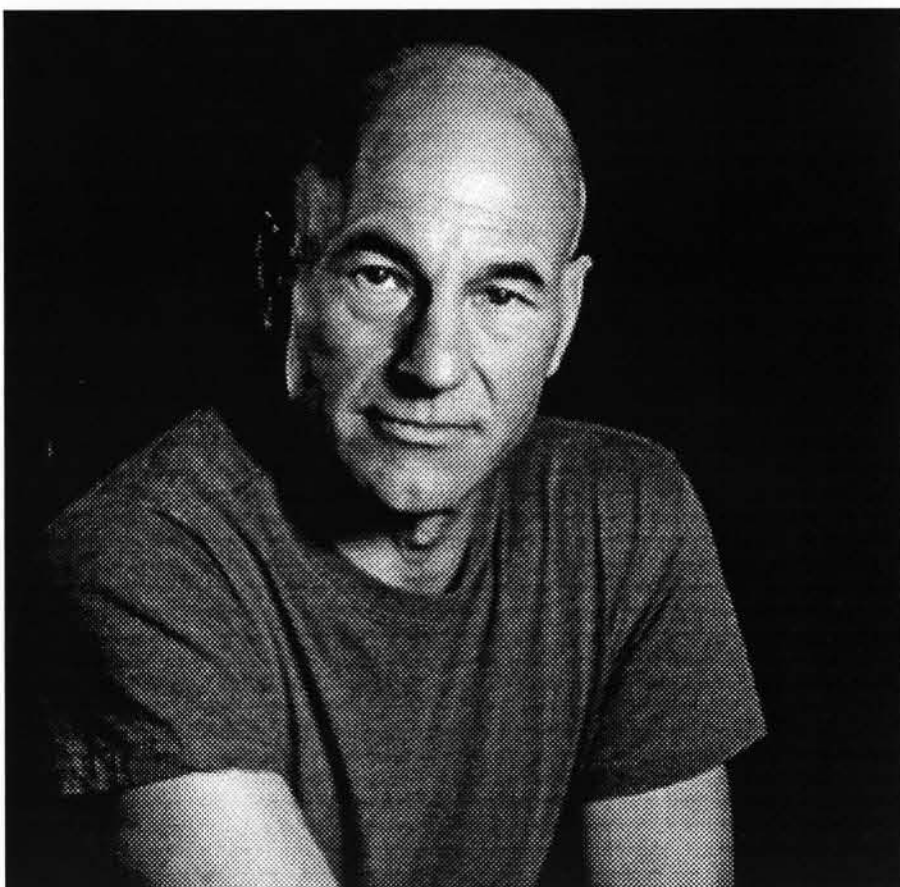


# Lost and found

**Drama On 3 – Embers** Sunday 18 April 8.00pm BBC RADIO 3

Twenty-five years ago, a young man with big dreams came to London from New York City and founded a fringe theatre, with international drama and experimentation at its heart. On the eve of this 25th anniversary, theatre director Lou Stein's newest play, based on Sándor Márai's best-selling book, *Embers*, is broadcast on BBC Radio 3. As his career literally comes full circle, Lou passionately discusses his latest project with Carla Parks.



Patrick Stewart plays *The General* in this lyrical masterpiece

When Lou Stein first came to London via a residency at the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia, he settled in west London. At the time, a place like Notting Hill had a bohemian feel, a real artistic vibe, which is why Lou was surprised that it had no theatre anywhere near it. "I got this idea to start a new theatre that had a pure focus on international drama, because there was

a lot of new English work being done, there was a lot of Shakespeare, but not a lot of international work," he recalls. And that, very simply, is how Notting Hill's Gate Theatre was born.

Now 50, Lou, who sports medium-length white hair and wire-framed glasses, has spent half his life in theatre, but he has lost

none of his drive to work on challenging and stimulating material. And his latest radio project, he maintains, is actually an extension of what he accomplished at The Gate. Naturally garrulous, Lou explains the connection: "There is a parallel between my starting at The Gate, my interest in international work and Radio 3, which is really interested in doing drama that pushes frontiers and experiments with music."

Having already worked with Radio 3 on an adaptation of Bernard MacLaverty's *Grace Notes* and a personal odyssey called *My Month With Carmen*, Lou returns to his international roots with *Embers*, a short novel written by Sándor Márai, who was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the 20th century and tragically committed suicide in 1989.

