

The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

When the show doesn't go on

This will always be remembered as the year of the lockdown, as no one will need reminding. It has pulled the rug from under people's lives in an extraordinary and devastating fashion. And the world of theatre and performance arts has suffered perhaps its deadliest blow since the Puritans closed all theatres and places of entertainment in the mid-17th century.

As *The Stage* newspaper reminded us recently, the government ordered no closures during the First World War, and performances continued during Zeppelin raids. Similarly, there were no such closures during the Spanish 'Flu epidemic of 1918-19 either—nor were there any during the General Strike of 1926.

During the Second World War, however, the government did step in to prohibit performances, but there were protests that the public needed entertainment for reasons of morale-boosting and, as now, performers lost their livelihoods overnight. Performances were reinstated as a result until the constant air raids during the Blitz put paid to them again.

Since the war, there have been interruptions to the business of theatre, through terrorist activities, or structural problems, but no closures that have lasted as long as they have at this particular moment in time. It seems that the old dictum of 'the show must go on' has

generally held good. Until now.

Well, public health does have to come first. And governments do have to make very tough decisions. It is not the business of this newsletter to take this, or any, government to task, nor to criticise (or praise) the way this crisis has been handled, but it is the

business of this newsletter to observe that somehow theatre 'will always out' in one way or another, even in the most adverse circumstances.

A perfect example of this is the rehearsed reading produced by Jermyn Street Theatre on 26 May of one of Rattigan's later plays, *In Praise of Love*. The actors were all in their own homes and linked



A screenshot from the online rehearsed reading of *In Praise of Love* streamed by Jermyn Street Theatre via YouTube on 26 May, featuring Jack Klauff, Issy van Randwyck, Andrew Francis (all pictured) and Mackenzie Heynes, directed by Cat Robey.

by the new marvel of modern technology, Zoom. The performance—for indeed it was much more of a performance than a mere reading—was then made accessible via YouTube. So, full marks for ingenuity.

But this of course then raises several questions, such as: does it come anywhere close to substituting for actors interacting with each other on a single stage? Does the technology get in the way of the performances? Can you act convincingly to a small computer image of your fellow actors? Does it bear any comparison to live screenings in cinemas? Or even: does it look odd when two actors have to kiss

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Editor's note: Any views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of The Terence Rattigan Society or its Committee.

Roy Kendall A Tribute

This was intended to be a profile piece in the way that we have featured various Society members over the years, but it is with profound sadness that we have to report the passing of Roy Kendall, the winner of the recent TRS play competition, and this becomes a tribute instead. In fact one of the last things—if not *the* last thing—he was in the middle of writing was an email to this newsletter outlining aspects of his multi-faceted career.

But to begin at the beginning... his only brush with a Rattigan play was at drama school, Webber-Douglas, when he, as a first-year student, was cast as Tybalt in a Finals production of *Harlequinade*. He was modest enough to state that it was not necessarily for his outstanding acting ability, but for his relative competence at fencing, thereby being less likely than anyone else to injure someone. Nevertheless he got his laughs and enjoyed the whole experience immensely.

Roy also trained as a theatre director at three regional theatres on an Arts Council bursary and his early career was spent as an actor and director in the regions and on the London fringe. He then turned to writing and an early play, *Body and Soul*, starring Patrick Stewart, earned him a nomination as Most Promising Playwright. It was later toured and transferred to the West End with Robert Hardy and Angela Thorne in the leading roles. He also adapted it for radio and it was broadcast on the BBC World Service and Radio 4 with Michael Williams and Penelope Wilton. This success was a clear indication of where his future lay. Other stage plays include *Unseeded* (Theatre Royal, Plymouth), *McGonagall*, *McGonagall* (Dundee Repertory Theatre), *The Sighting* (Oldham Coliseum), *Ulysses and his Voyage into the Unknown* (Lancaster Playhouse) and *Ill Met By Foglight* (Bristol Old Vic). Other plays for BBC Radio include *Kingdom Come* (again with Michael Williams and Penelope Wilton), *Face Value*, *The Nipponese*



Experiment, *Where the Lovemaking Does Go On* and *Marlowe's Diaries*, which starred Anton Lesser and Jeremy Northam, and won the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Award for Best Original Radio Play. He was also chairman and a long-serving member of the Writers' Guild Theatre

Committee (at one time alongside your editor) and was passionate about both the industry in which he worked and the wellbeing of his fellow writers.

