

# The Rattigan

The Newsletter of  
The Terence Rattigan Society

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## Version

## The first night of *The Sleeping Prince*

An extract from the diary of our President, 5th November 1953

"Michael Franklin called for me at 6.45. I was very excited, we were going to Terry's opening of *The Sleeping Prince*. Mr Hastings at Bradley's had lent me a white mink stole (£2,000) as I had told him I was going onto the party Terry was giving for Vivien Leigh and Larry Olivier. Was wearing my Susan Small blue dress, had to cut a lot of the hem off as it had got so muddy and tattered. Unfortunately got home at 5.30 so didn't have a lot of time; also had to put my false eyelashes on, they looked very false but there was no time to change them.

Michael had a Daimler hire car waiting to take us. Fortunately my long white gloves were back from the cleaners, so everything was perfect. He tried to explain on the way to the theatre some story about Mrs Rattigan thinking that Terry and I were having a big love affair, and I was to encourage her to think so .... The traffic was enormous because there was a film premiere on as well for *Julius Caesar* and also it was Guy Fawkes night.



Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in  
*The Sleeping Prince*, 1953

Several photographers made me pose for them when I arrived, it must have been the white mink - much to Mara Lane's annoyance, she is a regular first nighter, just to be noticed and get into the papers. We had excellent seats on the left side of the aisle, fourth row of the stalls. Sheilagh Wilson was in a box above us with Lionel Green, I was worried she would wonder why I was not with Terry, but he officially does not watch his first nights, but hovers around in the background to gauge the reactions. Noel Coward was in our row. Douglas Fairbanks and his wife behind us

- Somerset Maugham in front - Stewart Granger - David Niven - Arthur Ferrier - Norman Hartnell - Bunny Rogers - Mrs Manley, my French mistress - everyone! I was very proud of my white mink.

Afterwards Michael and I had to go to The Ivy to wait for Stephen and Phil Mitchell because we wanted more people to arrive at Terry's before Mrs Rattigan smelt a rat about **continued on p 9...**

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FCIPD, FCMI, RAF

Email: [committee@theterencerattigansociety.co.uk](mailto:committee@theterencerattigansociety.co.uk)

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## INTRODUCING Denis Moriarty

**Denis's first brush** with Terence Rattigan was as a young man in the Army, when he appeared in *French Without Tears*. Later, at Oxford, he became fascinated by what he refers to as 'the John Osborne thing'. He was aware that the intellectual climate was changing, and the middle-class plays he had been used to at Reading rep (he was at 'a good grammar school' in Reading) were becoming outdated. He admits he was not 'into' the theatre in a serious way, which he epitomises by not knowing Chekhov, but here was something fresh and challenging. With his usual modest understatement, he says he was 'tolerably good' academically. He was also a more than tolerably good singer, having been a boy treble at school, appearing in *Ruddigore*, *Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Gondoliers*. He then became a mezzo and sang *Iolanthe*. When his voice broke his great starring role was as Bunthorne in *Patience*, following this with Koko in *The Mikado* and Sir Joseph Porter in *HMS Pinafore*. He matched these achievements with playing Shaw's *St Joan*, Falkland in *The Rivals* and Celia in *As You Like It*. He won the prize for Best Actor at school (given by Old Boys the Boulting Brothers) on two occasions. At Oxford, he appeared in revue with Dudley Moore and future film-maker Ken Loach and played the lead in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. One might well have thought that performing was to be his path in life.

But no. After Oxford he went straight to the BBC at Bush House to work on the overseas



services. His first break came when, with his considerable musical experience, he landed a job as Assistant Producer, Music and Arts. His youthful choral experiences had led him to working with the foremost conductors of the day, his first audition

having led to his singing on a recording of the Brahms Requiem, under Klemperer, with Schwarzkopf and Fischer-Dieskau as the soloists. One of the highlights of Denis's career at the BBC was his four years as director of the very popular TV programme *Face the Music*, with the legendary Joyce Grenfell, Joseph Cooper, Bernard Levin et al. And the weekly guests were no less legendary - Solti, Pears, Walton, Eva Turner, to name but a few.

In the mid-70s, he was introduced to Alec Clifton-Taylor, who had written a book on English buildings. Denis describes Clifton-Taylor as 'quirky and oddly posh', and it was a very fruitful professional partnership at the BBC, leading to two series of six programmes on English towns. Denis can still lecture on any number of them to this day – along with many other subjects that have attracted his interest. On his retirement from the BBC in 1992, he turned to lecturing for NADFAS and to leading cultural tours for ACE (the Association of Cultural Exchange) to India, the Americas, Portugal, Sri Lanka and Egypt, as well as many parts of the UK.

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# A play about a play at the Arcola?

**A conversational review by Geoffrey Wansell  
and your Editor of Kenny Morgan by Mike  
Poulton at the Arcola Theatre in London**

**GC:** Let's start with the premise of the play. It's generally accepted that *The Deep Blue Sea* was inspired by the suicide of Kenneth Morgan, one of TR's young lovers, who had left TR and gone to live with someone else in a none-too-salubrious flat in Camden Town. Mike Poulton's play starts with an attempted suicide by Kenneth, who is discovered by another tenant and the landlady, and is brought round by a slightly dodgy doctor who also happens to live in the building. In other words, an almost exact mirror-image of the beginning of *The Deep Blue Sea*. Were you expecting such an obvious parallel with the Rattigan play?

