



PETER RANKIN

Joan Littlewood:  
**Dreams and Realities**

*The Official Biography*

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**STRATFORD  
EAST** THEATRE COMPANY  
...a people's theatre

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*To bossy women without whom I would have done even less*

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## PROLOGUE



In 1963, aged sixteen, I was taken by my father to see *Oh What a Lovely War*, Theatre Workshop's musical entertainment about the First World War. Even by that early age, the magnetism of the company's name and its director, Joan Littlewood, had been drawing me towards it. Aged eleven and stuck at boarding school, I had read a review of *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* and, among the stuffy pages of *The Illustrated London News*, the company still looked a jolly lot. Two and a half years later, in 1961, a news item on the TV announced Joan Littlewood's departure from Theatre Workshop and you didn't normally see stories about theatre directors on the TV news.

When, in the spring of 1963, she returned, there she was on TV again. Huw Wheldon was interviewing her for the BBC arts programme, *Monitor*. Her laughing eyes and warm voice, mocking the formality of a television interview, held me. How would this warmth and mockery translate into a show? That night at the theatre, I was to begin finding out.

On came a jaunty pierrot dressed in black and white, the actor Victor Spinetti. He was the master of ceremonies and he talked to us, really talked to us, so it wasn't embarrassing. When the right moment came, he summoned the company to start the show.

To set the scene, it sang a cheerful song of the period and then, in little scenes interspersed with more songs, explained how the war started. All this happened in a quick, tumbling way that left you almost breathless. It was, at one and the same time, childishly simple, easy to understand and funny. When the band vamped away in preparation for the song 'I'll Make a Man of You' and the actress Avis Bunnage, walked on in a glittering black gown to eye the audience evilly, it turned daring.

As the pierrots continued to sing and dance, the number of deaths at the various battles began to run across an electronic newspanel at the back of the stage. The audience gasped but, despite things getting worse, it did not sink into depression. It was angry, perhaps; glad to be informed, that's for sure.

Some weeks later, Theatre Workshop announced *The Merry Roosters' Panto*. It was to be performed at matinees during *Oh What a Lovely War*'s run at the Wyndham's Theatre. I rushed to it and there they were again: Victor Spinetti, Avis Bunnage and the actor who had been Field Marshal Haig, George Sewell. This time, Victor Spinetti was Eartha, a bossy Ugly Sister. Avis Bunnage was the Fairy Godmother, and George Sewell was Baron Hardup. Dumpy, the downtrodden Ugly Sister who was forever having her ears boxed by Eartha, was played by the actor who had been Sir John French, Brian Murphy.

Those Merry Roosters had a job to do the show, though, because the manager of the theatre, Mr Redsocks, would have none of it. He wanted an uplifting afternoon of Welsh recorder music, so the audience had to shout: 'Redsocks!' whenever he appeared in order to warn the pierrots. Big Gerry Raffles, in a top hat, frock coat and, of course, red socks, played him. By then, I already knew that Mr Redsocks really was the manager of Theatre Workshop. It was the jolliest show I had ever seen.

Although I was watching as a naïve and protected teenager, I had already been to see lots of theatre. Among other things, I had seen John Gielgud in Peter Brook's production of *The Tempest* at Drury Lane; John Osborne's *Luther* at the Royal Court; Shakespeare's York and Lancaster plays turned into

~~The Wars of the Roses, at Stratford-upon-Avon; Noël Coward's *Hay Fever* at the National Theatre, and, at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art's new theatre in Logan Place, Peter Brook's *Theatre of Cruelty*.~~ *Oh What a Lovely War* was different. Despite the horror of what we were told, warmth I had never felt before spread out into the auditorium. How this was achieved, what Theatre Workshop was, who Joan Littlewood and Gerry Raffles were, I didn't know, but those two performances were the trigger to finding out and it happened sooner rather than later; in fact only a few months later.

In the spring of 1964, Joan Littlewood, wanting money for her latest project, The Fun Palace, was set to direct a series of commercials for eggs. When my father, who was the agency producer but no longer in the family home, told me, I didn't hang about. On a dull Sunday afternoon, never having been to the East End before, I set off for a two-up, two-down in Plaistow where rehearsals were taking place before the shoot.

Because they had breaks, the actors were easy to talk to – that's Avis Bunnage and George Sewe again, and their stories were smashing – but I could not talk to Joan Littlewood. In that two-up, two-down, she was up and I was down, so I merely watched her appear each morning in her black-and-white-checked raincoat and was thrilled by that alone. When at last I had the opportunity to speak up, I told her I was theatre mad. 'Don't get stage-struck,' she said, the eyes still laughing, the voice still warm, 'Get science-struck.'

Fortunately my experience of science at school was enough for me to state with conviction that there was no good at it. Right then and there, and why, I still don't know, Joan gave me the date and place of the first day's rehearsal for *Henry IV*, her adaptation of Shakespeare's two Henrys, which she was taking to the Edinburgh Festival. I ran up the street, my feet not touching the ground. As starry eyed as that sounds, I am still grateful for that sensation because it doesn't happen again, whatever exciting things come in later life.

I went to the *Henry IV* rehearsals. I went to Edinburgh and the next year, while still at school, I watched Joan rehearsing the most notorious flop of the twentieth century, Lionel Bart's Robin Hood musical, *Twang*.

