



# The Rattigan

The Newsletter of  
The Terence Rattigan Society

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# Version

## Rattigan's 'lost play' tours the UK

Following its great success at the Jermyn Street Theatre in January 2011, Adrian Brown's production of *Less Than Kind* toured the country in the early part of this year, gaining further plaudits along the way. James Wilby took over the role of Sir John Fletcher, the Tory minister who has formed a relationship with Olivia Brown (played by Sara Crowe) much to the disgust of



James Wilby and Sara Crowe in *Less Than Kind*

Olivia's 17-year-old son (David Osmond), who returns to London after five years as an evacuee in Canada. It's a case of industrialist versus idealist in this reworking of the Hamlet theme. In this, the original script by Rattigan before the Lunts turned it into a star vehicle for themselves, it's mother love that clearly wins the day. It's not often that a theatre audience enjoys a 'premiere' in the centenary of the playwright's birth. Our renewed congratulations to Adrian for rediscovering this 'lost' play. ☞

## Rattigan in America:

A brief history by our US representative,  
Dr Holly Hill

"Why didn't Rattigan's plays succeed in America?" "What did American critics have against him?" were questions addressed to me at the Chichester Festival's centenary weekend. The recent Roundabout Theatre Company's Broadway production of *Man and Boy* brings my answers into a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective.

Under its founding director Gene Feist and Todd Haimes, its brilliant and resourceful Artistic Director since 1989, the Roundabout has produced four Rattigan plays since the early 1980s. It has been the only mainstream American theatre supportive of Rattigan's artistry. Why?

Getting off on the wrong foot with New York critics is too mild an image for Rattigan's relationship with them—think manacled. *First Episode* ran for a few weeks on Broadway in 1934. Brooks Atkinson, drama critic for the *New York Times* and regarded as the man who could make or break a play on Broadway, called it "an unpalatable mixture of tenderness and ear-splitting farce." and his distrust of Rattigan as an artist began: "if the authors were willing to pursue their theme earnestly, *First Episode* might be a disarmingly poignant drama."

*French Without Tears* (1937, 111 performances--dates are for Broadway runs) was received as pleasant but much too light. Atkinson thought that Rattigan "writes with capricious gaiety. Although his story is commonplace and his characters are unprepossessing, his style is an attractive one... But London comedies in New York are like New York comedies in London—a bit wan and dissipated by the hearty voyage. After a brightly prattling first act, this one becomes so light that it almost floats out of the theatre". **Continued on page 3**

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## The Terence Rattigan Society

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## INTRODUCING

### ...our US representative Dr Holly Hill

It is a great privilege to have secured our association with the distinguished theatre scholar and author Dr Holly Hill. It was she who astonished her professor at Columbia University in 1969 when she announced her intention to complete her postgraduate dissertation on the plays of Terence Rattigan. "Nobody takes Rattigan seriously" was his response.



It was also she who, according to Michael Darlow, "was perhaps the first person to recognise in Rattigan's writing a unique insight into the feelings and dilemmas of women".

For her dissertation, she had been granted a lengthy interview by Rattigan and it is likely that he never knew just how far-reaching the effects of that interview would prove to be. It helped to spark off a critical reappraisal of Rattigan in the United States, although his reception on the other side of the Atlantic has always remained more cautious than in the UK. Dr Hill's article for this newsletter addresses just this subject and represents something of a coup for the Society.

Dr Hill gained a BA in Speech and Drama at Stanford University in 1959, and an MFA in Theater (Theory and Criticism) from Columbia University in 1971. She received her PhD - in Theater (History and Criticism) - from the Graduate School of the City University of New York in 1977. She was Professor of Speech and Theater at the John Jay College of the City University of New

York from 1981 to 2005, and has been Professor Emerita since 2006. She is currently Adjunct Professor in the Master of Liberal Studies program at the Southern Methodist University.

She has lectured, served on theatre awards juries, written articles, features, books and theatre reviews, and was the New York Theater Correspondent for *The Times* of London from 1985 to 1995. She also contributed 243 entries to the Encyclopedia of the New York Stage 1920-1930.

She lives in Dallas, Texas, and was a founding member of the Dallas Theater Center. She is also very happy to work backstage doing just about anything that needs to be done. She clearly has theatre coursing through her veins. We welcome her most warmly as our special US representative. ☞

**In the next issue: Our Vice-President Michael Darlow and his incredulity at being asked, seemingly out of the blue, to write and direct Rattigan's television obituary. Here is a small taste of what is to come...**

In many ways being invited by Graham Benson to do the TV obit changed my life. It gave me the opening to work in the BBC Drama Department which, although I had made programmes for other BBC departments and had done drama in ITV, I had never done except years earlier as an actor playing generally small parts.

