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www.networktheatre.org

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The cast of Fred & Madge take a bow

Dear Networkers,

Welcome to the March 2010 edition of our Networking Newsletter.

The BBC does Gavin and Stacey, ITV does Ant & Dec and Network Theatre does Fred & Madge. Big crowds came along to watch Michael, Christina and the gang in Jess Farley's production of Joe Orton's first play. Did you see it? Lady Penelope did. Her review is on page four.

And then along came A Long Night in London; an absolute awe-inspiring feat on the back of only two rehearsals! The Q&A session following the performance added a massive dose of reality to the piece as the audience had a chance to talk to relatives of survivors of the Bethnal Tube disaster. Sandra Scotting of the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust has kindly provided us with the report overleaf.

Then next up we have Rosie de Vekey's Time for Love. Rosie gives us a glimpse at how things are progressing with her interview on page three.

Right, must put the kettle on.

Toodle pip,

Kirsty, the Editor

All submissions are welcome.

Please send to the editor at newsletter@networktheatre.org.

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A LONG NIGHT IN LONDON



A BIG THANK YOU FROM THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN MEMORIAL TRUST TO EVERYONE THAT PARTICIPATED IN AND CAME TO SEE THIS SHOW

Report by Sandra Scotting, Secretary of The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust

The play "A Long Night in London" by Bernie C. Byrne was performed at the Network Theatre, Waterloo over a long weekend in March in aid of the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust. The charity is raising money for a fitting memorial to the worst civilian disaster of the 2nd World War – the Bethnal Green tube shelter disaster. The play was written about this event in which 173 people died (mostly women and children) and over 90 were injured, with verbatim words from survivors. It was a cleverly crafted play and those who saw it and were connected with the tragedy found it so moving, so well acted and so powerful.

The whole evening came alive and brought home to all of us the enormity of what had happened in the disaster better than any text they might have read. The stage looked just like an underground shelter, the cast were in 1940's costume and you would not have known it was a rehearsed reading apart from the fact that the actors had a script sticking out of their pockets!! It was acted so well. The cast were brilliant and they had excellent singing voices too, encouraging the audience to join in with their wartime songs.

At the end of each performance there was a Q & A session and the audience were asked to talk about the disaster to their friends and family to find out if they knew anybody involved in the event. The horror of that night, which had to be hushed up at the time to prevent the enemy gaining propaganda from it and to keep up morale in London, had remained buried deep in most people which meant they could not talk about it, even today. So, many people will not even know that their relatives had been involved. There are still a number of survivors and families of those who died that have not yet come forward. One of the cast did just this and discovered that her 92 year old uncle was a survivor so this will be another good lead for the charity once he has been persuaded to talk about his experiences.

The cast, crew and playwright have all been very supportive to those involved with the charity and the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust committee want to thank the Network Theatre, Bernie Byrnes and the cast and crew for all their help, hard work and support in this venture. There was a collection undertaken each evening around the audience and this totaled £105.54, which was an extra boost too. The charity also sold copies of their book about the disaster by American historian, Sean Dettman, which has raised further funds for the charity. So it has been a success in so many ways.

It would be wonderful if the play could be performed again in the not too distant future so that more people could go to see it. It certainly deserves a much wider audience and recognition.

Do you like a drink?

Do you like Networking?

If the answer is yes, then getting involved with the NTC bar could offer you the opportunity for both these pursuits! As well as help with NTC shows, we are also looking for people who would like to help work the bar for our many External Companies who use the theatre. Demand for this is increasing with high profile companies approaching us for use of our theatre. Contact Hannah if this sounds appealing.

Time for Love:

An Interview with Rosie de Vekey, Writer/ Director

1. Come on then... give us a snippet on what the play is about...

Dull but brilliant Bernard almost accidentally invents a time machine and embarks on a dangerous and thrilling jaunt through history. However, he had not banked on opening up a whole new world to girlfriend Alison: will she now be lured away by the athletic attractions of a Viking, the all round charms of Henry VIII, or the well-crafted lines of Confucius?

Loveable cockney Mary and dashing Doctor Andrews join the adventure; and as they lurch from Saxon England to Renaissance Italy and discover if Mr Kipling did really start the French Revolution!

2. How are rehearsals going so far? Any funny anecdotes?

Is now the moment to admit to an incident involving an angry Viking, an axe and a small portion of the Long Night in London set?... Otherwise, it's been really fun so far and the cast have had me laughing every night.