When I left school, with only a note from Joan saying I could come if I was invisible, I went to the Theatre Royal Stratford East, the home of Theatre Workshop. There, having not been all that invisible as Joan put me on the stage, I got my first job. In this way, my growing up was combined with learning about Joan and Gerry and their theatre. First Joan, and later Gerry – I didn't like him much to start with – became my theatre parents. With Joan, I watched her disciplined imagination at work and thus was inoculated against what went on in other theatres, where actors learned lines, directors gave moves and that was it. With Gerry, I listened. He had a handful of principles about writing and theatre. They weren't complicated but he was strict about them and that could be painful. Yet, even with that knowledge, and despite having my own play directed by Joan in 1973, I was still only at the beginning because, for those ten years, I thought that she, with her overwhelming personality and phenomenal gift for theatre, was Theatre Workshop all by herself. I was wrong.

In 1975, Gerry Raffles, who was not only the manager of Theatre Workshop but Joan's old man – he had the disobedient hair and deep, merry laugh, eight years her junior – died. He was 51. Immediately after his death, I pulled away from Joan because she was behaving oddly, not like herself at all, or so I thought. This was because I had only known her as a unit with Gerry, so much so that, despite the constant arguing, I hadn't noticed there was a unit in the first place. Joan alone was different. That was something else I had to learn. Some months later, I came together with her again and, ten years later, she set to work on her autobiography. By then she was living in my flat and so was able to draw me in.

At the other side of London, where, in a house all by herself, lived her half-sister Betty, was a small room filled with rows of box files. Joan had put them there but she needed to refresh her memory

perhaps find out what she herself had not known. They contained the daily dealings of Theatre Workshop, the important and the unimportant, that Gerry had carefully saved from just before the Second World War until his death. It was the kind of stuff Joan had not really been involved with because she had been busy with her actors, exactly as Gerry had intended.

Day after day, I went to 29 Stockwell Green where, as I put each letter into chronological order, I could feel the power of a gradually building narrative. Gerry had left a message in a bottle. In it were the knockings on doors, the bills that could not be paid, the arguments with both Arts Council and commercial managements that had been part of the fabric of Theatre Workshop. They gave a context to the hits. Among them were letters from the young Gerry written to Joan in the late Forties and early Fifties when they were apart. They contained clues which I didn't pick up on at once but that, later, would reinforce my understanding of what Gerry wanted for Theatre Workshop. As most of this had happened during my lifetime, I felt as if I had stepped back into a parallel life, one that was all the more fascinating because it was so different from my own.

After I'd summarised the letters and given the result to Joan, she finished the first draft which ended in 1955, before the time of the plays that had made Theatre Workshop world famous. Puzzling over this, I posted it to an expectant publisher. A few days later he rang.

'But there's no *Taste of Honey*, no *Hostage*. I mean, come on, where's *Oh What a Lovely War*? Joan mad?'

The conversation ended pretty quickly after that. I put the receiver down and relayed the publisher's question to Joan. Her answer was equally impatient.

'Theatre Workshop was not just about doing plays. It was a design for living.'

Impatience always seized her when someone asked questions about Theatre Workshop. Explanations bored her. At rehearsals, she conveyed ideas through excitement. A to B to C? Forget it. She didn't stop there.

'Harry Corbett and George Cooper leaving the company was the end of Theatre Workshop.'

'So Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney and –'

'Writing jobs. I was working night and day to make a script. There was no time for anything else.'

Evidently 'anything else' contained the design for living. What was it, I wondered. However, Joan hadn't finished.

'Tyrone Guthrie was good but he didn't try to change the world. We did.'

Oh, Joan was referring to another director, something she rarely did, at least not politely. When she was young, Tyrone Guthrie was the best director in the UK and, if Gerry was right, the *only* one because he had told me Guthrie and Joan were the only directors this country had produced. So, good as he was, Guthrie hadn't changed the world. That, at least, provided a clue.

A few days later, Howard Goorney, a founder member of Theatre Workshop, rang from Bath to ask if he could drop round for tea after an Equity meeting in London. I repeated Joan's remarks about Harry Corbett and George Cooper, her two leading actors.

'Did she really say that?' asked Howard.

'Yes.'

'I'm glad. That's what I think.'

'Oh,' was all I could think.

My problem was Gerry Raffles. Where did that leave him? Gerry was proud of those shows. Had they not made Theatre Workshop world famous and, from his teens, had that not been his ambition? He especially loved *Oh What a Lovely War*. Almost hugging himself, he used to say: 'It's a little classic and it's going to go on and on.' Joan dismissing that and the other shows was breathtaking. I only I could have heard Gerry's reaction; but he'd been dead seventeen years.

What about this design for living then? It sounded rather grand, and grand can be irritating. It was

better not to ask Joan more questions, though. An argument would have followed and, as usual, would have come off worst. It was not only Muhammad Ali who could float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Still, I remembered that, if you took the trouble, you could look beyond Joan's grand words and find something practical.

Certainly, if I wanted to understand Joan and Gerry, using what I had learned from them, to find out about the sinews, the stresses and strains, the who-did-what that made Theatre Workshop into the company that broke more ground than any other in Britain during the twentieth century but left Joan wanting more, it looked as if I would have to follow the two aims: Joan's design for living and Gerry's Theatre Workshop.

