

NF Simpson Returns to the West End

Perhaps Emanuel's most famous literary OE had a programme dedicated to his work on Radio 4 over the Easter holidays, he is the only OE we know to have their plays performed regularly in the West End. *Does anyone know of any other literary Old Emanuel who may have slipped through our net?* NF "Wally" Simpson, Royal Court Theatre contemporary of Sir John Mortimer and Harold Pinter, was the author of several ground-breaking plays, the most famous of which are *A Resounding Tinkle*, *The Hole* and *One Way Pendulum*, which was made into a classic Sixties film with George Cole and Eric Sykes. Until the end of the 60s he was regularly published with Pinter etc, before strangely disappearing into semi-retirement which included many years living on a house boat, publishing a few novels, and writing comedy skits for TV. For most of the 1980s and 1990s he could only be traced via a PO box number.

He specialised in one act, often farcical, plays and although he slipped into public obscurity (but not that of the profession), mainly due to his inactivity and his shunning of the public eye, his plays are still frequently performed world-wide. Any drama student worth their salt their cut often teeth on NFS at university, and his one act plays are fantastic source material for students learning the tricks of the stage. He was a recognised master of manipulative stage techniques within the boundaries of a 1 hour play. Getting it just right was essential, otherwise a play could easily bomb. Should you do any internet search of any of the World's stage hot-spots, more often than not, you'll find NFS being performed at some left-of centre theatre. As librarian at Emanuel I have helped at least one PHD student research Wally's early life, shrouded in mystery as it is. *'Anonymity is where I live'* is as good an NFS quote to sum up his career. Many critics believe he watched his own "literary canonisation" from the sidelines, without reaping much reward from it, whilst some of his contemporaries have become household names, not that they were better writers, only better at selling their wares and embracing the public.

Stylistically *A Resounding Tinkle*, his most well known play, typifies Simpson's lack of plot and establishes his talent for memorable one-liners and farce. For NFS to work, it demands *absolutely* straight delivery from actors. What is now known as dead-pan. Such an approach makes the audience believe that the characters are living in a form of reality. The impossible becomes believable in the blink of an eye. This was the theme that he used in all his dramatic work. It was to become a great influence on the likes of John Cleese when Monty Python began. Cleese loved NFS; *'the only experiences to which I can compare my own discovery of the Goons is going to see N. T. Simpson's play One Way Pendulum at the Bristol Old Vic or, later on, hearing Peter Cook for the first time.'*

The radio documentary I mentioned earlier, which prompted this article, was a fascinating account of the career and work of NFS. It charted his appearance on the turbulent theatre scene of the late Fifties after winning a writing competition in *The Observer* whilst working as a teacher, to his influence, his disappearance and his return to his spiritual home The Royal Court this year with a new play entitled *If So*,

Then Yes, after a gap of more than 40 years. The first public reading of this play will take place at the Royal Court, in early July. Health permitting, Wally will attend.

It is an astonishing comeback (most people thought he was dead!) and it forms the focal point of this fascinating radio story. Although, now well into his 90s, the documentary tries to fill in the blanks lost on England's water-ways; answering the question why there have been no new plays for 40 years and looks at his intriguing sideline of translating Italian plays into English (a skill he "picked up" in World War 2!). He served in the the Intelligence Corps, in Italy, Palestine and Cyprus. The National Theatre staged many of the Eduardo de Filippo he translated in the late eighties and nineties.

The radio documentary states "*there is no doubt that NFS was a significant and brilliant writer, the equal of his more famous contemporaries*". It was presented by leading UK comedy writer David Quantick (*The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*) giving a distinctive appraisal of this vital, but overlooked, playwright finding his place in theatre, especially the Royal Court, and television culture as it developed in the 1970s, and NFS himself began to write more and more for TV. The programme featured brand-new interviews with Sir John Mortimer, Sir Jonathan Miller, Armando Iannucci, John Fortune, David Nobbs, Eric Sykes, Barry Cryer, Eleanor Bron, Jonathan Coe and NF Simpson himself from his home in Cornwall.

Further information will follow when release dates of his new play at the Royal Court *If So, Then Yes* are confirmed towards the end of the year. But if you can't wait that long the Donmar Theatre in Covent Garden is having an *Absurd Theatre* season in July, - a triple-bill of comedies which gloriously reveal the absurdity of everyday life, 2 of NFS's plays will have extended runs "*A Resounding Tinkle*" will star Douglas Hodge, there will also be a very rare live performance of the short sketch "*Gladly Otherwise*". I've also been told than NFS has, personally, been involved in these new productions.

