

# May Fair Theatre

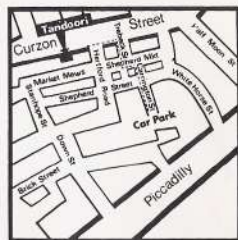


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## Intimations of Greatness

by Eric Shorter

Whatever it takes to make a great actress Edith Evans undoubtedly took it. But what does it take? What are the requisites? Fame? Many actresses are famous and far from great. Talent? Surely. But not all talented actresses are great even if greatly talented. Genius? That seems to me to get a bit nearer - the infinite capacity for taking pains.

But being famous and talented and willing to work harder than anyone else still leaves the field wide open to a host of second-rate plodders. What about taste? What about choosiness? Isn't that the thing that marks out the great actor? He steers his talent towards the heights of his art. He takes on big parts not solely because they are long but because they are a challenge which he feels he may match. He cannot be sure. No one can ever be sure.

The fame of great players springs from their greatness. It is therefore a chicken-and-egg question; and if it doesn't seem to lead anywhere at first for playgoers to whom a good actress is a good actress (and why not leave it at that?) it is important that we should know why a few - a very few - players in every generation reach the top as superb practitioners of their art.

What for example, about technique? Can you be a great player without technique? Surely not. Yet all the technique in the world is no guarantee of greatness. Then there is high intelligence. Is that not another vital attribute? And strength of character? And doggedness?

The tradition among players is that intelligence and character are unimportant and doggedness doesn't matter compared to that spark of genius which sets you above the rest without you ever knowing why - and without your admirers ever knowing why either.

Edith Evans did not know. She considered herself ordinary. At least she said she did to a good friend in her later years, Bryan Forbes, whose carefully considered biography of the actress has come out from Hamish Hamilton's for £5.95 under the title *Ned's Girl*, a phrase of her beloved father's. And it is one of the many qualities of Mr Forbes's study of a challengingly private life - challenging to the biographer, that is - that he has caught different aspects of his subject's character with such effective economy. Edith Evans seldom wasted words.

This sense of economy may be another clue to the mystery of what makes a great actor. Paring down effects to a minimum, like the best of line-drawings, Edith Evans could be economic not only with words but also with ideas. She could no more have defined what it was that made her great - and no other player of distinction could deny her greatness - than she could have accepted her biographer's assumption that "the critic is the natural enemy of the artist" since it was the critics of her day - James Agate, Sir John Ervine - whose writing sealed her qualities, and whose authority as connoisseurs of classical acting helped to create a public taste for it.

Which brings me back to taste: the artist's instinct for knowing what he can or cannot do best, and above all

*continued overleaf*

**INTIMATIONS OF GREATNESS** — *continued*

doing what he likes, not what merely makes him money. Doing work you despise is artistically ruinous. Edith Evans knew that.

This rigorous self-discipline made Edith Evans seem sterner to outsiders than was really the case. She had the most enormous respect for her art; and she was always dismayed by the tendency of even the better theatre managers to lower what she took to be their standards. Binkie Beaumont included.

What gives Mr Forbes's book its unusual value compared to so many of its kind is his ability to show us both the public and the private life of a character who - rather surprisingly perhaps for someone so much in the theatrical limelight - kept herself to herself as often as possible. Not many people even knew about her marriage. Still fewer knew of its romantic delicacy based inadvertently on absence which makes the heart grow fonder still. The husband's letters are those of a deeply sensitive, loyal loving and literate man who kept in touch, since his far from theatrical business took him often abroad, by correspondence and by reading theatre notices. Edith Evans seems never to have had a bad one.

The play that put her firmly on the theatrical map was Congreve's *The Way of the World* at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Her Mrs Millamant according to those who saw it has never been bettered. That was in 1924. And the other undisputed triumph which even today's playgoers never cease to marvel at was her Lady Bracknell in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Again, there has been nothing since to compare with it. The first great hit was in high comedy; the second in farce. And tragedy? Well, I remember her Cleopatra with Godfrey Tearle as Anthony. Some people could not take it seriously. The actress was 58 at the time. But to my mind age could not wither etc etc. Together they brought a degree of

grandeur to a tragedy often bedevilled by skimmed emotion and lightweight acting.