Joan's odd behaviour following Gerry's death in 1975 meant, to be more precise, that she behaved uncharacteristically. Since that time, I had got to know her alone. I had also got to know her family. I hadn't known them before. So, taking what I learned from watching them and what I had learned from being with Joan and Gerry over the course of ten years and being with Joan for another 23, I could add as I went along, everything I had found out for myself.

As Joan started out alone, that's where I'll begin.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A SPARK



Joan was conceived in the spring of 1914. It was a one-night stand and, from that moment on, the father would have no more to do with the flirtatious, dark-haired seventeen-year-old, Kate Littlewood. Fortunately Kate lived at home and had a job as a showroom assistant for a brush manufacturer in south London. The mysterious father had a job in the City and was thought to be rather posh. Apart from that, nobody knew much about him.

When Kate told her father, Robert Francis Littlewood, of the unwanted arrival, he did not climb on to a moral high horse. After all, his daughter brought home her wage each week. He simply went out, found the man in the City, took him through the courts and got him to guarantee six shillings a week towards the child's upkeep. After that, the father was rarely mentioned.

On 6 October 1914, during one of the early blackouts of the First World War, Joan was born through no fault of her own, as she put it, in Stockwell, at the Clapham Maternity Hospital.

In later years, Joan said that as a small child she was nearly autistic, but then autistic was a word she liked the sound of, with its aura of mystery and isolation. If she had been faced with genuine autism in another person, distress would have sent her off, leaving someone else to cope.

Rather, Joan was a child with imagination but nobody much to talk to, except some chickens in the back yard, because until the age of six she was an only child. When one of the chickens had its neck wrung to provide a meal, it was the loss of a friend. Along with mutton stew, the greasy surface of which turned her stomach, chicken was a dish she refused to eat for a long time.

At Number Eight Stockwell Road, where the family lived, washdays depressed her and, outside, her spirits were not lifted. All she saw were identical streets, dusty privet hedges, lace curtains and geraniums in window boxes. At the top of the road, she was to look up at the long list of recently killed young men on the new cenotaph as it was unveiled by a reverend in a dingy surplice, the crowd moaning their responses.

Kennington Park, to the east, was no better. Joan knew that Bonnie Prince Charlie's men had been brought there for execution in 1746 and had not been executed, but massacred. To the west was the fever hospital, beyond that the road to Clapham, and beyond that the cemetery. For Joan, SW9 was no-place.

She was aware that there had been talk of sending her to an orphanage. On the one hand this would have made her feel wobbly, uncertain whether she should exist at all, but on the other hand, looking around at what she'd been lumbered with, a rundown neighbourhood and an uneducated family, she could have been inclined to bolshiness. Perhaps her unknown father was handsome, clever, and witty with a house in a smart neighbourhood. Stuff Kate and stuff Stockwell.

Kate had a temper on her, and with Joan around lacked no opportunity to use it. Once, she chased her daughter around the house with a carving knife because the little girl had tossed her head at her.

Kate called Joan heartless. Joan, when talking of Kate, called her a slut. When writing about her, she avoided the word. However, by portraying her as a flirt and a gambler – even if it was only betting on

horses – she implied it.

Still, for all the greyness and bad temper, there were moments of delight in Joan's childhood and she described them with affectionate detail: the receiving, every birthday, of a box filled with beautiful wrapped William pears from her father, winter evenings with Robert Francis and her grandmother Caroline Em, and above all, reading.

Caroline Em had worked in a pub that served food, the Fox and Goose in Threadneedle Street. There, just by watching, she learned how to cook. Joan loved what she served, except for the mutton stew and the chicken, that is, and, from then on, preferred robust English dishes like steak and kidney pudding and bangers and mash. For the rest of her life, whenever she was unsure of what she was eating, she would arrange it on the plate and then arrange it again, a childhood habit that made any cook's heart sink.

In the evening, after the meal at Number Eight, Caroline would sit in the kitchen and take up her sewing. With her tiny nose and her silvery topknot bun, the picture she made was already pretty but then, as she stitched, she gave a little performance. Dishes at the Fox and Goose were conjured up in words, tales of the royal family's private life were recounted, and ditties were sung. Joan loved it. What she did not love were bank holidays when plans to go to exotic Golders Green foundered as Kate lingered in the pub, leaving her daughter outside with a dry biscuit.

Fascinated by Caroline's sewing as Joan was, it was never to become one of her own accomplishments. Darning, she insisted, did. It would be a brave person, though, who would have put her to the test. A demon of destruction lurked inside her ready to jump out when it came to activities and objects that held no interest. Baths overflowed and saucepan bottoms burned. It was the same with gadgets: she admired them but couldn't work them. Merely at the approach of her questing fingers they would fall apart or explode.

It was different if Joan loved something. Flowers, she adored. She arranged them not only well but originally. The same went for laying the table when guests were coming. That could be left to her and the result would be enchanting. The mysterious wooden box and the tissue paper that the William pears came in probably attracted her more than the actual fruit.

Reading was different. It was not only a love, it was the beginning of escape. Her first school was one of the British and Foreign Society's Practising Schools, this particular one at 21 Stockwell Road. There, she struck lucky. Yes, she was bright and came top in everything but also the teaching was surprisingly good. The schoolmistresses were women who had lost their husbands-to-be in the First World War. They had a vocation which led them out into the world, right across it sometimes, in order to teach. First they had to practise, though, and that's where Joan benefited.

