

Guthrie, Sir (William) Tyrone

by Diarmaid Ferriter and William Murphy

Guthrie, Sir (William) Tyrone (1900–71), theatre director, was born 2 July 1900 at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, one of two children of Thomas Clement Guthrie, a young Scottish doctor, and Norah Guthrie, daughter of General Sir William Power. His great-grandfathers were Thomas Guthrie, founder of the ragged industrial schools, and the nineteenth-century actor, Tyrone Power (qv), while the Hollywood star of that name was a distant cousin.

Guthrie grew up attended by Irish nannies and spent his childhood summers at Annaghmakerrig, Newbliss, Co. Monaghan, his mother's Irish family home. On his mother's death in 1957, he inherited Annaghmakerrig and in later life made it his home. He attended a daily dame school in Tunbridge Wells, and then, in 1911 was sent to board at a preparatory school in Tunbridge Wells, Hurstleigh, followed by another, Templegrove in Eastbourne. In 1914 he entered Wellington College at Crowthorne in Berkshire, which specialized in producing army officers, but he decided against a career in the army and went to St John's College, Oxford, in 1919 to study history. He was awarded a scholarship, but refused the money on the grounds that he did not need it. While at Oxford he became friends with Hubert Butler (qv), whom his sister, Susan, married in 1930. He tried his hand at singing before stumbling into acting with the Oxford University Dramatic Society and graduated with a pass degree in 1923.

In the year of his graduation he was invited by James B. Fagan to join the Oxford Playhouse, but stayed only a few months. By the time he accepted a job with the infant BBC radio service in Belfast in 1924, he and Fagan had realised that he was a limited actor. In Belfast he took charge of all speech programming, including radio drama, and was given the opportunity to direct at the Ulster Literary Theatre. The city stimulated his interest in folk art and his fascination with the effect of 'locality – through climate, history, economics and religion – on people's characters' (*A life in the theatre*, 36). In October 1926 he moved to Glasgow to become director of the Scottish National Theatre Society: through his ancestry he felt attached to Scottish nationalism and motivated by the idea of creating a national theatre, but he was forced to operate on a shoestring budget. His father died in February 1928 and later that year Guthrie left Scotland to move south and care for his widowed mother, with whom he had an exceptionally close relationship. Unemployed, he wrote a radio play, 'Squirrel's cage' (1929), which was accepted by the BBC and, again, he joined the corporation, acting as a script editor and writing several other radio plays. He also took an opportunity to work for Canadian radio for some months in 1931, but by then he had returned to the theatre with some success.

In 1929 Guthrie quit the BBC to become director of the Festival Theatre, Cambridge (1929–30), where he produced almost a play a week during four packed seasons, each season coinciding with a university term. While there he established a relationship with the Scottish playwright James Bridie, directing his 'Tobias and the angel'; Guthrie later acted in a television version of this play (1938). When, in the autumn of 1931, he became director of the Westminster Theatre, London, he opened with the inaugural production of Bridie's 'The anatomist'. Also at this venue he staged a well-received production of 'Love's labour's lost', which brought him to the attention of Lilian Baylis, manager of the Old Vic theatre.

In 1933 Baylis offered him the job of director of plays at the Old Vic at £700 for the year. He set about shaking up the theatre's somewhat musty reputation, injecting an element of showmanship into its activities. Among his strategies was the employment of Charles Laughton as the star of his first season (Flora Robson and James Mason were also engaged). Productions of 'Macbeth' and 'The tempest' had mixed receptions, but 'Measure for measure' and a version of Chekhov's 'The cherry orchard', based on a translation by Butler, were praised by the critics. Baylis had her doubts and Guthrie was not asked back in 1934, but his relationship with Laughton survived and he acted in two fine films in which Laughton starred in 1938, *Vessel of wrath* and *St Martin's Lane*. He directed several acclaimed productions in the West End and on Broadway (1934–6) before Baylis asked him to return as artistic director of the Old Vic and the associated Sadler's Wells theatre in 1936.