Meantime the School Archive has copies of both the radio documentary *Reality is an Illusion Caused by Lack of NF Simpson* and the DVD *One Way Pendulum* should anyone wish to view/listen to them at the Archive. We also have many of his plays in our Archive, including the exceptionally rare item *Snippets* which includes all the monologues he was written, many since 1983, most of which have remained unpublished until now, in this very funny collection. Another excellent read is an extremely strange novel NFS published in the 1970s called "*Harry Bleachbaker*," which was a novelisation of an earlier play. All are in the School Archive.

In researching this article, after much groundwork, I finally tracked NFS down to deepest, darkest Cornwall, and after inviting him to the grand opening of our new Library and Archive he humbly responded; "*you don't need me; you have Michael Aspel!*" He also enquired; "*is Gag's Corner on the far corner of the playing field still known by that name?*" Maybe some older OEs may remember the reference; but I doubt many this side of World War 2 will! For those readers interested enough NFS tells me that "*G.A. Garrington, who was known as Gag and gave this name to Gag's Corner, was a huge man who taught maths (though not to me) and retired when I was in my second year or thereabouts. Pity his prowess with the cricket bat is no longer celebrated - sic transit and all*

that ...” Many thanks to the researcher Ian Greaves who helped in the background research of this article.

The School Archive is open 9am-2pm in the Summer holidays (except when I’m on holiday myself). Please call ahead if you want to visit.

Comments would be welcomed, on this article, or other literary OEs

TRJ

AFTERWORD - from NF Simpson’s “Snippets”

The internet disgorges some 59,000 references to N. F. Simpsons of one sort or another. A newsagent in Station Road, Colchester, occurs more than once; like Huntingdonshire cabmen, Colchester newsagents seem to be a disciplined body. Michael Billington comments in the Guardian on a revival of Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*: ‘I suspect one problem in the 50s was that critics assumed Pinter was writing in the absurdist vein of Ionesco and N. F. Simpson. Now, it is much easier to see the play for what it is: a rep thriller reinvented by a man who’s read Kafka’; and describes Ali Smith’s play *just as* ‘like a cross between Monty Python and N. F. Simpson’. You do not have to have read Kafka or Simpson to read that; the names themselves have become a point of reference.

First, in this connection, N. F. Simpson is always associated with Ionesco, and the Theatre of the Absurd. The idea of the Absurd is initially said to have been widely diffused by Albert Camus’ 1942 essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: the sense that the world is ultimately indecipherable and generates only feelings of loss, purposelessness and bewilderment. Like the experience of, as it was elsewhere expressed, ‘angst’, it largely resulted from the looming presence of the Holocaust and the Bomb in the wake of the Second World War. Sixty years on, it is easy to forget how intense and real these fears and feelings were. The idea of The Theatre of the Absurd was invented by Martin Esslin. It tended to become a portmanteau into which any avant-garde writer of the time could be thrown. But to evoke them this way doesn’t suggest they were very funny. Nor were the colleagues assigned to Simpson in the movement exactly humorists. Pinteresque alienation is tearful and sinister. Beckett was the poet of ultimate bleakness; only more slowly was he seen as being funny too. *Waiting for Godot* was staged in 1955, at the Arts Theatre, just two years before- Simpson’s *A Resounding twinkle* at the Royal Court.

Secondly, then, Simpson is also always associated with the Royal Court and the generation of dramatists promoted there by George Devine’s New English Stage Company. Its fiftieth anniversary is being celebrated this year. But he is in fact closer in age and outlook to Beckett (b. 1906) and Ionesco (1912), than to John Osborne (1929), Pinter (1930), seen from a different angle, or Arnold Wesker (1932). The answer of those voting men, which revolutionised British Theatre, was social and

very earnest. Pinter's indeed developed into being quite specifically political. The view of the world taken in Ionesco and Beckett was more existential.

Existentialism, with a capital E, was yet another cult word of the time, of course, and very, very earnest. Inasmuch as the Absurd married serious theatre with popular entertainment, music-hall and mime (as Osborne, formally, would too), it was dedicated to debunking earnestness.