There was also the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and Lady Pitts in Bridie's *Daphne Laureola* and the Countess in Fry's *The Dark Is Light Enough* and the Countess in the film *The Queen of Spades*. All unforgettable. All stamped by greatness. By what? The definition is still elusive, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat.

When George Henry Lewes proclaimed that in the art of acting the greatest is he who is greatest in the highest reaches of his art - and he was thinking of Kean - we are bound to recall that Edith Evans did not do her finest work only in exalted regions. What she did was to raise the height of any role she played. She gave it new depths, a new richness, her own stamp; and by stamp I do not mean mannerisms. It was the stamp of authority: the stamp of a great artist.

She could transmute and make immortal in the mind's eye of the playgoer the art of playwrights from Shakespeare and Congreve to Wilde and Enid Bagnold. Get hold of Mr Forbes's book if you doubt me. He writes flabbily. He venerates his subject to be of much use as a critic. And the book is long. But it is stuffed with recent theatre history and with letters from Bernard Shaw, George Moore, Sybil Thorndike and William Poel. And more than a whiff of what it is that makes for greatness comes through the reticent nature and abiding professional integrity of the actress herself.

*The views contained in this four-page editorial section do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Theatre or the publishers. Any letters should be sent to the publishers, Silwell Darby & Co. Ltd., 8 Headfort Place, London, SW1X 7 DH. Tel. 01-235 3547. The editorial is the copyright of the publishers and nothing may be printed wholly or in part without permission.*



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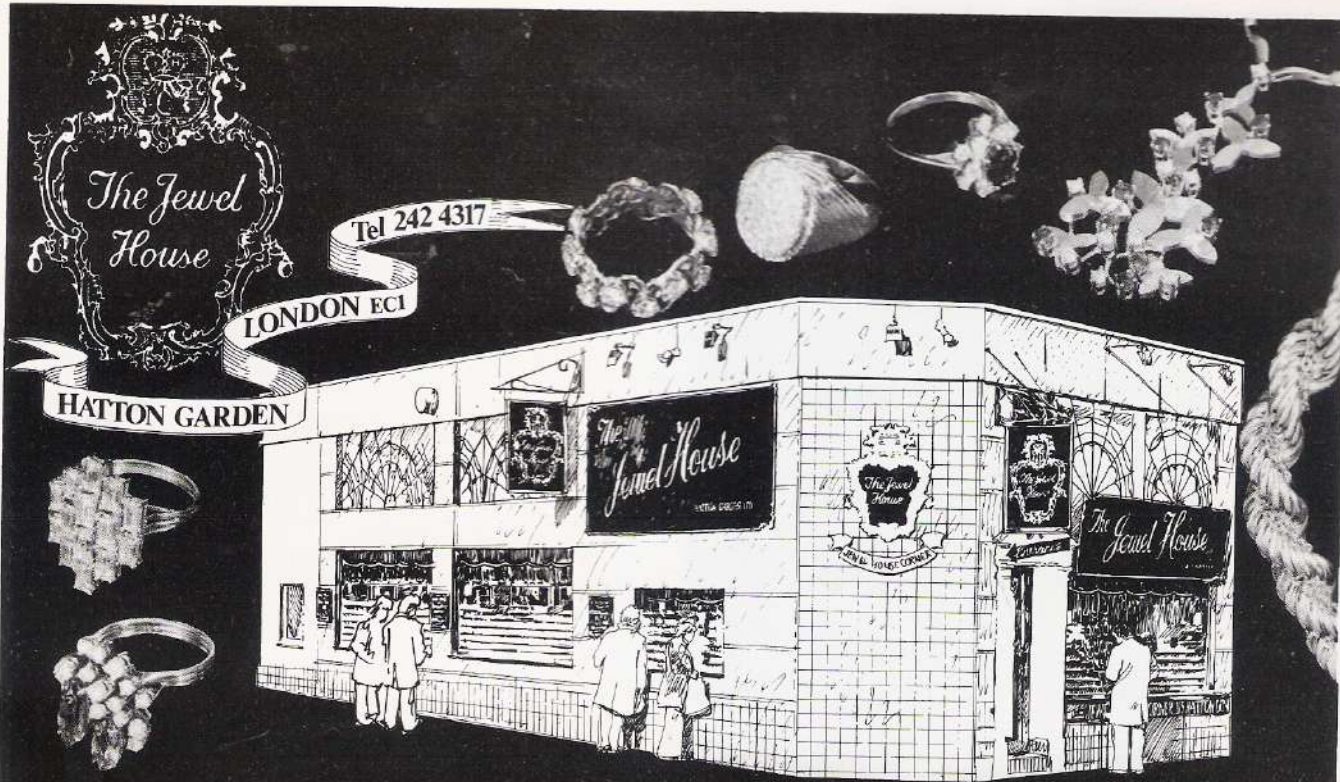
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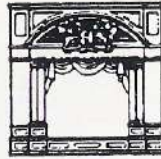
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*Vol. 2 No. 3*