Roy's television films include *The Cornet Lesson*, *Too Much Monkey Business* and *Housewives' Choice* for BBC 1, *Love Song* and *The Children of the Gods* for ITV and *The Garden Party* for IKON-TV, Holland - all of which, along with his radio plays, have been sold and broadcast worldwide. Latterly, alongside his writing he taught at many drama schools and colleges including the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Webber Douglas Academy and RADA. From 1998 to 2016 he was Course Director of Advanced Screenwriting and Playwriting Programmes at the New York University/Tisch School of Arts in London. Also in 1998 he attained a PhD (English) at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham at Stratford-upon-Avon under the supervision of Professor Sir Stanley Wells.

He had just completed his debut novel, *The Last Fool*, and his play, *The Onion at the End*, which won the TRS competition, is now being published ([for details see p7](#)). Roy was a professional of the highest order and his breadth of experience in the creative world was second to none. He was a devoted family man and is survived by his wife Katina and their three sons. It is a sadness that having joined the Society after winning the play competition, he was with us for such a comparatively short time. We should have known him and enjoyed his company for much longer. ☞

Mastermind—specialist subject: the life and work of Terence Rattigan!

Just imagine—you are sitting in the famous black chair, with the intimidating lighting half blinding you and the ominous music playing. John Humphrys turns to you and says: “And your specialist subject is?” And you find yourself stammering out “The life and work of Terence Rattigan”... for you are indeed in the middle of a nightmarish dream sequence of your semi-conscious mind as you doze away a languid afternoon in the middle of the summertime lockdown. And before you’ve gathered your senses you find the questions coming at you thick and fast. You do your best to answer, dredging the furthest edges of your memory and mentally scanning the pages of forgotten theatre programmes. It might go something like this...

1. In *The Browning Version* the soon-to-retire classics master, Andrew Crocker-Harris, is known to the boys by two nicknames; one is The Crock—what is the other?
2. In *Separate Tables* Major Pollock strikes up a particular friendship with one of the other hotel guests—what is the name of that guest?
3. Terence Rattigan was born in London in 1911—in what street was he born, where there is a plaque to this day commemorating his birth at number 100?
4. Whilst at school at Harrow, Terence Rattigan distinguished himself as a sportsman—in which sport did he excel?
5. Rattigan’s first play transferred to the West End and enjoyed a modest success, but from which theatre did the play transfer?
6. Of which play is it often said that it bears a close resemblance to an episode in Rattigan’s own life when a lover of his committed suicide?
7. Rattigan’s father gave his son an ultimatum—if he did not succeed as a writer within two years he was to attempt a career in his father’s profession—which was what?
8. His first great success *French Without Tears* is set in a ‘crammer’ where a young woman sets several male hearts a-flutter—what is her character’s name?
9. Can you name the actor who originated the roles of Crocker-Harris in *The Browning Version* and Major Pollock in *Separate Tables*?
10. What was the name of the Academy Award-nominated film, scripted by Rattigan, set during the Second World War, and which was titled *Johnny in the Clouds* in the US?
11. Rattigan achieved the feat of having three plays on in the West End at the same time—who was the only previous playwright to have done so?
12. Who was the fashion model who often acted as Rattigan’s hostess at his parties, in particular at his house in Sunningdale?
13. Which play of Rattigan’s opened in June 1939 but closed after 60 performances as a result of the looming World War?
14. David Niven and Wendy Hiller both won Academy Awards for their roles in a film adapted from a stage play by Rattigan in 1958. Which play?
15. *Duologue* is a short play for one actress. Under what new title was it performed by Zoë Wanamaker in tandem with *Harlequinade* in the 2016 Kenneth Branagh theatre season?

How did you do? Did you have any passes? Answers on page 7...