**GW:** Yes, I suppose I was, but I do think this was much more than a biodrama – I think Mike Poulton has a much deeper play here than might have been expected. He has tried to do something more interesting, and more complicated, and has drawn resonances from *The Deep Blue Sea* which give real substance to his own play.

**GC:** Did it worry you at all that it was dramatically so close to the Rattigan?

**GW:** Well, at one point it is almost a parody of the Rattigan, but I think we have to forgive the fact that *The Deep Blue Sea* has clearly helped the structure of this play. Unless you are a Rattigan aficionado, you are not going to be overly aware of the similarities – or unduly worried by them.

**GC:** But we have the same characters – the landlady with an ever-ailing husband, the slightly awkward neighbour who looks through Kenny's address book to find someone to contact, the foreign doctor who has been struck off –

**GW:** True, but then the play expands into something very different.

**GC:** And Rattigan himself of course appears in – as it were – the role of the deserted husband, who is summoned by the well-meaning neighbour.

**GW:** Yes, and as in *Deep Blue Sea* he tries – although somewhat half-heartedly it has to be said – to win Kenny back. This is where it's not so close to reality. Kenny Morgan actually left Rattigan

about nine years before the supposed action of the play takes place –

**GC:** The play being set in 1949 –

**GW:** And they got back together after Terry's affair with Chips Channon, but then Kenny left him again—so it's not quite the heartbreaking scenario that we're led to believe in the Arcola play. When I was writing my biography I was contacted by two other lovers of Rattigan's from around the same time. To be blunt, Terry could be pretty promiscuous. I'm sure he was very fond of Kenny, but Kenny was by no means the only one. In fact the actor playing him – Paul Keating – very good – looked more like Michael Franklin to my mind.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This summer sees a bumper issue of the newsletter as there has been a surge of Society activity, two new productions of Rattigan plays, a special one-off script-in-hand performance in Tangier, and a new play focusing on Rattigan and his relationship with Kenneth Morgan, all of which are reviewed in these pages. On this page we feature the last of these. ☞

**GC:** I had a problem with the ages of the characters. Kenny would have been late twenties in 1949, and his new lover – called Alec Lennox here – was supposed to be about 19, but age-wise they looked the other way round. And Terry would have been 38 in 1949 –

**GW:** And very glamorous –

**GC:** Yes, quite. But here, Simon Dutton gave the impression of a slightly portly gentleman of 50-plus who has seen better days.

**GW:** I agree it wasn't the most flattering portrayal in physical terms. Terry only started to go to seed a little, if you can call it that, post-Osborne.

**GC:** OK, let's leave that aside! I think we agree that the play developed into something rather special. Were there any other weaknesses in the play for you?

**GW:** Only that it demanded a lot of its audience in terms of 'back story'. It would have been a bit impenetrable for someone not in tune with Terry's plays. It's not a 'coach party' show.

**GC:** No, certainly not commercial in that sense. I thought it worked very well in a studio space, like the Arcola.

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# Englishness Celebrated at Birthday Dinner

*A report by Roger Mills*

A **standing joke** amongst market traders goes—Q: ‘Who’s the only person to have seen so-and-so in a suit?’ A: ‘The Judge’. For me it’d be—Q: ‘Millsy in a black tie?’ A: ‘Members of the TRS!’ Yes, the fact that, after vowing years ago never to get into a boiled shirt again, the Birthday Dinner has attained such a must-go status that even I trouble the hirers and emerge from my habitual chrysalis a gaudy butterfly.

After 2016’s at the Garrick Club it’s easy to see why. Wonderful venue, convivial company and speeches of just the right length – backed by a fine meal and eminently drinkable wine. One feels that Rattigan would have approved. Indeed the Garrick Club could have been designed for Terry with its stated aim to be a place where ‘actors and men of refinement and education might meet on equal terms’, where ‘patrons of the drama and its professors were to be brought together’, and where ‘easy intercourse was to be promoted between artists and patrons’.

I can offer no higher compliment to the venerable old place that to say, were I years younger, I might try to find a gullible current member to put my trivial name forward, bribe the staff to hide the black balls, and take my chance with the seven year waiting list. (*Actually an average of only 3-4 years now!—Ed.*)

We assembled in the Library – the kind of room, furnished with comfortable leather furniture, which is the fantasy of many – before eating in the Milne Room and an adjacent private dining room added to accommodate folk who booked later than the first day but were determined to be present.

Proposing the birthday toast, David Suchet returned again to the continuing reassessment of Rattigan’s work, pointing out that far from being the stereotyped ‘comfortable’ writer, in *Man & Boy*’s Gregor Antonescu he created a man with no redeeming features whatsoever. A character so amoral and wicked and so challenging that it took four times of asking before David agreed to play it in the 2005 revival. An example, he said, of the truth that you just have to take on such roles if actors are to fulfil their mission as servants to the drama.

Guest of Honour Simon Heffer reckoned he was a



**Vice-President Greta Scacchi with Guest of Honour Simon Heffer, who graciously accepted honorary membership of the Society.**

*Photograph by Roger Mills*

reluctant theatre-goer but an admirer of Rattigan mainly through his screenplays which he first encountered on TV in the Redgrave/Puffin Asquith 1951 *Browning Version*, an experience he shares with many I suspect. His well-judged remarks singled out *Journey Together*, *The Way to the Stars* and *The Sound Barrier* for especial praise – the latter to acclaim from a senior serving RAF bod present. Simon praised Rattigan’s understanding of a certain kind of Englishness,

which to some is seen as defunct but in fact is still apparent continually in everyday interaction. He is surely right. If Rattigan writes about anything, he said, it is a sort of pragmatic reserved acceptance and tolerance (much on show recently) combined with a determination to ‘do the right thing’. (Call it concealment if you like but in *The Way to the Stars* the intensely sensual relationship between Archdale (Redgrave) and Toddy (Rosamund John) is obviously bubbling away under the Rattigan’s surface *sang froid*. As is the fact that Iris Winterton (Renée Asherson) and Penrose (John Mills) can’t wait to throw caution to the wind – only prevented by that cursed Englishness and doing the right thing. It’s all what Michael Flanders calls, with some approval I think, that ‘veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half-truth’.)

