A Date with a Dame

BY FRED BASON

Flora Robson made her first appearance on any stage at Enfield in 1908, when she was five. It was at a school concert where she recited ‘Little Orphan Annie’ (with actions). As an encore she recited two other pieces that she had learnt before she was six years old—and with actions as well. I was not present at this memorable performance because I was one year old at the time.

She began her professional career in 1921. It was at the Shaftesbury Theatre, in Clemence Dane’s Will Shakespeare. The play was produced by Basil Dean and the cast included Mary Clare and Philip Merivale. It is probable that I saw this play because Mary Clare was the first famous actress I was friendly with. I had seen Mary Clare in a play called The Return of the Soldier, which had the notices up to close at the end of the week. With the cockney impudence I had in my ’teens I sat down and wrote to fifty important people, appealing to them to support this sad but brilliant play. The play ran for many weeks instead of a few days!

But, to return to Flora Robson, I have no recollection of seeing her in Will Shakespeare, but as she appeared as a ghost I have an alibi. I remember very well, though, when she did come into my life. It was in 1932, when she appeared in a play by Somerset Maugham called For Services Rendered.

Maugham had given me a front-row seat in the grand circle for the first night. I sat next to his Swiss valet. I made a joke or two, but the valet never smiled. Nor did either of us smile during For Services Rendered. It was a very sad play.

The first-night audience was not in sympathy with this sad play. There was coughing and a murmur of voices. Someone in the gallery called ‘Speak up, please!’ with some justification.

Flora was cast in the role of a spinster, aged around forty. She had to propose marriage to a retired Navy man who was desperately trying to make a living in civilian life and failing to do so. His embarrassing rejection of her proposal led to a bout of hysterics, and she was carried off the stage screaming. Her
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screams could be heard in the wings. Maugham’s valet exclaimed: ‘What sadness!’ I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I was weeping.

At the fall of the curtain Flora got an ovation. I stood up and cheered. ‘Bravo, Flora! Bravo, Flora!’ I called out. I knew that from that day onwards I would be her admirer for the rest of my life. Maugham’s valet stared at me in astonishment as he clapped politely. The lady on my right, however, had been weeping for the past quarter of an hour, and was still weeping as I stood up shouting ‘Bravo!’

Afterwards the valet asked me to have dinner with him, but I declined as the suit I was wearing was frayed at the cuffs and I was wearing the navy’s boots that I had to wear when I was selling books off my barrow in the street. But I went back-stage to thank Maugham for sending me a ticket. I couldn’t find him; but I got Flora’s autograph. She said ‘Thank you for asking me!’ and there were tears in her eyes. I remember that I had to climb three flights of stairs to get to her dressing room, and there were only three people there whilst there must have been thirty in Cedric Hardwicke’s dressing room.

Three times I saw this play during its short run of six weeks, and each time Flora’s acting caught at my throat and I was moved to tears. To me it was not just acting; she seemed to be breaking her heart. I was afraid that the sustained hysteria might do her some physical harm. In fact I was really rather glad when the play ended and she no longer had to break her heart—and mine—every night. The fact is I had fallen in love with her.

The next play I saw Flora in was an all-out flop called Head-on Crash. Dame Flora will remember this play because it was probably the worst in which she has ever appeared and the first in which her name was up in lights—and she was given star billing. The gallery booed this senseless, almost incomprehensible play. I did not boo. I sent her a bunch of eight roses. Why eight roses? Because I lived for years at number 152—and these numbers together and you get eight. I paid eight shillings for the bunch, which was a great deal of money to me in those far-off days. I did not put my name on the label. I simply put ‘With fond regards from an admirer’. The play was off in about three weeks.

Flora’s next appearance was with Paul Robeson in Eugene

O’Neill’s All God’s Chillun got Wings. I saw it at the Piccadilly Theatre in about the third week of its run. I had been seriously ill, having caught a severe chill at my barrow, which turned to pneumonia. Whilst the press raved over the great acting of Flora I was fighting to stay alive. I pulled myself together the best way I could, and a friend took me in his car to see the tour de force of Flora’s brilliant performance in this play. As Ella she got her first real chance and she took it with both hands.

The other star of this play was Paul Robeson, and I said to him one day: ‘If I had a hat I’d raise it to you in admiration, but all I can do is raise my cap.’ He laughed at this and said: ‘I often wear a cap. I must send you a photograph of myself wearing one.’

And he did! I like to think he had it taken specially for me, but perhaps I’m kiddin’ myself. The odd thing is that when I show people this photograph and say: ‘There’s Paul Robeson wearing a cap, nobody seems to think it odd. But can you imagine Paul Robeson wearing a cap? I can’t; and I certainly never saw him wearing anything on his head at all. Paul Robeson in a cap!

