

PROSCENIUM

Vita & Virginia

By Eileen Atkins

Vita & Virginia

Wednesday 19th to Saturday 22nd March 2014
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Vita & Virginia

Eileen Atkins

Cast:

Vita Sackville-West.....	Linda Hampson
Virginia Woolf	Evelyn Moutrie
Director	Shirley Wootten
Stage Managers	Crystal Anthony David Pearson
Assisted by	Sheila Harvey
Set Management.....	Mark Brookes
Properties.....	Novelette Gordon
Lighting and Sound Design	Paul Robinson
Lighting and Sound Operation	Arnold Glickman

The play is adapted from the correspondence
between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West.

There will be an interval between Acts 1 and 2.
Approximate running time 2 hours 15 min.

The Author

Eileen Atkins was born in 1934 in a Salvation Army Women's Hostel in east London. Her father was at one time under-chauffeur (i.e. he cleaned the cars) to the Portuguese Embassy and then became a gas meter reader and her mother worked as a barmaid. Eileen took dancing lessons as a child and from the age of seven to fifteen supplemented the family income dancing in the working men's club circuit for 15 shillings a session billed as baby Eileen and singing 'Yankee Doodle' for American troops at the London Stage Door canteen.

She attended Latymer Grammar School where a sympathetic teacher recognized her dramatic talent. She gradually lost her cockney accent and her parents were persuaded that, unlike her elder sister and brother, she should stay on at school until she was sixteen. She applied for entrance to drama colleges and took a three year teaching diploma at the Guildhall School of Drama and Music.

However, her real interest was in performing and she spent some nine years struggling to make a living. Her first part was Jaquenetta in 'Love's Labour's Lost' with Robert Atkins' company at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. She worked as ASM at the Oxford Playhouse (she was sacked by Peter Hall) and in repertory at Butlin's, Skegness. She played a number of walk-on parts in the 1957 season at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford. From the beginning of the 1960s her career as a Shakespearean actor took off and she played a wide variety of roles, including Viola, Miranda and Paulina, at the RSC, The Old Vic and the National Theatre. But she was always interested in doing new work and has acted in plays by Pinter, Edward Bond, Beckett and Arnold Wesker.

Eileen describes how her interest in Virginia Woolf began :

'From the age of 19 to almost 29 I almost couldn't get employed. But then this young man producer came to see me after one thing I had done and told me he liked what he saw, adding that he thought I looked like Woolf. He said he had written about Vita and Virginia. I admitted that I didn't know a thing about this woman – I was badly educated and he was shocked.'

This production never got off the ground but it did inspire her to start reading Woolf. She began, rather adventurously, with 'The Waves', but she absorbed the novels, essays and letters with great enthusiasm. She was persuaded by Patrick Garland in the 1960s to do a one-woman show based on 'A Room of One's Own.' He too saw a likeness to Virginia Woolf. Eileen Atkins offers her explanation of this:

'I should be so lucky that I should look like her – but it's nothing to do with bones or eyes. What I think people see in me is someone who might put stones in her pocket.'

'I hate to miss things. She was like that always doing everything and getting exhausted. I do have nervous disorders – which I think helps – but not what she had.'

She began her adaption of the letters of Virginia and Vita in the late 1980s and 'Vita & Virginia' opened in Chichester in 1992 with Atkins playing Virginia and Penelope Wilton, Vita. One critic remarked: 'Vita is flamboyant and ravishing beside Woolf's droopy washed-out garments. She towers like an Amazon, dangerously attractive, above the spectral Woolf.' When the play transferred to The Ambassadors Theatre, London and then to Broadway, Vanessa Redgrave took over the part of Vita.

In 1997 Eileen Atkins wrote the screenplay for a film of her favourite Woolf novel, 'Mrs Dalloway', and she and her husband also invested money in the venture. However, although it was often well-reviewed the film did not attract an audience, causing them severe financial problems:

'I had to work. I was nearly bankrupted after 'Mrs Dalloway'. If you're nearly bankrupted you're in trouble for the rest of your life. I didn't have a pension. In any case it doesn't hurt me to work. I think it's quite good really.'