Many children don't like school. For Joan, it was liberation. As soon as she could read, she was lost in books, her first supply arriving by chance. It happened in 1920, when her mother, Kate, married James Morrill, an asphalter. Joan, aged six, was the reluctant bridesmaid. The newly married couple moved to two rented rooms at 33 Stockwell Road, leaving Joan behind with her grandparents. To fill the empty rooms at Number Eight, they took in lodgers and, as these lodgers moved on, so they left books. *The Sorrows of Satan* by Marie Corelli, Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, *She* by Rider Haggard, *Opium Dens of the East End*, and *Under Two Flags* by Ouida: Joan devoured them in no time. Having done that, and having decided what was suitable – blooming for her was a swear word – she read a chapter a night to her grandparents, who themselves couldn't read.

A year later, in 1921, Joan's half-sister Betty Morrill was born and, in 1923, along came plump smiling Mildred who was always known as Millie. Joan was not best pleased. For a start, they were too young to be company and, worse, she had to make herself useful. It was off to Clapham Common for her, pushing them and her aunt Carrie's baby in a pram. She hated it. She hated making herself useful in principle. One can add brain fever to autism on Joan's list of attractive disorders. She



dreamed of having it when asked to fill the coal bucket. 'No, I can't. I've got brain fever,' is what she longed to say. The idea came from an episode she had read in *True Stories* in which the heroine was struck down with it.

When it came to Clapham Common, the best Joan could do was tuck a book in the pram, settle under a tree, leave the babies to their own devices and read the next thrilling chapter. The inevitable happened. When it was time to go home, Millie, a toddler by then, had toddled off. She was nowhere to be seen. After searching the Common, Joan had to go to the police station. There she found Millie gurgling and smiling on a policeman's knee. All Joan could think was: 'He seems to be doing a better job of it than me.'

Kate gave birth to two more Morrith children, Jim, and Jeremy who was known as Jerry. In conversation Joan was always careful to speak of all four – Betty, Millie, Jim and Jerry – as half sisters and half-brothers. Jim, in contrast, said they always referred to Joan as their sister, not half that or half that, and, what's more, his opinion of Kate was quite different. He thought she was a decent mother and defended her angrily when there was any accusation of slut.

By the age of twelve, Joan had tried to leave home three times. She was edging away, not only from Stockwell but her family too. She recalled Kate at that time saying: 'Stuck up little bitch, too big for her boots.' In later life, there was a word Joan used: 'ethnic'. She didn't use it then but her particular meaning of it, based on what she saw around her, was beginning to evolve. It was not a compliment. 'Ethnic' meant accepting without question what had been handed down to you. If you didn't ask questions you were stupid, so from the beginning Joan's feelings about the working class were mixed. When, as a whole, it came under attack, she stood up for it but, if she thought one member of it was backsliding, that person would be scorned.

Her stepfather was a little different. He was all for the Society of Asphalters attaining Union status and tried his best to stick up for the rights of both himself and his fellow workers, sometimes getting into trouble for his pains. Joan admired that and, from him, began to gain an understanding of wrongs further afield than home, like hungry, jobless men marching from the north east of England down to London.

Two family traits Joan could never escape were hooded eyes – Kate and all her children had them – and truculence. Some people, even actors in her own company, thought that Joan came, not from working-class Stockwell, but landed Warwickshire gentry. The hooded eyes set you right double quick.

The truculence came from Kate's hot temper and James's orneriness. It was in her half-brother Jerry, when, as an adult, he took his employers to court, dismissed his counsel and defended himself. 'The freeborn Englishman,' Joan called him. Sometimes she admired that spirit but not if it was only backed by ignorance. Then she despised it and, when it only led to family rows, she hated it. Backchat was great, but flesh-tearing feuds repelled her. Despite her own ability to lash out, she was not thick skinned.

Actually, Joan had more than the family truculence. Unlike the others, she seemed to have a deep well of anger inside her. It burst out in a boiling torrent that made grown men tremble and women cry. From her diary entries, it is clear that she was aware of this anger and, because it came from her family links, hated it all the more. 'You do that and I'll kill you,' she hissed at Betty during a birthday party for Millie. Betty, without pause, shot back equally vicious words. It looked as if they were going to come to blows. Were they six years old? No, Joan was in her 70s, Betty not much younger.

In Betty you could see Joan's retiring side. Joan may have been tough at work, but away from the theatre she found difficult situations hard to face, like birthday parties at which she was the birthday girl. From most of them, she ran away. Betty did that too. She was a mirror image of Joan, only the silvering had worn away in places.

Not all parties drove Joan away. As long as people didn't stand around talking, she could enjoy them as much as anyone else. What she liked was singing and dancing, just as she remembered from a party one Christmas when she was little.

For a few hours, the crackling fire and the colourful decorations created a fairyland that took her away from Stockwell. The pleasurable lead-up to this was the preparation of the pudding, the stirring and the tasting. It took weeks. Closer to the day was the choice of roast, in this case a large piece of beef taken from the rump. It was called an H-bone, the kind of cut Caroline had seen displayed at the Fox and Goose. To look at it was spectacular, and eating it was not bad either, as long as you knew that it had to spend hours in the oven to get the toughness out. On the actual day came the getting in of booze: a crate of stout, a bottle of gin, a bottle of whisky, port and lemon, rum and peppermint. At teatime, neighbours and relatives came to call. James, having laughed a neighbour into silence for singing operetta, took over to play songs on the piano that were easy for anybody to sing along with. That in turn stirred everyone into shifting the furniture so that the carpet could be rolled up for dancing. This was the bit Joan liked best as she had invented her very own dance. When she recounted the events of this day, it was impossible not to think of Mr Fezziwig's party in *A Christmas Carol* and yet she didn't like Dickens.

