RATTIGAN: INSIDE AND OUT

Dan Rebellato explores Terence Rattigan as a playwright both of private emotion and of epic political struggle.

The graph of Terence Rattigan's reputation eerily tracks that of T.E. Lawrence. When Lawrence died in 1935, his reputation was at a height, the dashing hero of the Arab Revolt, a figure of mystery for his post-war anonymity in the RAF ranks, and, as dark clouds gathered over Europe's politics, he had started to be called upon by some as a potential saviour. His first biographer, writing a year before Lawrence's early death, noted with bemusement that some talked of him as 'a light to lead stumbling humanity out of its troubles', before throwing caution to the wind and declaring him 'the Spirit of Freedom, come incarnate to a world in fetters'.

No one ever quite thought Terence Rattigan could save the world, but many in the mid-1930s thought he might save the theatre. *French Without Tears* (1936), his first major success, premiering a year after Lawrence's death, was a comedy of unusual youth and freshness. While Rattigan was keen to throw off the reputation it has given him as a lightweight farceur, and would certainly write more serious and better things, it was the play that established a reputation which remained high until the mid-1950s. Rattigan suffered an eclipse after Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and the rise of the Angry Young Men. Lawrence's reputation was almost simultaneously dealt a blow by an extremely hostile biography written by Richard Aldington in 1955, which sought to show that Lawrence of Arabia had systematically exaggerated his role in the First World War and was a masochist and homosexual to boot. Aldington's account was much disputed but some of the mud stuck and in amongst the epic heroism of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is the portrait of an irrational and sadistic brute. Rattigan, too, was now a figure of mockery, with critics and commentators dismissing him as a relic of a happily-

TERENCE RATTIGAN
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forgotten generation.

But both men have had a dramatic resurgence in recent years. Over the last quarter-century, the persistent merits of Rattigan's plays have been increasingly acknowledged by a new generation, who have stripped the productions of their superficial mid-century trappings and rediscovered them as profound portraits of aching emotional longing. Lawrence, meanwhile, with his deep loyalties and affection for the Arab world has re-emerged in some quarters as a guide for western engagement in the Middle East. During the Iraq war, US military leaders like General Petraeus took to quoting Lawrence's '27 Articles' from 1917 as a kind of counterinsurgency field manual.

The juxtaposition of Rattigan, the urbane, witty, West End playwright, with Lawrence of Arabia might seem a bit unlikely. In fact there are some real connections: Rattigan and Lawrence were both upper middle class, Oxford-educated, homosexual Englishmen, who hid their personalities with obsessiveness and guile. Rattigan's father was a diplomat and Terry spent some time as a young boy in Egypt where men who would become key figures in Lawrence's story passed regularly through the family home.

But still - Terence Rattigan? That portraitist of middle-class despair, of unequal passion, the anatomist of unstated human pain? Can he really be compared to the adventurer and horseman, rebel and mercenary that Lawrence briefly was? It's worth noting that none of *Ross*'s first critics in 1960 thought there was anything strange about Rattigan writing a play about this man. Although it can seem strange to us to read a Rattigan play packed with discussing terrorists, revolutionary groups, and guerrillas blowing up train lines, perhaps this should tell us that even now his reputation is not quite restored. Perhaps he is more than the playwright we think he is.

The plays that have been most celebrated in recent years have been the more apparently domestic ones. *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) set in its dingy West London apartment; *Separate Tables* (1954) in a south-coast boarding house; *After the Dance* (1939) in a fashionable London flat; *The Browning Version* (1948) in the Crocker-Harris's cramped teaching quarters. These locations might encourage us to see Rattigan as an unmistakably domestic writer, whose interior locations take us on journeys to their characters' own interiors. Certainly there's some merit to that claim.

But we should not forget how carefully Rattigan places the action of these plays against a wider, even epic canvas. Hester Collyer's apartment in *The Deep Blue Sea* is in a large tenement block and through the careful choreography of people passing the front door, voices heard on the stairs, and the constant fear of discovery, Rattigan paints a much broader picture of British culture's struggles with class and sexuality than its simple story of unrequited love might at first suggest. *After the Dance* is a bleakly pessimistic play in which the story of David, Joan and Helen's triangular relationship is part of a comment on a hedonistic generation's failure to confront the rise of fascism. And fascism, in a certain way, is the secret subject of *Separate Tables*, particularly its second half; in the decision of Major Pollock to take up his usual table and the decision of the other residents to let him, against the wishes of the imperious Mrs Railton-Bell, we are seeing nothing less a tyrant being brought down: 'the dining-room of the Beauregard Private Hotel', writes Rattigan in the closing stage direction, 'no longer gives any sign of the battle that has just been fought and won between its four walls'. It may be a domestic setting, but it is a representation of war.