Simon is surely bang on in his analysis, bang on too in appealing for *The Sound Barrier* to have a greater profile. It’s a wonderful piece and gets perhaps his best screen performance from Ralph Richardson playing aircraft tycoon Sir John Ridgefield – a part that encapsulates all of Rattigan’s most enduring concerns. (At one time this was available as a double DVD set with *Hobson’s Choice* – a far more appropriate coupling than it might appear at first glance. They have more in common than the director.) Topped by one of Denis Moriarty’s *extempore* but classically constructed votes of thanks, this was an occasion to send one to Leicester Square tube with a spring in the step.

Sadly one absentee was our bubbly and always enthusiastic member Patricia ‘Paddy’ Holland, a regular at many functions.

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# The Reluctant Hero

**Martin Amherst Lock reviews Ross at the Chichester Festival Theatre**

**I must confess** that it was with some trepidation that I approached the recent production of *Ross*. My only previous exposure to the play had been at school back in the 1970s. Chosen no doubt by a head of drama because it has an all-male cast, no set and easily assembled costumes – sheets and tea towels borrowed from matron for the Arabs and a motley assortment of uniforms from the CCF for the soldiers – the play was way beyond the talent of schoolboy actors and seemed interminable. I need not have worried: one glance at Chichester's vast stage framed by sandstone pillars sprouting exotic Assyrian capitals and we were instantly transported to the desert wastes of Arabia and another world – another world but politically not a remote one, because, in its exploration of what led the Middle East to become riven by bitter conflict, the play touches upon a past whose repercussions are all too keenly felt today. A revival of *Ross* is not only timely in its helping us to understand in some small part why the Arab world is in such turmoil; it also serves as a reminder that far from being 'merely' a writer of plays set in seemingly enclosed, inward-looking drawing-rooms, Rattigan is also adept at creating drama which in its historical sweep, constantly changing locations, use of film and dream sequences and shifts in time has more in common (much as he would probably have loathed the comparison) with Brechtian epic than traditional English theatre. And arguably Brechtian too is his choice of a deeply flawed and highly complex character to be his play's reluctant hero.

Why, one can't help wondering, did Rattigan decide to write a play about T. E. Lawrence, that enigmatic figure who is immortalised in Lawrence's own hagiography *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, known to us all thanks to Peter O'Toole's mesmerising portrayal of him in David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, and recently the subject of Howard Brenton's fascinating play *Lawrence After Arabia*? The audacious glamour of someone who strode through the streets of London 'clad in the magnificent white silk robes of an Arab prince' must have appealed to Rattigan's sense of theatricality, as doubtless did the extraordinary magnetism and power of an individual who seemingly single-handedly galvanized a disparate bunch of Arab tribes into rising up against the Ottoman empire. On a more subtle level, one can imagine that Rattigan with his fascination for the outsider might also have been drawn to someone who was successful despite emphatically not being 'one of them' – the non-commissioned cartographer who,

scarcely able to salute properly, in moments has the top brass eating out of his hand, the opportunist who delights in defying authority whilst simultaneously exploiting it. And perhaps Lawrence also spoke to him as a character because he too had endured a tough childhood at the hands of a dominating woman, in Rattigan's case a strict grandmother who stood in for his parents when they were away on diplomatic duties, in Lawrence's a mother who was a firm believer in corporal punishment. More than anything Rattigan's Lawrence emerges as someone who is desperate to belong, to be included but finds it enormously difficult to trust others, a situation in which it is difficult not to see tinges of Rattigan's own emotional landscape.

Given such a complex and self-conflicted hero, any production of *Ross* stands or falls on its leading actor. Both physically and intellectually, Joseph Fiennes rose magnificently to the challenge, portraying with total conviction the multiple facets of Lawrence's character, from seductive charm and extraordinary chutzpah to a waspish sense of humour and an arrogance which at times shades into sadistic and even masochistic cruelty. From the very beginning of the play when 'Ross' is being grilled for returning late to barracks Fiennes captured perfectly a schoolboyish inability to resist showing off: the man who supposedly longs for anonymity and is treating the RAF as his own brand of



**Joseph Fiennes as 'Ross'**

*Photograph by Tristram Kenton*

monastery has to reveal that he has been dining with Lord Astor and the Archbishop of Canterbury; as a character in Brenton's play brilliantly puts it, Lawrence is for ever 'backing into the limelight', someone who, a dab hand at the art of concealment, hides behind a carapace of wit, impudence and intellect.

What was especially impressive about Fiennes' performance was his ability to encompass the enormous range of Lawrence's moods, from utter delight when, his plan having been accepted, he lounges at Allenby's desk as if it were his own, to deep sadness when recalling having to shoot one of his faithful Arab companions. Painfully memorable was his depiction of Lawrence after the famous rape scene at Daraa: his once brilliant white robes filthy, he looked spiritually and physically utterly broken. Far from being invented by Lawrence as a form of self-chastisement as Brenton's play would suggest, this horrifying act Rattigan makes **cont. overleaf...**

clear did indeed happen, leaving deep physical and emotional scars.