At the Practising School it was soon noticed that Joan was scholarship material. This was all very well, but she had a horror of exams. The first time she was supposed to take one, she was sick in a drain on her way to school. Back at home, Caroline wrapped her in a soft shawl, put her in Robert's armchair and fed her on sponge cakes accompanied by sips of soda water. With exam day over, Joan felt better.

When the exam day for the scholarship arrived, Joan simply didn't turn up. Only when she thought it would be over did she feel it safe to return. She was met by an unwelcome surprise. Miss Barnes, her teacher, had arranged for her to take the exam on her own. With a deadening weight of responsibility bearing down on her shoulders – no one else in the family had done anything like this – Joan tried to write her essay, *A Day in the Life of a Penny*. Feeling awful, she struggled on, convinced she was making a hash of it but, no, she won the scholarship. It was to La Retraite School in Clapham Park.

At La Retraite, she had to wear a uniform. Jim said how proud she was of it, but behind his words could be heard the widening gap between Joan and him, and the rest of the Morritts. Every night before going to bed, she arranged her uniform with the care she took over laying the table.

That kind of attention, did not, however go to one particular item of clothing she was given to wear. This one was nothing to do with uniforms and school. It was a brown velvet dress which she had to iron first because it was a hand-me-down. If you add together a garment that had been worn by someone else, her dislike of being useful, in particular her dislike of ironing, plus her aversion to the colour brown, it is not hard to predict what happened next. Attempting to dispel the dullness of her task, she brought a book to her ironing and, during an exciting chapter, let the iron go right through the velvet. Although she often recounted that incident, she always left it unadorned. By not commenting on it she was making the accident appear to come out of the blue, she being no more than an absent-minded and innocent.

She didn't think the teaching at La Retraite was as good as at the Practising School; it wasn't strict enough. However she enjoyed the airy rooms, the small classes and the atmosphere of learning. As for the Roman Catholic ritual, it didn't frighten her as it does some. She liked it. This started with the girls having to put on soft shoes before entering the school. Perhaps that's what Joan partly had in mind when later she insisted that her actors wear soft shoes at rehearsals. Yes, anyone taking movement seriously wears soft shoes or takes off their shoes altogether, but Joan regarded the stage as sacred. Why else was there a rush of that deep anger whenever she saw a classic play done badly? For her, the perpetrators were blasphemers.

Another memory of convent days that projected forward was that of silence. In the early years Theatre Workshop, the actors were expected to sit quietly in their dressing rooms for an hour before the performance. 'Our lives were monastic,' said Max Shaw, one of those actors, and he was not merely referring to poverty. La Retraite was called La Retraite for a reason. Joan learned about long periods of silence. People may think this boring or frightening, but this was a silence that could be both comforting and enlightening. Boisterousness may have been a characteristic of Joan's productions, but here we find her quiet, serious side; not a confining seriousness but a releasing one.

The silence of retreat was certainly her only comfort after the death of Carrie, her much-loved aunt, from tuberculosis at the age of 39. Carrie had a caustic wit that amused Joan. Having to wait for relatives at the funeral, who hardly knew Carrie, crying or 'blubbing', the word Carrie used to use, merely annoyed her.

She preferred to attend Mass at La Retraite, the first Mass she had ever sat right through. She thought it beautiful and, another day went up for communion but, being neither Catholic nor baptised, was turned away. Mass was far better than listening to the C of E hymns sung around the cenotaph, ones like 'Abide with Me', which she poked fun at all her life.

The Stations of the Cross, she really liked. As with the Mass, there was theatre about it. The influence it had on her came to the surface in the 1960s when she wanted to do a play about the Rongelap Point disaster. She saw it being performed like the Stations of the Cross, promenade theatre before promenade theatre.

Mother St Teresa, the headmistress at La Retraite, seeing Joan's thoughtful as well as argumentative side, suggested she become a nun. Joan dismissed the idea because she didn't consider Mother Teresa clever enough to make a good case, but the idea did attract her.

Besides, other ideas to do with her future were already forming in her head. She had an art teacher, Miss Nicholson, who believed in her and took her to art galleries. Far and away the most important was the one closest to Stockwell, the Tate (now Tate Britain). As soon as Joan discovered it, she knew that she could get there by herself, and did. The number 88 bus came from Clapham to Stockwell station where she jumped on. It then crossed Vauxhall Bridge and arrived at the gallery, the whole journey taking eight minutes. It's a short journey and yet for the rest of Joan's family, it might have been the other side of the world. This was the end of pushing a pram to Clapham Common. Joan had found something much better.