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present  
The Nimrod Theatre of Australia  
Production of

**GORDON CHATER**

in

**THE ELOCUTION OF  
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

by

**STEVE J. SPEARS**

Directed by RICHARD WHERRETT

Designed by LARRY EASTWOOD

Lighting by JOE DAVIS

THE ELOCUTION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN was presented by  
the Nimrod Theatre, Sydney, Australia on Wednesday 25th August 1976.  
By arrangement with The Rock Theatre of Paris

*There will be one interval of 15 minutes*

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GORDON CHATER (*Robert O'Brien*)

Gordon Chater who was born in England is an eminent name in the entertainment world in the land of his adoption - Australia. Equally at home in farce, comedy, drama, musicals, intimate revue and vaudeville, he has received some of Australia's highest best actor awards for radio, television and the stage. For the role London is now seeing Chater play - Robert O'Brien - he gained the National Critics' Award for Best Performance in 1977. On the outbreak of World War II, Chater was studying medicine at Cambridge, but soon joined the Royal Navy. Despite family wishes he was determined to turn to acting upon demobilization. A four weeks leave in Sydney in 1946 led to his decision to make the harbour city his future home.

He was lucky to gain immediate employment and soon was touring New Zealand in *Dangerous Corner* and understudying in *Love In Idleness*, both plays reaching Melbourne's Princess Theatre in 1947. As with many other actors in Australia at that time, he earned his bread and butter with radio work. He cannot recall the name of the play which gained him the coveted Macquarie Radio Award in 1952, except "that it was the comedy award for doing a dramatic role in a funny voice". Radio work was not confined to plays. Chater acted as straight feed to legendary Australian comics such as Mo, George Wallace, Jack Davey, as well as Tommy Trinder and Arthur Askey. At the same time he was performing at Sydney's Minerva Theatre and even in night clubs.

From 1950-53 he toured for J. C. Williamson's - Australia's top commercial management - in *Worm's Eye View* and *Seagulls Over Sorrento*. Then in 1954 came his first intimate revue with the Phillip Street Theatre - *Top of the Bill*. In all he appeared in eleven shows for the Phillip management, including two musicals, *The Duenna* and *Mistress Money*, based on Molière and specially written with him in mind. The former had an unsuccessful Canadian try-out for New York. The Phillip revues did much to make Chater popular. He also appeared in a Vaudeville revue, *Laugh Around The Clock* for the Tivoli circuit, as well as playing Dame Sinbad in pantomime, with Jenny Howard and Billy Russell. In 1958 he enjoyed a personal success as Maitland in *The Chalk Garden*, with Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson. He was *Charley's Aunt* in 1961 and a few years later Cristoforo in Shaffer's *The Public Eye*. Later still he played the lead in *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running*.

1965 brought another highlight with the satirical television series *The Mavis Bramston Show* which affected the working and living habits of Australians who refused to work overtime or go out on nights it was screened. It made Chater a household name and gained him a Golden Logie. Miriam Karlin joined the cast for a period and Peter Myers was its producer for a time. *Bramston* was followed by an equally successful comedy series, *My Name's McGooley, What's Yours?* Over the years Chater has made occasional working visits back to England. In the late '50s he appeared in some television plays. In 1970 he appeared in the West End - at the Mayfair as it happened! - in the revue *10 Years Hard*, which starred the late Michael Flanders. Back in Australia in 1971 he portrayed the Duke of Windsor at the age of 79 in *King Edward*, a one-man play. Chater has also been seen in the classics. He was Epithodov in the Old Tote Theatre Company's first production, *The Cherry Orchard*, which had the late Sophie Stewart as Madame Ranevsky.

