

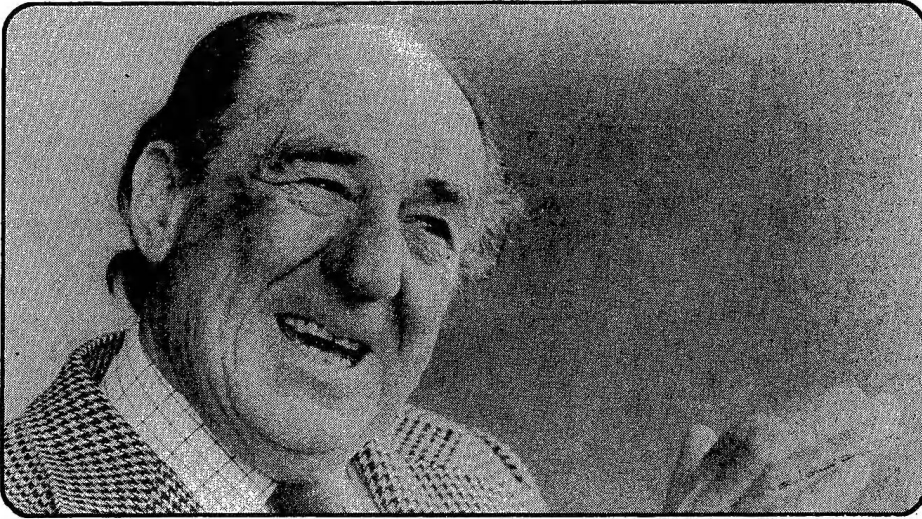
IN 1937, at a time when Gielgud, Olivier and Richardson were already established as the new young heroes of English theatre, a 26-year-old commercial traveller gave up selling chalk and blackboards and ink to the schoolrooms of England and chanced his safe, dull life. "I threw my bonnet over the windmill on Friday and on Monday I crept through the stage door of the Savoy theatre as the third assistant manager."

Sir Michael Hordern had made a debut of sorts and it seems appropriate for an actor whose career has been a stealthy, delayed progress to the top that it should begin with this tiny whimper. And it took Hordern, allowing for five years' enforced absence for war service in the navy, until 1959 to begin his ascent and achieve the roles and notice his natural, untrained talents deserved. He returns to the National in *The Rivals* very much the leading man.

It was a performance in the tiny Arts Theatre as Chekhov's *Ivanov* and the old discarded author in John Whiting's sensational, competition-winning *Saint's Day*, which did the trick and made his name. "Chekhov meant nothing to me," Hordern says with one of those famous shrugs. He came fresh and unknown to the role and was so applauded that what he aptly calls, "the theatrical corridors of power" came to see. In those days Glen Byam Shaw, co-director with Anthony Quayle of the then Stratford Memorial Theatre, was a man of high influence. And for the season of 1952 Hordern was cast by him just below the level of the stars, in a line of roles, which might have been calculated by Byam Shaw to show up his discovery: *Menenius* in *Coriolanus*, *Caliban*, *Jacques* and *Sir Politick Would-be* in *Volpone*.

Hordern, who insists that he has never had any specific theatrical ambitions "except to be an actor," once more began without either assumptions or knowledge. "I knew nothing about the plays — *Coriolanus* I hadn't even heard of — but Byam Shaw said to me "will you promise you won't read them?" So I came to the first rehearsal with the script as if "they've just been written."

The season worked triumphantly for him: Kenneth Tynan even used the word "great" for his *Menenius*.



Michael Hordern: picture by Kenneth Saunders

Michael Hordern, about to open in *The Rivals* at the National Theatre, talks to Nicholas de Jongh of a career taken by stealth

Knight of the genial countenance

And in that decade we began to see portraits from Hordern's remarkable gallery of distressed gentlefolks and authoritarians, drifting urgently out of their right minds.

