



The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

ISSUE No. 38 OCTOBER 2021

Version

Birthday dinner a critical success

For reasons that will be only too familiar, this year's Annual Birthday Dinner did not take place in June, as in previous years, close to the date on which Rattigan was born, but on 23 September at the Oxford & Cambridge Club via the good offices of our Chairman, Denis Moriarty.

If the Committee had had any concerns that members would be reluctant to venture forth and gather in a public place, they were soon reassured and a full Princess Marie-Louise Room was guaranteed. We were delighted to see both our Founder, Barbara Longford, in very cheery form following her recent spell in hospital, and likewise our former Membership Secretary Di Scotney. Unfortunately, his forthcoming theatre show prevented our President from being with us, as he was required by his producers to remain within the production 'bubble' (a visit to *Poirot and More* is being planned alongside the AGM—see back page). He had sent a letter of apology and explanation to the Chairman, and this letter was kindly read out to the assembled members by none other than our Vice-President, Lord Fellowes, who once again supported the occasion, accompanied by Lady Fellowes.



The renowned theatre critic Michael Billington (seen here in the National Theatre foyer) was the guest of honour at the Annual Birthday Dinner

We were very fortunate that our Events Secretary Phill Ward managed to secure the services of the former chief theatre critic of *The Guardian*, Michael Billington OBE, as our guest of honour. He has the distinction of being Britain's longest serving drama critic, having occupied that position at *The Guardian* from 1971 to 2019. His address to the Society is reproduced on pages 4 and 5, with his kind permission.

In the course of the evening we learned that he and our Chairman had been at Oxford together and had both featured in a production of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*.

Apart from his journalism, Michael has written books on Peggy Ashcroft, Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn, as well as the authorised biography of Harold Pinter, first published in 1996. In 2007, his book *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* won the Theatre Book Prize from the Society for Theatre Research. Copies of this, and another of his works, *The 101 Greatest Plays - from Antiquity to the Present*, were on offer to members afterwards.

It was wonderful to see the Society in full bloom, as it were, once again, especially to meet some recent new members. **Cont. on p 8...**

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The Terence Rattigan Society

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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.

Introducing

James Heyworth-Dunne

Glancing at James Heyworth-Dunne's CV is like having the top names in the world of high finance swimming before your eyes—Rothschild, Gartmore, Mercury Asset Management, Mitsubishi Trust and Banking... It's an impressive list and James has obviously had a very successful career in these exalted ranks. It began in 1968 when he was a graduate trainee in the investment department at N M Rothschild & Sons, rising to a main board directorship in 1982 and membership of the executive committee in 1984. From 1979 he was responsible for all non-UK investment management and for all global clients, which sounds suspiciously like a meteoric rise.

In the middle of all this, he took a temporary leave of absence from Rothschilds and from 1973 to 1977 he became managing director of Cayzer Limited and a director of Gartmore Investment Ltd. Finally leaving Rothschilds in 1987, he went on to manage the global investment management department for non-UK pension and other tax-free funds at HD International Ltd, where he stayed for five years.

By this time he had clearly established himself in the field of global investment strategy and in 1992 he joined Mercury Asset Management Ltd as the head of that particular department. Three



years later he made a further career move as managing director of Norwich Union's investment management subsidiary, being appointed to "cure performance problems", to re-engineer the business so

as to seek external clients, and to relocate it to London. This must have gone well because after another five-year stay he moved on once more, this time to Mitsubishi Trust and Banking, where he was appointed to assist in re-engineering the global investment management business in Tokyo and to establish offices in London and New York.

