

The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

A Tale of Two Cities resurrected

Having become accustomed to the close and intense personal relationships central to the other Rattigan works that I have seen, I was pleased and surprised by this interpretation of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. It was initially written in 1935 at the request of John Gielgud and was on a much larger canvas. Gielgud was interested in playing the two major roles; however, in a casual and callous manner he abandoned the production and it was pulled a few days before its opening night. It immediately slipped into obscurity and remained unseen for some eighty years until rediscovered by the director, Adam Spreadbury-Maher, who has adapted and condensed the original Rattigan script to make it suitable for the restrictions of the King's Head.

Inevitably some of the sweep and detail of the novel has been lost in this adaptation, which is now played out on a bare flat stage with Paris and London being imagined from two stools and a chair.

The bareness of the set left everything in the hands of the eight actors – each of whom switches skillfully between several characters, including appearing effectively at one point as two runaway horses trampling on a young girl. There was a particularly good performance from Stewart Agnew, in his first major role after drama school, who played both the young advocate

Sydney Carton and also the flamboyantly self-centred Marquis de St. Evremond. All the small cast played their varied parts with skill, but particular mention must go to Shelley Lang as the sinister Madame Defarge consumed with her list of names woven into her eternal knitting. A very worthwhile resurrection which deserves to remain in the repertoire of Rattigan's works.




TRS member Graham Mander reports on A Tale of Two Cities at the King's Head Theatre

(Photo: Alastair Muir)



Michael Darlow chaired a Q&A session after the performance and commented that the play “contains interesting insights into the mood of the period in which that adaptation was made as much as into the mood in Britain at the time when Dickens wrote the original novel. Also it gives an insight in Rattigan's mindset at the time and one can already detect some of his characteristics as a writer of stage dialogue. Rattigan wrote most of the dialogue while

Gielgud did the construction and breakdown of the book into the outline of a play”.

Members enjoyed an early supper at a nearby Italian restaurant, and were joined there by Major General Derek Crabtree, who had taken the part of Sydney Carton in the first performance of the play at St. Brendan's College Dramatic Society, in 1950. Also present was Lee Penhaligan, Chairman of the Sir Terence Rattigan Charitable Trust. 

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The Terence Rattigan Society

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INTRODUCING Our Chairman and Founder Barbara Longford

“How about getting a commission for old Rattigan?”, said Richard Imison. It was 1974, Barbara was a script reader for the BBC Radio Drama Department and Richard, its Head, had instigated an international commissioning scheme whereby radio drama groups worldwide chipped in to attract a top writer to the medium. There was unanimous approval for the suggestion, Terry was taken out to lunch and the result was *Cause Célèbre*, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in October 1975. Barbara remembers the moment (and the late Richard Imison) with clarity and fondness. She had seen so few Rattigan plays, having grown up during his unfashionable period and, with the exception of some fine amateur productions, had to wait until 1980 when *The Browning Version* and *Harlequinade* played at the National Theatre, with Geraldine McEwan and Alec McCowen, directed by Michael Rudman.

Fast forward to July 2010. Barbara’s friend, Diana (our Membership Secretary) had arranged a visit to the National Theatre to see Thea Sharrock’s production of *After the Dance*. They took Diana’s son (Barbara’s godson) and his young wife to see how ‘old Rattigan’ would go down with the current generation. None of them had seen or read the play, which was over 70 years old, but everyone was moved and astonished. And Thea’s production was the catalyst for Barbara’s desire to form the Society.

Apart from knowing Alan (Alan Brodie Representation), having chaired The Noël Coward Society for many years, Barbara had no contacts whatsoever in the world of Terence Rattigan. She had a



treasured first edition of Geoffrey Wansell’s 1995 biography, but had no idea who he was. An updated centenary edition of Michael Darlow’s book *The Man and His Work* was published in June 2010, which Barbara read avidly before taking the plunge and ringing Michael up with her idea. She set to work

on the plan early in 2011 and from the outset Geoffrey and Michael did everything they possibly could to help set up the Society. She recruited members for the Committee; it was important that it was not a talking shop but that everyone had a specific role. The biographers put her in touch with Lee Penhaligan, Princess Galitzine, Adrian Brown, Dr Holly Hill and Junko Tarrant, which led eventually to the launch of the Society, in September 2011 at Terry’s birthplace, 100 Cornwall Gardens, London.

