

Aristos

THE JOURNAL OF ESTHETICS

July 1982
Vol. 1 No. 1

Rattigan's Renaissance

by Holly Hill

When Sir Terence Rattigan died in 1977, no major American newspaper or magazine published an appreciation of his work. The arts editor of a prominent national newspaper rejected my proposal for such an article by declaring: "But Rattigan was not first-rate." In the spring of 1981, a new arts editor at the same newspaper not only assigned me an article about Rattigan, but titled it "A First-Rate Playwright's Return to Prominence."

The appreciation was inspired by a production of *The Winslow Boy* which began in a small Off Broadway theatre and went on to gross a million dollars on a national tour. Even Rattigan's most optimistic American admirers did not dream that the first New York mainstream revival of his work would meet with such success.

In Britain, Rattigan had made a considerable recovery from the derision heaped upon him in the late fifties and the sixties, when young critics hailed such "Angry Young Men" newcomers as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and John Arden, greeting their so-called "New Wave" of playwrighting like a Second Coming. Between 1970 and 1977, there had been critically and commercially successful London revivals of five Rattigan plays. Michael Darlow and Gillian Hodson's thoughtful and sympathetic biography, *Terence Rattigan: The Man and His Work*, appeared in the summer of 1979. The biography was the first published full-length study of Rattigan's work. In view of the length and scope of his career, such serious appraisal was as overdue, but as welcome, as the National Theatre's first Rattigan revival, their 1980 production of *Playbill*.

News of all this filtered across the Atlantic, but the American theatrical community had seldom shown enthusiasm for Rattigan. Though fourteen of his plays were produced on Broadway, only *The Winslow Boy* and *Separate Tables* had been both critical and commercial successes. Few regional or Off Broadway theatres revived Rattigan's works, and many critics and scholars held them in contempt. Some of my academic colleagues mocked my choice of Rattigan's plays as the subject of my Ph.D. thesis,

and not until after his death did Twayne Publishers assign a Rattigan study for their English Authors series. Rattigan aficionados in America were few.

It seemed as if a decade or more might have to pass before a new generation of critics could view Rattigan's plays from a fresh, unbiased perspective. As late as 1974, when *In Praise of Love* opened on Broadway, Clive Barnes was still sniping at Rattigan for his alleged lack of "commitment." When Simon Gray's *Molly* played Off Off Broadway in 1978, Barnes seized the opportunity to declare how superior it was to *Cause Celebre*, Rattigan's play on the same subject. The best that most American critics could say was that Rattigan was a good boulevard playwright—a polished lightweight.

With a stroke as daring and effective as Rattigan's famous second-act curtain in *The Winslow Boy*, two Off Broadway producers created a fresh perspective for Rattigan's work. In the play, the brilliant barrister Sir Robert Morton savagely questions Ronnie Winslow about his alleged theft, exposing holes in his story and reducing the boy to hysterics in front of his family. Sir Robert's dismissal of the case's merits appears obvious, but then he calmly announces "The boy is plainly innocent. I accept the brief," and the curtain falls before the audience whose expectations have been flamboyantly reversed.¹ Gene Feist and Michael Fried, Producing Directors of Off-Broadway's Roundabout Theatre Company, followed in spirit Rattigan's daredevil technique. They scheduled a revival of *The Winslow Boy* to follow their enormously successful revival of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Not only would Rattigan's drama appear just after the very play which had launched the "New Wave" in 1956 and sent his reputation into prolonged eclipse, it would also have to impress critics and attract audiences on its own, in a modest production without stars, whereas *Look Back in Anger* had boasted Malcolm MacDowell as Jimmy Porter.

The gamble paid off generously. The New York critics gave *The Winslow Boy* much better reviews than *Look Back in*

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 1)

Anger. Even Clive Barnes cheered, just as if he had never written a negative word about Rattigan. John Simon actually apologized for having previously undervalued Rattigan's work. Calling *The Winslow Boy* "the most rousing and uncheatingly uplifting drama in New York today," Simon wrote in the November 17, 1980 issue of *New York Magazine*:

It has a plot... that moves forward ineluctably yet suspensefully, with exemplary crafted changes of pace; characters that, however peripheral, bulge with foreshortened but three-dimensional palpability; and, loveliest of all, areas of unstated possibility—opened but unfilled-in vistas where the audience's imagination is allowed free, creative play.