Rattigan's Artistry: Classical Allusions in *Cause Célèbre*

by James Heyworth-Dunne

Rattigan freely adapts facts from classical myths to fit them into his plots, to make them ring true to modern audiences and to reflect his personal experiences and deep tensions and his wider concerns about the human predicament. Rattigan's genius is to expose as poignantly from the adapted facts and his modern plots the themes that resonate in the classical myths that are his base.

The extensively studied *The Browning Version* attests to Rattigan's method and achievement. For example, although Agamemnon and Crocker-Harris are totally different people in totally different situations, Rattigan exposes how for similar reasons they are seen to deserve the viciousness of their wives who themselves are nonetheless softened by the flicker of sympathetic features.

Classical allusions in *Cause Célèbre* have been less studied than in Rattigan's other plays. The factual dissimilarities between *Cause Célèbre* and *Medea* are great. The plights of Alma and Medea are the same. Both are caught in predicaments caused by others and from which there is no escape.

Alma has not been wronged. She is passionate. She has taken a young lover, her latest, who murders her husband whom she tolerates affectionately. Alma is prepared to lie, to the police, "I did it, with a mallet" and, before the trial, to her counsel, "I have already told you, I killed Ratz alone and George had nothing to do with it". Alma was prepared to face execution to protect her lover, regardless of the fate of her two sons. *Cause Célèbre* recounts the background to the murder

and the trial at which Alma is acquitted and her lover found guilty.

Medea is a wronged woman who, abandoned for another by her husband, Jason, murders her two young sons. She expects her enjoyment of

Jason's suffering to outweigh her misery at her loss.

Rattigan exposes the themes in *Cause Célèbre* that are common to *Medea*. Factual dissimilarities become irrelevant. Both plays open with warnings, tremulous but not dire.

Alma's housekeeper wants to dismiss an applicant for the job of handyman – he is too tall. Alma intervenes, the strapping youth is hired and becomes her lover. Jealousy and fear of rejection lead the lover to murder the husband.

Medea's nurse and tutor bewail their mistress's treatment and expect her to take revenge. Medea's revenge lust reaches a crescendo during which she resolves to kill her two sons: "... a woman is full of

fear.... but, when once she is wronged in the matter of love, no other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood".

The plays have three principal themes in common. First, perceptions of guilt and its true nature. Second, the reduced importance under particular forms of stress of a mother's relationship with her children. Third, the challenge of dealing with one's lot and the fate of those who cannot.

Neither Rattigan nor Euripides values public perceptions, personified in *Cause Célèbre* by the trial jury and in *Medea* by the chorus. The jury is swung from outright condemnation to acquittal by court room dramatics. The chorus is manipulated



Anne-Marie Duff as Alma in the 2011 Old Vic revival directed by Thea Sharrock
Photo: The Guardian

by Medea into support until it witnesses the horrible crime itself.

More telling than public perceptions is the analysis of guilt by the heroines themselves. During the trial, Alma says “I did not plot my husband’s death... I have never, in all my life, harmed a human being Not meaning to. Not till now”. Alma recognizes her unintentional role in the crime. To prosecuting counsel she says “...I suppose I felt responsible”. In response to her counsel she clarifies these words. “Do you mean morally responsible for your lover’s protection?” “Yes. That is exactly what I mean.”

Medea describes in her famous soliloquy the tormented struggle between her reason and her passion and her powerlessness to control the latter: “...my passionate spirit is stronger than my reasoned thoughts”. Ovid, in his later rendering of Medea, has her capture exactly the dilemma: “I see the better course and I approve it, but I follow the worse”.

