

Secrets and Truths

Terence Rattigan turned his personal anguish into searing drama in *The Deep Blue Sea*.

By Gerard Raymond

"All great dramas are about secrets, and the secrets keep falling out of the closet at the beginning of the play," says director Mark Lamos, discussing his current revival of Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* at the Roundabout Theatre Company. "Here, as in Ibsen, the situation is revealed to you, and the real feelings of the characters — the ones that are causing the problems — are those which even they don't know themselves."

But there are also secrets that remain hidden in this 1952 British drama, now starring Blythe Danner and Edward Herrmann. We may discover truths about the heroine, Hester Collyer, who tries to kill herself in despair after the failure of her extramarital affair with a younger man; but what does the play tell us about Rattigan? Buried within *The Deep Blue Sea* are shards from the life of the passionate yet reserved



Midlife crisis: Blythe Danner stars as Hester in the Roundabout production of *The Deep Blue Sea*.

homosexual playwright who successfully transmutes his personal anguish through the play's three leading characters.

From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Rattigan was arguably England's most popular playwright. With a string of hits including *French Without Tears* (1936), *The Winslow Boy* (1946), *The Browning Version* (1948) and *Separate Tables* (1954), he enjoyed a glittering career rivaling that of the West End's other darling, Noël Coward. He also flourished as a screenwriter, turning several of his plays into successful movies, including *The Prince and the Showgirl* and *Bequest to the Nation*; his original screenplays include *Breaking the Sound Barrier* and *The VIPs*, the first movie to exploit the headline-making romance between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Rattigan continued

writing up to his death in 1977 at age 66, but in his final two decades he was ignominiously cast aside both by the critics and his formerly adoring public.

Playwright John Osborne struck the first blow with *Look Back in Anger*, a corrosive slice-of-working-class-life play that ushered in the so-called Angry Young Man movement of English theater in 1956. Rattigan went out of fashion overnight. As proletarian anti-heroes yelled and raged on the London stages, the patrician playwright's repressed and lonely characters seemed downright old-fashioned and melodramatic. Rattigan's work was too overtly commercial for the young turks who had wrested control of the English stage.



James Hanley and Margaret Sul-lavan played Hester and her lover in the original Broadway production.

They also despised his elegant and closeted lifestyle. Rattigan never hid his sexual orientation from his friends, but given that homosexuality was illegal in England at the time, he took great pains to maintain a socially acceptable facade for the public. Perhaps the young revolutionaries, including the esteemed critic Kenneth Tynan, didn't do the older playwright justice. Underneath Rattigan's well-crafted surfaces ran deep and subversive

currents. Indeed, he may have looked like the enemy, but he was more a soul brother.

Rattigan used to claim that "*le vice anglais*" was actually the English's refusal to admit to their emotions. Although his plays may appear at first glance to be as buttoned-down British as you can get, he pinpoints with great accuracy exactly what was wrong with the society he seemed to epitomize. "Rattigan is actually savage about England and how repressive it is," says director Lamos. "In the angry young plays, the minute the curtain goes up you know exactly what's going on; [in Rattigan's plays] drama is what goes on underneath."

Since the early 1990s, Rattigan has been enjoying a renaissance — while, ironically, the celebrated works of the angry young men have become period pieces. Karel Reisz's 1993 revival of *The Deep Blue Sea* at London's Almeida Theatre is now regarded as a landmark in this decade's reappraisal of the playwright's work. Even as Lamos' production opens on Broadway, on the other side of the Atlantic, Neil Bartlett's staging of Rattigan's final play, *Cause Célèbre*, is completing a run at the Lyric Hammersmith and a new production of *Separate Tables* opens at the King's Head. And David Mamet has begun filming a remake of *The Winslow Boy*. An excellent biography by Geoffrey Wansell, published last year in the U.S. by St. Martin's Press, has contributed greatly to the flurry of interest in Rattigan by uncovering the private torment behind the playwright's public image as a glamorous playboy.

The Deep Blue Sea is one of Rattigan's most personal and private works. He was prompted to write the play after his former lover, actor Kenneth Morgan, committed suicide in 1949. Morgan had left Rattigan for a younger man, but when the new relationship soured, he ended his life. Wansell illustrates how Rattigan's experience "colored every line of the play." It's easy to see how the suicidal Hester is a stand-in for Morgan, and her devot-

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The *Deep Blue Sea*, the Terence Rattigan play that just opened at the Roundabout, literally changed my life.

It was 22 years ago in South Africa, the country of my birth. I had just become a teenager when I grudgingly went on a school trip to Johannesburg's Andre Huguenot Theatre. Up till then, I'd been a serious film buff, seeing perhaps three or four movies a week. One of the most immediate surprises of this theater visit — which remains a vivid memory today — was the realization that when the curtain went up, there weren't any opening titles. (Instead, there was a program, one I still have in my possession.) The play was *The Deep Blue Sea*, and it totally gripped me.

This beautifully written, powerful, and moving play tells the story of an older woman, Hester Collyer, so in thrall to the love she feels for a young man, Freddie Page (who is utterly incapable of returning that love), that she has left her husband and the privileged life they shared. Hester was played by the British actress Helen Cherry (wife of the late Trevor Howard); Freddie by British actor James Faulkner. I remember all these details as clear as day, without even consulting the aforementioned program. Although I am sure I did not — *could* not, at age 14 — catch all the emotional resonances of this astonishing piece, its effect was transforming.

I started going to the theater voraciously, whenever my parents would take me. Despite a cultural boycott then in existence, Johannesburg had a thriving theatrical scene. In addition to commercial venues like the Andre Huguenot (run by the still-active theatrical impresario Pieter Toerin),



Rattigan (r.) and Laurence Olivier pose with Marilyn Monroe on the set of *The Prince and the Showgirl*. The playwright wrote the script, based on his play *The Sleeping Prince*.

ed and successful husband, Sir William, a version of the playwright himself. But Rattigan put something of himself into Hester as well. Like her, he had rejected an older lover who still desired him in the way Sir William wants to reconcile with Hester. There's also a bit of the younger Rattigan (a one-time enlistee with the Royal Air Force) in the callow young pilot whose body Hester still craves.

Rattigan's triumph in *The Deep Blue Sea* — his greatness as an artist, if you like — is the ability to tap into his soul while staying within the constraints of traditional commercial theater. He infuses an ordinary middle-class English woman with desires that are as carnal, as passionate, and as tragically unsuitable as those of Cleopatra or Phaedra — or for that matter, Blanche DuBois, the creation of his American contemporary Tennessee Williams.

Even as Rattigan was working on early drafts of the play, there were rumors about an original version in

which Hester was a man called Hector. The story went that the playwright caved in to the demands of the Lord Chamberlain's office (the official censor of the time) and subsequently reversed the character's gender. If there indeed was a male version, it has never surfaced. Wansell argues quite persuasively against its existence, pointing out that Rattigan was hardly likely to expose himself so openly and was much too savvy about his West End audience's tastes to attempt such a bold, not to say foolhardy, gesture. (In the case of *Separate Tables*, it appears the playwright did write and then suppress a gay-slanted scene, which is now being restored for the first time in the current London revival.) But as far as *The Deep Blue Sea* is concerned, it's not hard to argue that Rattigan's hidden emotions give the play its depth. ■

GERARD RAYMOND most recently traced the history of *Cabaret* for *InTheater*.