

The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

Lunch with the legendary Elena



On Saturday 19 January we were transported back to the Soho of the 1950s when founder member and legendary restaurateur Elena Salvoni hosted a Society lunch at Little Italy in Frith Street, Soho. The restaurant was formerly Bianchi's, where she had presided for 30 years. The décor has changed a lot since then—as we were told by Vice-President Geoffrey Wansell in his introductory speech—and where there had been a somewhat raffish, bohemian atmosphere there was now a sleek modern establishment with faux-brick

walls and a smart open staircase to the first floor, where we were gathered.

When Elena spoke she pointed out exactly where TR had sat when on his own (just about where our Treasurer is sitting in the background, behind Elena in the picture) and exactly where he had sat when accompanied (by the window). “I must live on!” she declared, to which there was only one riposte, supplied by Hon Sec Clive Montellier, “But you are!” It is no secret that Elena is now 92 and shows no sign of flagging energy, or of diminishing memories. The Soho of the 1950s is as vivid to her now as it ever was, and she relishes her position as a grande dame of the restaurant world, the veritable ‘Queen of Soho’. This was a real treat of an occasion, and another delightful event in the Society calendar. ☞

Rattigan and Milligan?

by Clive Montellier

From the biographies, we know that one of Rattigan's close friends was Tony Goldschmidt (later known as Goldsmith), who was killed on active service in WWII, but it was only on re-reading Spike Milligan's wartime autobiography *Rommel? Gunner Who?* that I discovered that Goldsmith was Milligan's platoon commander in the Royal Artillery, and a popular one at that. There are several mentions of him in Milligan's account of the Tunisian campaign, but the most poignant is from 24 April 1943, the day Goldsmith was killed:

“At about 11.10 I heard the dreadful news, Lt Goldsmith had been killed. Alf Fildes noted in his diary: *‘Learn with regret we have lost our best officer’*. I went back to my cave and wept. I remember calling his name.

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INTRODUCING

...founder member Elena Salvoni MBE

It seems entirely appropriate to follow the account of the Society lunch on page 1 with a profile of our hostess on page 2. There is hardly a celebrity she has not met and served at some point in her near 70-year career. She has over 400 signed photographs of the great and the good, all of whom have fallen under her spell.

She served Terence Rattigan many times, and didn't know he was a celebrity playwright until a young Joe Orton told her he had to telephone TR because he might help him put on his first play. She and her husband Aldo lived next door to Joe and his lover Kenneth Halliwell and knew them well. They would often pop in for coffee and a chat. One day Joe knocked urgently at their door saying he had to make this phone call, but he couldn't use the payphone at the Angel tube station because feeding coins into the box wouldn't sound very impressive when talking to a famous playwright. He made the call from Elena's phone and *Entertaining Mr Sloane* saw the light of day.

Elena was born in Clerkenwell in 1920 and left school at 14 to become a seamstress. In 1943 a girlfriend persuaded her to go and work with her at a restaurant in Old Compton Street, when waiters were in short supply and they had to take on girls. She never looked back. She had found her true vocation.

"If you don't like people, don't go into the restaurant business," she says. Her affection for her customers is infectious, and she has inspired great loyalty over the years from many struggling youngsters who went on to become household names. Sean Connery, John Hurt, Cameron Mackintosh, Stephen Fry, 'the boys from Monty Python' - she can remember them all, and tell

you a story about them too. She upbraided the painter Francis Bacon for knocking over a £70 bottle of wine and told him it was time to go home, even escorting him into Greek Street to find a taxi.

Her favourite story about TR is when she was



summoned to the table to be told, "When I ask for toast I want it toasted on both sides". There were no pop-up toasters then and a new girl had forgotten to turn the bread under the grill.

In 1981 she moved to L'Escargot, where her clients included Princess Diana and other young royals. When that closed in the 1990s, she and Aldo retired, but she soon became restless and jumped at the chance to run L'Etoile in Charlotte Street. Initially concerned that her customers wouldn't follow her there, she was soon reassured. They flocked. But now the 'Queen of Soho' is back in Frith Street, where she hosts a lunch on the second Wednesday of every month. She seems well set to outlive all her customers.

Photo Caption Competition

The second caption competition, asking readers to identify the actor on the *Journey Together* poster has at least prompted some response. Two responses, to be precise, one of which correctly identified Jack Watling. The winner was Ian Payne, of Wolverhampton, whose two glasses of champagne will have to go on ice until he visits London! Should this competition idea ever gain any momentum, we may have to consider a more sensible prize.