But this is far from a one-man show and throughout the evening Fiennes' performance was complemented by the excellent portrayal of the three key players – General Allenby, Sheik Auda Abu Tayi and the Turkish Military Governor – who, wheeling vulture-like overhead, battle for possession of what Rattigan calls Lawrence's Will. Paul Freeman skilfully depicted an Allenby who has infinitely more perception – and tolerance – than one might expect of a senior officer of the period. Michael Feast's Turkish governor was a creepily oleaginous manipulator who grasps with uncanny insight that the way to break Lawrence is not through mere torture: he needs to have inflicted upon him something that will force him to acknowledge the deep-seated desires and longing from which he has always fled.

Interestingly, Rattigan does not give Emir Feisal a role in the play – his inclusion in Brenton's *Lawrence After Arabia*, and indeed Lean's film, makes it much easier to follow the development of Lawrence's desert campaign as he discusses it with his principal Arab ally – perhaps because he wants the spotlight to shine solely on Lawrence. His substitute, Sheik Auda, in less experienced hands could easily slip into a caricature of an irascible native, but Peter Polycarpou's Auda developed from predictable hot-headedness to a strong father figure, his finding in Lawrence another son being especially touching. Indeed, throughout the production Adrian Noble handled Rattigan's trademark blending of comedy and tragedy with great skill, allowing the colonel-blimpish Flight Lieutenant and order-barking Flight Sergeant, characters doubtless born of Rattigan's first-hand experience of the RAF, to be foils to the much more subtly drawn depictions of military leaders such as Allenby. Shifts in mood and pace were effortlessly managed as was Rattigan's somewhat clunky signposting via film and a military lecture that we are now going back in time!

Skilled too was Noble's delicate handling of the characteristic daring of Rattigan's writing: the mere suggestion of an erotic frisson between the Turkish governor and his captain; the love that blossoms between Lawrence and both Hamed and Rashid, signalled by an affection which suggested that for all his protestations Lawrence was not beyond craving physical intimacy; and the brutal evocation of gang rape, none the less powerful for being portrayed off stage. Above all he let us hear the silence of the desert – to allow tableaux of stillness and composure to hang before us and seep into our consciousness.

But what this production most successfully captured was the play's poignant mood of yearning in its portrayal of someone simultaneously wanting to conform but

despising normality, in flight from himself and searching for self-annihilation, and yet longing to be included: Lawrence cannot find love within his own class and certainly not with the opposite sex, so he seeks it with strangers, with those who are different, be it Arabs or squaddies. But just as it would seem to be within his grasp it eludes him: Lawrence's delight on seeing the other RAF lads all rally round to speak up for him is deeply moving, yet he cannot truly embrace their friendship because he is living a lie, is not who he claims to be.

Similarly, he is hopelessly compromised with his Arab friends and therefore unable ever to be truly open with them, because he knows from the outset that the dream he has fed them of a united Arabia is a fiction. Longing to belong but never being able to be truly honest about yourself: it's a situation which Rattigan clearly understood very well.

Freddie Page's life stopped, we learn in *The Deep Blue Sea*, in 1944; we imagine Lawrence's stopped in 1918. We are given a tantalising hope that a future could lie ahead but, crushed by Lawrence's unerring instinct for self-destruction, it is cruelly whisked away from us.



## Back to where it all began

### *Michael Darlow reports on a unique performance in Tangier*

Earlier this year, writing in the Newsletter about the spate of new Rattigan productions to look forward to this summer, I said that perhaps the most intriguing was a new production of *After the Dance* in Tangier. Now I am delighted to be able to report that the production and associated events around it lived up to expectations.

As members know, at the time of Rattigan's birth his father, Frank, was a rising young diplomat, a qualified Arabic speaker and the number two man in the British Legation in Tangier, the strategically vital, historic port city on the northern coast of Morocco at the gateway from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean. Frank Rattigan had held the post since May 1909 and Terence was almost certainly conceived there. That Terence was born in London was largely due to the fact that the Foreign Office had given Frank the task of entertaining the ex-Grand Vizier of Morocco (roughly the equivalent of a former Prime Minister) El Mehdi El Menebhi during the celebrations surrounding the coronation of King George V, due to take place on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1911. The evidence points strongly to the idea that in late July, when Frank and his wife Vera returned to Tangier, baby Terence went with them and spent the first six months of his life in the city. Then, in February

1912, Frank was assigned to a new post in Cairo. In later years Frank and Vera Rattigan would look back on their time in Tangier as the happiest and most carefree of their married lives.

For much of the previous decade Morocco had been a potential flashpoint in the mounting tensions between Germany, France and Britain which in 1914 would lead to the outbreak of the First World War. These tensions escalated dangerously just three weeks after Terence's birth when the Germans sent a gunboat to Agadir, the Moroccan port on the Atlantic coast. Ostensibly this was to 'protect the lives and property of German citizens living in Morocco' but was, in fact, an open challenge to France's right to control Morocco. When the British Government made it clear that if the Germans attacked French interests Britain would side with France, Germany backed down and war was temporarily averted.