Once in the gallery, she hurried along, twisting her head sideways to avoid seeing the Turners. She had to go past them because her goal was in the gallery beyond, the Constables. She loved those. In the few steps she took to get from the one to the other, you can see the violence of Joan's likes and dislikes. Because he's so modern, Turner fascinates many; not Joan. All she noticed was that he couldn't draw. It is true that his human figures are not great and indeed you don't find them in his most famous paintings but is that a reason to write him off? For Joan it was. On the other hand, one Constable could hold her attention for an hour, an escape and a retreat at the same time. However, despite painting being a passion for her, it was mixed with one even stronger.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# THE SPARK CATCHES FIRE



The spark was struck at the Practising School. One afternoon, Miss Barnes took her class to see *The Merchant of Venice* at the Brixton Theatre. As you would expect of a young person whose life would be taken up with theatre, Joan was spellbound. Yet it was not to the point that she was entirely uncritical. She didn't think much of Antonio or Portia but Shylock, she hung on his every word. Back at school, she looked out the play and learned his speech, 'I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?' going so far as to put on a big coat, draw a beard on her face using burnt cork, and perform for her grandparents at evening reading time.

At La Retraite, another school trip took her to a matinee at the Old Vic. The play was to be *Hamlet*. This visit would be the start of a relationship with the Old Vic that takes a bit of understanding. At rehearsals, in later years, Joan did nothing but mock the name. When ticking off her company, it became a shorthand for bad acting, while her imitations had actors doubled up but that is not the whole story.

When, as a child, she told her family that she was going to this matinee, her aunt Fan, whom she insisted wasn't really her aunt, said: 'That blood tub.' It annoyed her. Once upon a time Bill Sykes, it is true, had dragged Nancy by the hair round the stage gauging the number of times he could do it by the amount of booing he was hearing, but those days were over. Emma Cons, a social reformer, had taken it over in 1880 and turned it into the Royal Victoria Coffee Music Hall where no alcohol was drunk and entertainment was decent, if not always interesting. On Tuesday evenings there would be a science lecture. This led to lessons being given to poor would-be students in the dressing rooms and subsequently at the Morley College, an offshoot specially founded by Cons to help working-class people further themselves. It was one of the first adult education colleges in the country. Although that happened before Joan's time, when she reached her Theatre Workshop years, classes were something she too organised. They were for people not necessarily in theatre; the neighbourhood children living near to the Theatre Royal Stratford East, for example. This was part of something bigger she wanted to achieve; but that is yet to come.

In 1898, Cons' niece, Lilian Baylis, joined her aunt to help run the Coffee Music Hall and, when Emma died in 1912, took over the reins entirely. Aware that the Hall's nightly fare was less than thrilling, she cast around to find something that would not only edify but hold the interest. After much prayer, she received her answer: Shakespeare. And though she knew little about the playwright, she instructed the director, Ben Greet, to create a company and set to work, which he did in 1914, the year of Joan's birth. Between then and 1923, all Shakespeare's plays in the First Folio were performed. This had never been attempted before. That is why Joan did not want her ignorant aunt Fan abusing Lilian Baylis's efforts.

At that matinee, the actor she saw playing Hamlet was the Old Vic's first home-grown leading player, the 25-year-old John Gielgud. The cast also included Donald Wolfit, Martita Hunt and Robert Speaight. That was the list she gave when writing about it, one of the rare occasions Joan gave a list

actors we may have heard of. The play had her on the edge of her seat and from then on she went on foot to every new production. Only by queuing up for late door and being prepared to run up to the gallery at the last minute was she able to afford the five pence ticket price. That waiting and longing, sometimes in the rain, was a scene that in 1967 she put into the musical, *The Marie Lloyd Story*. One audience member, Alan Strachan, the director, was so haunted by it, despite it being only a fleeting moment, that 35 years later, he was able to describe it precisely.

Throughout her life, Joan damned most of the theatre actors who were considered our stars. She did not damn John Gielgud or Donald Wolfit. Gielgud she called Edwardian and, like everybody else, imitated him, but there was none of her usual scorn. As for Wolfit, she never said a bad word about him. Maybe this was to do with those two actors being wrapped up in an experience that cast the die for her life.

She went home and once again looked up the play, this time learning 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' Like the Shylock speech, it was spoken by a man. Whether consciously or unconsciously this marked the beginning of how she meant to carry on: she was always happier with men and was often accused of not liking women, and being particularly tough on actresses. She denied it but said many things against women, often things she saw in herself and disliked, that one could think she was truth in that accusation. 'Bring back boy actors for the women's parts,' was one, along with: 'The reason why there are fewer funny women than funny men is that women can't be objective.' Another was: 'Women are drawn to directing. They like arranging things and making pretty patterns' – all the while, denying she was ever a director herself.

As for her desire to play men, it would not have seemed peculiar at the time she was acquainting herself with Shakespeare. At the Old Vic, Sibyl Thorndike had played Prince Hal and King Lear and Fool. Admittedly that was more to do with the shortage of actors during the First World War than an idolising of the male sex.

Another production at the Old Vic did not impress her so much but it was the one to inspire her to put on a Shakespeare play at La Retraite. This was *Macbeth*. Gielgud, who was playing him, she described as too decorative but it was that very feeling that she could do better that was her inspiration. A good *Hamlet* would be overwhelming but a not-so-hot *Macbeth*? There's more action and murders in that one, which Joan of course noticed, and it was shorter.

Having decided that she herself would play Macbeth, not to mention Third Murderer and the Old Man at the end of Act Two, she approached her favourite teacher at La Retraite, Mother St Vincent. Not only did Mother St Vincent give her consent, she organised rehearsal space. This left Joan to dragoon the girls she thought would be right into giving up their time to be in the play. She succeeded. As for her, it was no sacrifice. Rehearsals were in the evening and during the holidays. In other words it was more time away from home and household chores.