That initial phone call could also be said to have changed Graham Benson's life to an even greater extent - a few months later I introduced him to a young colleague of mine called Christine Fox. Not long after that they asked me to be the best man at their wedding! Today they have a beautiful daughter who has herself recently got married. All of which can be said to be down to Terence Rattigan. **To be continued...**

**Continued from p1:** *Flare Path* (1942, 14 performances) moved a few critics, but most thought it was not a very good play and the terms “mechanical,” “machine-made” and “contrived” were applied to Rattigan’s writing. Such was his fate also with *While the Sun Shines* (1944, 39 performances): “contrived as though by a ruler, pencil and a pair of shears,” “a comedy tossed together by a hack writer in a hurry”.

While the Lunts carried *Love in Idleness* (renamed *O Mistress Mine*, 1946) to 451 performances, Rattigan received no credit for the success. Typical were “[the play] is filled with flaws, implausibilities and occasional moments when one of the Lunts is off the stage” and Brooks Atkinson’s “a wretched little comedy that is hardly worth the trouble of acting”.

Finally some plaudits came Rattigan’s way with *The Winslow Boy* (1947, 218 performances), largely because American critics thought that he was finally addressing a serious issue. But many were disappointed that he kept the drama in the Winslow home: “The result is a great theme in a small play.” Brooks Atkinson declared that the first act had “so much sweep and character” that the second “fritters away the genuine emotion of the theme...it is disillusioning to discover that Mr. Rattigan is only a practising playwright when the occasion calls for an artist.”

The mixed reviews for *Playbill* (1949, 62 performances) ran from “as playwriting, it is not too far from double bilge” to some plaudits for *The Browning Version*: “a three-dimensional exposure of the bitterest frustration...a masterpiece.” But Atkinson found Crocker-Harris “a crotchety, inferior old man...pure sentimentality and I cannot grieve over his misfortune.”

He (and others) called *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952, 132 performances) a soap opera, contending that Rattigan remained too personally aloof from his characters and themes for an American audience and was “too easily satisfied with craftsmanship.”

Most of the New York critics regarded *The Sleeping Prince* (1956, 52 performances) as a sleeping pill, but were finally, finally won over by *Separate Tables* (1956, 726 performances). Atkinson called *Table Number Seven* a masterpiece in miniature: “In his spare literary style, Mr. Rattigan conveys overwhelming pity and tenderness. What he does not say is more eloquent than what he has put on paper.” His review was the only time Atkinson recognized Rattigan as an artist. *Separate Tables* was hailed for its study of and compassion for the elderly, the lonely, the outcasts of society. Atkinson found Rattigan’s subject of loneliness “relevant.”

*Ross* (1961, 159 performances) was received respectfully as a biographical study, *Man and Boy* (1963, 54 performances) was deemed dull, and the full-length *In Praise of Love* (1974, 199 performances) was judged by

Clive Barnes in the *New York Times* as sentimental and facile: “There are many theatergoers...who relish a package of theatrical confirmation rather than theatrical confrontation. This could be their kind of show. It was not mine.”

This is where I came in, because I interviewed Rattigan before *In Praise of Love* opened (the assignment was from the *New York Times*, which decided not to use the interview when their critic did not like the play) and saw my first Broadway production of a Rattigan play. Rex Harrison shamelessly played Sebastian for sympathy, which makes me wonder how many Rattigan works were misrepresented in their Broadway productions.

This is partly true of Maria Aitken’s uneven *Man and Boy*. I saw the play on opening night, when actors are exhausted from press previews, resulting sometimes in a “phoned-in” quality that I noted in the performance. I thought that Antonescu’s minions and wife were caricatured, that Carol and the quirky Basil were excellent, and that Frank Langella’s glimmering black pearl of an Antonescu was sometimes nearly alone on stage in terms of connecting with the other actors.



Except for John Lahr, who dragged out Aunt Edna and hidden homosexuality for his essay in the *New Yorker*, a new generation of critics greeted this *Man and Boy*. *The Wall Street Journal*’s Terry Teachout wrote an appreciation of Rattigan months before the opening, and in his review judged that *Man and Boy* “turns out to be a tautly effective melodrama whose subject...is as timely as tomorrow’s tweets.”

Most of the critics felt that the play was a lesser Rattigan work, some thought it was not a good play but had contemporary relevance: “it’s first-class entertainment, especially in our post-Madoff era.” All of the critics lauded Langella, though a few thought his asteroid performance unbalanced the play. But they recommended going to see him, giving the Roundabout an opportunity to create impressive ads in the *New York Times*. Rattigan’s name may now be more associated with success.

