



The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

Back over June and July I was 'laid up' unable to pursue my usual day job of photographing steam engines, electric bollards, old buses, marquee components, market stalls, fun fairs and the odd fashion catwalk before writing on same. Sensibly I took the opportunity to do a bit of reading and included two of my favourites; Michael Darlow's Rattigan biography and Norman Painting's *Reluctant Archer*.

I recommend both.

Both also came to mind during the excellent Alan Brodie and Dan Rebellato talk at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester during the run of *The Deep Blue Sea* reported elsewhere in this issue.

One questioner asked when the revival of interest in Rattigan started. A question to which, I suppose, many of us have our own answer.

My own interest, for example, didn't need reviving. But anybody wanting an answer as good as any should read the introduction to Michael's book. I suspect his honest recollection would stand for many.

Going back to that period it seems impossible, in retrospect, to understand the influence that Kenneth Tynan was allowed to have on British theatre.

But maybe a clue comes in Norman Painting's super autobiography. Painting was up at Oxford, researching for a PhD, during Tynan's time. At the same time he was acting and directing alongside, amongst others, Shirley Catlin (Williams to be) Robert Hardy and Robert Robinson.

He gives us a picture of Tynan as a man who came from the same area, the Midlands, determined to dominate Oxford and, reading between the lines, to be taken at all times at his own valuation. It's only a few pages of a wide ranging excellently written tome which shows

us Phil Archer was played by a very remarkable man. (And that radio's oldest soap needs 'Bruno Milna' today as never before.) As a bonus there is a wonderful portrait of Dylan Thomas.

This sent me to Humphrey Carpenter's centenary history of the O.U.D.S. where I found this anecdote about John Gielgud's 1932 production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

"The only failure in this remarkable production seems to have been Terence Rattigan. He had just one line, 'Faith, we may put up our pipes and be gone', and proved quite incapable of saying it to anyone's satisfaction, least of all Gielgud's, who remembers giving 'endless demonstrations of disapproval'. On the first night Rattigan spoke it at the solemn moment after Juliet's death had been announced—and to his horror raised a laugh from the audience. He tried it with a different emphasis the next night, but the audience still laughed. Word got around that he was having trouble, so that by the end of the week he could only avoid causing mirth by delivering the line so quietly that it was entirely inaudible."

Finally without going into boring detail about my recent period 'in dock' I ought to credit Norman Painting with some part in my continued existence. Just after completing *Reluctant Archer* he suffered a heart attack, the lead up to which he recounts in a short addendum.

One sentence has stayed with me since first reading in 1982. It is: "I inflict this cautionary tale on my patient reader to show how dangerous 'showing a stiff upper lip' can sometimes be. If your body tells you it is utterly exhausted believe it."

It was with those words in mind I contacted the surgery and, fully recovered, I commend it as a sentiment to act on unreservedly.

Roger Mills

A slow evolution

Dan Rebellato and Alan Brodie discussed the genesis of *The Deep Blue Sea*

There will be bigger houses at Chichester's Minerva Theatre but few will have had better value for money than the forty or so of us gathered in July - on the last day of the run as it happens - to hear Dan Rebellato talk on the genesis and development of *The Deep Blue Sea*.

Standing at a lectern that looked just a tad out of place in Hester and Freddie's cheap furnished rooms he grabbed his audience from the first sentence describing Rattigan's ashen faced response to the news of Kenneth Morgan's suicide, delivered to the Adelphi Hotel Liverpool where *Adventure Story* was previewing. Terry was silent, unsurprisingly given the prospect of scandal breaking over his head. Morgan an ex lover had taken his own life. Homosexuality and suicide were both acts illegal at the time. When after a long period he spoke he simply said: "The play will open with the dead body in front of the gas fire."

Yet from that initial idea there followed three year's gestation. Why so long?

Dan pointed out, what might be called, Rattigan's career context. At the time Rattigan was seen still as a writer of light comedies. Yes there had been *Flare Path*, *The Winslow Boy* and *The Browning Version* but the first was viewed as melodrama, *Winslow* as a sort of Edwardian pastiche and *The Browning Version* was presented with *Harlequinade* really a very lightweight piece of work.