'I was the producer and my word was law.' When Joan said that, she was letting slip how things were going to be from then onwards. 'I've never told any actor what to do,' is what she usually said, and, while there was truth in it, nothing got on to any stage if she didn't want it to.

Once she had the go-ahead, she had to think about how she was going to do it. At the Old Vic, the productions she saw still had different sets for every scene, and, to cover the big changes, some scenes were played in front of a cloth. Most teenagers wanting to do a play, having been to one in the professional theatre, tend to copy what they have seen. Having done that, they react against themselves and do something else. Joan skipped that stage. She already knew that the Old Vic productions were heavy and slow. In three years' time, Tyrone Guthrie, would take over as director of the Old Vic and go for a permanent set that would keep the action flowing. It would be the latest thing in the 1930s anyway. It wasn't, of course, as it was based on the Elizabethan theatre. Many years later, as a seasoned director, Joan wrote that she was comfortable with the Elizabethan layout too. In fact

only a permanent set made her happy. In the Assembly Hall at La Retraite, necessity began to teach her what she would always prefer. There would be no scenery, just the banqueting table.

Of the production, her accounts diverge. When describing it in conversation, she said that she forgot to put stools out, only to realise it worked much better that way. From then onwards, she rarely had chairs on any stage. When writing about it, she said that she made the decision about not having the stools in advance. Instead, she directed the diners to dip down to make it look as if they were sitting. This is a device she used many years later. It worked because, at the end of the scene, you went quickly to the next one. Time was saved because there was no need to clear the chairs. Either way, her desire for speed and flow was already revealing itself.

When it came to her account of the performance, there was no divergence. That was always the same. Before an audience of nuns and schoolfellows, it went like wildfire. Next morning, the headmistress summoned Joan to her study. She thought she was for the high jump but not at all. Mother St Nicholas wanted an extra performance to present to the Mother Superior, who was coming over from France. Joan was thrilled, partly because of the special guest's importance and partly because it gave her the chance to improve the production. This time, the music took most of her attention. At *Hamlet* she had heard 'Fingal's Cave' on a gramophone. It had not been thrilling. For her *Macbeth*, she would have real drums and a real choir. Again, she was beginning as she meant to go on. 'You can't start a play without music,' she would say, 'and it must be live.' This time, parents were allowed to come but only the parents of the performers. Among them were James and Kate. They sat at the back.

When, at the point in the play Banquo was murdered and Joan, as Third Murderer, was stabbing a concealed piece of meat and squirting jets of cochineal, there was a cry from the audience. The Mother Superior from France had fainted. Joan, at first delighted, was soon disappointed. Mother Mary Agnes hurried round during the interval to tell her and the rest of the cast to go easy. Joan's mind began to roam.

After Aunt Carrie's death, insurance money came through. It was to pay for the one and only family holiday Joan was taken on. Ramsgate was the resort. For the occasion, Kate dressed herself in black and walked around with Carrie's little daughter, Marie, saying to anyone that stared: 'She's lost her mother.' Joan, repelled, wandered away along the beach. She found a pierrot show. Because you had to pay to see it, palings surrounded the performing area but even from behind them, she could see enough. The little songs the pierrots sang to introduce themselves and the black and white costumes that seemed to come from no particular period but went right back to *commedia dell'arte* enchanted her. Three performances a day were given. She watched every one. In the evening, coloured fairy lights were turned on and a talent competition was announced. Joan volunteered. 'My Mother's Arms' was the song she sang but all confidence drained away when, to her mind, came the picture of her own mother's arms. The idea of being in them was revolting. Only one person voted for her.

Back at school, Joan tumbled into one of those moods people round her in later years would dread. It was an angry 'I don't know what I'm doing, but, boy, is everybody else going to pay for it,' mood.

She wrote a beautiful letter to the Old Vic offering her services, signing with her father's surname. Kate intercepted the reply. Catching sight of the envelope was all it took to provoke a cold fury.

In central London, Joan joined a march demanding independence for India. Gandhi came out on a balcony at the Dorchester Hotel to watch. Back at school, she organised her own march. It was on behalf of a dead rat. Mother St Teresa warned her that she could be up for expulsion and was risking her chance of going to university. Joan replied that university students were scabs. She had seen students from Oxford and Cambridge driving buses during the National Strike in 1926. She was already aware, because James had told her, that the miners were always stuck out on their own with no one prepared to support them. She was not expelled. She had just won another scholarship. What for

where to, she didn't say.

In the middle of this turmoil Miss Nicholson, her art mistress, showed some of Joan's paintings to the young Barnett Freedman, who was teaching at the Royal College of Art. He would, in 1940, become a war artist. Back in the late 1920s, he foretold a distinguished career for Joan as a painter.

Actually, Miss Nicholson was afraid Joan was taking seriously the idea that she should become a nun. Joan told her not to worry. She was over that. Miss Nicholson, known to Joan as Nick, suggested a little holiday. Joan, caring little either way, accepted. At least she would be away from home. In point of fact, she was not planning on becoming a painter either. She had secretly written for an audition at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

The test pieces arrived. There were two. The first was from *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe and the second was from *Hindle Wakes* by Stanley Houghton of the Manchester School and, in that sense, prophetic, given how much that town would feature in her life and work. Both suited Joan. The speech from *Tamburlaine* was Tamburlaine himself speaking, another man, and Marlowe, together with Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, was one of her favourite playwrights. The *Hindle Wakes* speech was that of a spirited heroine rejecting a proposal of marriage from a dutiful boyfriend who has made her pregnant. He's nice enough but nothing special. She can do better. Joan could easily understand her attitude. And she did very well, except that the day of the RADA exam was right in the middle of her school exams, known in those days as matriculation.