The Roundabout production, directed by Douglas Seale and acted by an American cast with heightened sensitivity for the nuances of Rattigan's character relationships and dialogue, played to sold-out houses in New York from October through January. *The Winslow Boy* could have stayed indefinitely in its Off Broadway house. However, Roger Stevens, Chairman of the prestigious Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., needed a play to fill in for an unexpected flop. He chose *The Winslow Boy*—a piquant historical irony, for Rattigan had enjoyed his first success in 1936 when his romantic comedy *French without Tears* was staged in the West End to fill in for a flop, and "filled in" for nearly three years.

Stevens sent the Roundabout production on a three-month cross-country tour which ended with a month's engagement at the Kennedy Center and talk of a Broadway run. With Roundabout producers Gene Feist and Michael Fried holding out for their splendid original company and prospective Broadway backers demanding stars for the leading roles, the Broadway production did not materialize.

The Winslow Boy's success, however, launched a Rattigan renaissance in America. This was given a boost in June, 1981, by the success of the National Theatre's production of *Playbill*, which represented Britain at the first Baltimore International Theatre Festival. In the 1981-82 theatre season, London fringe theatres (the equivalent of New York's Off and Off Off Broadway) staged Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* and *In Praise of Love*. New York's Roundabout Theatre Company produced *The Browning Version*, as did one of America's leading regional companies, the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

Reviews for the plays were not all raves. In the May 3, 1982 *New Yorker*, Edith Oliver called Rattigan "not a particularly distinguished writer" but "a careful craftsman," while Douglas Watt commented in

the *Daily News* of April 23 that "Rattigan's plays were old-fashioned even when they were new"—old refrains in the body of Rattigan criticism, but ones bound to be heard again as Rattigan's achievements are debated. James Fenton of London's *Sunday Times*, who appears to have missed the nearly two decades of abuse Rattigan suffered from British critics during the "New Wave" and Absurdism crazes, preceded his March 7 review of *In Praise of Love* with the peculiar comment:

Was there ever, in fact, a Rattigan Revival?... when we talk about a Noel Coward revival or a Terence Rattigan revival I hardly think that the popular taste which had supported these talents had ever died out. The eclipse of Rattigan's reputation is, I should say, yet to come.

By contrast, Frank Rich began his April 23 *New York Times* review of *The Browning Version* with:

The once-tattered reputation of Terence Rattigan has risen so steadily, both in London and New York, since his death in 1977 that critics are no longer needed to plead his cause. As it's now clear, Rattigan's best plays are his best defense—they're almost foolproof.

What happened to lift Rattigan from boulevard playwright to acknowledged artist? On both sides of the Atlantic, we have endured a quarter-century during which most playwrights have regarded a plot as something they'd be buried in after death. Woolly thinking and sloppy construction have been rampant. Rattigan was seldom guilty of either. Though his twenty-four plays are not flawless, the clarity of conception and construction in the majority are outstanding. They have "good bones"—a prime requisite for aging well, and a startling contrast with the degrees of calcium deficiency evident in other playwrights of the last thirty years.

The polished surfaces of Rattigan's plays still seem, however, to make critics nervous. Confronted with *The Winslow Boy*, some reviewers showed themselves to be begrudgingly impressed by Rattigan's craftsmanship. Typical was James Lardner of the *Washington Post*. He wrote in his 30 April 1981 review:

If you pride yourself on having a sensitive meter for old-fashioned dramatic formulas and stratagems, you will have a field day (or field night) counting up all the flimsy ingredients in this stiff-upper-lip British melodrama—the stock characters, the contrived sub-plots and the implausible transitions. But if you're willing to turn the meter off and look at what lies underneath, what you'll find is a splendidly harmonious and often exhilarating production of a play with surprising strength and subtlety.

It will take time and greater familiarity with Rattigan's plays for such critics to shed prejudices against well-made plays, to appreciate Rattigan's meticulous craftsmanship, and to recognise all the levels of meaning within it. *The Winslow Boy*, for example, is about much more than the importance of right and justice being done to individuals by government and society. In Rattigan's study of a broad range of characters—metaphorically extended to the offstage followers of the Winslow case—he examines the psychological relationship of values to action. Each character confronts the case in terms of his or her own moral principles and/or practical concerns. The three principals—Arthur and Catherine Winslow and Sir Robert Morton—are not even in agreement on exactly why and how the battle should be fought. From the conjunction of forces for and against the prolonged struggle, Rattigan crafts a portrait of the kind of human spirit which makes it possible for any righteous ideals to triumph in the world. The polished surfaces of Rattigan's plays are not ends in themselves, but looking-glasses to worlds within.

