

PROSCENIUM

The Killing of Sister George

By Frank Marcus

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Wednesday 18th June to Saturday 21st June 2008
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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June Buckridge (Sister George) Linda Hampson
Alice 'Childie' McNaught Christina You
Mrs Mercy Croft Kathleen Jones
Madame Xenia Susi Thornton
Directed by Sheila Harvey
Stage Manager Charles Anthony
Assisted by Crystal Anthony
Properties Margaret Rudolph
Lighting Paul Davies
Sound Robert Ewen

The action of the play passes in the living-room of a
London West End flat in the 1960s.

Act 1. A Tuesday afternoon in late September

Act 2. Scene 1 A week later. 4 a.m.

Scene 2 Late afternoon of the same day.

Act 3. Two weeks later. Morning.

Our thanks to Compass Theatre, East Lane Theatre Company, Belmont
Players and Dave Buckley for help with this production.

THE AUTHOR

Frank Marcus was born in 1928 in Breslau, Germany, into a Jewish family. He fled to England in 1939 and was educated in a school run by Anne Essinger, one of the co-ordinators of the Kindertransport.

In 1950 the equivalent of the modern fringe theatre was to be found in London's club theatres (officially open only to members and therefore not subject to the Lord Chamberlain's censorship, though not immune to police prosecution) and Frank Marcus, fascinated by the theatre, gained some experience as an actor. His first play, *Minuet for Stuffed Birds*, was produced at the Torch in 1950 and the following year he married its leading lady, Jacqueline Sylvester.

It was in the 1960s that he made his reputation as a playwright with four plays running successfully in main-stream theatres. Though his reputation declined in the 1970s – and now rests mainly on just one play – he wrote over twenty plays and is described by Alan Benedict as: A master of intelligent, wary comedy – dialogue so smooth, dramatically productive and rich in character.

During the 60s he was appointed drama critic of the Sunday Telegraph, a position he held for some ten years, and his experience as an actor and playwright and his profound knowledge of European theatre informed his reviews. He caused something of a stir by reviewing, under a thinly-disguised pseudonym, his own play, *Mrs Mouse Are You Within?*, assuming the role of an outraged puritan and demanding the author be horsewhipped.

Looking back on his career as a critic he said: I find that I have been tolerant of roughness, obscurity and boredom in experimental performance provided there was passion and seriousness of purpose, and hard on self-indulgence and compromise.

In his later years he suffered from Parkinson's disease and died in 1996.

THE PLAYS

Politics, social class, sexual freedom – the early 60s was a particularly exciting and innovative time in the British theatre with a wide-ranging variety of plays by Bill Naughton, David Mercer, David Storey, Edward Bond, Joan Littlewood's Stratford East theatre. Frank Marcus was not an explicitly political writer but with a number of other playwrights explored the theme of sexual hypocrisy. Giles Cooper's *Everything in the Garden*, where suburban housewives turned to prostitution, examined the conflict between surface respectability and greed, and Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane* delighted in being shocking and outrageous while illuminating grey areas of inhibition. Frank Marcus "was the most sophisticated of these writers, carrying into his skills a wide technical knowledge of European Drama, in particular of Molnar and Schnitzler. *The Formation Dancers*, 1964, about the changing relationships between two men and two women, and *Cleo*, 1965, a footloose, innocent (though not celibate) young girl, both owe much in subject matter and form to Schnitzler's *Reigen*." J. Elsom: Post-war British Theatre.

Alan Benedict recalls his feelings on the opening night of *The Killing of Sister George*: " 'Drink my bathwater' ordered the burly Reid of her sullen housemate and we all swallowed hard. What would the censor say? Still three years to run and lesbianism was never a subject we imagined he would tolerate. But lesbianism was never actually mentioned, what was important was the way women exercised power."

Philip Hope-Wallace in his Guardian review also did not mention lesbianism:

"*The Killing of Sister George*, which landed at the Duke of York's theatre last night, is the third play to reach London from Bristol in the current programme ... and the best. Frank Marcus has a cruel and pathetic story to tell and he exploits cruel comedy with a firm hand... This woman's world of polite hostility and sarcasm provides Mr Marcus with a splendid target. It may not be edifying but with the superlatively wry and clownish Beryl Reid as the ageing actress losing her job it is not only scorchingly funny but sometimes alive with true feeling.very entertaining and a distinct advance on *The Formation Dancers*."

MARCUS ON MARCUS

On *The Formation Dancers*:

"Explodes pretensions, but this time those of trendy intellectuals of approaching middle age: their dishonesty, conformity and their desire to be in the swim, to be fashionable."

On reaction to *The Killing of Sister George*:

"It never occurred to me to be shocked. What I am shocked by is people exploiting each other, using each other, being forced to break off relationships because of society, because of money, because of all these things. Any love relationship seems to me to be perfectly valuable and it never occurred to me to be shocked by lesbianism. To be absolutely honest I wasn't all that interested in that aspect of it.

