

The Birth of the Old Vic Association

(Editor's Note: The following are extracts from a very much longer article written for us by Mr. L. Warwick James. We are most grateful to him for giving us permission to print them.)

I left boarding school in December 1922 with the intention of being a doctor. However, possibly with a view to filling my spare time, my father spoke to a friend, Mr. Everard Morrish, (Chairman of the Governors of the Old Vic) who thought that some spare time occupation could be found for me. I had at this point never heard of the Old Vic or Lilian Baylis and South of the Thames was a sealed book. The whole prospect seemed most exciting. I found my way to Waterloo on the day appointed and I asked my way to the Old Vic and was told "There, Mate". I saw a large rectangular building with some knobs on top at the corners. It stood (as I found later) at the corner of Waterloo Road and the New Cut. The corner that I could see seemed occupied by a tea shop, John Pearce, but above that was a large board "Home of Shakespeare and Opera in English". I had arrived but it looked from where I stood that the entrance to the theatre was through John Pearce.

I have no idea how I found myself in the theatre, sitting and watching "Henry VI" and that would fix my first visit as January/February 1923. In the interval I was collected by a Miss Irene Beeston and taken to "The Manager's Box", from the depths of which arose a large black figure who announced herself as Lilian Baylis. She said she had been told I wanted to help. Before I had time to reply, she said "Well, my dear, this is Mr. Disney". (I had hardly noticed him). "He's starting the Old Vic Association, go and have a coffee and talk about it." Mr. Disney and I went into Pearce and Plenty, had a drink, talked and arranged our next meeting.

I went to the Vic on the agreed day, but could find no Mr. Disney and no one seemed to know anything, so I went to Miss Baylis' Box and explained that I was looking for Mr. Disney, to be interrupted "Oh, my dear, Mr. Disney has died, he had a heart attack last week." She continued "You'll have to be the secretary now. Mr. Rowe (later Sir Reginald, a Governor) will of course help you, you'd better start right away." I left the Box agape. I knew nobody in the theatre, I knew nothing about the Association. I decid-

ed to go home and await the morrow, when I was to meet Mr. Rowe. I went along to Lincoln's Inn and he told me that the object of the Association was to raise money and encourage audiences. He had decided that the subscription should be 10/- (50p.) per year or £5 for Life Membership. This would entitle the member to a copy of the "Old Vic Magazine" (issued I think monthly during the season) and to attend the Circle function on 12th Night. He said that there would be an Association Room when they had rebuilt the Old Vic - that was why money was needed. The members could distribute the green leaflets giving the plays and operas that were to be performed.

So I had landed myself with the founding of something utterly nebulous. School had in no way prepared me for such a task. It was awe-inspiring and yet very exciting - a real challenge.

I started by talking to Miss Beeston, who combined so many occupations as did everyone in any way attached to the Theatre. She was Editor of the "Old Vic Magazine" and Secretary of the Old Vic Circle. She introduced me to the Vic gallery, many of whom were members of the Circle. They would discuss the merits of Tenor A and those of Tenor B in .....They were tremendously keen and I felt more staunch Old Vic-ites than the gallery Shakespeare audience.

I visited the theatre as often as I could so that I could find out constant members of the audience to enrol them. I gradually found my way around, acquired yearly members and worked in Lilian's Box except when I was sent down to the "Wardrobe" - a house in the New Cut. I had to carry everything around with me, for there was nowhere to leave a book. I learned all this in the course of time, but I also had to learn about the theatre and the people who worked in it.

The Old Vic Association, the OVA, the Latin for egg, was obviously an egg that wanted hatching, and to grow. I was so to speak the Mother Hen who had to do the hatching, not by sitting, but by seeing, meeting, talking. I realised success begat success and I enrolled Ethel Smythe, Maude Royden, Edwin Fagg, Radcliffe Hall, Winifred Isaac, Margaret (Meg) Bourdillon, the Manders and others. I approached all the people who regularly attended and gradually membership grew, friends introduced friends. It was very exciting; I could not offer members in 1923 anything more than they would have by joining the Circle. I could say that when.... there would be a room and a library. It was clear that the Association was proving of interest. I had acquired an Assistant Secretary, Meg Bourdillon. I don't think Lilian asked her but I rather think I adopted her because she wanted to help. Hitherto I had kept a book with members' names and subscriptions which enabled me to carry it around. However, the possibility of a room pointed obviously to a card index.

I went down before the restored Old Vic opened and bought down a filing cabinet and the books that had already been donated to the Library. I went into the Foyer and went up the stairs to find the Old Vic Association's Secretary's office and the Old Vic Association Room.

Lilian Baylis, herself, I saw a great deal of her to start with (although she never enquired into the progress or finance of the Association). It is

important to realise that I was possibly the only person in the Vic who did not depend upon the Vic in some way for their future. I was a medical student and was (I suppose) creating something positive for the Vic and I was interested. I cost the Vic nothing, in fact it was a fair deal for the Vic. I stood therefore in quite a different relationship to Lilian than anyone else in the Theatre. Anything I did was of my own free will.

After the move the number of members began to grow. We could use the Rehearsal Room for lectures and these proved a great success. The Library grew and grew and it became necessary to have a rota of librarians to check books out and in. The numbers grew steadily and the OVA became not only a great backbone to the theatre but an evergrowing source of new audiences. I think it must be about this time that Miss Rankin entered into active interest as a librarian, but this jumps on into 1928.

It is up to others to see that the Vic and Lilian's memory should continue. I see it as an honour and a happiness to have been associated with the root cause and the inspiration of so much that lives as the outcome of Emma Cons, Lilian Baylis - The Old Vic.

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