Some of these inner worlds have already been explored, predominantly by British critics and in the Darlow-Hodson biography. They have commented upon such themes as fear of emotion and of sex, the pain of unequal passion, and the importance of understanding and kindness in human relationships. They have lauded such accomplishments as the myriad implications of Rattigan's extraordinarily rich, precisely stylised dialogue. Other aspects of Rattigan's work are most perceptively examined in the forthcoming Twayne Publishers book, *Terence Rattigan: His Plays and Their Times*, by Susan Rusinko, a professor of English at a Pennsylvania college. Professor Rusinko points out the deep ambivalences between private need and public conduct in Rattigan's characters, the life-affirming tragic stature of his vision, Rattigan's importance as a social critic and a conscience for the period in which he wrote, and the Chekhovian nature of his craftsmanship. Rattigan, she writes:

... re-ordered the mechanics of the Scribean *piece bien faite* to serve his dramatic purposes. His stories and plots create tensions and climaxes that are emotional rather than contrived and mechanical, resembling much more closely in their individual scene construction, in the overall play structure, and in their taut understatement the plays of Chekhov... Like Osborne and Pinter, Rattigan is concerned with deeply personal problems of love, sex, and marriage. In the resolutions of his problems he is Chekhovian in the way in which his characters en-

ture in their lives, without melodramatic endings and without total victimization by society... Polished without being slick, natural without untidiness, Rattigan's art has given firm shape to the mid-twentieth century mainstream of English life, chronicling the sweeping changes in the moods and attitudes of the time, as did Chekhov for his time.²

Much remains to be discovered or more closely examined in Rattigan's plays and in his film and television scripts. The profundity of Rattigan's psychological portraiture, for instance, is attested to by an expert on the subject. New York City psychiatrist Allan Blumenthal encourages his patients in private and group therapy to study Rattigan's work, particularly *The Browning Version* and *Separate Tables*, for its insight into the mechanism of psychological repression. Dr. Blumenthal comments:

In the character of Crocker-Harris, protagonist of *The Browning Version*, Terence Rattigan demonstrates the nature of the schoolmaster's inner conflicts, his vulnerability and the subconscious defence-mechanisms of repression. Without explicit psychological explanation, he makes clear the meaning of Crocker-Harris's emotionless external manner and through the events of the story, he demonstrates the breakdown of his defense. To reveal inner conflict clearly through its effects in action and to do it dramatically and convincingly is a formidable artistic task. In this respect, Rattigan is surely a genius.

The most recognizable sign of psychological repression is the "stiff upper lip." While Britons acknowledge their stiff upper lips—at least the other fellows'—natives of other countries usually do not. This has led to a blind spot in American critics' reactions to Rattigan. The stiff upper lips of Crocker-Harris and Sir Robert Morton, of Sybil and the Major in *Separate Tables*, T.E. Lawrence in *Ross*, the men in *The Deep Blue Sea*, and numerous other Rattigan characters, have been perceived as exclusively British. Yet, as Dr. Blumenthal points out:

I believe the issues dramatised by Rattigan are universal. Psychological repression, for example, is hardly confined to the British. Repression leading to muted emotional reactions and buried personal values is tragically widespread. I have seen it in patients from England, but also from the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, Australia, and even Asia.

Many of the other conflicts dramatized by Rattigan are the result of confusions over

philosophical issues—issues such as the mind-body dichotomy, free will vs. determinism, the meaning of sex, the role of women, etc. Such philosophical questions arise in every culture, and every individual is potentially a victim of irrational and contradictory philosophical attitudes prevalent in his culture. Although Rattigan chooses his characters predominantly from one particular social group, the problems they manifest stem from philosophical questions relevant to all people.³

"The underlying theme in Rattigan's work is a passionate defense of the single, unique person."

Rattigan's work will be better and more widely appreciated when the universality of the psychological problems he dramatizes is acknowledged.

Another point of universality in Rattigan's work went unrecognized not only by most of his critics but by Rattigan himself. He often attacked doctrinaire drama and was critically dismissed—consistently in America and particularly during the "New Wave" in Britain—as an ideologically empty playwright. Ironically, the body of Rattigan's work is profoundly ideological.