Those first six months of Terence Rattigan's life spent in Tangier, plus the years of his early childhood in Egypt and in London, are of particular interest in considering his plays, not only because of their presumed psychological impact upon him, but because in his work he repeatedly returns to events which occurred during those early years. Indeed, much of Rattigan's work can be seen as a probing into the uneasy transition of his and his parents' class and generation from the comfortable certainties of the years immediately before the First World War into the uncertainties, social and emotional self-doubts of the decades following the Second World War.

So I was particularly intrigued when, earlier this year, I was invited by Rob Ashford, the Tony, Olivier and Emmy award-winning director and choreographer, who with Kenneth Branagh co-directed last year's excellent production of the double-bill of Rattigan's plays *Harlequinade* and *All On Her Own* and the acclaimed production of *The Winter's Tale* starring Branagh and Judi Dench, to give a pre-performance talk and write a programme article for his production of *After The Dance* to be staged in Tangier. *After The Dance* is the play in which Rattigan probes most intensely the emotional and political differences between generations, between those who were young after the First World War and those who were to fight in the Second World War. I was particularly interested to see what resonances and impact the play would have for an audience in Tangier today. This was not only because of Rattigan's connection with the city but because we are again living in a time when the world is going through a period of tension, upheaval and danger, much of it again centred on the Islamic and Arabic speaking world.

Arriving at Casablanca Airport in the evening of Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, I was immediately struck by the

massive changes in the thirty years since I last worked for an extensive period in Morocco. Driving the two hundred miles north from Casablanca to Tangier it was clear that huge changes are taking place all over the country – new inter-city motorways, vast construction and development projects of all kinds. Driving into Tangier itself it was clear that today Frank and Vera would not recognise the city they had taken their baby son back to a little over a century ago. But a few minutes later, walking the last few yards up through the old Kasbah to the beautifully restored traditional Moroccan riad (a small palace with a beautiful interior courtyard garden) where I was to stay as a guest, it became clear that the historic inner city of Tangier, the Medina, has hardly changed from the city the Rattigans knew, the city in which Henri Matisse painted in 1912-13, the city which would later be a home and inspiration to writers including William Burroughs, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Allan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Joe Orton.

The performance of *After The Dance* was to be the centrepiece of a weekend of events, organised by Rob Ashford and Madison Cox, renowned garden designer to the world's rich and famous, to raise funds for the American Legation Institute for Moroccan Studies in Tangier.

The first event of the weekend was a drinks party on the Friday evening in the old American Legation itself, a historic building in the Medina, gifted to the USA by the Sultan of Morocco in 1821. It quickly became clear that ex-pat life in Tangier remains little changed from the ex-pat social life that Frank and Vera Rattigan would have known a century ago. The tight-knit community of British, French, Spanish, German and Italian diplomats, businessmen, artists, writers, designers, art, antiques and jewellery dealers, their families, partners and friends, still devote much of their leisure time to visiting each other's homes for tea parties, receptions, drinks and dinner parties – not unlike the Scott-Fowlers and their friends in *After The Dance*.

The following afternoon there was a garden party, at which I was to give my talk on Rattigan and the background to *After The Dance* in the stunningly beautiful garden of the Villa Mabrouka, high on the hills overlooking the bay and old harbour of Tangier and, further away to the West, the site where a massive new commercial port for Tangier is under construction. In the open air in such beautiful surroundings, to an accompaniment of noise from another, nearer to hand, construction site, it was difficult to get people, many of whom were not British and had never heard of Terence Rattigan, to concentrate on my seemingly out-of-place 'pearls of wisdom'. However, afterwards people were very polite and claimed to have found my talk "interesting". Hmm!

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# The slings and arrows of love

***A report on the National Theatre production of The Deep Blue Sea by Anthony Campling***



Helen McCrory as Hester

Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

The ‘curtain’ opens, the top ascending, the bottom half descending, to reveal two floors of a 1950s Notting Hill boarding house with the flat of Mr and ‘Mrs’ Page strung out across the wide stage, the kitchen, stage left, the bedroom behind it and the sitting room, at the front of the house, to the audience’s left, clearly containing, for those familiar with this major Rattigan play, the prostrate body of Hester Collyer in front of the gas fire. A towel lies at the foot of the door and the windows are closed. We see the occupants in the other flats and on the stairs, then outside the Page’s door, alerted by the smell of gas.

By luck or deliberation, whether conscious or not, Hester has aspirined and gassed herself merely to a nasty headache, having forgotten to put a shilling in the gas meter, and is up and about again within minutes after the ministrations of Miller, the German ‘doctor’ – now struck off – who lives upstairs. Meanwhile, the sympathetic caretaker-landlady has spilled the beans, in the absence of Mr Page, that Hester is actually Lady Collyer and married to a High Court Judge whom they call, and whose chauffeured Rolls-Royce soon brings him round from Eaton Square (in today’s London traffic, the play would need to be thirty minutes longer than its 2 hours 40 minutes with interval).

Hester (‘Hes’) has left her boring old Judge (or is she taking a sabbatical? – he wants her back) for Freddie Page, the young, dashing former Spitfire pilot, now a test pilot, but a chancer, who’s been down at Sunningdale playing golf and who forgot to return home the previous evening for Hes’s special birthday – steak and claret, no mean ration-book feat for the impecunious ‘Pages’ who are behind with the rent.

Thus the stage is set for the developments of the rest

of the day and TR’s brilliant trilling between the two (in this case both of them blue) notes of physical and spiritual love; as she says, talking of her two available men, she is indeed “between the Devil and the deep blue sea”.