Mr Chater appeared in *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* in all the Australia capital cities except Brisbane - a total of 383 performances.





STEVE J. SPEARS (Author)

Steve J. Spears was born in Adelaide in 1951. His first major work - *Stud* - had its premiere in Adelaide in 1973. His next play - *Africa: A Savage Musical* - was premiered at the Pram Factory, Melbourne and was later toured through Australia under the banner of Steve's ad hoc theatre company, The Rock Theatre of Paris.

*The Resuscitation of the Little Prince Who Couldn't Laugh as Performed by Young Mo at the Height of the Great Depression of 1929* premiered at the Adelaide Festival Centre in 1976. The play was performed again at the Nimrod, directed by Richard Wherrett, in 1977.

*There Were Giants in Those Days* will be produced at the 1978 Adelaide Festival of Arts and Steve's mute musical *Mad Jean* is scheduled for the Sydney State Youth Theatre's inaugural production at the Theatre Royal (1978). *King Richard* is scheduled by Sydney's Old Tote Theatre Company for late '78.

*The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* has been awarded The Australian National Critics Award, National Professional Theatre Awards for Best New Play and Best New Talent, the Australia Writer's Guild Awgie Award for best Australian play and The Major Awgie "for works of particular merit".

Steve is now working on a play about the life and suicide of George (Superman) Reeves.



RICHARD WHERRETT (Director)

Richard Wherrett currently holds the 1977 Australian Critics' Award and the National Professional Theatre Award for the Best Director. He was born in Sydney in 1940, and graduated from Sydney University in 1961. His theatre career began in England in 1965 at the E15 Acting School, where he was a full-time acting tutor for four years. He then directed frequently at the Lincoln Theatre Royal, LAMDA and RADA, and various youth workshops including Manchester Library Theatre and London's Royal Court.

Back in Australia he was Associate Director with Sydney's Old Tote Theatre Company for two years, directing Ibsen's *The Man of Mode*, Brecht's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and toured the hit Australian play *Legend of King O'Malley* to the South Pacific Arts Festival.

In 1974 he became one of the three Resident Artistic Directors of Nimrod Theatre. Here he has premiered the works of Australian playwrights Alex Buzo, Alma de Groen, Steve J. Spears and Michael Cove, directed new productions of Shakespeare and Chekhov, and introduced Sydney to Peter Handke's *Kaspar*, *My Foot, My Tutor*, and *The Ride Across Lake Constance*. He directed Ron Blair's *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*, based on Byron's letters, for the 1976 Adelaide Festival, where he returns this year to premiere Tim Gooding's post-Hiroshima history of Rock-n-roll - *Rock-olal*. Most recently he has directed David Hare's *Fanshen* for Nimrod. Mr. Wherrett was Artistic Director for the 1977 Australian National Playwright's Conference and has written several scripts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

LARRY EASTWOOD (Designer)

Larry Eastwood is 28, an Englishman who trained at the E15 Acting School. He came to Australia in 1970 to take up the positions of Production Manager and Resident Designer for the Nimrod Theatre. He has designed more than fifty productions for Nimrod including *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, both of which toured Australia - whilst *Hamlet* was televised by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Mr Eastwood left Nimrod at the end of 1976 to free-lance full time. He has since designed *The Norman Conquests* for the Old Tote Theatre Company, *Constant Research* for the Dance Company of New South Wales and has worked on the feature films *The Long Weekend* as Production Designer and *Newsfront* as Art Director.

JOE DAVIS (Lighting Designer)

Joe Davis joined Strand Electric in 1926, leaving after a few years to become production electrician for Julian Wylie and C. B. Cochran. In 1953 he joined H. M. Tennent Ltd. and was their lighting designer for 27 years. He was the founder Chairman of the Society of British Theatre Lighting Designers, of which he was made life president after 10 years. For 22 years he was personal lighting designer to Marlene Dietrich. He is a Director of Theatre Sound and Lighting (Services) Ltd and has been responsible for the lighting of over 500 major productions and last year celebrated 50 years in the theatre. Amongst his London credits are: *The Lady's Not For Burning*, *Under Milk Wood*, *Irma La Douce*, *Oklahoma*, *The Sleeping Prince*, *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Banana Ridge*, *The Kingfisher*, *Cause Celebre*, *Breezeblock Park*, *Filumena*, *Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *Waters of the Moon*.