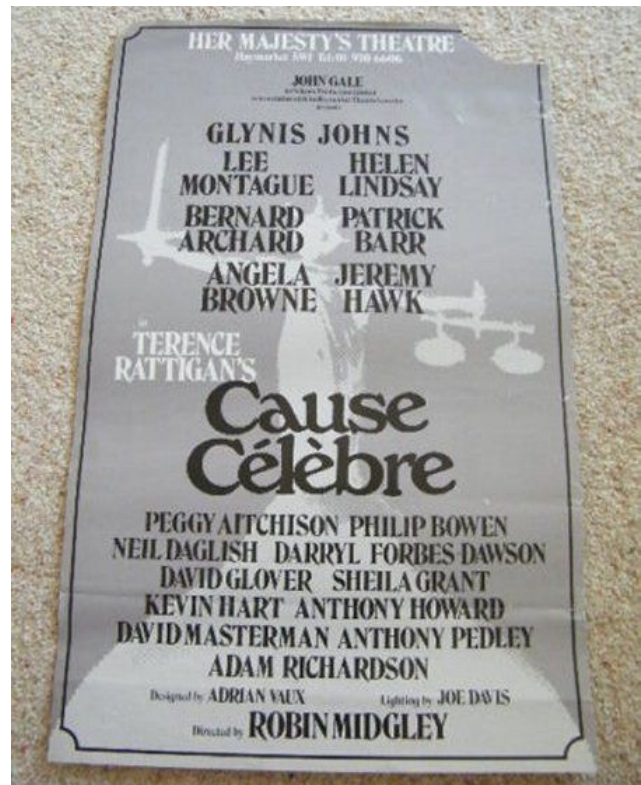
Alma’s uncontrolled passion unwittingly caused another to commit a dreadful act – the murder was bestial – while Medea’s uncontrolled passion caused her to resolve to commit a dreadful act, more bestial only because it was infanticide. The difference between committing and not committing the act was, at least for courtroom purposes, the difference between guilt and innocence.

The overwhelming power of passions unleashed caused both heroines to put their children into second place. Therein lie eternal truths for Rattigan and Euripides. For Rattigan the overwhelming passion is the indispensable importance of the emotional and sexual partnership that provides the only platform from which a person can contemplate existence. For Euripides the overwhelming passion is the unshakeable belief in the putting right of wrongs and protection of self.

Neither Rattigan nor Euripides is content to let it rest there. How can either Alma or Medea carry on living emptied lives?

Both plays end with resolution just as they both started with warnings. Rattigan maintains Euripides’ structure.

In sunlight, in a spot where she and her lover went, Alma commits suicide, grateful for “peace at last”. Alma will indeed have felt grateful for release from her emptied life and from guilt arising from the unintended consequences of her attempt to



The poster from the original West End production at Her Majesty's Theatre in the last year of Rattigan's life, 1977. The play was produced by John Gale.

create her platform for dealing with her lot.

The sun god, Helios, Medea’s grandfather, lifts her in his chariot from the terrestrial world. As a descendant of a god, she cannot die a normal death and has to suffer. Medea rides into the heavens, without a soul. ∞

James Heyworth-Dunne read History at Cambridge, then qualified as a barrister in 1969. He retired from the City in 2004 and has been a member of the Terence Rattigan Society for four years.



Helen McRory prepares to do murder as Medea in the 2014 National Theatre production adapted from Euripides by Ben Power and directed by Carrie Cracknell
Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

Editorial:

Rattigan and the Human Condition

It is now widely accepted that Rattigan was a master of the drama of the unspoken, the inequality of love between individuals and the inability to express emotion, especially in the English middle-classes. A playwright who first appeared to be a mere boulevardier with light comedies such as *French Without Tears* and *While the Sun Shines* and perhaps even *Follow My Leader*, his 1940 farce about the rise of Hitler, matured into a dramatist of distinction, bringing psychological insight to troubled and flawed characters trapped by their own feelings – or at least that is a fairly common perception.

But one must not forget that his first play *First Episode* dealt with serious matters of the heart amongst undergraduates, and his third play *After the Dance* contained much darker subject matter under its bright, social exterior. And before he wrote *While the Sun Shines* he had also produced *Flare Path*, a play which balances the tensions of war against the pent-up emotions of those who remain at home waiting. So perhaps the signs were there from the outset – the signs of a playwright who was to take the well-made play and shape it to his own dramatic ends, which were far more complex and truthful than was often associated with the well-made plays of the time. He certainly seemed to deceive the critics, who were initially reluctant to see anything inherently new in his work.

