

I want MORE RADIO PLAYS

Says VAL GIELGUD in an exclusive interview with Whitaker Wilson



VAL GIELGUD and I are the best of friends.

So I rang him up at the B.B.C. the other day and told him I wanted to see him officially. I told him it was for a special interview exclusive to RADIO PICTORIAL and that he would have to be on his best behaviour!

I found him greatly disturbed over the loss of his favourite pipe. He declared he had left it on another man's desk, a long way from where we were. His secretary obligingly offered to go and retrieve it. In a few minutes she returned and said it wasn't there. He was equally sure it was, and then found he had put it in his drawer.

Having settled this momentous question he inquired what I wanted.

"Something about your life. I suppose I had better begin by asking how old you are?"

"Thirty-three."

"Good heavens—a mere kid. Where were you at school?"

"Rugby."

"And after that?"

"Trinity, Oxford. I was in the British Army for six months."

"How could you have been?—er—I don't mean to say I don't believe you, of course... but—well, how old were you then?"

"Just eighteen. I just managed to get a commission in the Grenadier Guards at the end of the War. It was probably one of the last commissions obtained by anyone."

"Well, what did you do then?"

"Variety."

"Variety of what?"

"Stage variety. Then I did a bit of sub-editing."

"What sort?"

"A comic paper, of all things."

"You amaze me."

"I thought I should. I was private secretary to a member of Parliament for some time."

"When did you join the B.B.C.?"

"In May, 1928, I became assistant to

Eric Maschwitz. Before that, though, I had done a goodish bit of acting, some of it with my brother John. I played in Fagan's Repertory quite a lot. At the beginning of 1929—on January 1, to be exact—I became Dramatic Director at Savoy Hill.

"I have written a good deal that way, but my first to be published was *Black Gallantry*, in 1928. I have always been keen on military history; it is one of my hobbies, as a matter of fact. My novel *Gathering of Eagles* is a story of the retreat of Napoleon from Moscow. *Imperial Treasure* was a story of Siberia. *The Broken Man* was another of mine."

Your radio plays I know. As a matter of fact, I followed *Red Tabs*, when you revived it a few weeks ago, with the copy in front of me."

"It's not a good play, really."

"I don't agree with you. I think it is."

"All right. Have it your own way! My reason for reviving it was that I wanted to prove one thing only: that a debate—that is all it is, really—can be dramatised for radio presentation."

"I think you did prove it, but what about your stage plays?"

"I have written several which have been produced—by Sunday Players, chiefly. *Self* and *Chinese White* are amongst them. There's another on the way called *I May be Old-fashioned*. It will be produced by repertory players."

"What made you give up all connection with Light Entertainment?"

"Because it is one man's job to look after it. It is another man's job—certainly not the same man—to see to the dramatic and serious side. I was very pleased when I found Eric was so willing to take it on and make a success of it."

"Any new views to give me regarding plays?"

Not new ones. I have never changed my opinion regarding them. You know as well as I that radio comedy is difficult to write.

"I believe in comedy, of course, but I believe it when I see it, which is not often. It is the same old question of the radio audience being the smallest in the world.

Another exclusive interview
in "Radio Pic." next Friday

A theatre with one lonely person for an audience. It is no good giving him the sort of humour that demands a full theatre for its appreciation."

"And you are still as keen on historical plays as ever?"

"Of course. I have found out that people like plays about someone who really lived. I am presenting twelve new plays in 1934 to set against the twelve revivals in 1933. The revivals were a success. I have every indication of it."

"You still want plays, of course?"

"I always want plays.

"Dangerous thing to say in print, isn't it?"
"Oh, I don't know. I may get forty instead of thirty a week, but someone may write something worth producing. If you are going to say that in print you might add, for my sake, that I do not want plays that have been wandering round the West End theatres

and have been rejected. They are not likely to be successes as radio plays. People seem to think anything is good enough to broadcast. *It isn't*. Humour must be delicate, not broad.

Broad humour is no good to me. If I make the lonely man sit and chuckle in his chair, I have given him a good entertainment.

"And that is what I am out to do."

"Mind you, Val, I think half the trouble is that people don't listen."

"I know, but it is my job to compel them to listen. One of my greatest fears is the man who washes the dog and tries to listen to a play at the same time. He wouldn't do it at a theatre. He listens attentively there because he has paid to do so.

"You say you are doing twelve new plays this year. Are you going to do any revivals?"

"Certainly. In the summer, probably."

Val Gielgud is fairly tall—nothing like the height of Eric Maschwitz, of course—with dark hair, short moustache and beard. He is alive and quick in his decisions.

Val is a hard worker.

He says he is at his best between midnight and dawn. He reads everything he can lay his hands on, military history holding out a sort of fascination to him. He is a student of crime and deeply interested in the Dreyfus Case.

I should imagine the gentleman is rather extravagant. His clothes give me that impression.

Also the quality of his cigarettes. Val never offers me a "gasper." He wears a monocle on occasions, though I am not certain what the occasions are. He has a touch of the Oxford accent which must be more or less natural to him because he does not lose it in moments of excitement.

He is a good talker, but is always ready to listen.

He never misses a point in rehearsal. He has his secretary by his side at all final rehearsals. The slightest thing wrong and he remarks on it while she takes note of the passage. He then goes down to the studios and reads out her notes, but it is rare for him to interrupt a rehearsal if he can possibly let it go on. While he is producing a play, nothing else in the world matters.

That play means everything to him until the last line has gone into the air.

That is how I see Val Henry Gielgud.