## NIMROD THEATRE

Sydney's Nimrod Theatre was founded in 1970, and like all good entrepreneurs, it's a little bit special. It's still doing what it set out to do - to recognise, encourage and use the best of Australian talent, to be at the hub of all that is lively, professional and exciting in theatre in Australia. Nimrod can probably claim to be in the forefront of the upsurge of the last ten years which has proved beyond all question that Australia is well and truly capable of producing plays of world class - which can find support from commercial impresarios from Sydney to London to New York.

Nimrod helped launch David Williamson on the world map - it shared with him the 1972 George Devine Award, and has premiered the plays of Ron Blaire (President Wilson in Paris, The Christian Brothers) since produced in London. Since 1970 Nimrod has mounted ninety productions, sixty-five being Australian plays and fifty of these first produced at Nimrod. (Most are obtainable in the Currency Press publications distributed by Cambridge Press in England, such as those by Alex Buzo, Peter Kenna and Jim McNeil.

Among the overseas writers presented have been Edward Albee (All Over), David Hare (Fanshen), David Rudkin (Ashes), Tom Stoppard (Travesties) and Heathcote Williams (The Speakers). An annual look at the so-called classics has included productions of *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Seagull* and a long-running Austral-Italian *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The Company began by converting a small triangular warehouse to a 140 seat auditorium around a diamond shaped stage. Then in 1974 it moved into a converted Cerebos Salt Factory which it transformed into a 300 seat thrust stage theatre. Two years ago a second, totally flexible 100 seat space was opened within the building - it was here that the *Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* before transferring to a larger venue and a tour of Canberra, Hobart, Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne over 383 performances.

Nimrod is unusual in Australia in having three resident artistic directors. The company is conspicuously successful, often in projects which others have thought too expensive. Last year Nimrod played to an average 80 per cent of capacity. It earns more than three quarters of its income from the box office and by exploiting successes on national tours, which augment the modest Federal and State subsidies.

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### Acknowledgements

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For immediate service in the interval, drinks may be ordered in advance at the bars.

The Management wish to emphasize that smoking is not permitted in the auditorium and that photographs may not be taken during a performance. It would be appreciated if patrons respect these rules, understanding that they are made for their own comfort.

The management reserve the right to refuse admission, also to make any change in the cast, without notice, which may be rendered necessary by illness or other unavoidable causes. In accordance with the requirements of the Greater London Council: (i) All exit doors shall be available for exit during the whole time that the Public are on the premises. Provided that any persons leaving during the performance or exhibition may be directed to certain exits at the discretion of the management. (ii) All gangways, corridors, staircases and external passageways shall be kept entirely free from obstruction. (iii) Persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating or in any of the other gangways.

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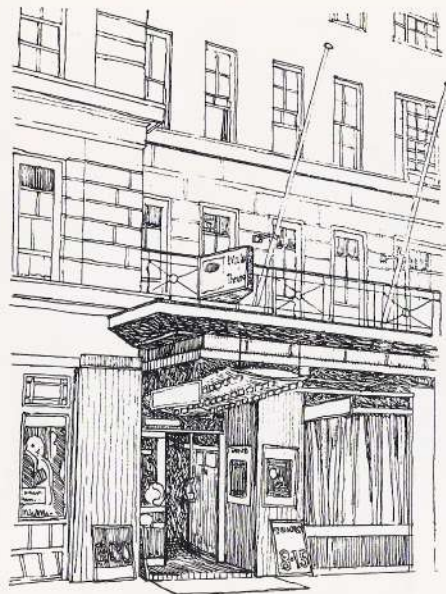
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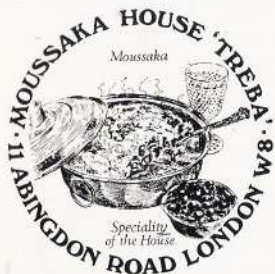


## MAY FAIR THEATRE

The May Fair is unique among London's West End theatres in that it is contained within the walls of an hotel. The May Fair Hotel has stood in Stratton and Berkeley Streets since 1927. One of the popular features of the Hotel during the 1930s and '40s was The Candlelight Room. Here both Harry Roy and Ambrose with their bands played for patrons.