Prejudices based upon sex, race, religion, nationality and class have accounted for incalculable atrocities. But the most oppressed minority throughout history has always been the individual. The underlying theme in Rattigan's work is a passionate defense of the single, unique person. His position was seldom recognized because ideologies are usually thought of as particular systems or sets of principles, such as socialism, capitalism, feminism. In December of 1974, Rattigan told me: "People should care about people, and I've some doubts that the ideologists do. They may care about the starving millions, but they're not worried too much about those millions' particular concerns." Rattigan was. When his characters stood up for different systems, Rattigan stood up for his characters.

Beginning with his revelation of the apparently stuffy naval Commander in *French Without Tears* as a sensitive and sensible man, Rattigan's concern for his characters as individuals was evident. By the end of his first decade of playwriting,

with *O Mistress Mine* and *The Winslow Boy*, it was a hallmark of his work. In *O Mistress Mine*, Rattigan exposed an impassioned seventeen-year-old socialist as an unwitting hypocrite; in *The Winslow Boy* he showed his heroine, a sincere socialist and feminist, giving up the man she loves to fight for the principle of right.


The Winslow Boy is Rattigan's most explicit defense of the individual. One of his most subtle is *The Deep Blue Sea*. Rattigan's portrayal of Hester Collyer anticipates the women's movement. She is a woman who has tried to live through the men in her life and has found that she cannot. She is confused by her sexual awakening yet hungry for fulfillment, has no job training or career goals, and must develop a sense of her own identity and worth almost at middle age. But *The Deep Blue Sea* is not a narrowly feminist play, and not simply because the word 'feminism' never occurs. Rattigan's characterizations of Hester's husband and lover, who are threatened, bewildered and wounded by her attitudes and actions, are equally sympathetic, and anticipate the problems men have had adjusting to women's increasing demands.

Rattigan's skill in presenting values from varying characters' points of view has been practically demonstrated to me several times when I have taught *The Winslow Boy* to college classes. The students have been divided almost equally in their sympathies for the characters whose highest values are moral principles and those who cherish everyday comforts. My students' debates have proved to all of us the truth in the exchange between Catherine Winslow and Sir Robert Morton, in which they conclude that only a minority from all political parties is united in its concern for personal liberty, and that one can only hope that this minority will always prevail.

The respect for individuals conveyed in Rattigan's characterizations was extended to his actors and audiences through the trust he placed in both. This trust, which rests upon Rattigan's use of dramatic implication, is proving well-founded with succeeding generations of performers and playgoers. The last scene of *The Winslow Boy* provides an apt illustration. Sir Robert says goodbye to Catherine Winslow and asks "Shall I see you in the House then, one day?" She replies: "Yes, Sir Robert. One day. But not in the Gallery. Across the floor."

In her response, Catherine implies that she means not only to go on fighting for women's suffrage but, once the vote is won, to stand for the Commons and to face Sir Robert as a member of the Opposition. "Across the floor"—three simple words—is at once a discovery, announcement, challenge, and a flourish of trumpets. In the Roundabout Theatre revival, the actress playing Catherine said

(continued from page 5)

"Across the Floor" and extended her hand to Sir Robert, as an equal. At the performance I saw at the Kennedy Center, the audience broke into applause. The actress completed the line with a gesture, the audience heard the trumpets and answered with its own. Rattigan's ability to challenge actors and to stir audiences lives. With his artistic renaissance moving beyond Britain to America, his recognition as a world-class dramatist approaches. 

NOTES

1. *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, vol. 1 (London; Hamish Hamilton, 1953). All quotations from this edition.
2. *Manuscript of Terence Rattigan: His Plays and Their Times*, by Susan Rusinko. Quotations from pages 5, 65, and 45.
3. Interviews with Dr. Allan Blumenthal in New York City in January, 1975 and May, 1981.

Holly Hill is an Assistant Professor of Speech and Theatre at John Jay College of the City University of New York. She has contributed reviews and arts features to such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Soho News*, *Playbill (Broadway)*, *Horizon*, and *American Arts*.

'Rattigan's Renaissance' was originally published in the inaugural issue of *Aristos* in July 1982 and is published online in January 2011 with the kind permission of the author.

Copyright © 2011
The Aristos Foundation