He immediately wooed Laurence Olivier to lead the Old Vic company, other members of which included Alec Guinness, John Mills, Robert Morley, and Sybil Thorndike. This was the season in which Olivier's rise to prominence as a great Shakespearian actor began, his most important roles being a Freudian interpretation of 'Hamlet' and a hugely successful 'Henry V'. Olivier learned much from Guthrie, being particularly impressed by his dictum that to perform a role well the actor had to learn to love the character. Guthrie soon earned a reputation for highbrow brilliance and edgy productions – a modern-dress version of 'Hamlet' in 1938, with Guinness as the prince, was particularly influential. During this phase of his career 'Tony', as he was known to his theatre colleagues, has been characterised as combining 'an Establishment manner and authority with a ruthless radicalism of mind' (Findlater, 263).

When Baylis died in November 1937 Guthrie became manager as well as artistic director of the theatres, though the ballet and opera companies at Sadler's Wells were given almost complete autonomy. He managed the Old Vic during the war, demonstrating an acute ability for administration: money was scarce and from 1941, when the theatre was damaged in the blitz, the company became itinerant. They played provincial cities – Burnley, Bristol, and Liverpool – until they were able to return to London to a base at the New Theatre in 1944. In this year a new era was ushered in with the return of Olivier and Ralph Richardson and the arrival of John Burrell. Guthrie came to feel sidelined by these starry actors and directors

and resigned. He spent the years 1946–50 as a wandering director, working in New York, Tel Aviv, Edinburgh, and Helsinki; his productions of 'Oedipus rex' from this period were particularly admired. He also directed opera at Covent Garden in 1947 and 'Hamlet' at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, in 1950. Despite the cooling in their relationship, in 1950 Olivier funded the production of 'Top of the ladder', which was both written and directed by Guthrie. It was staged at St James's Theatre, London, with Mills in the leading role, but was not a success. Guthrie seems to have been involved in the manoeuvrings which saw Olivier, Richardson, and Burrell ousted from the Old Vic, and he returned there as artistic director for one season (1951–2).

By then he had developed very firm ideas as to the nature of theatre and methods of staging. He believed that 'the theatre makes its effect not by means of illusion, but by means of ritual' (*A life in the theatre*, 313–14), and he was fascinated by the opportunities for colour and ceremony offered by the Greek classics, while hating the style of drama exemplified in John Osborne's 'Look back in anger'. From the late 1930s he had been evolving an approach that made him the most influential advocate of open staging, arguing that a return to 'theatre in the round', based on classical and Elizabethan practice, led to a more dynamic relationship between actors and audience; this had an enormous impact on the development of theatre architecture worldwide, and contributed to the abandonment of the proscenium arch. He demonstrated these beliefs and his support for provincial theatre in the two great projects of his later years. Guthrie was an adviser to the committee that established the influential Shakespeare festival at Stratford, Ontario, where he insisted on an open platform stage. He was artistic director of the festival in its first year, 1953, and in 1955, and directed there every year from 1953 to 1957 and again in 1960–61; he also persuaded Alec Guinness to appear there in Richard III. Among the younger actors to appear in his productions at the festival were Christopher Plummer, William Shatner, and the future novelist Timothy Findley, with whom he established a firm friendship. In 1963 he combined with another enthusiastic committee to found the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The theatre was built to his requirements and he was its first artistic director.

Guthrie continued to work in England, however, directing an important production of 'Coriolanus' in Nottingham in 1963, which launched Ian McKellen's career; McKellen wrote of Guthrie: 'he . . . changed my life' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 11 Sept 1983). Guthrie had a similar influence on Brian Friel whom he invited to spend six months at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in 1963–4. This was an educational and liberating experience for Friel, who wrote his first great play, 'Philadelphia, here I come', immediately on his return. Despite being notoriously dubious as to the purpose of theatre directors, Friel said of Guthrie that he was 'not only a great man of the theatre but a great man without qualification' (Murray, Friel, 11), and he dedicated his play 'Lovers' (1967) to him.

