



The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

A prescient choice at Hampstead

The *Fever Syndrome* is a genetic condition that affects the auto-immune system and causes dangerously high temperatures. The sufferer in Alexis Zegerman's new play is Lily, a 14-year-old girl newly arrived with her parents for a family reunion in her grandfather's Manhattan brownstone.

As quickly becomes clear, Lily is not the only victim of a troubling condition. The entire clan is subject to a febrile brew of rage, insecurity, rivalry and unhappiness that stems not from faulty DNA but from the woeful parenting of Richard Myers.

Myers, an eminent geneticist played by Robert Lindsay in Hampstead Theatre's production, is facing a double irony. A pioneer of IVF treatment and the medical genius who enabled the birth of legions of babies, he is a cruelly destructive father to his own children. Now this enabler of human life is ill with Parkinson's disease and all too aware that his own existence is drawing to a close.

His far flung clan has gathered to see the patriarch receive a Lifetime Achievement award for his scientific work. And the scene is set for an Ameri-

can family drama in the tradition of Arthur Miller, Tracy Letts and Tennessee Williams.

Except that this psychodrama, by a British playwright, has little to say about the contemporary world. Though the family tensions are often gripping, the backdrop of the pioneering era of

IVF feels like yesterday's frontier.

What saves the play (a wonderful set aside) is its brilliant cast. It is a tribute to actors such as Lisa Dillon and Sam Marks that Robert Lindsay, who fails convincingly to walk the thin line between autocracy and frailty, offers the least convincing performance in a production selected for the latest outing of The Rattigan Society. It was, its flaws notwithstanding,

a prescient choice.

The play's theme of family corrosion chimes with Rattigan's focus on loneliness, the lives of the middle classes, the troubled relationships between fathers and sons and the torment of the human heart. *The Fever Syndrome* reached a thermometer reading on the tepid side of boiling point. Whatever its drawbacks, it remains a compelling exposition of love and loss. *✍*



Robert Lindsay and Lisa Dillon in *The Fever Syndrome*

Mary Riddell
reports on the latest Society outing to a new play at Hampstead. Mary has been a columnist for both *The Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph*

✂ A VISIT TO HAMPSTEAD THEATRE, P 1

✂ RATTIGAN AT THE MOVIES 2—*THE SOUND BARRIER* PP 4, 5, 8

✂ EDITOR'S NOTE, P 7

✂ EDITORIAL: HOW I FELL IN LOVE—WITH THEATRE, PP 2, 3

✂ ARTICLE: INFINITE KINDNESS, PP 6, 7

✂ DATES FOR YOUR DIARY, P 8

✂ *FLARE PATH* REPORT, P 8



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Editorial

How I fell in love - with theatre

It all started in the summer of 1964. I was 15 years old and the highlight of the school holidays was a residential drama course for people like me, i.e. stage-struck teenagers. It was organised by the Junior Drama League, which was then the youth version of the august British Drama League, based in London's Fitzroy Square, very close to where Samuel French's theatre bookshop then was (which was handy).

Except that this was not in Fitzroy Square: the drama courses in the other two school holidays *were* in London, but this one, the summer one, was in Chichester. There must have been thirty or forty of us, lodged in the Bishop Otter training

college along with half a dozen tutors. Now, I have huge sympathy for those poor theatre practitioners—directors, voice coaches, acting teachers (not substitute teachers, but teachers of your actual acting) and the admin lady who looked after us all as best she could. They must have been down on their luck to take on a gang of unruly teenagers all hell bent on enjoying time away from home, or boarding school, in whatever way they could, which mostly meant seeing who could stay up at night the longest. But they were serious professionals, our tutors, and took their jobs very seriously. We had a proper respect for them, but not all of us wanted to pursue full-time drama training later on. In fact, the majority were probably there just for the fun of it, as a purpose-built social circle. And that was fine. It was all tremendous fun, even if we got roundly ticked off for all-night sessions of smoking and talking. But these were innocent days. The Sixties that we all know about now hadn't really registered in 1964. Oh yes, there

were crushes, and a bit of snogging (and my first experience of self-harming—not me, but a nice girl who had safety pin scars in a neat line from elbow to wrist). But nobody overstepped the mark in sexual terms. Staying up sitting cross-legged on the floor until dawn was exhilarating enough for us ‘young adults’ finding our way in a world outside home and school.