Eileen Atkins reflects on 'the many faces of Woolf, the lecturer ('A Room of One's Own'), the romantic ('Vita & Virginia') and the diarist ('A Moment's Liberty'). In 'A Room' Woolf is lecturing and has a point to make – that women should be given equal chances with men – and embroiders on the point brilliantly, ironically. With 'Vita' it was her only attempt at sex, and we see her very vulnerable and ordinary.'

The Play

Virginia Woolf:

Virginia Woolf was born in January 1882 in London. Her father, Leslie Stephens was a man of letters and the first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, who came from a family distinguished for public service; from her mother Virginia said that she inherited her looks. Both parents had married before and had four step children; Virginia was the third child from this marriage and when her younger brother, Adrian was born all eight children lived with their parents and servants at **22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington**.

Long summer holidays were spent at **Talland House** in St. Ives, Cornwall – a place which played a large part in Virginia's imagination and provided the setting for 'To The Lighthouse'. In 1895 her mother died and Virginia suffered her first mental breakdown. Although her brothers were educated at public school and Cambridge the girls were educated at home and the main source of learning for Virginia was her father's extensive library to which she had unlimited access – she determined from an early age to be a writer.

Virginia's second breakdown followed her father's death in 1904. By the end of the year she was recovering and started reviewing for the Times Literary Supplement. Her elder brother Thoby, after graduating, formed a regular 'Thursday Evenings' meeting, and after he died of typhoid in 1906 Virginia and her brother Adrian continued what had become the beginnings of the **Bloomsbury Group** of intellectuals and artists and writers. One of the founder members of the group was Leonard Woolf, who had joined the Ceylon Civil Service in 1904, and when he returned in 1911 he proposed to Virginia. They were married in St. Pancras Registry Office in 1912 and in spite of the vicissitudes caused by her fragile health she always regarded him as her reliable and



protective rock. In 1919 the Woolfs bought **Monks House** in the Sussex village of **Rodmell** (near to her sister and her husband Vanessa and Clive Bell's rented **Charleston farmhouse**), a weather-boarded house which they used principally for summer holidays until bombed out of their London flat in 1940 when it became their home.

In 1917 the Woolfs bought a small hand-printing press as a hobby and therapy for Virginia. They were living in Richmond, Surrey, and the **Hogarth Press** was named after their house. Soon they became publishers and by 1922 the Hogarth Press had become a business and they commissioned works – principally from modernist writers. After 1921 all Virginia's works were published by them including all the novels which made her reputation as an experimental, modernist writer: 'Jacob's Room' 1922, 'Mrs Dalloway' 1923, 'To The Lighthouse' 1927 and 'The Waves' 1931. They had moved back to London in 1924 to **52 Tavistock Square** and the press operated from there.

In 1922 Virginia first met Vita Sackville-West and the progress of their at times passionate, at times tentative and at times turbulent affair is realised in this play. It led to the publishing of 'Orlando', a roman à clef inspired by Vita's life and ancestors of **Knole** in Kent.

Vita's son, Nigel Nicolson, described the novel: 'The effect of Vita on Virginia is all contained in 'Orlando', the longest and most charming love letter in literature.'

The affair cooled but they continued friends until the January day in 1941 when Virginia left Rodmell to walk to the River Ouse with her pockets full of stones.

Vita Sackville-West:

Vita was born in **Knole House**, near Sevenoaks in 1892, the only daughter of Lionel Edward Sackville-West, who succeeded his grandfather as 3rd Baron Sackville in 1908, and his wife and first cousin, Victoria Sackville-West. Vita was educated at home until she was thirteen when she went to Helen Woolff's School for Girls in Park Lane, where she began to write novels, plays and poems.