Yes, he felt the need to reassure audiences, and maybe even himself, that he was serious playwright. But he was also aware of the risks. *After the Dance* with its sombre notions and poor reception had sent him away from serious things as well as bringing on a spell of writer's block. So *The Deep Blue Sea* was really his first attempt to write a profoundly serious play about ordinary people.

But there were other irons in the fire and it was only with *Adventure Story* and *Who is Sylvia?* safely in performance that Rattigan set off to the Stag Inn at Binfield to work on Hester Collyer.

Ah yes Hester. What about the myth that it started out with a homosexual couple? Despite folk, including Brian Forbes, who say they saw the first draft which concerned a male relationship, Dan doesn't believe a word of it. For a start there were too many limitations and it wouldn't have been put on anywhere. Rattigan was too much of a commercial person to think a few performances in a theatre club was worthwhile. Hester, Dan was clear, is not a man in drag, she is a woman in the mid twentieth century.

All the drafts, bar the first, are in the British Library and, from these, it's obvious the basic plot was fixed from the very earliest stages. The journey of the suicide note and the proffered shilling are all there but everything else changes enormously. The ideas become more explicit in each successive draft through a process of paring down and refinement taking away excess material and improving the dramatic effect.

Some significant changes take place in Miller's character - a number of his pompous lines are removed and given to Welch. But it is Rattigan's sense of the dramatic which makes it Miller who stages the dramatic intervention at the end. Throughout he compresses and refines but in doing so what emerges is a powerful image of Britain and the ordinary British at the time. It is a masterpiece.

But, as Dan pointed out in discussion with Alan Brodie, it was masterpiece that fell out of favour from its first production until the 1993 revival at the Almeida.

So how was Rattigan affected by his fall from favour after *Look Back in Anger*?

Dan reckoned Rattigan thrived when he was liked and was upset when he sensed he'd fallen out of favour. He commented: "*Variation on a Theme* got poor, sometimes snide, reviews. But Rattigan continued to write the plays he wanted to write and he did keep up with developments in the theatre. But even *Ross*, as late as 1960, met resistance."

"He did go into a decline and set off to

Hollywood to be the best paid script writer in the world writing a number of forgettable films. He had a slight revival in the seventies, but I think when he died, in 1977, he felt a bit of an anachronism.”

Asked when there was revival of interest in Rattigan Dan thought it started when people realised that the plays weren't period pieces - they didn't need to be set when they were written to work.

“The 1993 Almeida revival looked at a new way to present the play. It does not need to be period, it can be simple, and it can be atmospheric. The plays have to have new approaches. They are not just about french windows and gentility.”

“In plays like *The Deep Blue Sea* the human drama is real and not located in any place or time. He also wrote good meaty parts for women, indeed in the development process he built up the parts for Mrs Welch and the Landlady. He

was quite ahead of his time when you look at some of the very cardboard token women offered by some of his contemporaries.”

Alan Brodie mentioned that he often had requests to do *The Deep Blue Sea* with man in the lead. But he felt strongly that this would change the play. Dan Rebellato reported that Nancy Carroll (Hester in the CFT production) was clear the part was written for a woman and to play it with a man in the lead would alter it fundamentally.

Asked if Rattigan would continue to be seen as relevant beyond 2019 Dan offered no firm opinion beyond the plain fact that all playwrights go in and out of fashion and it was impossible to predict. He was equally non-committal on what Rattigan might be writing about if he was alive to today - other than proffering: “The play will open with the new Prime Minister saying ‘I will sort everything out!’”

An hour or so passed in no time.

A Rattigan Archive insight

Dan Rebellato showed members some gems from the British Library

With most writers now word processing will we, going forward, have the kind of archive that will tell the future just how a play emerged in its final successful form? Draft after draft handwritten and then typed up for more handwritten changes. Do people nowadays keep the lot as one saved file after another on the PC. Or just the final version?

If they don't keep the drafts and a contemporary 'Terence Rattigan' does not have an archive of around 700 folders and boxes future critics and researchers won't have the priceless privilege of tracing the creative process. The refining, the revising, the simple crossing out of single words that make concrete the reality of 'spending the morning putting a comma into one of my poems and the afternoon taking it out again' a remark attributed I believe to Oscar Wilde.