First published in 1942, *Embers* is a masterpiece of lyrical language and compelling suspense. The General and Konrad are two old friends who have not seen or spoken to each other in 41 years. Over one last resplendent meal together, they go back to a moment in time when their lives and that of the woman they both loved were shattered by a horrific betrayal. For the General, it's a chance to find out what truly happened on that fateful day and to take revenge on his friend.

*Embers* was a "lost", obscure book until it was rediscovered and translated into English in 2001 by Random House's Carol Brown Janeway and suddenly became a bestseller in the United States – and this, coincidentally, proved to be the biggest hurdle in bringing the play to Radio 3 listeners. Lou says, "At the beginning I thought I just wasn't going to get the rights to this because it was so hot and people were so interested in it. I approached Carol [Brown Janeway] and we went through quite a tricky period." Carol's reluctance was based partly on the fact that this book was "her baby", which she had lovingly translated from the Hungarian. After a year, Lou persuaded Carol to let him adapt the book with a bold reworking of the text, but keeping Márai's poetic language.

With a script that begins with a shocking opening scene that should keep listeners captivated, everything else, including the perfect cast, fell into place. "For the character of the General you have got to get an actor of extraordinary presence and I don't mean presence, I mean extraordinary presence," the director states. Only one actor, Lou believed, had the vocal power to carry such an imposing part and luckily *Star Trek's* own Patrick Stewart, in his first major role since returning to the UK, agreed to take on the part within three days of getting the script in New York.

For Lou, Patrick coming on board was, well, out of this world. "When I first arrived in this country, in the late Seventies, Patrick was a Royal Shakespeare Company actor, and I used to run to the RSC, pay my £2 and sit in the gods to watch loads of wonderful actors and I remembered him from those days and I just thought, 'I'd love to work with him!'" he says. That the feeling was mutual only confirmed what Lou, as a veteran director, already knows: "It shows you how much interest there is if the script is right and the project is right."

Jenny Agutter equally loved the project and agreed to play Krisztina, the woman at the heart of a love triangle. While Krisztina has very few lines, Lou uses music to flesh out her character; "I'm very interested in how music – not as an accompaniment but as a kind of character – can become an important part of the drama."

Lou is fortunate that his "partner in crime", Belfast-born Deirdre Gribbin, is not only his wife but a prominent composer; her newest work, *Mare Tran*, will premiere on Tuesday 27 April at BBC Music Live 2004 in Northern Ireland. Deirdre and Lou, together with their trusted sound engineer, seamlessly layered the music and sound effects into *Embers*, to create an atmospheric and tense scene in which the action unfolds.

"Good theatre," Lou claims, "comes from bringing together good members of a team and getting them working on a project.

Radio 3 has been brilliant because it allows a bit of space and freedom to create a team ... I think the results benefit everybody." Lou's team was complete when RSC actor David Horovitch and Sara Kestelman, a theatre actor, respectively took the parts of Konrad, the General's oldest friend and dinner companion, and Nini, the all-knowing narrator.

Lou is clearly committed to his work and always chooses projects and stories that resonate with him. "You have to be passionate about it," he says. Upon reading *Embers*, he felt that the book touched on universal and emotive themes that made him question the value of friends, lovers and wives, and why we are betrayed by friends.

Though *Embers* does not offer any easy solutions to these questions, it is ultimately, in Lou's eyes, an uplifting and cathartic story. "Everybody who has lived life a little will identify with what this trio's done, because in the end there's no good guy and there's no bad guy; there are three people who adore each other and for whom a single event makes it impossible to carry on a relationship.

"It's sad, but the uplifting part for me is that after all these years, the General gets it out, he gets to tell Konrad what happened and I think it's been a cross he's been bearing for years ... I think if people really get into the story and really listen to it, sort of what I call 'make a date with it' ... it will really purge them."

Lou's ultimate aim is to "do work that will affect people". His 25-year career, it seems, has been about getting people to think. After spending most of his life working in this country, he does admit to missing the United States and returns often. But now a true European in outlook, he worries that he would miss the culture here if he moved back to American shores. No matter: what is their loss is Britain's gain.