I've always thought *Sister George* was a play about oppressive paternalism, it's certainly not a play about lesbianism. This awful film has given it a ghastly angle which I totally reject. What I couldn't have foreseen and didn't know when I sold the film rights, was at that precise moment Hollywood would relax its moral code, and introduce this totally gratuitous lesbian scene which has nothing to do with the play."

On politics:

"I'm not politically explicit. I'm not sure I could be, but I'm subversive in a moral sense. I like shaking people up a bit, making them feel unsure and question their accepted conformist tenets. I think it's very healthy for people and it's what a playwright should do."

RADIO SOAPS

Mrs Dale's Diary was the first all-British radio soap and was first broadcast on the Light Programme at 4.00 p.m. on Monday 5th January 1948 with Marie Goossens' harp introduction. The title character was a nice, rather earnest, middle class doctor's wife: Mary and her husband, Jim, lived in the Middlesex suburb of Parkwood Hill and had a son and daughter to supply the romantic interest, a glamorous and sophisticated sister, Sally, a mother-in-law with a cat, Captain, and a charlady for a little Cockney light relief. The Queen Mother was reportedly – and probably apocryphally – heard to comment: It is the only way of knowing what goes on in a middle class family.

Its endless stream of 'cut-glass' accents ('Selly', 'Keptan') and cups of tea were much parodied and after 10 years or so it was retitled *The Dales* and moved to Exton, a new town in the Home Counties in an attempt to de-posh it.

In 1963 Ellis Powell, who had played Mrs Dale since the start, was suddenly sacked, amid allegations about her private life, and was replaced by Jessie Matthews: an early example of the BBC's ruthless casting policy.

It maintained to the end a healthy and devoted audience and when the programme was axed in April 1969 after 5531 episodes the Liberal MP, Peter Bessel, tried to introduce a parliamentary reprieve.

The Archers came from an idea from Godfrey Baseley, the farming and countryside correspondent at BBC Midlands. It was part of the BBC's remit to inform but programmes such as *Down on the Farm* were finding it difficult to persuade post-war farmers to modernise their methods. At one meeting a farmer told Baseley that 'what we want is a farming Dick Barton', so, working with Edward J Mason, one of the Barton scriptwriters, he devised detailed biographies of the principle characters 'to reflect every aspect of farming in a Midlands village' and came up with five episodes which were piloted in the Midlands in 1950. As a result, on 1st January 1951 at 11.45 a.m. on the Light Programme the first national episode of 'An Everyday Story of Country Folk' was broadcast and soon became so successful that it replaced *Dick Barton*,

Special Agent in the prestigious 6.45 p.m. slot.

The huge importance and popularity of *The Archers* is best illustrated by the episode of 22nd September 1955. The main romantic story in the early years was the on-off courtship of farmer's son Phil Archer and headstrong rich girl Grace and they were finally married in April 1955. Five months later there was a fire at the stables of Grey Gables and impulsive Grace dashed into the blaze to save Christine's horse, Midnight. A burning beam crashed on her head and she died on her way to hospital.

It so happened that 22nd September was also the evening of the launch of the new ITV television service, but the BBC claimed there was no connection. Nevertheless, in June the production team had drawn up a short list of possible fatalities, which included Christine Archer, glamorous Carol Grey and Phil Archer himself, before deciding on Grace. To keep the story line secret until the last minute the meeting's minutes were not circulated.

Ysanne Churchman, who played Grace, was given notice that her character was being axed but was not told how: "Divorce and death seemed out of the question. I thought perhaps she'd lose the power of speech or something. It was very unnerving." The cast were told that this was an 'exercise in topicality'.

To keep the secret all the episodes that week were polished, recorded and broadcast each day until on the Thursday Norman Painting (Phil) was greeted by a tearful Ysanne: They've done it, they've killed me off. The BBC switchboard was jammed for 48 hours. In Kent people were seen at doorways weeping for Grace. The BBC were flooded with cards, many addressed to Dan Archer asking him to pass condolences to Phil. There were so many wreaths and bouquets that the BBC had to appeal for no more to be sent.

Two listeners remember that evening. "We were sitting down to watch Channel 9 I think it was called (ITV) when the lady from next door came knocking. 'Grace is dead', she shouted. That was the end of our viewing for the night." "I have to admit to being more concerned about whether Midnight (the horse) was OK. ITV – what ITV?"

Our Next Production

The Lady in the Van

By Alan Bennett

Adapted by the author from his autobiographical memoir, The Lady in the Van tells the story of Miss Mary Shepherd, whom Alan Bennett first came across when she was living in the street near his home in Camden Town. Taking refuge with her van in his garden originally for three months, she ended up staying fifteen years. Funny and touching, The Lady in the Van marks the return to the stage of one of our leading playwrights.

Directed by Linda Hampson

Wednesday 5th November to Saturday 8th November 2008

7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 020 8866 7075

About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, and to join our mailing list, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

**This season is dedicated
to the memory of
Roderick Jones (1931-2007)**

Contact us at:

www.proscenium.org.uk

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