Make no mistake, though, we took the acting seriously. We had classes, we had rehearsals, and we were divided into groups to present finished scenes at the end of our time there. Perhaps it was only a week, ten days at most, but it seemed to occupy the whole summer.



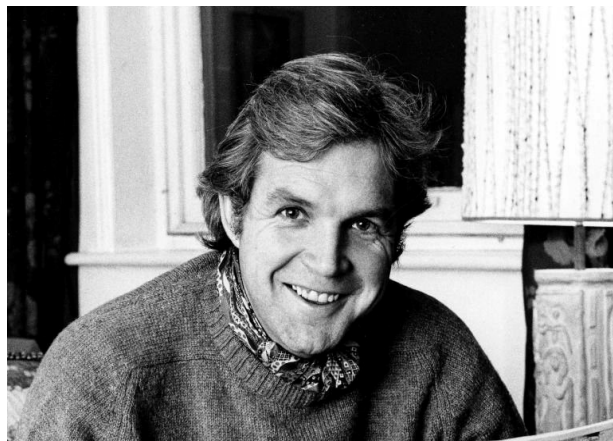
The highlights were visits to the very new Chichester Festival Theatre, which was then the out-of-London base for Laurence Olivier’s new National Theatre Company. I was completely mesmerised by Olivier’s *Othello*, and bewitched by Frank Finlay’s *Iago* and Maggie Smith’s *Desdemona*. Also in the company, in smaller roles, were the likes of Derek Jacobi, Edward Petherbridge and Edward Hardwicke. And Colin Blakely and Robert Stephens had a shining moment in the extraordinary spectacle that was Peter Shaffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (opposite page).

John Stride and Billie Whitelaw starred in *The Dutch Courtesan* by Shakespeare contemporary John Marston, and we were agog when John Stride (pictured right) came to Bishop Otter College and gave us a talk about being an actor and working with Olivier.

I had been stage-struck from the age of 14, and to this day I cannot remember how or why—it

certainly didn’t run in the family—but at 15 my course was set. I gave not a fig for university, the great pinnacle of academic achievement that we were all expected to aspire to—I was only interested in a proper drama school training. And so it was to be, though my father had to be won round by my performance as Sir Politick Would-Be in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* in the school play in my final year.

One or two Junior Drama League contemporaries graduated to greater things: David Thompson became the founding head of BBC Films, and Richard Ommanney went on to write TV sitcoms, most notably *Three Up, Two Down* (starring Michael Elphick and Angela Thorne). But most of us moved on into different spheres. For myself (in case you were wondering) I worked in the theatre as an actor for 16 years after leaving Webber-Douglas in 1970, with occasional forays into TV and the West End, but mostly in regional theatre and on tour, which I adored. The best way ever to get to know distant parts of the UK. 1987 saw my final stage appearance (at the Mill at Sonning) in—strangely enough, and completely coincidentally—a new comedy by Richard Ommanney called *The Making of Julia*. His first stage play and my last stage appearance.



It seems a little odd, when one looks back over one’s youthful passions, that the world of theatre held the key to everything—social life, professional aspiration, love affairs, even marriage. Many of my contemporaries opted for very sensible careers, spurning the wildly unreliable and creative, but one or two of them had a sneaking admiration for someone who followed his heart. **Giles Cole**

Rattigan at the Movies 2: *The Sound Barrier*

Roger Mills discusses his favourite Rattigan film

I suppose *The Final Test* (Rattigan Version 34, October 2020) could have been written about any period, but I reckon if Rattigan ever skewered a period in time it was 1952. His screenplay *The Sound Barrier* is fixed immovably there midway between, say, 1930 and any one of: a) Donald Campbell dying on Coniston Water in 1964; b) Brian Trubshaw getting Concorde off the ground; or c) the collapse of Rolls-Royce over the RB211. (Take your choice.) Confession – it's my favourite of all his films.

1952 was the high water of a time when virtually any consideration was laid aside in the pursuit of speed on land or air to bolster national prestige. A mere two months after release, a de Havilland Comet aircraft disintegrated at the Farnborough Air Show killing 16 spectators. Even with hindsight it's scarcely believable that a full programme of events continued once the wreckage had been cleared. Different times surely?



