome man, but tall and striking, with a mature face and a rich voice, he was able to play characters beyond his natural age range. The war gave him the opportunity to play older characters earlier than he would have otherwise. His development was rapid. At the end of the war, Barry Jackson invited him to join the Birmingham Repertory Company. Jackson also recruited the precocious 20-year-old director Peter Brook, who was to become Scofield's greatest collaborator.

Jackson took over the Stratford Memorial Theatre after the war, taking Scofield and Brook with him. Brook directed Scofield in several landmark productions: His Armado in *Love's Labours Lost* (1946) was a remarkably mature performance, but even better was his Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* the following year. Not for the last time, Brook threw out most of the scenery during a dress rehearsal to create an "empty space." Peter Ustinov likened Scofield's reading of the Queen Mab speech to "an elusive nocturne from a man who didn't like to be referred to as a poet, talking in his sleep."

His first *Hamlet* (1948) was a hit. One critic wrote that he had not seen "a performance less externalised, able to communicate suffering without emotional pitch and toss; he had that within which passeth show."

He was also attracting commercial attention. Screen tests were enthusiastically received in Hollywood, with Darryl Zanuck describing him as "The best [actor] I've seen since John Barrymore."

Characteristically, his commercial West End breakthrough came under Brook's direction. In Jean Anouilh's *Ring Around the Moon* (1949), Scofield played the twins, using them to explore his full range as an actor. Few actors are plausible playing two different, related, characters. Scofield seized the chance to demonstrate his immense capacity for creating real characters, as he would again on television in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1994) playing old Martin and the malevolent Antony.

The early 1950s saw classical theatre flourish on the commercial stage. Scofield joined Gielgud and Brook for a season at the Lyric Hammersmith, which again stretched his range. Gielgud directed him as Richard II (a part that Gielgud had defined for a generation of actors), and as Witwood in the Restoration Comedy *The Way of the World*. The highlight was Brook's production of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*, with Gielgud and Scofield as the co-conspirators.

His second *Hamlet* (1955), part of a season with Brook, became the first English-language production to visit Moscow since 1917. During the visit, Scofield met Olga Knipper, the leading lady of the Moscow Arts Theatre under Chekhov and Konstantin Stanislavski. His last stage appearance would be reading their letters at the Almeida (2001).

This *Hamlet* was followed by an adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, in which Scofield played the "whisky priest." Brook was concerned that concentrating on performances for *Hamlet* was holding Scofield back in rehearsals for *The Power and the Glory*. *Hamlet* closed on a Saturday night. On the Monday, at a dress rehearsal for the Greene adaptation, Brook describes "a small man" entering the room. "He was wearing a black suit, steel-rimmed glasses and holding a suitcase. For a moment we wondered why this stranger was wandering onto our stage. Then we realised it was Paul, transformed." He had been unable to inhabit the part until *Hamlet* was behind him. He won an *Evening Standard* award for *The Power and the Glory*. Laurence Olivier, rarely generous to other actors, described it as "the best performance I can remember seeing."

This flexibility enabled him to ride out the changes in British theatre in

the late 1950s without any of the disorientation experienced by older colleagues. He was just getting into his stride. The role of Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (London 1960, New York 1961) defined his performances for popular audiences, winning him a Tony on his first Broadway appearance. In many ways, More is a typical Scofield character, wrestling with questions of moral integrity and authority in a humane, unsentimental and convincing manner. Director Fred Zinnemann insisted on Scofield for the part in the movie. The studio had wanted Olivier, who enjoyed a higher profile.

Scofield's range also made him appear a much more modern actor than the other great classical performers. Aged 40, he turned to one of the physically most difficult of Shakespearean roles, King Lear, directed by Brook in a modern production for the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was one of his greatest triumphs, bringing all of his humanity and intelligence to bear. Irene Worth, who played Goneril, marvelled at the speed of thought he portrayed, describing it as "thought in an electric blender." Director Peter Hall, who worked with Scofield later at the National Theatre, has called Scofield the first post-war actor to strip his character of glamour and sentimentality.

The 1960s saw landmark performances in difficult classical pieces (his Timon of Athens for John Schlesinger was a defining performance, while his Uncle Vanya drew comparisons with Michael Redgrave) and contemporary writing (he shone in John Osborne's *Hotel in Amsterdam*, and lit up Charles Dyer's quickly dated *Staircase*).

Through the 1970s and 1980s, Scofield continued to combine commercial and classical theatre. He worked extensively at the National Theatre under Peter Hall, not always with the happiest of results. *Othello* (1980) was disappointing, but *Amadeus* (1979), in which he played Salieri to Simon Callow's Mozart, was a huge success.

Callow's reminiscences of *Amadeus* highlight what made Scofield an extraordinary actor. He describes the moment when they finally got in front of an audience: "He and the audience were making love and woe betide anyone who came between them." This was not selfishness. When Callow "finally got the hang of it and attempted a little gentle love-making" himself, Scofield "was more than happy to encourage" him.

One night, unprompted, he told Callow that he would never play Salieri with anyone else but him. He remained faithful to this pledge.

Scofield was choosy about which parts he accepted, but the choices were not always successful. He gave two great late performances, as Captain Shotover in Shaw's *Heartbreak Hotel* (1992), and the title role in Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* at the National in 1996. In part, his inspiration stemmed from his refusal to be restricted. "As an actor," he said, "I don't admit to any limitations. In rehearsal one comes up against apparently insuperable barriers, but if one can imaginatively get past them, over-reach one's natural reach, it is astonishing how elastic one can become."

This insistence on continuing to find something new, on refusing to fall back into old habits, is the mark of a great artist. Writing about *Timon of Athens*, Scofield described the "physical process of rehearsal and performance" as "the actor's most reliable means of informing himself." The actor must be "prepared for anything," must be "presumptuous." He trusted the rehearsal process to reveal clues to the depth of a character. This can put increasingly greater strains on an actor, as Scofield acknowledged late in life: "the more you know, the more nervous you become. The risks are much bigger." He continued to work in the same way on radio. He remained a serious and humane artist to the end of his life, never having abandoned his determination to leave "an impression of a particular kind of human being."

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