It is inescapably true that he had great success with the light comedies mentioned above, both of them running for over a thousand performances, a rare feat, and one which clearly marked him out most potently as a dealer in light-hearted romances. He then further enhanced that particular reputation with plays like *The Sleeping Prince*,

described even by him as ‘an occasional fairy-tale’, *Who Is Sylvia?* and *Variation on a Theme* – being in fact a variation on the theme of *La Dame Aux Camélias*. But then again, before *The Sleeping Prince* saw the light of day, in 1953, the world had been given *The Winslow Boy* (1946), *The Browning Version* (1948), and *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), three of his greatest and most enduring plays. And one mustn’t forget that *Separate Tables*, his other world-class drama, came the year after his ‘fairy-tale’ play, and was

followed by *Variation on a Theme*. So perhaps critics and audiences alike could be forgiven for not fully recognising the true worth of the four great plays at the time as they alternated with more lightweight material containing rather less perceptiveness of the human psyche.

Does it seem odd to us now that he seemed to zigzag between styles and subject matter in this way? Did he himself perhaps still wonder whether his true métier was lighter comedy since that had proved more successful financially? Or can it be explained by the fact that every dramatist, however brilliant, can sometimes question his own abilities, or become disenchanted with the reception of more seriously-intended works? He saw himself, he once said in an interview, as an Ibsenite longing to be a Chekhovian (all playwrights being one or the other in his opinion), but he nevertheless cast himself as something of a Lonsdale or a Coward on occasion. Does that breadth of style weaken his reputation or enhance it? Do we admire a writer who has such a broad range, and thereby risks his reputation, or do we prefer a writer who sticks to what he succeeds in best? Perhaps in a writer of such range, who takes such risks, we can find a little more humanity at play.

It is also interesting that he turned several times



to large historical subjects, plays envisaged on a much more epic scale. His study of Alexander the Great, the somewhat dully titled *Adventure Story*, came in 1949, featuring Paul Scofield in the leading role. Then there was *Ross* in 1960, starring Alec Guinness, which became his second most successful play after *While the Sun Shines*, running for almost two years. He was to be tempted by history again as late as 1970 when he adapted his television play on Horatio Nelson, *A Bequest to the Nation*, for the stage. Again he was fascinated by the great heroic figure, who despite enormous success and reputation is ultimately alone, and questioning his own worth. Is there a parallel to be drawn here with Rattigan himself one wonders? Was that part of their appeal as characters for him?

So is it too fanciful to see Rattigan as something of a chameleon figure, who drew upon the pain and frustrations of his own inner life to inform a wide range of characters, both male and female, young and old? Most dramatists write from within themselves to one degree or another, so one could possibly conclude that the act of writing for him was a therapeutic act, and one which led him to explore such a wide range of material, from youthful infatuation to psychological ruin with—in between— fairy-tale, farce, romance, humour, pathos, the cruelty of love, pain, torment, yearning, self-destructiveness, loyalty, disloyalty, morality, immorality, class values, marital bitterness, theatricality and the facing of approaching death whether in war or by disease. There is not much there that he did not cover about the human condition. ∞

Covid-19 update

It is only too apparent that as this issue of the newsletter is being prepared there is still no clear indication of when the lockdown restrictions will be sufficiently eased to allow events to take place and for public transport to be used in a more 'normal' fashion. Accordingly, although there are plans for further Society gatherings and events, none can be scheduled with any degree of certainty. We have already lost the Annual Dinner this year, the AGM is another potential casualty, and for this the Committee is profoundly sorry, but do bear with us! We will meet again! And no doubt in due course there will be a whole raft of plays with this pandemic as a backdrop. Now that's something to look forward to!

The Onion at the End

The winning play in our competition - written by Roy Kendall (see p2) - is now being published by a new play publisher, Salamander Street Plays, and copies are available via their website: www.salamanderstreet.com at £10.99 including UK postage.

Roy was very proud of winning the competition and greatly appreciated the efforts of Michael Friend (director) and Michael Wheatley-Ward (producer) in staging the play at the Sarah Thorne Theatre, Broadstairs, in February 2018.

Mastermind—Specialist Subject Answers (from page 3)

1. The Himmeler of the Lower Fifth 2. Sybil Railton-Bell 3. Cornwall Gardens (No. 100 is now the home of our member Junko Tarrant) 4. Cricket 5. The Q Theatre 6. The Deep Blue Sea 7. The Diplomatic Service 8. Diana Lake 9. Eric Portman 10. The Way to the Stars 11. W. Somerset Maugham, in 1908 12. Jean Dawney (later known of course as Princess George Galitzine, our first President) 13. After the Dance 14. Separate Tables 15. All On Her Own.