During the latter part of 1962 work began to convert The Candlelight Room into the intimate Theatre that is now the May Fair. The 26-ft. wide stage and 310 seats were provided for, and above, parts of two floors of bedrooms were converted to allow for the flying and hanging of scenery plus, of course, the usual theatre backstage facilities and dressing rooms.

The Theatre was opened on 17th June 1963 by Sir Ralph Richardson who starred in the opening production of Pirandello's



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During the last ten years the Theatre has played host to commercial presentations for sales conferences and seminars with, of course, the full facilities of the Hotel being available to delegates. Many familiar faces have appeared in these shows, among them: Michael Aspel, Jimmy Edwards, Gerry Marsden, Lady Barnett, Georgie Fame and Bruce Forsyth.

Other daytime and Sunday activities have included a number of television 'chat shows' among them a series with Eamonn Andrews and several programmes with David Frost and Michael Parkinson.

Two even more usual shows staged here have been a bridge competition relayed to the audience on a scoreboard resembling a bingo card with commentary by Omar Sharif and a 15-minute show launching a new shoe fabric at a cost of £5,000!

Whilst these activities have been taking place the Theatre has firmly established itself in the West End with its stage attractions. Since "Six Characters in Search of an Author," two shows have had extremely long runs. "Beyond the Fringe" transferred from the Fortune Theatre to play for a further two and a half years and on 7th September 1970 Christopher Hampton's "The Philanthropist" starring Alec McCowen opened having had a season at the Royal Court Theatre. Alec McCowen was succeeded by George Cole and then Nigel Hawthorne and in all the play ran for over three years, closing finally on 27th October 1973. In between these two long runs a number of revues and seasons of plays have been staged together with an annual Christmas matinee presentation of "Sooty" which played to capacity audiences for 11 years running.

Since "The Philanthropist" productions have included seasons of "The Farm" from the Royal Court, "The Ride Across Lake Constance" from Hampstead Theatre Club and Roy Dotrice's remarkable solo tour de force as John Aubrey in "Brief Lives." More recent successes have included "Hinge and Bracket" and Michael Frayn's "Alphabetical Order" (again from Hampstead Theatre Club) and James Bolam, Jane Asher, Stephen Moore in Christopher Hampton's "Treats." In January 1977 Michael Codron presented yet another successful transfer from The Hampstead Theatre Club "Dusa, Fish, Stas & VI" which ran for 9 months, and earned Alison Fiske the award of Best Actress in a new play in The SWET Awards.

To sum up, the May Fair Theatre is a splendid example of a building used to its fullest advantage at the same time providing good entertainment whilst offering all the facilities of the Mayfair Hotel to further the enjoyment of patrons.

## Monological Monica

by Adam Benedick

BERYL REID has just been on the box. It wasn't one of those guest appearances. We can all forgive them. A minute or two is nothing. Well, almost nothing. It is certainly nothing to take seriously. But this wasn't a guest appearance. If anything she was the host. I am sorry. I would rather not talk about it.

Where I like Beryl Reid is on the stage. There can be no doubts then. She was trained for it. She liked it. And we all like her on it. As playgoers we trust that she will soon be back.

Meanwhile, where does her art stand? Highly with me, especially when it's allowed to stand alone. It thrives when most monological. Miss Reid has stood alone for much of her career. Not that she has lacked companions on stage. Far from it. Others have often butted in. She likes that. It brings out her monological side as a comedienne. Even an imaginary dog will do. It is the memory of an imaginary dog in a sketch at the St. Martin's Theatre a quarter of a century ago that starts in me a low glow of nostalgic admiration for her art.

Accents are her speciality. Goodness knows how wide the range is. It sounds comprehensive. Is it accurate? I dare not say. My spells in Lancashire and Yorkshire, Staffordshire and the east Midlands after a childhood in

north London with expeditions to Essex, Sussex, Kent and Hertfordshire instilled in later life Higginsian assumptions that I could spot a voice's origins at a murmur. But not any longer. Not since Miss Reid. Her ear sounds too exact. Or at any rate intimidatingly assured. Sometimes you feel she has invented a new region, always that she knows where she is, even if you do not.