Barbara began her career teaching in the East End of London but her time in BBC Radio Drama was the most formative and enjoyable period. She met most of the leading actors of the day. They were all keen to do radio. The pay wasn’t good, but they were able to play a vast range of parts for which they might be unsuited physically. She spent a weekend in a basement studio at Broadcasting House with Samuel Beckett and Patrick Magee, for a recording of *Texts for Nothing*.

She remembers Paul Schofield coming into the studio with such self-effacement that he could have been one of the cleaners, until he began to work. **Cont. on p4**

'One long hope deferred'

A letter to TR from St. John Irvine

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Honey Ditches, Seaton, Devon

9th September, 1935

Dear Mr Rattigan,

About seven out of every ten young men at Oxford and Cambridge want to be dramatic critics. Their letters arrive at newspaper offices, so to speak, in bundles of fifty. Candidly, I don't know how you are to obtain the sort of job you want. Every paper already has its quota of critics – there are four of us on *The Observer* – and the opportunities of obtaining employment are becoming fewer because the popular papers give less and less space to dramatic criticism.

I suggest to you that you ought not to be looking for that sort of job at all. Your ambition is to be a dramatist, and your raw material, therefore, is people. Why not take a job that brings you into contact with a lot of unspecialised people. If you become a dramatic critic, your nights will be spent in the theatre, seeing over and over again that ghastly collection of grubs called "first-nighters" and the performance of every sort of play, mostly bad. Your days will be spent in writing about the plays and in trying to write plays of your own. Any relaxation you have will be obtained in the company of other writers, each of them complaining bitterly of insufficient notices or wondering how he can obtain more publicity. After five years of that sort of existence, you won't be able to recognise a human being.

But if you will do what I did, spend twelve years of your life in a job that has nothing whatever to do with the theatre or with art of any sort, and you will store your mind with stuff that may be of incalculable value to you. My job was in an insurance office, and I had to deal with claims made by workmen under the Workmen's Compensation Acts. I have often urged Noël Coward to go to Huddersfield and live there as an industrial insurance agent for a couple of years, living on what he earns from his work, but he funks the job. Well, why don't you take it on – or some other job which will bring you into contact with your raw material. I wrote my first three plays, *The Magnanimous Lover*, *Mixed Marriage* and *Jane Clegg*, in the evenings after I had done a day's work in the City. My first novel was written in the same circumstances. I do not believe in this idea that a writer is made by going straight from Oxford to a study where one writes about other people's work and tells them where they get off! If you must join a newspaper, take a job as an ordinary reporter. You'll learn something about people from that job, though you may toughen your imagination at the same

time. In your shoes, I'd try to become a reporter on a country paper – not a London one – the sort of paper that sends you to Flower Shows and makes you report in great detail the proceedings of the Rural District Council. A year or two of work of that sort would make a man of you. Think of the variety of people and things you'd come in contact with, and the knowledge of human character you'd obtain. What could a year or two as a dramatic critic do for you in comparison with that?

Anyhow, whatever you do, get into your head that your prime business is to familiarise yourself with your raw material: people; and that any work which separates you from it and makes you spend your time in sects of specialists is damned bad for you. A well-known woman novelist took a house in the country and announced to the neighbourhood that she did not wish to be called on: a piece of presumption, I thought, for it implied that people would wish to call on her. I remonstrated with her in the terms in which I am remonstrating with you, but she persisted in abstaining from the company of what she called "dull people" and filled her house at week-ends with other writers, mostly sycophantic. She saw nobody but writers either in the country or in town. To-day, her books are unreadable. She hasn't seen a human being for at least a decade, and doesn't know what one is like. Her characters are repetitions of the people about whom she first wrote or the ghosts of characters in other authors' books.

Your information about your play on *A Tale of Two Cities* is new to me. On the facts, as you state them, you seem to me to have been badly treated. I cannot think why Sir John Martin-Harvey should object to the performance of your work. He has had a pretty good innings with *The Only Way* and made a handsome fortune out of it, none of which, I imagine, was shared with a Dickens. To try to make a permanent monopoly of the subject and bar a young man from doing anything with it seems odd to me. Why Bronson Albery, who is a very decent fellow and one of the few intelligent people in theatrical management, should allow himself to be overruled by Martin-Harvey on this point, I cannot think. Martin-Harvey is a very good actor and, I should have said, a man of generous mind. It might be worth your while to talk to him about the matter. Don't let the disappointment dash you. Exploit your setbacks. You'll have more in this job. My experience has been and still is that a dramatist's life is largely one long hope deferred.