More on Rattigan and Rankin

by Michael Darlow

Further to my article in the Society's Newsletter last year about Rattigan's friendship with the Oxford University student David Rankin, I have received some fascinating newly uncovered material from my friend and colleague, the award-winning playwright and screen writer Michael Wilcox. It transpires that David Rankin was Michael's cousin and, while undertaking research into his family background, Michael came across Rankin's diary and letters he wrote during the last months of his life in the spring and summer of 1938.

As members know, Rankin was drowned on Thursday 21st July 1938 while swimming in the sea off Polperro in Cornwall. An inquest recorded Rankin's death as 'Accidental Drowning', but members of Rankin's family believe it was suicide. Among the material Michael found is the last entry in Rankin's diary, dated Monday 18th July 1938. In it he describes a play he intends to write, called *The Suicide*, about "... a middle-aged man who, remembering the ideals which were once his, finds that it would be too difficult to renounce so much of his past now and kills himself in the hope that his friends who have envied and admired him may be stimulated to wonder whether what they admired was more than ephemeral and whether they themselves did not share his characteristics."

Society members will notice clear thematic similarities between Rankin's intended play and the play which Rattigan was struggling with at exactly the same time – *After the Dance*.


Michael also found the last known letter, dated 15th May 1938, which Rankin wrote to his parents from Oxford. In it he writes about the political situation. Just weeks earlier Hitler had marched into Austria and incorporated it into Nazi Germany and now seemed to be threatening Czechoslovakia. In commenting on the ineffectual response of the League of Nations and Chamberlain's National Government to these events and the continuing civil war in Spain, Rankin tells his parents "It seems to me that the inevitable conclusion is that so long as there are nation states such as Britain, France, Germany, Italy, which exult in their own exclusiveness and strive for the predominance of their particular race, there will be power politics and the dangers of war. That does not mean that nations must disappear, it does mean that men must devote their first loyalty to the whole of mankind."

He wishes that "... the Socialists, whose theories have so much to commend in them..." would drop their bitterness towards their political opponents and

end "their absurd divisions". He characterises the members of Chamberlain's National Government not as a "collection of criminals ... but as a cabinet of rather uninspired men who are faced with an absurdly difficult situation."

Michael Wilcox says one can imagine Rattigan and Rankin eagerly discussing the international situation together and exploring their political ideas. Rattigan had been intensely interested in politics ever since he was at Harrow. Although, unlike some of his friends, he never became an active member of the Labour Party or, like a few, joined the Communist Party, he did participate, despite his pacifist leanings, in demonstrations in support of the Republicans in Spain.


It was during this period, at the time of his relationship with Rankin, that Rattigan worked on both *After the Dance* and, with his friend Tony Goldschmidt, his satire on Hitler, Mussolini and the Chamberlain government, *Follow My Leader*. It is impossible to be certain to what extent the relationship with Rankin influenced Rattigan's writing of either play, but that the friendship did exercise some influence on both, and perhaps later on plays such as *The Deep Blue Sea*, seems inescapable.

Michael Wilcox's own work has considerable affinities with the work of Rattigan. A number of his most highly regarded plays deal with relationships and the difficulty and pain of love and sex. Michael has edited five volumes Methuen's "Gay Plays" series and he, like Rattigan, is fanatical about cricket. 

Milligan and Rattigan?, continued from p1

"Apparently, he and Bdr Edwards were sheltering in a fox hole. *'We were under mortar attack; we sat facing each other, our knees touching. Tony had the map board on his chest, his arms folded round it. Suddenly, I was blown out of the trench. I went to get back in and I saw that Tony had been hit by a mortar bomb in the chest. He died instantly...'*

"All the boys came back very shaken. For someone as splendid, kind, intelligent and witty as Tony to be killed outraged my sensibilities. His friend, Terence Rattigan, wrote a personal obituary in the Times (reproduced in full in the book). I remember his last words to me. He was about to leave for Longstop. 'It won't be long now, I'd say Tunis in ten days.' He was patting his pockets. 'Blast, I'm out of cigarettes.' I gave him five of mine. 'Here sir, have five of my soap-saturated Passing Clouds, a holy medal in every packet...' He took them, smiled, tapped the driver on the shoulder and said, 'To battle!'"

Makes one wonder whether TR and Milligan ever met up. 