The plot of the film is simple in the extreme. In wartime, Peter Garthwaite (Nigel Patrick), an RAF pilot, marries Sue (Ann Todd), the daughter of John Ridgefield (Ralph Richardson), a successful aircraft

manufacturing entrepreneur and after the war becomes his test pilot. Garthwaite dies in attempting to break the sound barrier in a new plane, the *Prometheus*, after which his wife and child (born on the same day he is killed) desert Ridgefield. Mach 1 is reached later by Garthwaite's friend and successor Philip Peel (John Justin) who remembers an incident from during the war when he realises he must have been close to the speed of sound.

I promise no spoilers – only to say the father-daughter relationship is the emotional crux of the story with a number of typical Rattigan concerns played out. After Garthwaite's death, Sue deserts her father and while there is a rapprochement in the end it smacks to me of a required 'happy ending' rather than an inevitability. Sure, in a climactic scene, Sue glimpses the loneliness of the long distance entrepreneur, but I am not at all sure that the forgiveness which quickly follows would come quite so easily. No matter – within the confines of the movie it works OK, but it smacks of the sort of tidy ending avoided in *The Deep Blue Sea*.

Despite a cracking cast, though, it's quite clear that the aircraft are the stars and indeed the aerial photography is stunning, taking up a good proportion of the screen time. Factually, the film is full of holes; it credits the British with an American record (albeit not in a jet plane) amongst other things. I'll bet, though, that the fictional treatment reaches a sort of truth about how such commercial enterprises worked back then.

Screenplay-wise, this must be some of Rattigan's sparest work and, unusually, if we get to know the characters – and we do – it's as much about what they don't say, which says a lot about the times too. Take Nigel Patrick's Garthwaite,



who it would be easy to write off as 'RAF stock character number one', and to whom everything is a 'piece of cake'. Agreed there is a bit (or maybe even a bit more) of Freddie Page about him but he's serious – boy, is he serious – and without a word he shows us all the time just how divided he is between Sue and Flying – both of which he is besotted with. Peel is more sensitive than Garthwaite and maybe a more thoughtful pilot, but in the end he sings from the same hymn sheet.

John Ridgefield is modelled on men like William Morris, Herbert Austin, AV Roe and maybe most significantly Geoffrey de Havilland. Successful industrialists in on the ground floor of internal combustion engine exploitation and still controlling their firms. Ralph Richardson's JR is hard to like, easy to feel sorry for. A complex, self-made multi-millionaire who presses on ambitiously perhaps because it's all he knows. But he's no mere obsessive control freak – though we see the ruthlessness that's got him where he is. Richardson shows us a man so trapped by what he has built you can see the responsibilities literally weighing him down. His company's still young enough that the blokes who started off with him are still in the firm – and the

thousands dependent on him for their daily bread are on his mind. Mach 1 is just another stage in keeping the show on the road. At any cost? These days it'd be the core question, but nearly seventy years ago?

Will Sparks (Joseph Tomelty) Ridgefield's eccentrically dressed, emotional chief designer is pretty clear about the risks and the limits of knowledge. But it's left to Sue to mount any ethical challenge, probably asking

for the first time in any movie whether anybody wants to get from London to New York in two hours and whether there is any point anyway. All she wants is a good reason why – and doesn't really get any more than the Everest answer (and I don't mean 'always fit the best') or that it's a race that either Ridgefield's or Britain, or both, must win. The same belief that drove Donald Campbell on. And to be fair you feel that's the view of the filmmakers too.

As for Sue Garthwaite, all the time I was reminded of a trade rag piece of mine pithily entitled '*Laura Jesson is dead – we just have to accept it*' about changing shopping patterns. And Laura Jesson (*Brief Encounter*) is dead. But she did live, my mum was a 'Laura Jesson' and so were all her friends. And Sue and her friend Jess (Dinah Sheridan), wife of fellow test pilot Philip Peel, are absolutely real, closely observed, early fifties, middle class housewives. They, as much as anything else, pinpoint this in time—women easily recognised by their daughters, my generation, born at the same time as the film, who ripped up that set of gender-roles. They were going to have careers not jobs, were not going **Cont. on p 8**

Infinite Kindness: Rattigan, Williams and Grossman

In his latest Rattigan-related essay, *James Heyworth-Dunne* compares him to two other contemporary writers in terms of humanity

The compassion for humanity that Terence Rattigan demonstrates, and the poignancy he achieves, rank him alongside great twentieth century writers such as Tennessee Williams, also born in 1911, and Vasily Grossman, born in 1905.

