

The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

Version

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The Rattigan Society in the Rattigan Set

Forty members of the Society and their guests (numbers being restricted by the capacity of the two reception rooms) attended the Christmas Party hosted by founder member Antony Fletcher, the current occupant of K5, Rattigan's former set (as they are called) in Albany, Piccadilly.

Rattigan biographer Geoffrey Wansell (we are incredibly lucky in having two eminent Rattigan biographers amongst our number) gave an address and signed copies of his book. He was also presented with a framed certificate commemorating his appointment as a Vice-President of the Society.



Geoffrey Wansell receives his VP certificate from the Chairman

It was a heart-warming experience for Rattigan aficionados to occupy the same space for an hour or two that the great man had occupied in 1943-1945, when he was working on *While the Sun Shines* and *Love in Idleness* — originally

entitled *Less Than Kind* (see enclosed flyer) - as well as the screenplay developed from his stage play *Flare Path*, eventually called *The Way to the Stars*. ☺

Rehearsed Rattigan readings

Society member Roger Mills writes...

At Chichester last summer there was an excellent series of rehearsed readings of Rattigan plays. I was particularly struck by the quite stunning presentation of *Heart to Heart*. Here was a one-off play,



Our President flanked by Vice-President Geoffrey Wansell (left) and host Antony Fletcher (right) in K5, Albany

commissioned by the BBC, when they still did such things, from a major playwright, when there were such things, with an all star cast and not a police uniform in sight. Director Philip Franks announced the piece as having had "minutes of rehearsal" but I think he had his tongue in his cheek. He should have done – this was a quite excellent presentation that speaks as powerfully to us now as when it was written, probably more so since the age of deference is dead.

The lead performances were exceptional, with Dominic Rowan bringing more than a smidgeon of pathos to the part of talk show interviewer David Mann and David Westhead as the Cabinet Minister Sir Stanley Johnston lingering in the memory for a long time. But in truth you could have plonked the whole cast in front of a Radio Drama Department microphone and broadcast it live, it was that good.

Continued on back page

☞ INTRODUCING OUR VICE-PRESIDENT, p2
☞ REHEARSED RATTIGAN READINGS, pp1&4

☞ CIRCLES AND TANGENTS BY MICHAEL DARLOW, pp3&4
☞ DATES FOR YOUR DIARY, p4



The Terence Rattigan Society

President: Princess George Galitzine

Vice-Presidents: Michael Darlow, Greta Scacchi, David Suchet CBE, Geoffrey Wansell



Committee:

<i>Chairman</i>	Barbara Longford (barbara.longford@ntlworld.com)
<i>Membership Secretary</i>	Diana Scotney (dianascotney@virginmedia.com)
<i>Treasurer</i>	Andrew Kenyon (andrew.kenyon@rbkc.gov.uk)
<i>Editor</i>	Giles Cole (gc@gilescole.com)
<i>Webmaster</i>	Stephen Bradley (stevebradley1@me.com)
<i>Theatre Liaison</i>	Michael Wheatley-Ward (wheatley-ward@btinternet.com)
<i>Drama School Liaison</i>	Elizabeth Donnelly (elizabeth.r.donnelly@googlemail.com)
<i>Secretary & RAF Liaison</i>	Gp. Capt. Clive Montellier FCIPD, FCMI, RAF (montellier@live.co.uk)

INTRODUCING

...our Vice-President David Suchet CBE

It is, of course, hardly necessary to 'introduce' David Suchet to anyone, let alone members of The Terence Rattigan Society. Apart from his many appearances on stage, television and film, he is also distinguished in our eyes as the unveiling of the plaque outside Rattigan's birthplace, 100 Cornwall Gardens, in 2005. As you will not readily have forgotten, that is where we held our inaugural Society event (as reported in the last, and first, issue of this newsletter).

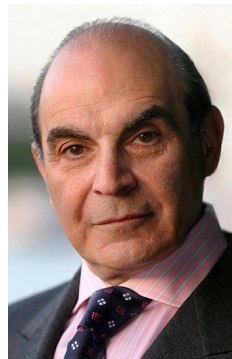
David doesn't consider himself to be natural casting for most of the great Rattigan roles, and has only played one part in a Rattigan play – Gregor Antonescu in *Man and Boy*. That he made a great success of it is well known: what is not quite so well-known is that he turned it down three times before, the first time being in 1994, when he considered himself to be too young, and not ready to delve into a character so irredeemable. In Rattigan's own words, he had "written the devil" and it takes a brave performer to take on such a part. Rex Harrison famously declined it in the original production because he was too concerned with being popular. David Suchet had no such foibles and his performance was mesmerising.

It was another of our Vice-Presidents, Geoffrey Wansell, who convinced him finally to take on the role. Geoffrey reopened his eyes to Rattigan as a dramatist, and it has been a passion of David's since then to retrieve *Man and Boy* as a play of substance.