Now you may wonder where, in this high-flying career, was his love of theatre, and the answer is that he has been a theatregoer all his life, first—as he says—uncomprehendingly, solely for entertainment, then from fascination, and in the last three decades or so as a dedicated student especially of playwrights who were given to classical allusions. He therefore numbers among his favourite plays Sartre's *Les Mouches*, Genet's *Les Bonnes*, Camus's *Caligula*, Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and *Ghosts*, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and two early plays by Pinter, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. The question on your lips must now be "What about our beloved Terry?" Fear not. He includes three Rattigan plays among his favourites: *Flare Path*, *Separate Tables* and *French*

Without Tears. And you may have noticed that he has, so far, penned two articles for this newsletter, plus a third which will be featured in the next issue of *The Rattigan Version*.

He sees a very clear connection between Rattigan and ancient Greek drama, which he explores in the next issue with a comparison between Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy and *After the Dance*. He says that the history of classical Greece and Rome has never left him and, now retired, he is developing that particular fascination with this foray into writing.

Among other achievements—yes, there are more—he taught himself Russian when he first retired, so as to “penetrate the Russian classics in the original, especially the golden and silver periods, 1830-1930”. He says he needed a demanding activity to replace what had been very demanding work “at least in terms of time spent”. Oh, and he has been a dedicated horse rider for nearly fifty years, since first acquiring a horse in 1972.

He studied at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and has the distinction of being a barrister-at-law in Middle Temple, a Harmsworth scholar no less. Apart from his knowledge of Russian, he also speaks French (as one might have guessed from two of his favourite plays being quoted with their French titles) and he tries to keep his French up to the mark with a study in recent years of Flaubert and Baudelaire. (If he weren't so thoroughly modest and engaging a fellow one might start to resent him a little for being so hugely accomplished.)

However, he very generously took your editor to lunch at Mon Plaisir (a pleasure indeed), which immediately frees him from any resentment or envy by anyone. Obviously. And on that occasion it was clear that his French was immaculate—especially when conversing with the head waitress or, as Rattigan might have put it in *French Without Tears*, the *serveuse de la tête*.

A man of many parts indeed. ☞

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor

I was thrilled to read that a new Rattigan script has been discovered, albeit short and perhaps best classed as juvenilia. How fortunate we are that David Charles Manners immediately recognised the significance of his find! Tantalisingly, though, there is no indication of whether and how this item will be available to look at. As a Rattigan scholar – currently editing a new collection of essays on Rattigan's work for Cambridge University Press - I would love to see what it reveals about Rattigan's early attitudes to theatre, laughter and life and whether it contains any hints of the playwright he would become. Further, permit me to express the hope that it eventually finds its way to join the Rattigan archive at the British Library.

Yours etc.

Dan Rebellato

Fundraising Update

The indefatigable Lucy Briers, aided by Loretta Monaco, Norman Home, Simon Williams and others, has now managed to raise well over half the amount needed to begin the restoration of the Rattigan Family Memorial in Kensal Green cemetery, as reported in the last issue. Over £8,000 was raised initially, via a concerted campaign of letter writing and social media, and the GoFundMe page has now raised a further £6,750, which leaves just over £9,250 still to be found. Please alert all the theatre-lovers you know! The quotation is only valid till January. ☞



Rattigan's great gift

by Michael Billington OBE

This is the complete text of the address given by Michael Billington at the Annual Birthday Dinner on 23 September at the Oxford & Cambridge Club (see the report on the front page). He was introduced by our Chairman, Denis Moriarty.

One of the advantages of being an old critic is that one is able to see how fortunes rapidly change in the theatre; and of no one is that more true than Terence Rattigan. I have witnessed the rise, fall and resurrection of his reputation in the most spectacular way; and I'm reminded of the truth of Feste's wry observation in *Twelfth Night* that "the whirligig of time brings in its revenges".

I first became hooked on theatre in the mid-1950s when Rattigan seemed the embodiment of success. *Separate Tables* was a West End hit. The film of *The Deep Blue Sea* had just been released and his plays were regularly revived. I suspect my admiration for Rattigan was influenced by a good friend and Oxford contemporary, the playwright David Rudkin, who later claimed in a radio tribute in 1976 that Rattigan was not the commercial middlebrow dramatist his image suggested but someone who, in Rudkin's words, "was peculiarly haunting and oblique, who speaks with resonance of existential bleakness and irresolvable carnal solitude".