The Judge comes across as almost completely devoid of any emotion whilst Freddie’s narcissism and general uselessness has to be seen to be believed: on discovering Hester’s suicide note, his initial anger transmutes into concern for himself – how the newspapers would have said he had first broken up her marriage and then, within a year, driven her to suicide – an understandable analysis.

But poor Hes is besotted and when Freddie says he must leave her, for both their sakes, her pleading to him not to go is memorably heart-rending and hugely sad, a truly wonderful tribute to the trinity of playwright, director and actor. Tears flow, on stage and in the auditorium. Life beyond her sado-masochistic relationship with Freddie is too awful to contemplate, but leave he does, eventually, and it is such a relief to see him walk out of the flat, close the door, pause, and move off down the stairs without turning to look back.

Hes wants both kinds of love – the spiritual and the physical, or as we might put it today, friendship and sex – but it seems that Sir William can only offer, possibly, a very stunted version of the former, even for a High Court Judge in the 1950s, whilst Freddie’s narcissism and general roguery leave just the bedroom available, but even that must lie in some doubt now that he has been ‘driven to drink’ – by Hes, supposedly.

We prepare for the worst as she fires up the gas meter and moves to the wretched gas fire but, no, this time she lights it, fries an egg and starts to devour it heartily as the curtain falls. Yes, a positive ending and with hope; she has mentioned art school as a possibility and you are allowed to think that her life’s journey may well be getting easier, somewhat like that of dear old Crocker-Harris at the end of *The Browning Version* who, in a different way, has suffered the slings and arrows of physical *versus* spiritual love and seems to be moving on to an easier job and a happier life, shorn of the unctuous Headmaster and, hopefully, his wife Millie. So Hes has recovered her appetite for life and, we hope, love.

It’s really all about Hester, played by the very talented Helen McCrory, who is on stage almost throughout. It is a marvellous part and she works hard and succeeds and deserves the fine praise and acclaim that has been universally given to her. The only other humans you would want to go on holiday with are, despite his mysterious previous, unspecified misconduct, Dr Miller, and also Mrs Elton, the nosy landlady with the heart of gold. The other characters are left largely undeveloped and, probably, deliberately, played



in stereotypical, wooden fashion save for Freddie who, whilst remaining the sort of man you would absolutely hate your daughter to become involved with, perhaps, in the end, moves slightly towards redeeming himself when he recognises not only the damage Hes is doing to him, but also vice versa, and cites them both as the reasons why he must leave.

With an average of two and a maximum of four actors on stage, your reviewer fell to wondering about the suitability of staging the play at the vast Lyttleton Theatre with its massive stage and auditorium. Sadly, it's suitability lies solely in the realm of 'business models', 'financial leverage' and the like, rather than any contribution it makes to the audience's experience. Although we had good seats (halfway back in Row O), it is extremely doubtful whether we would have recognised any of the cast had they chanced to walk by us in the restaurant afterwards, and the almost total lack of being able to see any facial expression certainly diminishes the experience. Fringe and amateur theatre, despite the variability of the acting and direction, with the front row forming one wall of the room the play is set in, can often provide a more intense and enjoyable viewing experience and one that is closer to what the playwright wished to achieve.

It is easy to see why *The Deep Blue Sea* is in most Rattigan fans' top five and it was also good to see an enthusiastic capacity audience taking part in the revival of respect for our hero's work. Supper afterwards was delicious with the usual good company and conversation; Barbara's organisation was as impeccable as ever, and we were especially pleased to welcome Cynthia Lacey, a new member from Massachusetts, who heard about the event and based her visit to the UK around it. Another fine Society outing! ☞

### **The first night of *The Sleeping Prince*** **cont. from front page**

Michael and Terry, all very complicated.

The play was a great success. It was incredible to believe that Vivien was 40 tonight, in her blonde wig. Laurence Olivier acted brilliantly and Malita Hunt was superb. I laughed a lot.

The party was completely "made" for me by being introduced to Somerset Maugham by Tony Darnborough. I was really thrilled he paid me the wonderful compliment of saying he could hardly believe that anyone so beautiful could also be very wise - as Tony had said I was one of the few wise women he knew.

Alex Stirling was there taking pictures and Terry's mother was very sweet to me. Vivian

Leigh was introduced to me - and my mink! Terry said in front of everyone that we couldn't be married because I'd cost him too much in mink. We ate cold buffet supper and drank champagne - Michael looked after me very well." ☞

**Extract by kind permission of our President, then Miss Jean Dawney**

### **Back to where it all began cont. from p 7**

And so that evening to the performance itself, in the Gazebo, the beautiful home of internationally renowned interior designers Veere Grunney and David Oliver, standing in a walled-garden close to the King of Morocco's heavily guarded palace. The audience, about one hundred in all, were seated as for theatre-in-the round around the edges of the room. Rob Ashford had assembled an impressive cast, all of whom were donating their services, and, as the ultimate proof of the outstanding quality-in-depth of the cast, the Rattigan Society's own Greta Scacchi appeared in the small part of Miss Potter, the secretary who appears briefly in the third act.

Although hampered by the fact that the cast had had only two days of rehearsal and still had scripts in their hands, and that quite a number of the audience, whose first language was not English were having to follow the dialogue from scripts, Rob Ashford and his cast succeeded in producing a remarkably effective, and at times moving, production.

Outstanding, among an all-round fine set of performances, were Hugh Sachs as the Scott-Fowlers' louche and lazy hanger-on John Reid, Jessie Buckley as Helen Banner, James Norton as David Scott-Fowler and Suzann O'Neill as the pioneer aviator Moya Lexington. Talking to members of the audience afterwards it was clear that many people who had not previously encountered Rattigan's work had found the play an eye-opener.