So where does Simpson fit, if he has to be 'fitted' at all? His comedy is only significantly predated by the Goon Show, which began in 1951. He is the almost exact contemporary of Spike Milligan. The wartime experience of this age-group, with its overtone's of concert parties, boredom and real conflict, sets them apart from the resentments of the national service generations whose aggressions had to be dealt with on a civil stage. The writers Simpson acknowledges are Sterne, Wodehouse and Thurber, as providing impetus to him, though, not the form. Beyond that, he is inclined to put similarities down to different people absorbing the atmosphere of the times, rather than any direct influences. Peter Cook, for example, who was in John Bird's production of *A Rebounding Twinkle* at Cambridge in 1957, cannot have seen it before then, but was already writing in a similar way to Simpson when neither of them could have known about the other. Simpson had not heard of Ionesco until after he wrote *A Rebounding Twinkle*. Inasmuch as a Theatre of the Absurd existed, with Simpson as part of it, it was any way a rather avant-garde, intellectualised form of clowning, compared to what his work is and what it gave rise to.

For the true heir of the Simpsonian Absurd is surely The Theatre of the Very Silly. Or rather, attaining a mass popularity which never came Simpson's way, the Television of the Very Silly. John Cleese's civil servant from the Ministry of Silly walks was perfectly in step with Simpson's surreal rifts on suburban and bureaucratic life.

Here the connections are more demonstrable, in a tribute to Milligan (Daily Telegraph, March 2002: *Spike changed Britain more than, the angry Young Men*) Cleese wrote 'the only experiences to which I can compare my own discovery of the Goons is going to see N. T. Simpson's play *One Way Pendulum* at the Bristol Old Vic or, later on, hearing Peter Cook for the first time.' Putting the opening of Cook's Establishment Club, 'London's first satirical nightclub' in 1961, Jonathan Miller at the time-cited the 'satirical non sequiturs' of N. T. Simpson as part of the 'genetic changes' that had 'sharpened the climate of the London theatre'. Sharpness, foreseen in the banishment of the simple turn to other 'sixties revue by the edgy, agenda-laden *On the Fringe*, would eventually remerge in the political hectoring of contemporary stand-up; but for almost half a century after 'satire', the Simpsonian spirit held sway. Writing about the Goons, Cleese was right about Simpson too: they 'challenged the stuffiness with joy. They created a sense of liberation that went beyond laughter, evoking a strange, insane energy from people who suddenly found themselves breaking through the glass ceiling of

respectability'. Behind Monty Python, The Goodies and all their hugely popular spawn stands N. H. Simpson.

Born in 1919, the son of a glass-blower, and educated in Battersea, Norman Frederick Simpson took an honours degree in English at London University after war service in the Intelligence Corps, in Italy, Palestine and Cyprus. He taught A level English to adults until 1963. Since then he has been a full-time writer. He still is.

He has written over twenty plays, worked on several television series, some entirely his own, others in collaboration, and has published one novel, *Harry Bleachbaker* (1976). The plays which made his name were *A Resounding Tinkle*, produced at the Royal Court in 1957, the year after *Look Back in Anger*, and *One Way Pendulum* (1959); though the one-act *The Hole* (1958) is almost equally well known. One-act and even ten-minute plays are very much part of his interest. He contributed to many late-fifties and early sixties revues such as *Pieces of Eight* and *One Over the Eight*, a sketch-writing skill later transferred to television, where he wrote for Beryl Reid, among others. John Cleese played Holmes in his *Elementary, My Dear Watson* in 1975. Later plays such as *The Cresta Run* (Royal Court 1965) and *Was He Anyone?* (1972) are equally characteristic and should be cited as much as the first two. N. F. Simpson was only ever Norman to those close enough to use Christian names between males before 1956 (not many); and never Frederick. Since the year of the Abdication Crisis, when, just out of school, he was working innumerate as Simpson, a bank clerk, he has been known to his friends as Wally. His writing sometimes seems to be a continuous flow from which he extracts nuggets of ideas ('I am a miniaturist, really' he says) now- in this form, now that.

Snippets first appeared as interval readings on Radio Three, under the title *Snippets Two*. It was recorded in August 1982: by Richard Vernon with a mixture of avuncular complacency and slightly irritable common sense. An earlier series of thirteen even shorter *Snippets* had been recorded in 1981. The writer listens to what people say and the ways in which they say it with an innocent and astonished ear. Much of the surreal logic takes off from language itself and from the obsessions it represents. Sterne and Lewis Carroll, Wodehouse and Thurber would recognise it with delight.