By the mid-1950s Guthrie had become much more involved in Irish life. In 1954 he directed Cyril Cusack (qv) in a controversial production of 'The bishop's bonfire'

by Sean O'Casey (qv) at the Gaiety Theatre. The rival demonstrations prompted by O'Casey's attitude to catholicism led Guthrie to write: 'Dublin drives me mad – so much pretension about being A Capital, having A Culture, such a lot of self-appointed Guardians of this, Protectors of that, so much fucking Holiness . . . & what is it really? Bolton or Wakefield in a more enervating climate.' (Murray, O'Casey, 363). He directed in Dublin once more, giving Eugene McCabe's 'Swift' at the Abbey Theatre during the theatre festival of 1969: reviews were moderate. In 1958 he directed Gerard McLarnon's 'The bonfire' in Belfast, prompting criticism because of an unsympathetic evocation of the atmosphere around 12 July celebrations; nevertheless he was later appointed chairman of the Ulster Theatre Council. He was chancellor of Queen's University Belfast from 1963 to 1970, once more provoking protest when, during a speech at Belfast City Hall (1964), he described the border as wildly artificial and called on students to do their utmost to abolish it. Concerned at rural under-development and emigration from Ireland, in 1962 he purchased the old Newbliss railway station to use as premises for a jam and preserves factory. He engaged in frantic transatlantic travel in an effort to create export markets, but the business (Irish Farmhouse Preserves Ltd) went into liquidation shortly before his death.

Guthrie's publications include his radio plays (1931) and *Top of the ladder* (1952), critical writings on the practice of theatre – among them *Theatre prospect* (1932) and *A new theatre* (1964) – and books that combine autobiography with comment on theatre, including *A life in the theatre* (1960) and *In various directions: a view of the theatre* (1965). In the 1950s he collaborated with Robertson Davies on three works about the Stratford festival. Noted by contemporaries as shrewd, commanding, and sardonic, he was described by Kenneth Tynan as occupying the 'front rank' of classical directors (Tynan, 47). He was awarded ten honorary doctorates from universities in Ireland (TCD and QUB), Britain, Canada, and the USA, and was knighted in 1961.

Guthrie died suddenly at Annaghmakerrig on 15 May 1971, survived by his wife, Judith ('Judy') Bretherton, whom he had known since childhood and married in 1931. They had no children and she died in July 1972. Guthrie's will provided that, after Judy's death, Annaghmakerrig would become a retreat for artists and writers: it was opened as the Tyrone Guthrie Centre by Friel in 1981. Various papers and correspondence are held at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre and at TCD.

Tyrone Guthrie, *A life in the theatre* (1960); Tyrone Guthrie, *In various directions* (1965); Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan right and left* (1967), 47; *Times*, 6 Oct. 1969; *Ir. Times* 17 May 1971; *Times*, 17 May 1971; Brian Friel, 'Self-portrait', *Aquarius*, v (1972), 19–20; Richard Findlater, *Lilian Baylis: the lady of the Old Vic* (1975), 263–83; John Elson, *Post-war British theatre* (1976), 47, 167; James Forsyth,

Tyrone Guthrie (1976); *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 Sept. 1983; Simon Callow, *Charles Laughton: a difficult fellow* (1987); Anthony Holden, *Olivier* (1988); E. H. Mikhail, *The Abbey Theatre: interviews and recollections* (1988); J. Alan B. Somerset, *The Stratford festival story* (1991), xii–xiv, 2–27; Newmann; Samuel L. Leiter, *The great stage directors* (1994), 129–33; John Russell Brown (ed.), *The Oxford illustrated history of theatre* (1995), 407; McRedmond; Boylan; Elmer Andrews, *The art of Brian Friel* (1999), 111; Christopher Murray, *Brian Friel: essays, diaries, interviews: 1964–1999* (1999); Richard Pine, *The diviner: the art of Brian Friel* (1999), 53, 63–4, 98; Christopher Murray, *Seán O'Casey: writer at work* (2004), 357–63; www.tyroneguthrie.ie; www.guthrietheater.org (websites accessed 15 June 2006)