And even if 1959 brought a highly variable verdict from the critics who watched his *Macbeth* at the Old Vic and his *Pastor Manders* to *Flora Robson's Mrs Alving* in *Ghosts*, Hordern was quickly able to recover from those who said he had imposed comedy on Shakespeare and Ibsen where none was intended or existed.

"I got chewed up for Mac-

beth," Hordern ruefully recalls. And he quotes from memory the comment of one malicious critic who said he played the Thane of Cawdor like an Armenian carpet seller who would not even have been shown through the backdoor of *Dunstrane*. "It was very clever, very cheap, very funny, awful, wicked and cruel." He concedes that *Macbeth* mastered him but insists that laughter belongs in the doomed hinterland of Ibsen's play; when he was replaced by Donald Wolfit for the play's transfer the famous old declaimer outlawed the faintest flicker of

amusement and capsized the production.

Hordern's progress was not checked by all this, nor did it diminish his regard for critics. He is an exception to the prevailing rule that actors despise, detest or ignore the breed (except sometimes when the notices are good). He is grateful for them and they have returned the compliment in ample measure. "It irritates me profoundly when actors say they never read the notices. If they don't they're presumptuous. Second only to very good directors I've learnt more from critics than

anyone. Over and over again I've read something in a notice and thought "By God, yes. It hits the nail on the head."

And that Old Vic season at least reaffirmed his ability to cross from heights tragical to areas comical, and showed up the now treasured anthology of Hordern mannerisms. Memories of Hordern on stage and screen must take in what might be called *Horderniana*: the palm of the hand smacking the forehead in anger; chin stroked or pulled as if the flesh would come away; fingers on the right hand restlessly playing

behind his back while the rest of a mobile body is otherwise engaged; shoulders hunched, eyebrows signalling degrees of alarm, head shaking in amazed dissent, the voice in a sequence of grunts, murmurs and sighs, suggesting a whole rest-home full of decrepitude. It often looks as if various parts of him have scuttled off in directions of their own, fired by spontaneous urges.

He is a very vigorous and youthful 71-year-old, and one who confesses an inveterate affinity with the old. "It's not that one respects the wisdom of old age. I don't

But there's a freedom in the old, a basic awareness of human frailty and of the passage of the time, all mixed up in the brain. I feel it myself now." He describes it as a state between being awake and dreaming, a kind of speculative reverie between the two states. And you recognise a Hordern performance from that assessment.

But any impression of Hordern as a casual, extrovert player whose acting just happens when he goes on stage or before the camera is quite wrong. The part does not take him over or if it does, only in a limited fashion. "It's a sort of compromise. You know the play so well, and the part and the emotion, that you can't be taken over. You've the discipline of lines, of moves, of restriction of scenery and accents. The ingredients of your performance have to be technically there, working with the subconscious."

But he can remember back to *Lear* or *Prospero*, leaving the stage at the end of a big scene "and almost not knowing I've played it. Within the discipline of the stage you're lost." Comedy requires even more of the discipline of awareness, the need to create a response and laughter. As for the famous Hordern mannerisms, he says that he hardly knows at the close of a scene or an act where he has made use of them or how. He makes it sound as if a useful working relationship or compromise between discipline and spontaneity takes place.

His most recent decade in the theatre, ranging from his Gilbert *Pinfold* hearing a conspiracy of voices to his geriatric King *Lear* and his Stoppardian academic dazzled by his own intellect, has finally brought him to the top of the slope. But contemplating the view from there Hordern does not brood or hanker over great roles. He sees himself as "bit old and idle," basking in "a time of semi-retirement."

The call for him to play *Sir Anthony* left him doubtful at first. "Have I got to pull my boot straps up," he asked himself, and was at last coaxed. "I'm enjoying it enormously," he says with some surprise. When *The Rivals* is all over the coaxing of Michael Hordern should not be allowed to stop.

Hordern Rivals de Jongh Guardian



Clipped By:
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Sat, Oct 7, 2023