3. How does your time travel compare to that of The Time Traveller's Wife?

The time travel element is definitely something that the characters do deliberately, choosing where and when they go. Although they may get into some trouble when they get to various places, it is overall a pleasurable adventure. In terms of the journey, rather than the fade-out/fade-in motion of the Time Traveler's wife, we will be embracing time-travel in full-on 70s style psychedelia.

4. We're looking forward to seeing the Time Machine. You mentioned it being car like with wing mirrors. Who is designing it and how is it shaping up?

When I wrote the piece, I imagined that the time machine would be quite like a car and have an unimpressive look to it, so it seemed completely incapable of time travel, thus the feat would be even more unlikely. The super-talented Gary has had his arm twisted yet again, so I am excited to see the result.

5. You have a huge cast. What are your major challenges in staging the show?

Working with a big cast is a logistical challenge to start with. The costumes in the show is a huge deal, as we have to move through a lot of historical periods, so I am eternally grateful to Lizzie Ayers who is spending all her time sewing at the moment. We also have a small space to work in, and yet have to convey moving around in each place, so we are using all of the Auditorium, and sometimes even venturing into the audience. Also – hiding a great big time machine in the middle of the set is a bit of an issue, so the machine will form part of the set, and will be lit up when it is in motion.

6. Did you find a doctor (for the play I mean!)?

We did indeed. The lovely Robert McCann, a Network newbie, joins us as the dreamy Doctor.

7. How do you find directing your own work?

It's certainly a labour of love! It turns out I am slightly more precious than I thought, but I have really enjoyed seeing the play come to life. The process of directing is quite a lot to take on, especially as last time I only had to direct one person, but the cast and crew have been hugely supportive which has made life much easier. The challenge is getting what I imagined in my head, onto the stage, but I am working on it and hope the audience enjoy the result.

8. Are you finding time for love amongst a hectic rehearsal schedule? ;-)

My fiancé is still prepared to go through with the wedding at this point!

A Review of Joe Orton's *Fred & Madge* by Lady Penelope

"BECOME AN INSULTRIX TODAY!"

It was a brave, some might say foolhardy, decision by director Jessica Farley and Network Theatre Company to stage Orton's *Fred & Madge*; given that the play was never performed in Orton's lifetime and has rarely been staged since¹. A more cautious company might take this as a warning; however the decision paid off; the combination of a strong cast, inventive staging and focused direction resulted in an accomplished production despite a somewhat erratic script.

At face value Orton's first play is purely an escapist jaunt into surreal absurdity. The cast and artistic team clearly revelled in this; but the performance gained a deeper vitality from the equal attention paid to the darker themes of despair, pain and hopelessness that Orton was at pains to depict as part of his social commentary on 1950's working class Britain. Interestingly, for a Network audience of 2010, these themes presented some unintentional parallels to the mood of credit - crunch London and recession -hit Britain. Throughout the play references are made by the central characters; Fred (Michael Mayne) and Madge (Christina Houghton) to the place of the working classes; their belief that 'money doesn't bring happiness'; and the perils of social climbing and 'getting above yourself'. This is a society where the populace lack ambition and are expected to feel gratitude for one's lot in life.

The performance opened to a simple black and white set and to Fred and Madge seated in their living room; staring out to the audience. The set was made immediately absurd by the presence of an iconic London street lamp; which became a repeated feature and served to remind us of the period and location of the action. In actual fact, the play opened with Fred setting the stage furniture and so establishing the central conceit of the 'play within the play'. Michael executed this set -shifting in such a deliberately low -key manner that I suspect a number of the audience were unaware that the play had actually started! The conceit was repeated to great effect throughout the play, notably by Webber (Barry Clarke), the 'director,' who gave an impressive performance true to the period and by Sykes (Alastair Callcutt), as the 'late' audience member'-cum -stage hand. Alastair's was an entertaining and slightly gauche performance in this his debut with Network.

Nostalgia for worlds lost and fondly remembered is a constant theme of *Fred & Madge*; not unsurprisingly, given it was written in 1959. The hardships of rationing and the second world war would presumably still be familiar memories to Fred and Madge. Madge reminds us that 'the coal is not what it was' and reminisces over nuts roasting on the fire. For a modern audience it can be hard to imagine just how poignant this image would be at the time; but Christina and Michael made us in no doubt through their focused heart -felt reflections. As the fly on the wall party to their confessions of 'No whoopee', we truly sensed the mundane routine of this middle -aged couple's life.