13—15: You are a Rattigan scholar!
10—12: You know your stuff but there's room for improvement...
6—9: Try reading one or both of the wonderful biographies by two of our VPs...
5 or less: Saturday detention required, writing out 100 times "I should know better"...

When the show doesn't go on

Cont. from front page

and they both lean towards the tiny camera on their laptops, thus appearing to have the viewer as their target? These answers to all these questions will be a matter of personal preference, but no one can doubt that Zoom-ed performances are a valiant attempt to make the best of a bad situation.

Nevertheless, in this particular case, Issy van Randwyck managed to convey all we needed to know about Lydia and Jack Klaff was a suitably bullish Sebastian, who reveals a tender side underneath the male bravado. So did the play lose out? The predictable answer is both yes and no. Technically, there are serious limitations to watching multiple images on a laptop or tablet, with the speaker being outlined in a green frame, mixed with full-screen images of individual actors. The actors never seem to be looking at each other (almost impossible to simulate effectively when each actor is sitting at home on his or her own) and spend most of the time looking straight at the viewer. It is engaging in an oddly fascinating way, but it also provides an 'alienation' effect that Brecht would not have dreamed of.

On the plus side, the story unravels clearly enough; there is real empathy, irascibility, subtlety on display. One can therefore identify with the characters sufficiently to enjoy the whole experience and come away moved and entertained just as in a theatre.

But, the bottom line is: it isn't 'theatre' in the sense of sharing an experience with a multitude of others around you. There was no sense of collective audience reaction. There were approximately 220 or so viewers on 26 May, though the number varied as the play went on, some leaving and returning, others joining and so on, and that was 150 more than could have seen it close up for real in the Jermyn Street Theatre. I'm sure TR himself, had he lived to see this digital age, would have preferred this way of seeing his play to not seeing it at all.

A further point of interest is that in fact this was hardly a 'reading' at all. It was so skilfully managed that the actors appeared not be reading their lines—it seems hard to believe that they went to the trouble of learning them all by heart for what was advertised as a rehearsed reading—or perhaps their scripts were carefully placed at eye level? So there was much constructive thinking in this production, but one can't help but wonder how long such a form of

theatrical performance could endure before audiences found it too constrained, too much like TV talking heads, with no real ability for the actors to move around except within the confines of a small study or desk space. Perhaps the technology can improve to some degree (it inevitably will) but even so this doesn't seem like a long term answer. Hopefully, its interim, 'make-do' quality will cease to be necessary after another month or three. Or four...

A piece in the *New York Times* reports how a touring production of *The Phantom of the Opera* in South Korea has managed to circumvent the pandemic problems with very strict emphasis on hygiene at all levels. Each member of the audience is subjected to a fine spray mist of disinfectant on entering the theatre, there is hand sanitizer everywhere and so on. But social distancing? No—there are no blocked off seats (except that the front row is further away from the stage) and the show has been playing to around eighty percent capacity. Might this work here? Perhaps Andrew Lloyd Webber will show the way at one of the West End theatres he owns, the London Palladium, and perhaps the lockdown restrictions will become outmoded sooner than we think? Your editor is not entirely confident in that regard and suspects that it will take a very significant amount of time for audiences to gather in anything like their former numbers. But he will be very pleased to be proved wrong. ☞



This photograph by Nobby Clark is of a rehearsal for the recent production at the Bath Theatre Royal's Ustinov Studio, with Robert Lindsay as Sebastian. The play is particularly interesting in that it was based in part on the real life case of Rex Harrison's wife Kay Kendall, who died from leukemia. Originally conceived as a one-act play called 'After Lydia' it was reworked into a longer piece by Rattigan for a Broadway run in 1974 with none other than Rex Harrison himself playing the seemingly callous and cantankerous Sebastian. Dan Rebellato has said of the play that it is "Rattigan's last attempt at a well-made play and one of his best". ☞