Williams creates transcendental poetry from the abject adversity into which his characters were often plunged. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura leads a poor little life. She is lame, unconfident, dysfunctional in society and persecuted by Amanda, her exasperating mother. Laura's only refuge is her collection of miniature glass animals.



Amanda has prevailed upon her son, Tom, to ask his work colleague in the shoe warehouse to come to supper – a potential suitor, hopes Amanda. On the night, when Laura has finally been persuaded to emerge from her room, she recognises the young man, Jim, to be her contemporary at college, the universally popular basketball hero of their year and Laura's unattainable heart-throb.

Now, six years later, Jim, inexplicably, has a menial clerical job. Gradually Laura unfolds under Jim's influence. "Jim lights a cigarette and leans indolently back on his elbow, smiling at Laura with a warmth and charm which lights her inwardly with altar candles."

Laura is disappointed when Jim accidentally smashes the horn off her little unicorn, the pride of the collection, and more so when he announces his betrothal to another. "... It was as if the altar candles had been snuffed out..."

In their final scene, Laura rises above her hopelessness to comfort Jim regarding the breakage and, with

sublime symbolism, promises a future for those who have fallen from a great height.

"I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less—freakish. Now he will feel at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns."

Then she gently takes his hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand then pushes his fingers upon it. "A souvenir," she says.

Seamlessly, Williams transforms Laura from the pitiful object of multiple misfortunes into a compassionate young lady comforting another human and thereby living her finest and only such moment.

Rattigan also penetrates human feelings to create sublime moments. In *Flare Path*, the Countess was an unpretentious barmaid until the Count, a Polish airman flying with the RAF, married her. She is happy but suspects that the Count married her to make legitimate a wartime fling. The Count and Countess live in a hotel inhabited by RAF airmen.



When the Count does not return after a mission, although he is not yet presumed killed, she asks a guest to read her a letter the Count has written to her in French, to be read should he be killed in action. The letter tenderly and fully declares the Count's love and wish that after the war they should be together permanently at his home in Poland.

The Count does return to the hotel, his damaged plane having dropped into the Channel near the English coast.

"You must have been worried", he says to the Countess.

"No," she answers with feminine coyness and with understatement that finely expresses the deep enchantment of a woman who knows she is truly loved.



Grossman, author of *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate*, touchingly portrays the light of human kindness exhibited during an episode in one of mankind's darkest crimes. Grossman's mother was murdered by Nazis in 1941 along with most of the Jewish population in his family's home town of Berdichev, in Ukraine. Grossman never forgave himself for his infrequent communication with his mother and that he had not relocated her to Moscow. This guilt and motherhood are themes that recur in his writing.

The Old Teacher, written in 1943, was one of the first descriptions in any language of Nazi murders. In an unidentified Ukrainian town invaded by Nazis, the central character and focus of the story is Boris Isaakovich Rosenthal, a retired teacher, as was Grossman's mother. He is a frail 82-year-old bachelor.

The Nazis immediately cut off the town's external communications. "We are trapped now... well and truly in the bag," says a friend to Rosenthal.

Rosenthal asks the doctor, Weintraub, for poison. The latter refuses. "Never... never in all my life have I given anyone poison."

It is not long before the situation deteriorates so much that Weintraub changes his mind. "My wife is forbidden to go to the market - on pain of death. We all have to wear this armband... I feel as if my arm is weighed down by a band of red-hot steel."

Rosenthal refuses the poison, but Weintraub and his family take theirs.

Rosenthal understands the fate that awaits. "In a day or two there is probably going to be a mass execution of the Jews."

Despite the horror, Rosenthal feels a spirit of optimism. "The Nazis miscalculated. They meant to unleash hatred, but the fate of the Jews has evoked only grief and compassion... I have not seen malicious joy at our

destruction... only three or four times."

The day comes when the town's Jews will be gathered and herded to the ravine that has been dug where they will be shot and into which they will be cast down. In the commotion, 6-year-old Katya, Rosenthal's neighbour, is separated from her mother and taken hold of by Rosenthal.

At the ravine "people were backing away... some were refusing to move forward... some were trying to crawl back..."

The line nonetheless moves inexorably forward. Rosenthal's concern is Katya. "How can I comfort her? how can I deceive her?"

Rosenthal hears a voice. it is Katya's. She is calm. "Teacher, don't look that way, you will be frightened."