As we all know, Rattigan was to become a victim of the Royal Court revolution and to find himself an increasingly isolated figure in British theatre. I've heard some Rattigan admirers blame Kenneth Tynan for Rattigan's damnation, but I think that is to underestimate the hostility his work created. A Royal Court director who rashly admitted he'd been to a Rattigan play was regarded as a traitor. The highly influential theatre magazine, *Encore*, linked his name, absurdly, with Agatha Christie as symbols of the despised West End. Shelagh Delaney famously said that she'd been driven to write *A Taste of Honey* when she'd seen, and loathed, *Variation on a Theme*, during its pre-West End tour.

It was during his years of rejection that I had my

only long encounter with Rattigan. It took place in 1968 when I was sent by *The Times* to write a piece about the filming of a musical version of *Goodbye Mr Chips*, part of which was shot on location in Pompeii. I remember Peter O'Toole saying Rattigan's wonderful script was full of "chalk dust and reflections". I've also never forgotten interviewing Rattigan on a hotel balcony in Vietri and finding him the epitome of charm and courtesy, who spoke without rancour about the shift in theatrical taste. Sadly, the film of *Goodbye Mr Chips* sank without trace; and I only found out later that shortly after I'd met him, Rattigan was rushed to hospital in Naples where he nearly died of a burst appendix.

I remained a champion of Rattigan the dramatist, even though in 1973 I wrote an intemperately rude review of the curtain-raiser to *In Praise of Love*, which was a send-up of *Tosca* called *Before Dawn*. One of my prize possessions is a copy of the play signed by Rattigan himself with the words "To Michael Billington who, God knows, doesn't deserve it".

Happily, I was able to make amends, before Rattigan died, when I praised the revival of *The Browning Version* at the King's Head in 1976 and the première of *Cause Célèbre* in the West End in 1977. It was those productions that heralded the restoration of Rattigan's reputation.

Today, of course, Rattigan is widely revived, appreciated and understood. Amongst a host of recent revivals I would pick out Trevor Nunn's production of *Flare Path*, the rediscovery by Jermyn Street of the original version of *Love in Idleness* and the buoyant version of *While The Sun Shines*, which is one of the biggest successes the Orange Tree in Richmond has ever enjoyed.

Even *In Praise of Love*, which I so brusquely dismissed in 1973, was given a first-rate production in Northampton in 2011. Looking at my review, I

see that I seized on what I called the quintessential Rattigan paradox. The hero, a Marxist literary critic, has a crucial speech in which he says “Do you know what *le vice Anglais* really is? Not flagellation, not pederasty, whatever the French believe it to be: it’s our refusal to admit our emotions. We think they demean us, I suppose”. Yet the reason the play is so deeply moving is that its hero and his terminally ill wife find it easier to confess their mutual passion to other people than to each other. On the one hand, Rattigan condemns our emotional reticence: on the other hand, he makes it a source of theatrical power. That, for me, is one reason why he is a great dramatist.

If you want another example of the power of emotional reticence, you only have to turn to *The Deep Blue Sea*. I’ve always felt that the scenes between Hester and Sir William Collyer can only be understood if you realise that her husband has a love he can never fully articulate and that Hester herself is painfully aware of the sacrifices she is making. But the best example comes in the moment when Freddie returns to the flat for the last time to collect his suitcase. “Had any food?” Hester asks Freddie. “Yes,” he says, “I had a bite at the Belvedere. What about you?” Here are two people irrevocably parting—Freddie, I’ve always assumed, to certain death and Hester to an intended suicide—

and yet they exchange conventional banalities. Emotional reticence may be the English vice: it is also a dramatic virtue.