At Home with the Princess

by Barbara Longford

In November members of the Society's Committee received embossed **Princess George Galitzine at Home** cards inviting us to join our President for Christmas drinks at her home in Eaton Square. This stylish area has poignancy for us because Terence Rattigan lived at number 29 in the 1950s and there he read out to Jean an early draft of *Separate Tables* to ensure that she was happy with the lines given to Anne Shankland, whose character she had inspired. Jean suggested a few deletions, which Terry readily agreed to and which were never reinstated. Vivien Leigh's home is marked by a blue plaque, just two doors down from Jean's; Noël Coward lived around the corner in Gerald Road and remarked in his 1938 song *Marvellous Party* that "People's behaviour away from Belgravia would make you aghast".

Belgravia retains its glamour and our evening was magical. We watched Steve Bradley's (TRS Webmaster) film of the Centenary Service at The Actors' Church and David Suchet's planting of the sorbus tree in the garden. On an unusually hot Spring day last May David was poised, spade in hand, to speak, when twelve loud clock chimes rang out as if Sir Terence himself had orchestrated the interruption from on high.

The Society is fortunate to have on record not only David's tribute speech, written by Geoffrey Wansell, but also his inspiring impromptu words both in the garden and later at the Garrick Club.

Andrew Kenyon (TRS Treasurer) asked Jean if we might listen to a recording she made for Hal Prince in the late 1950s, which had led indirectly to Terence Rattigan persuading her to audition for the singing part of Diana Lake in the musical version of *French Without Tears – Joie de Vivre*. She was



successful and Terry was delighted. However, when the implications sank in – six performances a week and matinées – Jean pulled out of the project. *Joie de Vivre* closed after only four performances. Might our President have saved the day? We were all enchanted, particularly by the unforgettable *So in Love* by Cole Porter. We all felt privileged to hear the exquisite voice of a beautiful young woman.

The champagne was flowing and the stardust was shimmering and one of the guests asked Jean about her

Dates for your diary

The Tower Theatre Company (amateur) is performing ***The Deep Blue Sea*** at the Bridewell Theatre, off Fleet Street, London, in March. The Society has arranged tickets for the evening of **Wednesday 27 March** followed by a Society supper. A flyer and booking form is enclosed with this issue.

A new production of ***The Winslow Boy*** is coming to the Old Vic, directed by Lindsay Posner. The Society has made a block booking for the 2.30pm matinée on **Saturday 6 April**. A booking form is enclosed. Please note the discounted price is for over-60s.

The second Masterclass evening will take place at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, Sidcup, on **Wednesday 10 April**. The guest director will be **Adrian Brown** and he will work with actors in front of an audience of Society members and students. A booking form is also enclosed for this event.

MA students at Central School of Speech and Drama are performing ***Cause Célèbre*** from 15 to 18 April. Members are invited to book tickets via their box office—by phone: 020 7722 8183; or by email: boxoffice@cssd.ac.uk.

The second **Annual Birthday Dinner** is on **Friday 7 June** at the RAF Club in Piccadilly at 7 for 7.30 pm, with the distinguished TV and film director **Alvin Rakoff** as guest of honour.

We have persuaded the V&A to hold a TRS event on **Monday 15 July** in their lecture theatre at 6.00pm. The programme is entitled **An Evening on Terence Rattigan with Princess Galitzine** and will involve committee members, acted excerpts from the plays, drinks afterwards, as well as some reminiscences from our President. Reserve the date in your diaries!

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

Contributions to the next edition should be sent to the editor via email (gc@gilescote.com) by Saturday 20 April.

acting career. In the late 1950s her book *Model Girl* had just been published, she was on the panel of the BBC's *What's My Line* and this exposure led to producers Anna Neagle and Herbert Wilcox inviting Jean to test for a film. She'd had no acting training whatsoever but was simply asked to dance a tango with Frankie Vaughan. Jean loved the tango and was partial to Frankie and was invited to play the part of Wilfrid Hyde-White's rich society daughter, with whom Frankie (a Gibraltar fisherman) falls in love, in the 1958 film *Wonderful Things*.

None of us had seen the film and we asked if we might see an extract. Jean's performance is a revelation. More stylish, relaxed and credible than Grace Kelly, she could undoubtedly have been a film star. She was offered a seven year contract, which Terry advised her not to accept. She fell in love soon afterwards and, like Grace, she married her handsome Prince. ❧