After seeing Eugene O’Neill’s play I had to leave off going to first nights for a long time. I had neither the money nor the time to spare. I had acquired a bookshop. True it was only a small bookshop—being less than seven feet wide. It was in New Church Road, Camberwell. I had no competition; but also I had no customers! No money to spare for theatre-going!

Meanwhile I knew that Flora was making an even greater name for herself at the Old Vic and elsewhere. Acting with Charles Laughton and my loyal friend of the past forty years, Marius Goring, must have been a help to her. Perhaps the most important part she played at this time was that of Gwendolen Fairfax in The Importance of Being Earnest, because it proved to all the world that she could excel in parts that were not unhappy.

I didn’t see her in Mary Tudor, which I believe followed her season at the Old Vic, because then I was travelling over Europe and even to some parts of Africa gathering together sets and specimens of cigarette cards. Yes, cigarette cards! I had landed myself a really lovely job writing a weekly article on cigarette cards for Tit Bits which lasted right up to the day the Second World War started. I came back from Hamburg on the last boat
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out of that city with a suitcase full of German cigarette cards.

I only once heard about Flora during the war, when a dear friend of mine, Beatrice Winkler, went to see her at the Henry Miller Theatre in New York City in a play called *Ladies in Retirement*. She had nothing but praise to write to me. I sent Flora a postcard on which I wrote: 'Please don't retire! We can't spare you! Your London Admirer Fred.' Of course she knew nothing about it, but I was still in love with her.

Now we come to a more personal part of the story. Around my sixty-first birthday I had a load of trouble that I could hardly bear. In a wave of depression I took all the sleeping pills I had—about a dozen. I didn't die, but I had an agonising heart attack. The sweat poured off me with sheer pain. I managed to open my door and slide down the stairs into the street, where I was picked up by two policemen at two o'clock in the morning and taken back to my bedroom. One of them made me black coffee and the other walked me up and down the room. Perhaps they thought I was drunk! Anyway, I was very sick; and then I went to sleep.

It was light when I woke up. I was in less pain. One of the policemen was still with me. Seeing him I burst into tears. Then I went to sleep again. When I woke again he had gone. They never came back, but I shall never forget their kindness.

After this I felt a terrific need for company, to get out and mix with people and get a grip on life again. I wrote to a famous comedian with whom I was acquainted and asked if I could come and have a chat with him. I thought he'd cheer me up. I enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope for his reply; but one never came. Then I sat down and wrote to Flora Robson, knowing she had read my writings in *The Saturday Book*, and asking if I could come and see her. I didn't enclose a stamp this time.

She replied by return of post, inviting me to tea with her at six o'clock at the Haymarket Theatre, where she was appearing in a revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As I waited for her to arrive, at the stage door, wearing a brand-new cap which I had bought for the occasion, a pigeon up above gave me a warm, wet welcome. (The cornice above the stage door at the Haymarket Theatre is a great hang-out for pigeons.)
station at seven that evening, Flora gave me one of the happiest days of all my sixty-two years of living.

I was drinking a Pimms Number One by about eleven. We had chicken for luncheon. We had tea under an old apple tree at Alfriston, where she bought me an expensive, beautifully made tea-pot stand with a map of Sussex in the centre of it. She also bought me a large jar of local honey ‘to fatten you up’.

We had a couple of glasses of sherry when we arrived back at Flora’s home. I was given a packet of cigarettes, a large lump of cake and some French pastries to take home. It was five to seven when we reached Brighton Station. I was too full of sherry and emotion to say a proper ‘Thank You’.

I went down to see her again in October, and on this occasion she gave me proof of her magnificent memory by reciting to me (with actions) ‘Little Orphan Annie’, as she had recited it at the school concert at Enfield when she was five. She also gave me a lesson in elocution, showing me how to overcome echoes in large halls by using clipped words instead of rounded phrases. We talked and she knitted, and then we returned to London in a first-class carriage all to ourselves.

She gave me back so much self-confidence that I went to the Isle of Man next day and gave two very merry lectures to the Manx. And she gave me such confidence—and such happiness and such a sense of having found someone who really cared whether I lived or died—that I wrote and asked her to marry me.

It was ridiculous and absurd, of course: she a famous actress, a dame, distinguished; me an under-nourished, uneducated, impecunious cockney bookseller. What impudence! Of course she wrote back to me to say she never intended to get married; but it was the sweetest, kindest letter imaginable.

Now isn’t it odd that the person who has brought me most joy in my sixties is the actress who most often made me cry when I was a lad! In order to create happiness perhaps it’s necessary to understand unhappiness. And nobody who saw my beloved Flora in For Services Rendered thirty-seven years ago can doubt that she—above any other actress of our day—has got this wonderful understanding.