And war has often been Rattigan's topic. *After the Dance*'s expressions of dread for the coming battles made it too bleak for London audiences once the battles had actually broken out. Conversely, his *Follow My Leader* (1940) was a farcical satire of the rise of Hitler, written a couple of years earlier but banned by the official censor of plays because it would give offence to Germany, at that point a 'friendly power'. By the time hostilities had officially opened, the play could be produced,

ANNA CHANCELLOR (MILLIE CROCKER-HARRIS) IN *THE BROWNING VERSION*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JOHAN PERSSON**

STEPHANIE COLE (MRS RAILTON BELL) AND JOSEPHINE TEWSON (LADY MATHESON). *SEPARATE TABLES*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MANUEL HARLAN**

at which point its light-hearted japes seemed incongruous amid preparation for war. But it was in *Flare Path* (1940) that Rattigan struck gold again, a play not about the horrors of war, but the terrors of those left behind. The play is peopled with individuals whose private fears, their cowardice, their deceit, their longing, are given epic scale by being placed against an imaginative panorama of war planes taking off and landing.

In the post-war period, Rattigan turned his attention to historical subjects, again affording him a broader perspective in which grand themes of the individual in society could emerge. The first of these was *The Winslow Boy* (1946), set in 1910, pitting the legal and military authority of the Admiralty against a mere boy, with its famous cry for justice: 'Let right be done'. *Adventure Story* (1950) concerns Alexander the Great and follows his conquests across Persia. These world-historical events are the backdrop to a personal battle, in which we realise Alexander is seeking to escape himself. Dismissed by his father as effeminate, Alexander is seeking to deny and prove himself, and in the process becomes a brutal and callous destroyer of lives. It is a theme to which Rattigan arguably returns in *Ross*.

Of course, there is more than a hint of autobiography in these plays. Rattigan was fortunate in having the money and the theatrical circles in which to express his homosexuality fairly freely. And yet he was scared of exposure; the height of his reputation in the first half of the 1950s coincided with one of the most notorious police crackdowns on homosexual activity and Rattigan feared blackmail, exposure and disgrace. In some ways, plays like *Separate Tables* were his plea for understanding. But Rattigan's protectiveness had hardened into a callous emotional brutality often meted out against friends and lovers who he thought had got too close. Michael Darlow's excellent biography of Rattigan tells numerous stories of friends cast adrift, lovers snubbed, pleas for help ignored.

Rattigan was self-righteous about these flaws in private, but in public he turned them into drama. One of his great themes is the consequence of emotional self-denial. His great heroines are women of fearless sexual passion like Hester Collyer or Alma Rattenbury from *Cause Célèbre* (1977); his (anti-)heroes are men like Crocker-Harris, Major Pollock, Alexander, and Ross, haunted by the knowledge of how emotional restraint has deformed and distorted their lives.

Rattigan's stagecraft is always so fluent that it is sometimes hard to notice its ingenuity. The natural-seeming but elegantly choreographed entrances and exits in *French Without Tears* are what produce some of the biggest laughs. But he is capable of making those old mid-century settings into extraordinarily powerful machines for generating emotion and understanding. In *After the Dance*, Helen tells Joan that she and Joan's husband, David, have fallen in love and hopes Joan will consent to a divorce: after all, as is well known, Joan and David were never in love and only married as a joke. But during the scene, although it is never expressed, we realise with horror that in fact Joan's feelings are entirely real but that she is now trapped in her carefree pretence. We can feel the emotions welling up and - that most terrible of mid-century things - she may not be able to avoid 'making a scene'. She casually shows Helen to the door and Rattigan gives us one last moment of tension as the door sticks as Helen tries to open it. It's a tiny moment but it tips the emotion of the scene into emotional despair through an infinitesimal moment of farce.

Later in the same play, we track Joan through a ghastly cocktail party, watching her less and less able to maintain her brave face. At the back of the stage, Rattigan has given us a curtain, covering a pair of French windows, onto a balcony. At the end of Act 2, Joan steps onto the balcony and as the other party guests tumble back into the room to sing a sentimental song, one of them pulls back the curtain to reveal... nothing. It is a magician's trick but it tells us that Joan has taken her own life. The emotional inexpression that has been the mechanism throughout for showing us the depth of her feeling is crystallised in a shattering image of nothing that says everything.

In *Ross* and his later plays, although he rarely gets much credit for it, Rattigan has been learning from the new wave of British theatre. The influence of Joan Littlewood's, Bertolt Brecht's and Roger Planchon's companies in the mid-1950s, coupled with some advances in stage technology and design, had opened up a much more fluid sense of how the stage could tell stories and we see Rattigan grasping these opportunities with enthusiasm. In the dream states and magic lantern shows of *Ross*, Rattigan, the master of the well-made play, is breaking theatrical form apart, not for its own sake, but as a way of exploring the expressibility of forbidden desire. Think of the heartbreaking final moments of his final play *Cause Célèbre* in which Alma Rattenbury - hounded and disgraced for her desires - has fled from the court after the verdict is heard. The stage splits in two, on one side the pious but troubled forewoman of the jury Miss Davenport in her home; on the other, chronologically displaced, by the side of a river, preparing to take her own life, is Alma. Those foursquare walls of Rattigan's earlier work have broken apart; we now see the inside and the outside simultaneously, and it's a vision of impossible emotional freedom as Alma delivers her final speech and surely Rattigan's too: 'It is beautiful here. What a lovely world we are in, if only we would let ourselves see it'.

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