The audience had to hang onto its coat tails as Orton swept us along an exotic and surreal journey. Where else, one wonders, would one encounter 'locusts, hats and bats' in the same breath, or water sieved in a bath as everyday occurrences? Yet amidst this chaos, the concerns and despair of a normal middle - aged, working class couple; their fears of growing old or being pensioned off emerge. Michael and Christina portrayed Fred and Madge's relationship with apparent ease and clarity; although even Michael couldn't resist a slight smile at the reference to Fred's imminent old age and baldness! The couple's reflections on their daughter's attainments in 'sweeping' added a sad and poignant touch reinforcing Orton's depiction of the limited aspirations available to ordinary people.

We were reminded of the nation's love affair with the royal family and the advent of commercial television in the amusing cameo scene between Madge and her sister Queenie (Jennie Rich), as they gave convincing portraits of two archetypal housewives standing on the doorstep putting the world to rights. By rights they should have been sharing a packet of Strand cigarettes between them!

As *Small Part Player*, Lesley Winterflood brought a breath of fresh air and energy whenever she entered the proceedings. As Fred's supervisor, she made me giggle when in a fit of whimsy she took her tape measure to Fred's outside leg measurement and I am sure will long be remembered by certain members of the audience as the tiptoeing sexy blonde - haired nurse.

¹ The New Wimbledon Studio Theatre performed *Fred & Madge* in 2007.

The sieving water scene with its wonderful imagery, choreography and musical accompaniment reminiscent of 'Worker's Playtime' was a joy to behold. Congratulations to all 3 women for their facial dexterity; but especially to Gladys (Moira Cane) for her Network debut and brilliant comic timing.

And so we reached the interval; announced most fittingly and in character by Webber as a return to the 'play within a play' conceit. Congratulations to Barry Clarke for his research on Orton and his social, cultural and political highlights, which contributed to an impressive display in the Green Room. This was much appreciated by audience members relaxing over a pre, mid or post-show drink.

Act 2 opened with characters appearing unannounced in the role of stage hands and the eccentric capers and contortions continuing. As Fred & Madge enrol themselves on their journey to attain social standing, the audience are introduced to Old Man, Fred's doddering father, (Paul D'Orley), who bizarrely takes on the role of butler in their household. Paul was perfectly cast and in his own inimitable style managed to steal the show on several occasions.

The highlight of the act was surely the arrival of Dr. Petrie (Nigel Williams) and Miss Oldbourne (Sharan Hunjan) as hired entertainers of wedding guests. This storyline permitted Orton to introduce yet another absurd conceit; the 'insulters' who literally 'brought the house down' with their rant at London architecture and instruction of the company in the art of wild insults and display of invective. The audience deservedly applauded Nigel's amazingly paced and punctuated tirade against the BBC, which was a perfect device to express Orton's personal despair and angst against the movers and shakers of the time. Sharan's interpretation of Miss Oldbourne was both spirited and sexy, contained and powerful; and in sharp contrast to the other main female roles.

On their rollercoaster ride through the play, the audience were exposed in equal measure. to the dark mood of despair and desolation and the light relief of farce and comedic laughter The execution of the cameo 'feelings sweets' scene by Paul and Michael was a wonderful example of this; both brilliantly interchanged swift and convincing portrayals of the flavours of hope, sorrow, anger and rage. Another example was the (brief) passionate (and somewhat orgasmic) interlude between Fred and Madge as they remembered happier matrimonial times. Sadly, just when we believed that these central characters have the chance to overcome life's trials; the realities of life (or the constraints of 'the play') intervene; politics gets in the way, or rather the dictates of Webber the director, spoil the moment.

As the play draws to a close the wedding party fantasises about journeying to India and in the final bizarre scene, India arrives to meet them (complete with trumpeting of elephants and the shriek of ship's klaxons!) This finale typified everything about the play – mad, exotic, spectacular and unexplained. In some strange way this scene provided a cyclical ending; by contrasting in every aspect of colour, movement and sound with the opening scene of act 1.

Network should be proud of the execution of this performance; it was a well conceived interpretation, delivered by a strong cast, of a work that had inherent challenges but remained true to Orton's themes and preoccupations. My only criticism is that the script was over long; some judicious cutting, particularly of act 2 would have aided the audience enjoyment. Orton's script may have been a *work in progress*, but this performance was not. In their delivery of a complex, taxing and demanding work, the artistic team deserve great applause and definitely achieved Orton's finale wish "to a better life!"

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Weds 21st – Sat 24th April, 7.30pm

TIME FOR LOVE performances

22nd June, 7pm

OUTWARD BOUND reading

6th July & 8th July, 6.30pm

OUTWARD BOUND auditions

22nd – 25th September, 7.30pm

OUTWARD BOUND performances