Poirot is of course his most recognisable screen character, and he is filming the last five stories this autumn, which will complete a tally of 70. He compiled copious notes from over 60 of the Poirot books and discovered that Agatha Christie was amazingly

consistent in her depiction of the great man. She allowed for changes of fashion – such as replacing a pocket watch with a wristwatch – but everything else remained perfectly in place. Precisely like his performance.

It is sometimes forgotten that David began his career as a classical actor with the RSC. It was an invaluable experience – "a long apprenticeship", he says, with the emphasis on the word 'long'. He was one of the last actors to be taken on as a 'spear-carrier' and who ended up a dozen or so years later playing some of the most famous Shakespearean roles. He is particularly proud of his Iago (to Ben Kingsley's Othello), his Bolingbroke, Caliban and the Fool in *King Lear*.



In April he is embarking on a West End production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. He has an affinity with American roles, having also appeared, unforgettably, in *All My Sons*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Oleanna*. And awards? Surely he must have a shelf-ful of Oliviers by now? In fact, he holds the record for having the most nominations without actually winning one. However, he has won a Variety Club award for *Oleanna*, a Critics Circle award for *Virginia Woolf*, and a Royal Television Society award for his performance as Augustus Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now*.

He was a memorable Jagers in *Great Expectations* over Christmas. Look out, also, for his Duke of York in *Richard II* for the BBC, being screened during the Olympics, and the film *Effie*, written by Emma Thompson, in which he plays John Ruskin's father. There's also a documentary coming up about the life and journeys of St Paul, which he is presenting. Perhaps Poirot can find a mystery to unravel there too. ✎

Circles and Tangents

by our Vice-President Michael Darlow

An exhibition at Dorset County Museum in Dorchester will have been of interest to Rattigan fans. *Cranborne: Art in the Shadow of the Chase* included works by Peggy Rankin, elder sister of David Rankin, whose death, aged twenty, in the summer of 1938 had a major impact on the writing of *After The Dance*.

David, the son of a clergyman's daughter, went up to Oxford in autumn 1937 where he started keeping a diary in which he charted his moral struggles, anguish over his religious faith and awakening homosexual feelings. He joined OUDS, The Oxford University Dramatic Society, and it was probably at an OUDS event late in 1937 that he first met Rattigan. Rattigan had been a member of OUDS and regularly returned to attend its events.



Rankin appears to have been among the first in the succession of good looking, slightly below average height young men to whom Rattigan would repeatedly be attracted throughout his life.

On 22nd March 1938, his twentieth birthday, Rankin records his disappointment at hearing nothing from Rattigan and speculates that he "may have decided that my good looks are accompanied with too much intellect." However, the following day he receives a telegram from Rattigan inviting him to stay for a weekend and enthusiastically accepts, adding in his diary: "Mummy was rather worried, to such an extent that I wondered whether she guessed his intentions. However, I like him and am not afraid." There follows a three month gap with no further entries until 5th July 1938 when Rankin records how in the past three months he has become "gradually dispossessed of my ideals", and speaks of his feelings of moral confusion and fear that he will "find no more of life ... [than] fruitless quests for pleasure."

Throughout their relationship Rankin remained both in awe of Rattigan and somewhat disappointed in him. In a poem he wrote, dated 7th July 1938, he records his impressions of Rattigan:

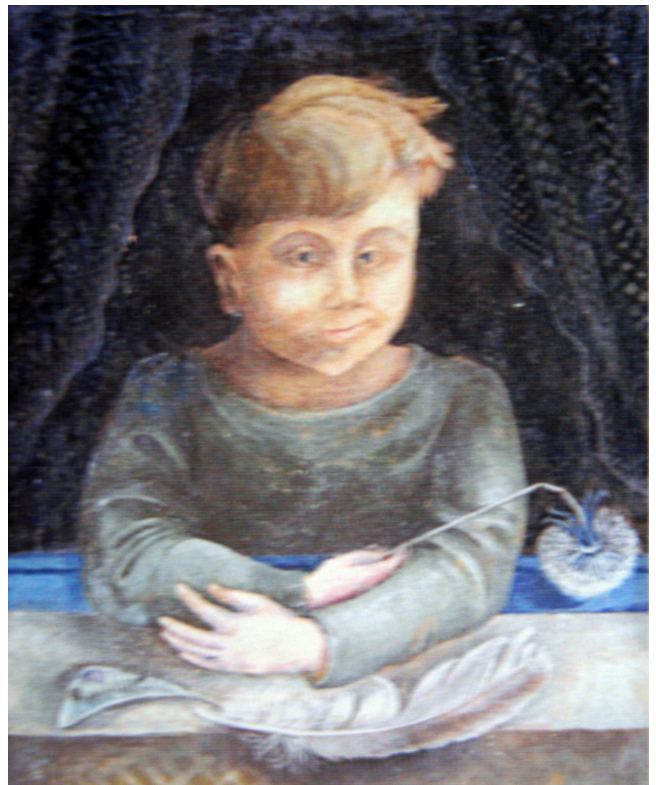
*The man had grey-blue twinkling eyes,
And gracefully walked and talked
His way through life with an obscene jest,
A drink, or a substitute wife.
His riches raised from a few light lines*

*Quoted from a London stage,
And he did not mind, nay, was rather proud
That there was not a profound page.
His talk was easy, and clever, and bound
By no other convention than this:-
That it should never discuss a man's soul
Nor a subject for laughter miss.*

Two weeks later Rankin went to Cornwall intending to write a play called *The Suicide* about a middle-aged man who, having failed to live up to the ideals of his youth, kills himself. Upon arrival Rankin, a strong swimmer, went for a swim in the sea. He never returned. Two days later his body was washed ashore. The coroner's verdict was accidental drowning. But to this day members of his family believe that his death was suicide.