And, like a mother, she covers his face with her hands. ✂

Opposite: Cherry Jones as Amanda in the John Tiffany production of *The Glass Menagerie*, 2016 (photo: Johan Persson); Sienna Miller as Patricia and Sheridan Smith as the Countess in Trevor Nunn's production of *Flare Path*, 2011 (photo: Tristram Kenton). This page: Vasily Grossman.

Editor's Note:

I am particularly grateful to Roger Mills and James Heyworth-Dunne for their continued interest in writing articles for this newsletter. I am delighted that Mary Riddell has contributed to this issue too, but I would also welcome contributions from other members in the form of articles, letters, information, observations, photographs, reminiscences about theatrical experiences—or anything of a theatrical or literary nature. These need not necessarily be tied to matters Rattigan, or even be of any great length. There is a wider horizon in theatre more generally, both revivals and new work, which could interest members of the TRS. As an incentive, I include in this issue an account of my early theatregoing. Anyone else?

The Sound Barrier

Continued from page 5

to have honeymoon babies and told their husbands that playing rugby every weekend and staying out till all hours afterwards, coming home drunk and poorer, wasn't on. Neither was following that with a summer of cricket. The lingering death of the pub trade had already started but it was women putting their collective feet down about being deserted of an evening that accelerated things. By the same token, mine was the first generation of men really who insisted on being present at the birth and taking an equal part in things and, if the economics were right, being house-husbands too. That's what made us children of the Sixties really - the rest from *Love Me Do* through the *Summer of Love* to *Oh Calcutta!* was just frills.

The Sound Barrier is not a documentary, but the documentary feel gives it a significance and a reality of the time that many other films of the period simply don't have. But it also shows us the seeds of the destruction of the stiff upper lip, why one-man companies in technology were on their last legs, the end of one-man design teams and the dying years of the 'little woman' worrying about having the pie in the oven by one o'clock. It's the beginning of the end of Doing It For Britain.

Not its intention, I'm sure, but that's what it ends up being. Better still, it is a very good watch for anybody of a certain age who remembers anything from The Festival of Britain and ten years afterwards, when it still seemed possible that Britain would retain a prestigious position in the world and also remain something of the world's workshop, and all progress lay in the air, or indeed the void. It will, in other words, do for me!

(My copy came in a dual DVD with *Hobson's Choice* but the film is now available both to stream and on DVD as a singleton for those who would rather not see Brenda de Banzie actually pinching a film off Charles Laughton!). ✨

Dates for your diary

Wednesday 1 June 2022

The Corn is Green at the National Theatre - Emlyn Williams' semi-autobiographical drama has its first London revival for 35 years. Matinee performance at 2pm. Details for this have already been circulated to members.

Monday 6 June 2022

The Annual Birthday Dinner at the Hurlingham Club. Full details and booking form enclosed with this issue.

Saturday 16 July 2022

Folk by Nell Leyshon at Hampstead Theatre returns. Once again the details have already been circulated

The following two events may also be of interest to members. No group bookings are being made, but individual bookings can be made via the links below:

Tues 24—Sat 28 May 2022

Here At Last Is Love by David Charles Manners. The true story of Sodomy Johnson, who ruled The Pink Sink bar beneath the Ritz Hotel throughout the Blitz.

Stables Theatre, Hastings 7.30pm (mat 28 May at 2.30pm). £13.50

<http://stablestheatre.co.uk/here-at-last-is-love/>

Tuesday 28 June 2022

Eton/Harrow Cricket Match

This will be the last opportunity to experience the match in which Rattigan once played, representing Harrow.

Lord's Cricket Ground, Tues 28 June, 11am, £20

<https://tickets.lords.org/en-GB/shows/eton%20v%20harrow/events>

A Flare Path for our times?

Having been victim of unprofessional critics during my lifetime in the theatre, I tend to adopt two phrases when asked to review a production. They are either the famous W.S. Gilbert's "Words fail me" or if the evening is pleasant I simply say "What a lovely time".

I went to the delightfully operated Playhouse Theatre in Whitstable run by The Lindley Players to see their production of *Flare Path*. I have to say it was outstanding. I will not list all the names and titles but the team work was evident.

For me the heart-rending reading of the Polish Count's last letter to his wife was electric, as I felt the situation could mirror what has been going on in Ukraine, albeit the Russians are now playing the part of the 2nd World War Germans.

This production is being entered into the Kent Drama Association Festival and I would not be surprised if it sweeps the board. ✨

Michael Wheatley-Ward