To be precise, it clashed with a chemistry exam. Unconcerned, Joan set off for Gower Street, where you can still find RADA. One of the judges depressed her by referring to the gap in her teeth, but another judge, by simply saying 'Good luck,' encouraged her. The audition was for a London County Council scholarship, and she won it. Only two were given each year, one to a girl and one to a boy. The boy who won in the same year as her was John Bailey, who went on to a career as a solid, slightly eerie, stalwart in B-films and television.

Back at the convent, the nuns were not best pleased with Joan's jaunt to RADA. They wanted her to go to university. Miss Nicholson wasn't pleased either. She thought Joan should have taken her chemistry exam and matriculated, which was needed to get into art school. Still, it didn't stop Mother Superior at St Teresa from boasting of this scholarship to the Schools Inspector.

Hindsight reveals that this was typical of Joan. On the one hand, fear and wilfulness nearly blew her chances. On the other, talent and determination saw her through. Joan tended to disguise fear with anger, so it could have been nerves about university that made her come up with the scabs accusation, even though some students had indeed been scabs. After all, she knew as little about what would happen at RADA as she did about what would happen at university.

What of the little holiday? Was that off? No, it was still on nor was it anywhere like Ramsgate. It was Paris. Nick, with her maps and guidebooks, knew all the works of art they had to see, but Paris itself made the biggest impression on Joan. It enchanted her.

The trip was tinged with wistfulness, though, because Joan had reached the moment when she had to decide on her future. Once back in London, she would not be returning to school and her father's six shillings a week would stop. That was certain. She had the RADA scholarship and would probably be leaving home. That was up to her. Nobody was forcing her to take up the scholarship, or to leave home. A temptation was to hide in the cloak of comfort Nick offered, and keep painting.

Many years later, when recalling this moment, Joan told of a balcony overlooking Paris where she and Nick sat one evening, Nick pointing out the repetitiveness of long runs in the theatre. This was one of her arguments for keeping Joan at an easel. However, it feels as if Joan was attributing those words to her in the way that a playwright, instead of writing a monologue, bounces thoughts round different characters. To know what a long run feels like requires an old hand at theatre and Nick was not an old hand. Nor, for that matter, was Joan. Long afterwards, she seemed to be dramatising the scene.

Joan continued by responding to this argument with her dream for the future. With Nick cast as the sympathetic listener, she launched into what this time was, not dialogue bounced around, but monologue:

Space, light and shelter, a place that would change with the seasons, where all knowledge would be available and new discovery made clear, a place to play and learn and do what you will. I know that work is the only solution to life's problems, creative work with some manual labour thrown in. The inborn hatred, murderous feelings, the hate and aggression that are part of us, even our petty feelings can be transformed by creativity.

[Joan's Book]

This still sounds like Joan, the playwright, at work. The speech divides into two halves. In the first half, just as Ibsen plants two pistols in the first act of *Hedda Gabler*, one of which will kill Hedda at the last, so Joan plants an idea in the 1930s which would mean a lot to her in the 1960s, but would also cause public confusion and private disruption. 'Space light and shelter . . . a place to play and learn' was an exact description of the Fun Palace which Joan tried to make happen in the 1960s. It's as if she wanted the reader to be aware of it early to show that its roots were deep. If she employed Ibsen's technique, it's because she admired his craftsmanship. After the success of *A Taste of Honey*, she took to the author, Shelagh Delaney, to analyse him as a lesson in structure.

In the second half of the monologue, the manual labour bit is slightly funny. To keep afloat, Theatre Workshop did do manual labour but the person who did the least was Joan. She always had an excuse you couldn't argue with: her need to work on the play, whatever that was, and, to be fair, at that she did work phenomenally hard.

'The hate and aggression that are part of us . . . even our petty feelings,' does sound a likely thought if too well-formed. It would have come from those flesh-rending rows at home and is borne out later on by her dislike of the family unit in plays. Here, rather than in the Fun Palace idea, is where the design for living began, a reaction against everything around her that she hated.

An answer could have been for Nick to adopt her. She offered to, but Kate turned that down and for once Joan was in agreement with her mother. Something told her that, nice as Nick and painting were, this was not the way for her.

'That dyke who took you to Paris,' someone said to Joan of Nick a few years before she died. That did not go down well. It chimed neither with her past innocence, when 'dyke' would have been an unknown word, nor her deep-down primness that was always there.

So, you have Joan giving herself sophisticated thoughts at the age of fifteen that you suspect she had much later, but at the same time not caring to admit to what may have been a simple if crudely put truth: Nick was a lesbian. This would seem to be corroborated by Nick persuading Joan, before she went to Paris, to have her hair cut short, saying that she had a well-shaped head. If you see Nick's painting of Joan at that time, for a split second you are puzzled because you think you are looking at a boy. Only after that do you see the school tunic.

In her indecision – Joan hated making decisions – she needed that click moment that would let her chuck Nick. In Paris, she found it when Nick referred to her illegitimacy. She did it by saying to Joan that a nice boy might not want a girl like her, so she was probably better off with her, Nick. And that was it. Joan was on her way to find her design for living by herself.



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