Mention of *The Deep Blue Sea* reminds me of another of Rattigan’s great qualities: his ability to encapsulate the national mood. That really came home to me when I saw Karel Reisz’s production of *The Deep Blue Sea* at the Almeida in 1993. It suddenly hit me that the play offered an in-depth, highly detailed portrait of England in the 1950s. Hester herself embodies all those women who defied class and gender expectations in her passionate need for sex. Freddie is the archetypal Battle of Britain war hero who becomes a displaced person in the post-war world. The household’s young married couple represent a stuffy, middle-class conformism. Miller, the struck-off emigré doctor, is the sexual outsider. And the landlady, Mrs Elton, has a tolerance towards transgression that Rattigan suggested was a quality of the English working class. When I wrote a book called *State of the Nation*, I cited *The Deep Blue Sea* as one of those plays that worked perfectly as a national metaphor.

The fascinating thing about Rattigan is that although he led a privileged existence—the flat in Albany, the house near Sunningdale, the Rolls-Royce—he had an innate **Cont on back page...**

Penelope Wilton and Linus Roache in *The Deep Blue Sea* at the Almeida in 1993
Photo: Alastair Muir



Horace, Rattigan and me

by Lindsay Johns

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This week I had the privilege of attending two exceedingly convivial dinners held by august literary societies in salubrious, metropolitan surroundings.

The first, on Tuesday evening, was the annual dinner of the Horatian Society, held in Lincoln's Inn hall. Founded in 1933 by lawyers, its members gather to "promote fellowship and render tribute to Horace." Not a member myself, I was kindly invited by a friend who is.

The second, on Thursday evening, was that of the Terence Rattigan Society at the Oxford & Cambridge Club on Pall Mall - a society founded in his centenary year of 2011 to "celebrate, enjoy and study the work and life of one of the twentieth century's greatest playwrights", and of which I am a member.

Both occasions were (to coin a Horatian aphorism) "delightful and instructive", combining intelligent conversation, an epicurean repast, a beautiful setting, erudite and witty post-prandial speeches and affable company with a unity of purpose - to venerate the memory of these two ostensibly very different, but on closer inspection, remarkably similar literary titans.

Horace (65 - 8 BC) is one of the greatest (and most widely quoted) Latin poets, famous for his *Odes*, *Epodes*, *Satires* and his *Ars Poetica*; Terence Rattigan (1911-1977) is a celebrated English playwright, famous for such masterpieces as *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *Separate Tables* and *French Without Tears*.

At first sight, their differences are legion and the comparison perhaps even spurious: Horace, like many Romans, probably wore humble attire - most likely toga and sandals - and, deploring excess, advocated "the Golden Mean" (*Odes Bk. 2, X*) - a philosophy of

moderation, simplicity and a lack of extravagance in all things, whereas Rattigan, urbane, dapper and debonair, drank the best champagne and was renowned for his sartorial elegance.

Horace lived in Rome, but also contentedly in the bucolic tranquility of the Sabine Hills, on a farm which his patron Maecenas bought for him, and often extolled the ataraxia of the countryside; Rattigan's domicile was The Albany, one of the most coveted and expensive addresses in London, amidst the hustle and bustle of the city, and, until his departure for Bermuda in 1967 for tax purposes, lived the gilded life of the consummate bachelor "man about town."

However, on closer inspection there are striking similarities between the two writers: both were from relatively humble backgrounds. Horace's father was a freedman, and Rattigan's was a diplomat who lost his job in 1922, thus causing the family to struggle financially. Both, however, received excellent educations - Horace at the best school in Rome, and then in Athens, where he studied literature and philosophy; Rattigan at Harrow and Oxford, where he enjoyed Classics and then read History.

Both had a sense of not wholly belonging, of being a Baudelairean outsider, "in the crowd, but not of the crowd." In fact, Rattigan had to conceal his sexuality, since homosexuality was not decriminalised in Britain until 1967.

