

## SYD GOLDER OBITUARY

22.08.1923 – 23.03.2007

By Katherine Wyeth

Sydney Elmer Golder, founding director of the Elephant Theatre Company, died leaving behind a legacy of extraordinary relish. From borstal boy to boy soldier, he was also a war veteran, pilot, thief, convict, civil rights agitator, finally to become a committed pioneer of London's fringe theatre. Born in South London in 1923, son of William Herbert Golder – professional golf caddy for Bobby Locke and the Prince of Wales (later to become Edward VIII) at Addington Palace Golf Club in the hungry thirties; Syd was steeped in crime from an early age. Abandoned by his mother and in spite of his loving father's efforts sent to Pawsons Road Workhouse, from which he escaped aged eight, only to be sent to the Bristol Training Ship the 'Formidable' aged eleven, and later at sixteen to Feltham Borstal where he met the young Brendan Behan.

Syd went on to serve with the Royal Engineers Regiment as an explosives expert in World War II from Tunisia and Algeria to Cairo and Italy, as well as assisting Tito's campaign as a partisan in Yugoslavia. After the war he returned to the occupation that he had been perfecting throughout his childhood, becoming the best 'creeper' (cat burglar) in the country and later taking part in many burglaries and bank robberies – though he never used a gun. In 1964 he was imprisoned for a bank robbery in Rochdale (the only one he didn't commit) and sentenced to fifteen years, of which he served eight. In 1969 he was moved to Parkhurst high security prison on the Isle of Wight, where he rubbed shoulders with the indomitable Frankie Fraser.

After one of Frankie's notorious 'tear-ups' (prison riots) – in which Syd was not involved (not wishing to jeopardise an upcoming prospect of parole), Syd was wrongly accused of assaulting a prison officer. Determined to seek redress for this, Syd did something no British prisoner had ever done before: he applied to the European Court of Human Rights to hear his complaint against the United Kingdom for not allowing access to a solicitor whilst in prison, and for interference with his correspondence to his MP. The case went to trial as *Golder v. The United Kingdom* and in 1975 (three years after his release from prison) the court ruled in Syd's favour. This ground breaking case remains a major landmark in civil rights history regarding prisoners' rights to a fair trial.

Upon his release from prison in 1972, Syd became a law-abiding citizen almost by accident when he applied for a job as a handyman at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (Rada). Soon he was attending classes and his childhood passion for theatre – which had been fuelled by tales told to him by his father, who had worked as a stagehand with Charlie Chaplin at the old Elephant Theatre on the New Kent road before the First World War, was re-ignited. In the late seventies Syd founded his Elephant Theatre Company, which opened in the Student Union at the Southbank Polytechnic with *'Alls well that ends as you like it'* and continued to produce around twenty plays a year. But Syd just couldn't resist an empty space and soon the company was presiding over many other London venues such as the Spice of Life, the

Bridge House, the Duke of Wellington, and later the King's Head Theatre where Syd held his artistic directorship of the lunchtime theatre until he died.

Over the last three decades Syd produced over five hundred plays, directing over one hundred, without a penny of private or public funding, providing opportunities to a host of young actors, writers and directors and assisting the early careers of such well established figures as Richard E. Grant, Stephen Daldry and Gary Oldman. He was intimately involved with each production, usually putting up the scenery himself and splitting any profits equally between all company members. Many Elephant Theatre productions won critical acclaim, notably Pinter's *'The Dumb Waiter'* (1981, at the Spice of Life), John Fowles' *'The Collector'*, Liam O'Flaherty's *'The Informer'* (adapted by John Dunne) in 1994 at the King's Head, and Monica Lissak's *'Joan of Arc'* (1998 at the King's Head). Syd was also a skilled actor, appearing in films such as Gary Oldman's *'Nil by Mouth'* (1997) and Guy Ritchie's *'Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels'* (1998), as well as crime dramas such as *'Fox'* (1980) and *'The Long Firm'* (2004).

Irascible and coarse in his manners, Syd was nonetheless a true working class gentleman – perhaps the very last of his kind. Honest and magnanimous he possessed an incomparable greatness of spirit, only seeing opportunity where other eyes would see obstacle. His salty tales and his great heart will be dearly missed by all who were lucky and honoured enough to have known his company.

Syd is survived by his goddaughter Katherine Wyeth – step daughter of the late Dan Crawford: founder of the King's Head Theatre, and his nephews Eddie and Paul Bayliss.