Will the only Rattigan centennial production in America inspire more stagings of his work in the future? *The Wall Street Journal*’s critic concluded his appreciation with the opinion that “Rattigan’s time will come again in the US, just as it has in England,” declaring that his plays “quiver with suppressed passions that are all the more explosive for having been kept under wraps. In the theater, that kind of explosion can make the biggest bang of all.” ☞

## Rattigan 'revealed'?

by Clive Montellier

On 18 January, the Society embarked on its first organised visit to a Rattigan-related production, fittingly represented by a new play by our own Editor, Giles Cole. Expectations were high, as *The Art of Concealment* had attracted consistently good reviews and, by the time of our visit, tickets for the remainder of its short run had sold out.

Giles' play drew on the biographies by two of the Society's Vice-Presidents, Geoffrey Wansell and Michael Darlow, together with the personal reminiscences of its President, Princess Jean Galitzine and took the form of a series of vignettes from Rattigan's life between 1929 and 1965, linked by the character of Rattigan himself at the time of the opening of *Cause Célèbre* in 1977. A cast of eight reflected a number of key figures from Rattigan's life, as well as the young Terry, his embodiment of his own audience – Aunt Edna, and another imagined character inspired by several of Rattigan's friends and colleagues.

I confess I approached the production with some trepidation. At one end of the scale, it might prove to be a work so deeply immersed in the Rattigan story and canon that it would be impenetrable to those of us still learning about him; conversely, the temptation might be to pepper the dialogue with blinding signposts – “So, Terry, it's 1942 – you must be very pleased with the success of your new play, *Flare Path*”, “Yes, but my tortured private life is still giving me all ends of grief”... As I should have expected, Giles' script steered a careful and expert path between these extremes, providing enough references to keep the Rattigan novice on track, but leaving enough unsaid to allow the action on stage to tell the story. A particular strength of the production was the casting, with not only Dominic Tighe as the young Terry and Alistair Findlay as his older counterpart, but also Daniel Bayle as Kenneth Morgan and Charlie Hollway bearing a striking resemblance to their namesakes. Most striking, though, was Graham Pountney, beginning the play displaying an uncanny likeness to his character of Rattigan's father, then slipping into the invented role of high camp, catty Freddie Gilmour. Such was the transformation of demeanour that it took me a whole scene to realise that it was the same actor! The production, though, went far beyond any parade of caricatured figures from Rattigan's life. The quality of the writing and acting combined allowed each to be fully three-dimensional so that, even though we knew they were following the predetermined path of Rattigan's life story, reflecting well-documented issues of sexuality and critical acclaim (or lack of it), we cared

## Dates for your diary

Our Vice-President David Suchet will plant a tree in memory of Terence Rattigan and his theatrical legacy in the grounds of the Actors' Church in Covent Garden, on **Tuesday 22 May**, following a special church service. There is a reception at the Garrick Club afterwards for Society members and guests.



Acclaimed director Thea Sharrock (*After the Dance* and *Cause Célèbre*) has kindly agreed to give a masterclass in scenes from Rattigan plays at the Central School of Speech and Drama on **Friday 1 June** from 7.00 to 8.30pm. The masterclass will be followed by drinks. This event is being organised on behalf of the Society by Elizabeth Donnelly.



The Society's first Annual Dinner (as close as possible to TR's birthday) will be held at the Garrick Club on **Friday 15 June**, hosted by our Vice-President Geoffrey Wansell, with Sir Ronald Harwood CBE, commitments permitting, as our principal guest. The booking forms for this event—and the others mentioned above—have already been sent out. There is still time to apply!



There will be an excursion to RAF High Wycombe Officers' Mess on **Saturday 29 September** for a special screening of Rattigan's *Journey Together*. This is also the occasion of the Society's first AGM. See separate flyer for details.



Any member who missed *The Art of Concealment* (see report, left) may still catch it at Riverside Studios (020 8237 1111) **until 20 May**. Please contact the Editor for a TR Society discount! The playtext has now also been published by Oberon Books.

about the people we were watching. If I dare presume to borrow from Rattigan's own thoughts on his work, this was genuinely theatre of character and narrative, rather than simply of ideas.

To round off the evening, we enjoyed a glass of prosecco and, more importantly, a chance to meet the cast who generously gave of their time after a draining performance. Such opportunities are what makes membership of a Society such as ours so worthwhile. How else would one find oneself watching Rattigan's mother encourage him to pursue Jean Dawnay, while the real Princess Galitzine sat in the front row as our President. And would Aunt Edna have enjoyed it? I think so! ☞

*Clive is the Society's Secretary and RAF Liaison officer.*

Anyone interested in joining the Society should contact the Membership Secretary, Diana Scotney, on 01462 623941 or at [dianascotney@virginmedia.co.uk](mailto:dianascotney@virginmedia.co.uk). We are always keen to hear from potential new members.

Members are encouraged to submit news, views, letters, articles or anecdotes to this newsletter. Please contact the editor via email ([gc@gilescole.com](mailto:gc@gilescole.com)). The deadline for the next edition is Friday 15 June (the date of our annual dinner).