Both never married, and thus male friends were a mainstay of their respective social orbits. Both experienced first-hand the horrors of war - Horace fighting on the losing side in Brutus' army at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC (leaving his shield behind as he fled), and Rattigan served as a tail gunner in the RAF during WWII, with the result that their works are imbued with a tangible strain of melancholy and an awareness of the sadness of life - a kind of Virgilian *sunt lacrimae rerum* - at having witnessed conflict, suffering and death up close and personal.

Both clearly understood the foibles, capabilities and limitations of human nature. Two millennia apart, both poet and playwright grasped the ephemerality of life, the importance of seizing the present moment and the chance of (inevitably transient) happiness in the face of the certainty of impending

death, and proposed ways of dealing with the ineluctable beauty and tragedy of the human condition. Tellingly, both spurned belief in an afterlife.

Be it Horace's promulgation of Epicurean philosophy (in his famous *Carpe diem* exhortation in *Odes Bk. 1, 11*) and the inevitability of death (in his *Diffugere nives*, *Odes Bk. 4, 7*) or Rattigan's masterful dissection of upper-middle class emotional repression, dissimulation and his "existential bleakness and irresolvable carnal solitude", both proffered in their art ways of coping with life's vicissitudes.

I think it was Kipling who - like me, no classical scholar - said of his Latin teacher that "he taught me to loathe Horace for two years, to forget him for twenty, and then to love him for the rest of my days and through many sleepless nights."

As has been said by the eminent former *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington (who was the guest of honour on Thursday evening), "few dramatists of this century have written with more understanding of the human heart than Terence Rattigan."

For these reasons alone, Horace should be more widely read and Rattigan more widely performed today. How many millennials up and down the country are even familiar with their names, let alone their magisterial, life-affirming works?

As a humanist (and also a writer of colour), the increasingly popular zeitgeist phrase "male, pale and stale" is anathema to me. Whilst I understand and empathise with its genesis, I'm no fan of identity politics, and thus the politics of representation matters less to me than the politics of quality. I respectfully care not one fig (to employ a classical idiom) for the colour, gender or sexuality of these authors. Instead, I care principally about their thoughts on life, their take on the human condition and the artistic and intellectual quality of their poetry and plays (although naturally one can, and often does, inform the other). If these stand up to scrutiny (which, in the case of Horace and Rattigan, they most certainly do), then I'm in their corner, irrespective of their lack of melanin or Y chromosomes.

Moreover, in an age when the term Dead White Men nowadays functions as the ultimate pejorative epithet, the works of both Horace and Rattigan are timeless and universal, whatever our colour, class or creed. To posit otherwise is lunacy pure and simple.

So if you are able, take down that book of Horace's poems from the shelf and dust it off, or watch the film of *The Browning Version*. Marvel at the Horatian treatment of seminal, eternal truths and be moved by the overwhelming pathos of *The Crock* (the protagon-

ist Andrew-Crocker Harris, as his pupils nickname him) and at the brief telephone conversation with the headmaster about the order of the final assembly speeches with which the play concludes, and which hints at the Crock's emotional resilience, and by extension, the indomitable strength of the human spirit. Let their respective literary genius make you happy, sad and pensive - maybe even all at once.

Horace famously spoke of creating with his poetry a monument more lasting than bronze ("exegi monumentum aere perennius", *Odes Bk. 3, 30*). Fortunately for us, he did. And the fact that people are still gathering more than 2000 years later to celebrate him, and in a faraway land, is proof plenty that he succeeded.

Likewise, the ineffable power, beauty and humanity of Rattigan's plays continue to resonate far and wide, transcending our immutable characteristics with their emotional tenderness, nuance and profundity. Theatre goes across the world - not just the Home Counties - remain transfixed and uplifted by his illuminating dissection of human weakness, folly, desire, passion, love and thwarted ambition, and by his compassion for those cruelly, stoically and heroically losing at life.