Elsewhere in this edition we read of how Terry reduced the quite wordy first version of *The Deep Blue Sea* down to its final pitch perfect precision, but at *Show & Tell*, a society event, at the British Library Dan Rebellato

showed the original typescript and the version used in rehearsal-this still being continually revised. Most interesting is a very wordy speech by Miller just before Hester goes to the fire for the last time which has completely disappeared.

Even more intriguing perhaps was Rattigan's handwritten revision of *Cause Célèbre* during conversion from its original radio form to one suitable for stage presentation. Dan pointed out that though Rattigan was not a dyed in the wool radio drama writer he had embraced the possibilities of the medium. Turning it into a stage play was hard work. Masses of blue paper revisions are interleaved with the original pages which show many cuts and alterations themselves.

We are at the mid-way point in the process which was completed when Leicester Haymarket Theatre director Robin Midgley went over to Bermuda and worked with TR for three weeks before the play went into rehearsal to come up with a script. Even that was not enough though and the dying Rattigan found time and energy to write regularly with new comments and ideas all

Miller Or perhaps you'd rather leave it to me in your will ?
 HESTER smiles.

Hester (Wearily) When all else fails, laugh the patient out of it. I've heard about that trick.

Miller There's no trick. If I were using tricks I could have thought of several more effective ones I assure you - like the trick of ringing up the police, for instance. But I respect the freedom of your choice - about the only freedom any of us have - the choice of living or dying. (He looks at the picture again) Yes, I like that picture very much. However it may come into my possession, I shall enjoy having it.

Hester I'm glad.
 He turns to go and then turns back.

Miller There's no trick in this either, though you may find it rather sentimental. I haven't many friends in this country, and I was glad today when I thought I might have found a new friend for the future. I shall be selfishly very sad if I find that isn't so. I'd feel rather like a shipwrecked sailor who wakes up one morning to find a companion on his raft, and then the next morning to find himself alone again - all alone in the middle of the hostile sea. Shipwrecked sailors should cling together, I feel, if only for warmth.
 There is a pause. HESTER suddenly shivers slightly.

Hester I suppose it really is rather cold in this room, isn't it ?
 She goes over to the fire, turns it on and lights it with a match. MILLER standing in the doorway, watches her.

Miller Goodnight, again.

The speech, deleted in the final version, by Mr Miller in *The Deep Blue Sea*. Terence Rattigan Papers. Earliest surviving draft of *The Deep Blue Sea* © the Sir Terence Rattigan Charitable Trust

in a batch of letters bought by the British Library in the centenary year for about £20. They show just how intensely clear sighted and practical the playwright was even while suffering terminal illness.

Cause Célèbre is not done enough but *Who is Sylvia?* is perhaps even less well known. The biographies agree he worked on it for a long time and the archive has the working notes on the early stages of its genesis. These were discovered by Dan behind a fairly anodyne catalogue description requested just to ensure completeness.

Seasoned archive users will know just how often gold dust is pulled out because you feel

you have to see everything and this was one such example. Not only are the basic plot elements and ideas here but also a seven page essay to himself working out ideas and pondering the question 'am I going to be a serious playwright or carry on writing comedies?'

On to *First Episode*. Six versions exist and all are different and it was never published in his lifetime. It is not clear who has made the alterations in each and when but it did mean that when Dan had to assemble the Nick Hern version he had to take from all and try to make a judgement about what Terry would have wanted. The Lord Chamberlain was left in no doubt about its quality though, his reader describing it as a trivial and unpleasant play and requiring several cuts. He was less damning about *The*

Deep Blue Sea simply concluding his report with 'a not very complicated plot very well presented'.

A notable thing about the archive is that Terry kept pretty well everything and organised it too. Dan thinks that Terry thought or maybe merely hoped that eventually people were going to take him seriously and wanted this all to be there when they did.

So we have all the telegrams of congratulation on getting the MBE, scrapbooks of every cutting, albums of photographs which makes one realise the repetition of a very few in every article and book.