When Rattigan met Rankin he was suffering severe writer's block following the unexpected success of *French Without Tears*. During the months of their friendship Rattigan worked with Anthony Goldschmidt on the satirical farce about Hitler, Mussolini and the Chamberlain government's policy of appeasement, *Follow My Leader*, and probably read parts of it to Rankin. The play was completed around the time of Rankin's death, but was immediately banned by the Lord Chamberlain as "not in the nation's interest" – it might offend Hitler! But at the same time Rattigan had also been struggling with a much more serious play, *After the Dance*. This play was not finally completed until some weeks after Rankin's death.

Continued on back page



Although events and characters in Rattigan plays are rarely drawn directly from people he knew, elements in them do frequently owe more than a little to events in his own life and the lives of those around him. So while none of the characters in *After the Dance* can be said to be Rankin or Rattigan, elements of the play and its characters do, I believe, owe something to Rattigan and Rankin's relationship. That belief is strengthened by the evidence from Rankin's diary and his other writings. The relationship may also have influenced some of the later plays.

David Rankin's death had a lasting impact on his sister Peggy. At David's funeral she dropped a sunflower into his grave. She never forgot the thud it made as it landed on his coffin. For the rest of her life Peggy Rankin's paintings frequently featured sunflowers and children in states of 'togetherness'. Many reference the power of the subconscious and she often depicted her brother as a boy. In one, painted not long after David's death, she sees him as a boy cradling a dandelion head full of seed, but the stork of the dandelion is broken while in front of him lie two swan's feathers.

In its subject and its symbolism the painting reflects Peggy Rankin's continuing bond with her brother but also her sorrow and sense of the loss of potential in a brilliant young life cut short. For me there is a strong affinity between paintings by Peggy Rankin and some of Rattigan's most deeply personal plays. ✎

The exhibition was at Dorset County Museum until 21st January 2012 and is expected to move later to Salisbury. Vivienne Light's book *Circles and Tangents: Art in the Shadow of Cranborne Chase* is published by Canterton Books. I am indebted to Peggy Rankin's daughter Linnet Allardyce for much of the information in this article and permission to reproduce Peggy Rankin's painting and the photograph of David Rankin. M.D.

Rehearsed Rattigan readings

Continued from page 1

Variation on a Theme was an enjoyable afternoon – yet despite the sensitive performance of Rachel Stirling in the lead role one was left agreeing with the cautious notices at the time it was first presented. Which brings me to *Adventure Story*, the first Chichester presentation and possibly the most problematic, given its vast historical span and range of characters. Apparently *Adventure Story* was one of Rattigan's own favourite plays and if I'd written it I think I'd have felt the same. Sam Hoare and Rob Heaps made a fine job of the main characters under Tim Hoare's direction but for me it was Robert Foxe's caring yet exasperated Cleitus which was the high spot of the afternoon.

Did these neglected plays give us any fresh insights? Maybe not – though one was reminded afresh just how

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 starting at 11.00am. There will possibly be a reception at the Garrick Club afterwards for Society members and guests. More information to follow!



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 6.30 to 8.30pm. The masterclass will be followed by drinks. This event is being organised on behalf of the Society by Elizabeth Donnelly. Booking form to follow.



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, other commitments permitting, as our principal guest. This exclusive black tie event, for Society members and their guests only, will be formally announced in due course. Please note the date. We would be grateful if those interested in attending could let us know—barbara.longford@ntlworld.com—so we can gauge likely numbers.



Separate Tables is to be performed by the Hilderstone Players at the Memorial Theatre, Broadstairs, on Friday 17 and Saturday 18 February at 7.30pm, and on Sunday 19 February at 2.30pm. £8.00 for TR Society members, £10.00 for non-members. Box office: 0845 2626263.

funny some of them are. I would add a massive vote of thanks to Jonathan Church for enriching the centenary year in such an innovative and satisfying way. ✎

Roger Mills is a freelance writer and researcher and editor of the magazine Steaming.

In the next issue

Our newly appointed US representative, the eminent scholar **Dr Holly Hill**, will contribute a special report on Rattigan's plays in America, with reference to the recent production of *Man and Boy*, starring Frank Langella in the David Suchet role of Gregor Antonescu, and directed, as it was here, by Maria Aitken. ✎

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.

Members are encouraged to submit news, views, letters, articles or anecdotes to this newsletter. Please contact the editor via email (gc@gilescote.com). The deadline for the next edition is Friday 16 March.