Horace and Rattigan's understanding of the ways of men and women, of life itself and of what it means to be human have seldom been better articulated - or expressed with a better choice of words, more polish or greater technical virtuosity. Petronius' famous line about Horace's careful felicity ("Horatii curiosa felicitas") still stands, as does Rattigan's strict adherence to the model of the "well-made play".

As such, both writers, as the guest speaker on Tuesday evening said of Horace, belong to "the humane republic of letters" and both thankfully "belong to the world." I for one am infinitely richer as a result.

Sincere thanks to the Horatian Society and the Terence Rattigan Society for two splendid evenings of food, fellowship and fun. 🍷

Lindsay Johns is a writer and broadcaster. He has written opinion, arts and travel pieces for the *Evening Standard*, *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* as well as *The Voice*, *Prospect*, *The Spectator*, *The Oldie* and *Standpoint* magazines. He used to present on BBC2's *The Culture Show*, has been a guest on the iconic *BBC2 Review Show*, and has made arts and social documentaries for BBC Radios 3 and 4.

The Birthday Dinner

Continued from front page

One encouraging sign is that it seems that an interest in Terence Rattigan and his plays is not the only spur for considering membership of the Society—some new members have a general interest in theatre, perhaps, which is certainly reason enough, and others have also caught the enthusiasm generated by established members for what we do. Let us hope that things may continue in that vein.

All in all, the consensus seemed to be that the evening—enhanced as it was by the presence of a leading drama critic—was an unqualified success. ∞

Rattigan's Great Gift

Continued from page 5

understanding of England and its people. He saw their fear of expressing their emotions. He also recognised their tolerance. The supreme example comes in *Table Number Seven*, the second half of *Separate Tables*. As you will remember, Mrs Railton-Bell seeks to have the bogus major drummed out of the hotel: his supposed offence is interfering with women in a cinema, although it is perfectly plain that this is a euphemism for homosexual importuning. One by one the guests rally to the major's side and the bigoted Mrs Railton-Bell is defeated.

It's worth recalling that the play was staged in 1954, one year after Lord Montagu and Peter Wildeblood had been sent to prison for sexual offences and Sir John Gielgud had appeared at Chelsea Crown Court. Yet Rattigan's play suggests that there was in the 1950s an underlying liberalism of outlook towards homosexuality and a suspicion of the underhand methods used by the police to secure convictions. Some argue today that there is something coded about Rattigan's dramatisation of the subject. I would counter that the play's very obliquity is part of its appeal.

I am grateful to have lived long enough to witness Rattigan's resurrection—and it's for all the reasons I've hinted at. His understanding of both the human cost, and the dramatic value, of

Dates for your diary

Sunday 21 November 2021

Annual General Meeting in Richmond, Surrey, followed by a visit to the Richmond Theatre to see our President and Vice-President, Sir David Suchet and Geoffrey Wansell, in a matinee performance of ***Poirot and More - a Retrospective*** before it reaches the West End in January (see image below). Full details and booking form to follow.

Thursday 2 December 2021

While The Sun Shines - a visit to the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, for the 2.30pm performance has been arranged. Details and a booking form have been sent.

Saturday 4 December 2021

Flare Path - a visit to the Palace Theatre Westcliff is proposed for a matinee performance of 'Flare Path'. More details to follow.

emotional reticence. His sensitivity to the mood of England. His essential liberalism. And, of course, there was his awareness of dramatic structure, which is something I suspect he learned at Harrow from his studies of the classics. I hope the time is past when we use 'the well-made play' as a pejorative term. *Oedipus Rex* is a well-made play. *Charley's Aunt* is a well-made play. *Waiting for Godot* is a well-made play. So Rattigan is in good company in writing well-structured dramas. Will he survive? No one can predict the theatrical future. But I would gamble on the best of his work being regularly revived for its questioning of middle-class values, for its awareness of the inequality of passion, and for what I once termed its profound understanding of the human heart. That, for me, was Rattigan's great gift. ∞