Many of the more thoughtful members of the audience who I talked to had been made more sharply aware by the production, and the perilously cliff-edge world which the play evokes, of the parallels between the period immediately before World War Two, the fatalism and distrust of that young pre-war generation for the irresponsible politics and politicians who strutted the stage of the late 1930s, and the politics and politicians of our time.

It was a beautiful evening and I was among kind and extremely generous people in a stunning setting, and yet, thanks to Rattigan and his play, it was not a comfortable or comforting evening - proof once again of the continuing relevance and power of Rattigan's finest work. ☞

# A passion for cricket

**A report on the Society outing to a screening of *The Final Test* at the Garrison Public House, Bermondsey, by Martin Amherst Lock**


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Whilst Rattigan's reputation as one of the greatest dramatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is now reasonably secure, the fact that he was also a highly accomplished writer of screenplays is sometimes forgotten. The opportunity to watch a Rattigan film which is not an adaptation of one of his well-known plays for the theatre but based on an original screenplay provided a welcome reminder of just how very skilled he was at writing for the cinema.

After an excellent dinner, eaten to the exotic accompaniment of *The Yellow Rolls-Royce*, Clive Montellier introduced the twenty assembled members of the society, including two warmly welcomed new members, to *The Final Test*, chosen he said because it has only recently been made available in DVD form by a small production company. Originally written in 1951 as a play for television, *The Final Test*, directed by Anthony Asquith and starring Jack Warner, Robert Morley and Brenda Bruce, was first released in 1953. It proved to be vintage Rattigan, skilfully blending pathos and humour and allowing the playwright not only to explore some of his perennial themes—the tensions between a father's expectations and his son's ambitions and the overriding importance of honesty in relationships – but also to indulge his passion for cricket. Beginning as a light-hearted send-up of the English seen through foreign eyes – a visiting American can hardly believe that huge crowds are happy to sit through the five interminable days of a test cricket match which neither

side is going to win – the film quickly becomes more sombre in tone: the son of a professional cricketer agonises over how to confess to his father that the game bores him rigid and finally does so with the cruelty which seems peculiar to the arrogance of youth. It is easy to imagine that Rattigan, in presenting the plight of a sensitive young man growing up in a sporty milieu, was influenced by his memories of the heartier side of life at Harrow; but far from giving us a simplistic celebration of aestheticism's triumph over sporting philistinism, Rattigan defies our expectations by gently mocking the boy's rather pretentious poetic efforts and presenting his literary idol as a bon viveur who is much more interested in perfecting his batting technique than writing poetry. Indeed, the true hero of the piece turns out to be not the lauded producer of esoteric television plays but the boy's father whose final innings, even though he is out for a duck, is greeted with a standing ovation. Both cricket and literature, Rattigan would seem to suggest, are crafts demanding dedication and skill; the only difference – and one can almost hear him speaking from bitter personal experience – is that the performing artist such as a world-class batsman or a Paganini lives on as a legend because nothing concrete is left by which he may be judged, whereas the writer bequeaths posterity evidence of his work at which it can delight in sneering! It was fascinating to see glimpses of 1950s London: the Oval with its backdrop of working gasometers and enormous crowds; pubs ruled over by hoity-toity barmaids serving their customers exotic drinks such as rum and orange; and sprawling suburbs through which Robert Morley could drive with the insouciance of a Mr Toad, head-scarved housewives flying in all directions! With Jack Warner as the dependably virtuous batsman, appearances from several actual first-eleven cricketers and a commentary provided by none other than John Arlott, *The Final Test* celebrates all that is best in British post-war life before the chill winds of '60s cynicism started to blow.

We are indebted to Clive Montellier for his excellent choice of film and to him and Barbara Longford for organising a most enjoyable evening which we hope will be the first of many opportunities to view Rattigan gems in the comfort of the Garrison's basement cinema. 



# Friends Remembered

by Barbara Longford

## Stuart Griffiths

Our distinguished former member, Stuart Griffiths, died in May last year and John Scotney wrote an obituary for the July 2015 edition of this magazine. Stuart and I first worked together in BBC Radio Drama on a production for Radio 3 by the Brechtian scholar, Martin Esslin, of *The Non-Divine Comedy* by Sygmunt Krasinski. Despite the gloom of the subject matter and Stuart's being a real 'intellectual', we became great friends. Stuart could talk on almost any subject and wore his learning lightly. He encouraged his friends to make the most of their potential. As a friend, I loved him.



On Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> July, Stuart's alma mater, Magdalen College, opened the new 'Longwall Library' and dedicated a shelf in Stuart's memory.

Two hundred or so alumni and friends were invited to view the library, listen to a performance of John Dowland's *Lachrimae or Seven Tears* (1604) in the chapel and to have tea and cakes and champagne on the New Building Lawn. Stuart loved Magdalen and since the death of his aged parents, whom he had cared for devotedly, much of his social life took place at events at Magdalen (and the TRS). Many of his lady friends had the privilege of accompanying him on these unique occasions and so I was acquainted with the President, Professor Sir David Clary. I re-introduced myself to David on this occasion and he instantly said "Oh, dear Stuart. How we miss him. He was so well loved here and was someone very out of the ordinary". Stuart was a former President of the Oxford Union.