Guess where she was born. You wouldn't without more hints than she lets out in her acting. It was in fact Hereford. But she was educated (and this sounds likelier) in south Manchester at Withington and Levenshulme high school. Before her sixteenth birthday she was on the stage in a concert party at the Floral Hall, Bridlington.

How long she was "on" we do not know or whether she was told to get off or whether there was even any question of either question arising in the presumably modest circumstances in which most girls of fifteen first find themselves on stage. But her admirers are bound to wish they could have seen her then. For Miss Reid has an endearing and distinctive personality. It looms out at the audience. It is sufficient unto itself. You have no need to look elsewhere to be amused.

This artistic independence can be fine. It can be awkward. When others are about the awkwardness sets in. They want attention too. They may not get it. Indeed it is unlikely they will get it - because of Miss Reid. And that can create confusion if we ought to be watching the others as well.

Mostly it doesn't matter. It used never to matter. In the radio series *Educating Archie* where she became so widely known as the galumphing schoolgirl Monica it was of no importance because radio is such a different medium from the theatre. The producer has greater power even than in the cinema or on television.

*continued overleaf*

## MONOLOGICAL MONICA — *continued*

But on the stage a personality like hers can be disruptive. It can turn things upside down. For fourteen years in revue, doing her own turn in assorted sketches at places like the St. Martin's the New Watergate and the Lyric, Hammersmith, Beryl Reid was an individual joy. She knew her audiences and they knew her. And it wasn't long before she became a minor cult with her saucy saucer eyes and mock-disdainful manner and old-girlish shots at seeming hoity-toity.

She made considerable contributions to the success of such revues as *One To Another* and *On The Avenue*; and a Midlands tour she once did with Jimmy Edwards revealed a new theatrical partnership. Then after *Dick Whittington* at Golders Green came that moment which rearranges many actors' careers. Miss Reid went suddenly legitimate. She was in her mid-forties with a vivid radio and revue reputation (though revue was losing its old appeal by then).

And unexpectedly she came loping across the stage of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, as the figure in a radio series whose lesbian domination of her household companion was giving the dramatic impulse to Frank Marcus's new play *The Killing of Sister George*.

There was something slightly shocking in the theme at the time (which the film of the play exploited more crudely); but Miss Reid took all the risk of serious shock out of it because she is shockingly unserious as an actress. Her voice has a way of swooping and hooting with such an affected dignity, as if she were laughing at the character too, that any hope of worrying about her feelings vanishes because she never really shows them.

As everybody knows *The Killing of Sister George* had an immense success,

both in London and New York where Miss Reid won what is known as a Tony Award for her acting (though myself I wouldn't have called it acting at all but skilled larking which was all the more effective for being out of her usual music hall context. If there was any serious acting in *The Killing of Sister George* it came from Eileen Atkins as the younger companion.

But Miss Reid's was surely an effective performance; and it led to other opportunities for "straight" acting - for example, as Madam Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* (Sister George used a bicycle too) and as the Nurse in a tour of *Romeo and Juliet* and later at the National in a dud revival of Goldoni's *Il Campiello*.

There has however been one unquestionably successful piece of would-be straight acting for the stage - as straight as Miss Reid knows how. This came in the revival of Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane*. Miss Reid played the sleazily solicitous landlady who makes ambiguous advances to her lodger. In the film of the play she was equally delightful.

Is it possible that in the cinema the tricky business of acting with others for a performer trained to perform solo can be disguised by the editing? With a player of such broadly emphatic humours brought up to create an immediate impact which has come to see you and you alone rather than a team or an author's play, it cannot be easy to slip sincerely into the background.

Such talent either flares or flickers out. Half measures are unthinkable. We may be sure Miss Reid will never settle for half, which is why it is hard to place her in a play unless it is a vehicle for her. Give her a front seat, though, and you can count on her riding to success.

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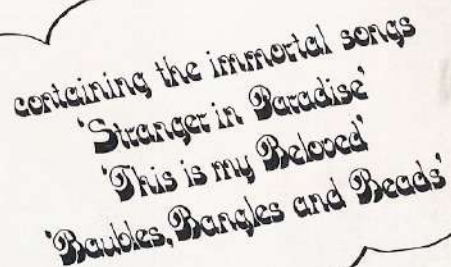
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