

Sir Peter Hall

St Catharine's first heard of Peter Hall in 1948, when his Perse School referee noted that:

"He plays the usual games, is a School Prefect, . . . Corporal in the A.T.C. [and] is particularly interested in Music, Art and Dramatics."

This clearly did the trick with then Senior Tutor Tom Henn, who asked him to perform a Petruchio speech he'd learned and offered him a place, after his compulsory National Service. Two years later, the now Sergeant Hall wrote from the British Army on the Rhine requesting that Henn intercede with the Army to arrange his early release from the Service, and he duly came up.

By his own account, in *Making an Exhibition of Myself* (1993):

"I loved Tom Henn because he was eccentric and emotional. He was a military man with a poet's soul, [who] could easily reduce himself to tears by intoning great verse . . . in an environment that was more like a country gentleman's study than a Cambridge don's."

Academically, Peter was schizophrenic:

"I secretly attended Leavis's lectures; but since I was directly supervised by Tom Henn, it was rather like a devout Catholic finding his day-to-day inspiration from the sermons of Luther."

He was, he tells us, "lucky enough to have rooms in the roof of the central court of St Catharine's, looking out towards King's Parade" – my rooms, I wonder? – although "I had been an invisible member of St Catharine's, . . . spending all my time in theatre circles. My attic in the roof of that lovely quadrangle had been largely uninhabited. The college had little connection with the drama."

Well, Peter was to change all that; the only Supervision Report on his file, from 1952, drily notes that he "[h]as found it difficult at first to adjust his studies to his dramatic activities".

Graduating with relief at his 2.2, what he claimed for his education was that "[a]lthough I wouldn't pretend that I am a Shakespearean scholar . . . I don't feel at a loss confronting a Shakespeare play. I know the background, and I know where to look."

He certainly did; within a few years of graduating he had directed Peggy Ashcroft in *Cymbeline*, Charles Laughton as Bottom in *Dream* and Laurence Olivier in *Coriolanus*. Aged 29, he founded the RSC in 1960 and ran it for eight years before taking over from Olivier at the National for fifteen years between 1973 and 1988, opening Denys Lasdun's Theatre in 1977. His own Peter Hall Company flourished from 1988-2011, when he retired from the theatre and public life due to ill health, in that last year directing the *Henry IVs* at Bath and *Twelfth Night* at the National, with his daughter Rebecca as Viola.

He visited the College several times: to be installed as an Honorary Fellow as early as 1964, to speak to the Shirley Society more than once, to give the first Tom Henn Memorial Lecture and in 2003 to receive an Honorary Degree from the University.

We held a dinner for that occasion in College, which was also attended by Rebecca, who had left without taking her degree in English, despite my admonitions, and who seems to be doing quite well in Hollywood, notwithstanding. The Hall-Cath's connection runs wide; Peter's elder son Christopher read English here before embarking on a successful career as a TV Producer – he is not here today because, with his brother Edward, who follows in his father's steps as a Director, he is filming the next series of Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*. Ed, who founded the brilliant all-male Shakespeare Company *Propeller*, has also addressed the Shirley Society in his time. And – rather more personally – Christopher's twin sister Jenny appeared with me in my first Cambridge rôle, in John Mortimer's *What shall we tell Caroline?*

Sir Peter Hall is a bundle of opinionated and passionate energy, whose impact on the Arts in this country has been huge and who publicly defended their importance with often breathtaking combativeness.

But first and foremost, he is a great Director; the screen above shows several of his early RSC productions, but in some ways the most extraordinary was his collaboration with John Barton, *The Wars of the Roses*, staged by the RSC in 1963-4 and recorded at Stratford for television broadcast in 1965, a version which has just been released on DVD, and which I recommend to you both for its exceptional brilliance and for the recently recorded interviews with Janet Suzman and David Warner, recollecting their work with Peter on this genuinely landmark show.

Paul Hartle

Sir Ian McKellen

Saviour of Middle-Earth, Ian was first recommended to Catz by Bolton School in 1956:

“It was clear from the beginning that he was extremely interested in the theatre and he made excellent use of the opportunities which this school offers both in its Miniature Theatre and in its School Dramatic Society. He has played very many parts from that of a youthful Malvolio in the Miniature Theatre in 1952 [he was 13] to Prince Hal in *Henry IV* 1956.”

His first Supervision Report notes:

“A character: bright, vigorous mind, and very much alive and independent. Will mature later.”

Two years later, after a glittering theatrical and respectable academic career, he wrote to Tom Henn to announce that “last term, I was elected to the Presidency of the Marlowe Society . . . an achievement of which I hope the College will be as proud as I am”. Since Tom Henn’s Report had already acknowledged that “[h]e’s one of the best actors in the Marlowe”, I’m confident that his hope was fulfilled. Of his other supervisors, “an unusual and pleasant person” expressed the characteristic kindness of one Francis Warner, whilst the more acerbic John Andrew (my own predecessor but one as Director of Studies), observed:

“Quite a clever boy, I think, whose attention is divided by his work in the theatre which is, incidentally, very good indeed. My impression is that he is working very well despite other demands on his attention. But he is of course a good actor and I may be wrong.”

His professional Shakespearean career began in 1969 with *Richard II* for the Prospect Company, which I saw at Cambridge’s Arts Theatre, but since then he has played almost every major Shakespearean lead, and his Macbeth, Richard III, Iago and King Lear remain among the greatest performances – all happily recorded.

Elected an Honorary Fellow in 1982, when I had the pleasure of escorting him after the subsequent dinner to the ADC Bar – my maximum impact moment in Cambridge theatre - he was given an Honorary Degree by the University in 2014 for his contributions to the Arts and to Gay Rights Equality, and joined us in College for several days of celebration: here he is in Sherlock Court, the Rainbow flag fluttering above. And here he is, speaking for himself.