His RAF flying log was displayed alongside

A 'Bench' mark Deep Blue Sea

Roger Mills reports on his most local recent production

To theatre goers in the Portsmouth area the name Bench Theatre is well known and has been for the fifty years they celebrate in 2019. The name comes from their first home, the old magistrates' court in Havant. I worked with one of the founders, the late Tim Mahoney, and some of their early members, Sharon Rose, Spokey Wheeler and Jenny Jones, Jill Sawyer and others.

In 1978 my mediocre acting career - safe as farmers and sea captains and not much else - came to a close with a, very rare for moi, sensible refusal of their urgent entreaties, mainly on the part of Tim, to tackle Bottom the Weaver - a part for which I was suited in every way bar acting ability. (It sounds easy, that refusal, but it wasn't at the time.)

Since then new generations have kept this always ambitious company refreshed and over four or five shows a year they have explored virtually every aspect of theatre fearlessly. Startlingly though, *The Deep Blue Sea* was the first of Terry's plays they'd done but it was worth the wait, well worth it.

I say that having, for various reasons, decided to pass up the CFT's revival just eight miles along the road.

I had a great evening out.

OK I know in a recent outpouring for

The Rattigan Version I reckoned *The Deep Blue Sea* was being done maybe too much these days, a view I don't withdraw. But there is a good reason for its popularity - and it is Freddie Page. Agreed he does not dominate the stage like Hester or have the cameo appeal of Miller but Freddie and our feelings about him are, at least for me, really what it's all about.

I know this is not a widely held view but I'd argue further the mark of a good production is one that makes one appreciate again the ambivalence of this war-damaged personality and maybe feel totally differently about him than you did before and are likely to do again. So full

Ben Tanner as Freddie and Leigh Cunningham as Hester
(Courtesy of The Bench Theatre)



marks to Ben Tanner who brought a fresh new vigorous interpretation and gave us a Freddie that we could understand, even sympathise with without really liking very much.

Ben's Freddie threw down the shilling in case he missed dinner knowing full well it might be used. Action not just of juvenile spite but with the insouciance that clearly said to Hester it's your life; do what you like with it. See if I care.

Against Freddie Hester is more predictable, more fixed by the dramatist I think, making it very easy to simply give a



David Penrose as Miller and Leigh Cunningham as Hester. (Courtesy of The Bench Theatre)

Simple I think. Collyer must in his public life be an impressive and one supposes pretty ambitious and dynamic bloke. The stage directions describe him as a forceful figure. He is sincere no doubt. He loves Hester deeply - we can believe that. It just doesn't come over. The lines don't back it up, it's simply underwritten. Compared with the fireworks given to Hester and Freddie poor old Bill gets a few damp sparklers. Interestingly in his biography of

'usual performance' and it is great credit to Leigh Cunningham that this wasn't the case. I was frequently moved by her well judged interpretation full of light and shade and I thought the climactic scene - where Collyer's offer of future security and a kind of loving is refused - was the best playing of this I'd ever seen. She was exceptional.

Here is the crux of the plot. Not two kinds of love as many a Rattigan theorist will argue. No. Two kinds of 'honesty'. Freddie thinks he is being honest, at least some of the time, but he isn't, not really. His main motivation throughout life I think is escape - and his 'honesty' is the self-deception of an immature and really rather selfish male. Freddie is honest but only according to his lights. Hester though is incapable of such dissimulation while knowing that her utter truthfulness and searing self-knowledge, which forces her to throw away the marital lifebelt, could lead to the most permanent of escapes.

In the final moments I wondered if this might be the time Hester didn't light the gas! This performance was that good.

In the third of this trio, Sir William Collyer, we meet one of Rattigan's potentially most interesting yet cussedly difficult to play parts. Collyer's interventions are crucial yet they simply don't have the impact they deserve. Why?

Rattigan Michael Darlow talks of earlier drafts presenting a much more forceful Collyer. It's a pity these didn't make it into the final version. Given these limitations Simon Walton's Collyer was effective but maybe a tad too understated, too self-effacing, at times. David Penrose was impressive as Miller and the other parts were well played especially Jeff Bone who will take some time I think to find a part more suited to his talents than Jackie Jackson.