Yours sincerely,

St. John Irvine

The final paragraph is particularly apt in relation to the theatre visit described on the front page (Ed). ☞

The Winslow Boy on Broadway

by TRS member Alexander (Sandy) Marshall

(Photo: Susan Palmer Marshall)

Britain's Old Vic and America's Roundabout Theatre Company have teamed up to present Rattigan's 1946 drama, *The Winslow Boy*. The result is that Broadway has a sterling revival. What is the price of righteousness? It's a question that Terence Rattigan tackles in this play. He lets you decide the answer.

This is a flawless example of a well-written play, in which Rattigan shrewdly takes the action out of the courtroom, and masterfully places it in the drawing room. The play is directed with exquisite nuance by Olivier Award-winner Lindsay Posner (who also directed the Old Vic production many of us saw earlier this year).

On Broadway, Rattigan's three-act play is condensed into two acts. Well, to be fair, all three acts are there, but only one interval. This version brings together an extraordinarily talented Anglo-American cast led by Roger Rees as the ailing but determined family patriarch Arthur Winslow, a man who is more interested in RIGHT than justice. It is a brilliantly conceived and wonderfully moving portrayal.

But the night does not entirely belong to Rees. This production has a genuine ensemble that makes incredulity feel all too real and human. The wonderful cast includes Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio as the intrinsically ladylike wife, Grace; Charlotte Parry, who portrays sister Catherine with complexity, intelligence and verve; and Michael Cumpsty who plays Desmond Curry with a sad but noble humanity. They are outstanding. Kudos also goes to Alessandro Nivola as the celebrated barrister, Sir Robert Morton. Nivola plays his part with a kind of arrogance, cruelty and virtue seldom seen on stage.

Rattigan's stylistic perfection became something of a liability when John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* premiered at the Royal Court in 1956. Suddenly there was a new generation of Angry Young Men with their kitchen sink dramas, and Rattigan was, for a time, driven off the English stage. History, however, turned out to be on Terry's side. Last year's Broadway revival of *Look Back In Anger* appeared to be tired and out of date. It was a dismal failure. *The Winslow Boy* (with excellent costumes and sets by Olivier Award-winner Peter McKintosh) hasn't been seen on Broadway since its original staging in 1947, and it's still fresh as paint.



Dates for your diary

The TRS New Year Drinks Party will take place on **Sunday 19 January 2014** in the Brydon Room at Chelsea Old Town Hall, hosted by our Treasurer, Andrew Kenyon. Our esteemed member **Adrian Brown** will be the guest of honour and the register showing the entry for TR's birth will be on display. The timing for the event is 12 noon to 2.30pm. Booking form enclosed.

The Finborough Theatre near Earl's Court, London, is putting on a production of TR's play **Variation on a Theme** next year and the Society is having a Gala Evening in early March. On going to press the precise date was TBC but a form is enclosed herewith.

After the success of the Terence Rattigan Evening at the V&A in July, it has been agreed to repeat the event at the **English Speaking Union** in Charles Street, London W1 on **Wednesday 21 May 2014**. For anyone who missed the event—or for those who would care to repeat the experience!—please reserve the date in your diaries. Further details and a booking form will follow. The programme will be the same as before, featuring Geoffrey Wansell, Princess Galitzine, Judy Buxton, Steve Bradley and Giles Cole, with Clive Montellier manning the slide projector.

The Ballroom at the RAF Club in Piccadilly has been booked for the **Rattigan Birthday Dinner** on **Friday 6 June 2014**. A booking form will follow in a later edition of the newsletter.

A subscription to the Society would make an ideal Xmas present! The new greetings card, shown in the last issue, would be a welcome change from snowmen and robins!

Contributions to the next edition should be sent to the editor (gc@gilescote.com) by Friday 28 February 2014.

Introducing our Chairman, cont. from p2

Robert Stephens, sadly altered from his glory days, came in to record *Gulliver's Travels*; Anna Massey was a marvellous Major Barbara; Lotte Lenya and Basil Dean came for meetings with Barbara's boss, Martin Esslin, Head of Drama, expert on Brecht and author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

Taking personal delivery from a young, dashing Tom Stoppard of his radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* was a huge thrill. Barbara has always been more interested in the writing than the acting and enjoys reading plays – well-written ones like Rattigan's and Coward's – as much as seeing them performed.

She is pleased with the way the Society has progressed but the happiest element of all has been the great warmth, understanding, depth and erudition of everyone involved, members included.

Barbara is working on a Terence Rattigan Studio Day or Weekend at Trinity College, Oxford, for 2015 and would welcome members' ideas for the content. 