## Patricia (Paddy) Holland

Paddy passed away in the early hours of Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> July. Here is a photograph taken in the Ritz, where her friend Rosalinda Zazzera had taken her to celebrate her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday last year.



Paddy was an active and exceptionally popular member of the Society. She was raised in Plymouth during the Second World War, the daughter of the comedian Harry Grose. She wanted to be an actress and gained a place at RADA, but her parents would not allow it. She went on to work in fashion and as a Manager for the Rank Organisation. Certainly in her later years (I have only known her for 10 years) Paddy was actively involved at her local church, St. James's Sussex Gardens. She organised fund-raising talks and lunches for them at which the late Elena Salvoni spoke about her wartime experiences and more recently Denis Moriarty spoke about art. Denis writes:--

*"We didn't know her well, but loved her and were overwhelmed by her welcome and sense of fun. She was very good company and we enjoyed talking about her religious commitments, with which I had very much a shared sympathy – its demands, failures, humblings and absurdities, but something which provided focus and concern, similarly identified, nothing too intense but pursued at least in the intent of hope."*

The funeral took place on 21<sup>st</sup> July, at St. James's, Sussex Gardens.

In Paddy's company I always felt as if I was drinking champagne; so life-enhancing was she. Paddy was also very glamorous and had a figure which many 20-year-olds would envy. As Denis has said, *"we pray for the benefits of her faith and that she may rest in peace"*.

## Sir Terence's Tree and Silver Jubilee at The Actors' Church



On Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> July, I attended a service at the Actors' Church to commemorate The Rev'd Simon Griggs' Silver Jubilee of his Ordination to the Priesthood and his ten years as Rector.

In May 2012, during the centenary year, VP David Suchet planted a tree in the garden of the church in memory of Sir Terence. Like Rattigan's reputation, this tree is thriving and is now about 8 feet high. Founder members will recall the Service that day, led by Simon, with contributions from David Suchet, Geoffrey Wansell, Charlotte Page, Simon Green, Nicholas Farrell, Greta Scacchi, Michael Darlow and ending with Adrian Brown reading his own *Elegy for Sir Terence Rattigan*. ☘

## Kenny Morgan *cont. from p 3*

**GW:** And Terry, of course, only wanted to write big commercial plays. A slight irony there, perhaps. But the important thing is that, as in *The Browning Version*, Terry took a small dramatic possibility and allowed it to blossom into a poignant and deeply moving play.

**GC:** With an almost perfect classical structure.

**GW:** Indeed. And Mike Poulton has, in a sense, taken the same dramatic possibility that engendered *DBS* and used it to fashion a very truthful, resonant piece of work about Terry himself—a wonderful *hommage* to Rattigan, you could say. As was your play, *The Art of Concealment*.


**GC:** I confess I was intrigued to see what a more experienced writer would make of a play about Rattigan himself. I have to say I admired the craftsmanship!

**GW:** Oh yes. It was compelling, beautifully acted, and within its own limits it worked extremely well. There is a bigger, better story than this about Rattigan, but this was a deliberate examination of one incident in his life. And a very telling one at that. All in all, a very appealing evening in the theatre.

**GC:** A final thought on Rattigan – if he had lived longer, do you think he would have written any more plays as good as *Deep Blue Sea*? Might he have focused on a few more heroic figures with a tragic flaw, like Lawrence and Alexander the Great?

**GW:** I think *Ross* is a very fine play, and he may have tried one or two more historical dramas, but as the wonderful actor Kenneth Griffith once said, Rattigan was ‘the magnificent miniaturist’. That’s where he was at his best. Exploring the layers of the human heart through beautifully observed detail.

**GC:** And often, as you said, using a small incident – like a schoolboy giving a schoolmaster a gift – and creating something which echoes down the years.

**GW:** Exactly so. That’s why he is such a terrific playwright. We’ll get a theatre named after him yet. 

**Kenny Morgan returns to the Arcola for four weeks only from 20 September. Box office 020 7503 1646.**

## Dates for your diary

### Saturday 1 October

Matinee performance of *The Dover Road* by A. A. Milne at Jermyn Street Theatre at 3.30pm, followed by Q & A and then a group supper.


### Saturday 5 November

Matinee performance of *The Winslow Boy* at St Peter’s Church, Notting Hill Gate, at 2.30pm. This will be followed by the Society’s Annual General Meeting and a group supper.

### Saturday 3 December

12 noon lunch at Brasserie Toulouse Lautrec, Lambeth, followed by a visit to the Cinema Museum for a screening of Rattigan’s *The Sound Barrier*, with guest of honour to be confirmed.

## Englishness Celebrated *continued from p 4*

Taken ill over recent weeks she passed away the morning after the party and will be sadly missed even by those who only met her recently and infrequently. She will also take with her an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Rank cinema operation when it was at its peak. I for one will miss her greatly. 

## Introducing Denis Moriarty *continued from p 2*

As if this weren’t enough, he also involved himself in politics, standing as a Labour candidate against the late Airey Neave in Abingdon in 1974. When the Labour Party split (dare one say ‘last split’?) he joined the SDP, describing himself as ‘an acolyte of Roy Jenkins’. Oh, and he has four children – two at one time in the theatre – and as a widower recently married the delightful Jinnie, whom many of us have met on TRS occasions. She is apparently very keen on the TRS, and one hardly needs to add that the TRS is very keen on Denis and Jinnie, such a stalwart member has he become. Particularly memorable are his contributions to the Rattigan Conference in Oxford and his hosting of events at the O & C Club. What a fascinating fellow he is. 