Simon Callow

Simon Gray: a True Original in Life and Art

The playwright Simon Gray died of lung cancer on 7 August 2008 at the age of seventy-one. He also found success later in life as a diarist, at first in wryly comic records of the disaster-prone productions of his plays – but with tragic irony most recently in *The Smoking Diaries*, reflecting on his lifelong addiction to cigarettes (and much else besides). Here, his friend the actor and writer Simon Callow pays a personal tribute.

IT SEEMED to many of us who loved Simon Gray that he might perhaps be indestructible. God knows, he had tried hard enough to destroy himself, but his body survived assault after savage assault. When I saw him for what sadly proved to be the last supper, just a couple of weeks before his death, he looked as well as I've ever seen him: clear-skinned, relaxed, with a little Greek sun still sitting on him.

Some years ago, when he had just emerged from touch-and-go multiple surgery, we dined at his then favourite restaurant (there was always a favourite restaurant, adhered to with passionate loyalty, until it fell, as it inevitably would, from favour). There he sat, at the exact table where he had so recently collapsed and been rushed to hospital after taking the sip of champagne that his doctor had forbidden. Several weeks of near-death experiences later, he looked wonderfully fresh and youthful. I commented on this. 'Where it really shows is in your eyes,' I said. 'You mean you can see them now,' he replied, and surrendered to wheezing, yelping laughter.

Those were the days of unbridled smoking, now that drinking was off the menu. As far as I know, he never touched alcohol after the kidney and liver operations: the connection between drinking and mortality had been vividly demonstrated to him. Like some mad scientist, he refused to believe in the destructiveness of anything until he had seen its results with his own eyes; although he died of lung cancer, I'm not sure he ever fully believed cigarettes were his undoing.

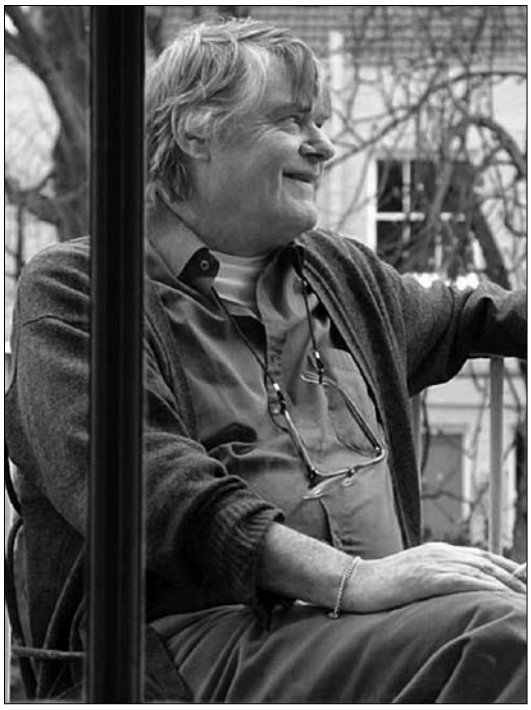
His relationship with them, so hilariously documented in *The Smoking Diaries*, was not sensuous, like Ken Tynan's, nor emotional, like Pinter's, but somehow intellectual. Popping the cigarette in and out of his mouth, he seemed to be having a querulous conversation with it, testing it, challenging it – like many of the conversations we had over the years, where he would pick at some proposition one had lightly advanced, prodding it, probing it, becoming exasperated, outraged, appalled, before collapsing into paroxysms of laughter in which all controversy dissolved and disappeared.

In earlier years, when he was still fuelled by unimaginable levels of alcohol (mostly champagne, but after a certain point all comers were welcome), the laughter didn't always materialize. Ignition point could be very low. At our very first meeting, after he had written me a generous letter about my first book, I had ordered the wine before he arrived, and said I hoped Gamay would do. 'No, it will *not* do,' he said, with alarming force. 'As it happens, I think Gamay is the most disgusting, repulsive wine in existence. I loathe Gamay.' After this thorny matter had been settled, with some difficulty, he immediately became funny, generous, easy. But it was a sticky moment.

On another, much later occasion, after a preview of one of his plays, we had supper with our mutual friend, the play's producer. Simon was not happy. An important cue had gone wrong in the first scene, after which he had repaired to the house manager's office to

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X09000190

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000190 Published online by Cambridge University Press



brood and smoke and drink. Over supper he asked for comments, which we were careful to pad with genuine praise, slipping in the odd reservation. There was a sex scene that was not going well. We both commented on this, and I wondered whether this or that or the other might be tried. 'There's no point,' he said, 'because the actor has no sexuality.' When I questioned this, he snarled: 'We all know about your sexuality – all too fucking much about it, in fact.'

I stammered that I intended no sort of criticism, that the show was quite brilliant, but in certain unimportant ways it could, perhaps, be better. 'Everything could be better,' he raged. '*King Lear* could fucking well be better.' At which point he said he had had enough and abruptly left. The next morning, he called and said he thought he might have been a little intemperate and that, by the way, there was a screenplay in the post with a role he'd like me to play.

It turned out to be that TV masterpiece *Old Flames*, in which Stephen Fry played a father-to-be hallucinating, as he awaited the birth of his child, about a school contemporary – me – he had once bullied. It was a disturbingly phantasmagoric work, a side of his oeuvre that was rarely explored in productions. Of course, he did write straightforward, well-made plays, but many more were predicated on an awareness of the oddity of things when viewed from another angle. His idol Dickens had a word for it, 'mooreeffoc', which is simply 'coffee room' backwards – the world seen from the other side of a glazed door.

I believe I introduced Simon to this coinage. He jumped at it: this was what he was about. His sense of the sheer strangeness of things was acute; perhaps his greatest character – the lonely bachelor teacher Quartermaine, sublimely incarnated by Edward Fox in the original – is a kind of holy fool, hardly able to connect with the outer world. Often this perception lent a dark dimension to his thinking. Insanity frequently beckons his characters. I appeared in *The Holy Terror*, the most extreme example of dislocation in his work, in which not only the protagonist but the play itself seems to be having a nervous breakdown. Detested by critics, it still seems to me a fearless, deeply felt work.

Friendship was Simon's mainstay. The early death of Alan Bates affected him profoundly. Alan was his thespian alter ego and they adored each other; often, at the end of a meal I was having with Simon, Alan would drop in for a coffee or a brandy just for the pleasure of a few extra minutes with him. It was extraordinary to hear the two men's 'duologue', like a man in conversation with himself.

Simon was unstinting in his interest, enthusiasm, and advice about any professional matter, always the first to read anything I ever wrote, likewise sending me everything he ever wrote.

His last dramatic masterpiece, *Little Nell*, about Dickens and Ellen Ternan, was given short shrift by the critics, but it will come back and be properly recognized, in all its dark, nightmarish complexity, as will his as yet unproduced *Hullabaloo*, an extraordinary Dionysian fantasia. Then, perhaps, Simon Gray will be understood for the true original he was, both in life and in art.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X09000190 Published online by Cambridge University Press