Leaving the theatre however one's thoughts revolve around Hester and Freddie and inevitably one's own life experiences and the difference between 'nice people and good people'. Here is the human condition as nowhere else in Rattigan save maybe *Variation on a Theme* (which isn't done nearly enough) or *Heart to Heart*.

I ought also to remark on the stunning attention to detail which ensured Hester rang the right number of digits for a London automatic exchange of the period! So often this is as bad as the average stage typing - anything will do. The show was backed by a programme that put many an advertising rich/content poor overpriced professional offering to shame.

This was the best non-professional production of anything I have seen in a very, very long time.

Very many congratulations.

The late Adrian Brown

It is sad that some obituaries of Adrian Brown led on his relationship with Terence Rattigan, a mid-1950s liaison, before acknowledging his own substantial body of theatre and television direction - a varied career crowned with much success.

The Stage's first two paragraphs went strong on the link and though Adrian was rightly proud of and indeed cherished his friendship with Rattigan his success was built on his own ability and inquisitiveness about developments in drama. Both were displayed on solid practical foundations laid in a time when new work was being performed widely both on stage and on the air. Memories of Shelagh Delaney and the genesis of *A Taste of Honey*, printed in these pages, showed how deeply involved he became in what might be called the Joan Littlewood years. His range though was catholic.

Like many of his generation he was picked up by Combined Services Entertainment while doing National Service. On release he went up to Oxford where he became involved in student dramatic life. A career in rep followed then came television where he built a lengthy CV. He crafted workmanlike productions when the 'box' was a dramatic sausage machine churning out new plays weekly and well crafted serials, like *No Hiding Place*, which aspired to more than under-rehearsed sensationalism.

He was nominated for a BAFTA for directing *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1985 and won an International Emmy in 1987 for *The Belle of Amherst*, William Luce's portrait of the poet Emily Dickinson, played by Claire Bloom.

However it was the relationship with Terry that led Barbara Longford to approach him when thinking about establishing the TRS; he was an early honorary member and supporter. We were indeed fortunate to have his knowledge at our disposal

Adrian was no sleeping member either. He directed two rehearsed readings for the Society kicking off with maybe the first revival for years of *Follow My Leader* about which he remarked that maybe he should have cut it some more. Two years ago he oversaw the AGM performance of the runner up in the Award - *Going Back* - which was in every way more successful. In the early years he conducted a Masterclass at Rose Bruford College and in 2014 gave an interview and read some of his poetry at the January function at Chelsea Town Hall.

Profiled in the premier issue of *The Rattigan Version* Adrian was described as a puckish figure



with a razor sharp wit, which was spot on. But he was not always an easy man, there was an unmistakable irascibility which surfaced at times from under the superficially rather shy exterior when he felt things were not going the right way or maybe the way he thought they should go. Some will recall his very stern, one might almost say vituperative, criticism of the Old Vic *Winslow Boy* with Henry Goodman which attracted a spirited defence from Kevin Spacey. He did not approve of some of the society's activities in more recent times - and said so in no uncertain terms.

But at the same time this core of self-belief and an insistence on what he saw as proper artistic standards must be admired and no doubt were what led to a number of latter-day successful productions, jointly with his partner Sean Garvey, including a well-received *Less than Kind*.

As well as being the last link we had with Terence Rattigan, Adrian Brown was probably one of the last of a type of theatre figure who grew up when those training as actors learnt to act rather than work for degrees in acting. A time when a degreeless John Arlott could move directly from being a Southampton policeman to a producer on the BBC Eastern Service. A time to learn through wide experience provided by weekly rep. A spacious age when making mistakes and tilting at windmills on the BBC and ITV was not only tolerated but, by the likes of the Bernsteins, Michael Mills, Sydney Newman and Bill Cotton Jr, probably expected. A time when the intelligence of the audience was never underestimated.

Adrian Brown was a dramatic polymath of the kind that we shall probably seldom see again - more's the pity. **TB**

Ronald Adrian Frederick Brown
Born 30th April 1929 Died 27th April 2019