While at school she began an affair with Rosamund Grosvener and also became close to Violet Keppel, daughter of Alice Keppel, Edward VII's mistress. T.J. Hochstrasse in his biography of Vita suggests:

'Her upbringing, both privileged and solitary, was shaped above all by the romantic atmosphere and associations of Knole, the sprawling Tudor palace set in a spacious park in Kent where she spent her childhood.'

In 1910 she met Harold Nicolson for the first time and the next year he visited her in Monte Carlo: 'He was as gay and clever as ever, and I loved his brain and youth and was flattered by his liking for me. I wasn't in love with him then – there was Rosamund – but I did like him better than anyone as a companion and playfellow.' In 1912, under pressure from her mother, she agreed to an engagement and wrote: 'Our relationship was so fresh, so intellectual, so unphysical, I never thought of him in that aspect at all ..Some were born to be lovers, others to be husbands, he belongs to the latter category.'



Despite having several affairs with women she married Harold in 1913 and bore him two sons. She then resumed her affair with Violet Keppel, who had also recently married, again under pressure from her mother, and both women moved to France in 1920, but Harold persuaded his wife to return home.

T.J. Hockstrasser points out: 'This crisis proved to be the catalyst for Nicolson and Sackville-West to reconstruct their marriage satisfactorily so that they both pursued a series of relationships through which they could fulfil their essentially homosexual identity while retaining a secure basis of companionship and affection.'

Vita continued to write novels and poetry throughout her life but her most substantial piece of work was her poem 'The Land' in 1926 dedicated to her lover, Dorothy Wellesley. She had met Virginia Woolf in 1922 and begun what was probably a much less physically passionate but certainly emotionally involving affair. She was, however, rather nervous of putting her poem in the hands of such a sharp, intellectual critic.

She also began an affair in 1927 with Mary Garman, who married Roy Campbell; this affair caused Virginia considerable pain – 'I rang you up just now to find you were gone nutting in the woods with Mary Campbell – but not me damn you.'

1927 also saw the preparation for the publication of 'Orlando'. Vita was thrilled and terrified 'at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando.'

In 1930 the Nicolson's purchased Sissinghurst Castle and the restoration of the garden became their joint project for the next three decades. Vita was made Companion of Honour for services to literature in 1948. She died in 1962.

Some Textual References

Bloomsbury Group: Vanessa, Virginia's sister, a painter married to Clive Bell, an art critic. Their son, Julian, was killed in the Spanish Civil War; Duncan Grant, a painter; Roger Fry, art critic; E. Morgan Forster, novelist, his semi-autobiographical novel, *Maurice*, which told of a passionate but doomed homosexual relationship, was written in 1913, revised in 1932, but not published until after his death in 1971; Lytton Strachey changed attitudes to writing biography by his acerbic and ironic portraits in 'Eminent Victorians'.

Vita's Family: Married to Harold Nicolson, a diplomat. Two sons, Ben, an art historian, and Nigel, a politician and author of 'Portrait of a Marriage', a study of his parents' rather unconventional marriage. Eddie Sackville-West, cousin, a music critic and man about town, who eventually inherited Vita's beloved Knole.

Socialites: Lady Sybil Colefax, Lady Dorothy Wellesley (also a poet and Vita's lover), Lady Cunard and Ethel Sands.

'The Well of Loneliness': a novel by Radcliffe Hall which dealt with lesbian relationships. Published in 1928 it caused considerable scandal: the publication was championed by Virginia and Vita to uphold the principle of freedom of speech, but both had reservations about the quality of the novel.

Ethel Smyth: musician and composer of the 'anthem' of the suffragettes. Vita and Virginia supported the aims of the suffrage movement but did not take part in the protests. All of the music featured in this production is by Ethel Smyth.

Dinner, by Moira Buffini

At the dinner party from hell, self-confessed 'rich bitch' Paige serves up Primordial Soup, Apocalypse of Lobster and Frozen Waste to celebrate the publication of husband Lars' book Beyond Belief. In this deliciously dark satirical comedy, revenge is a dish best served icy cold.

Directed by Lynette Alston

Wednesday June 4th to Saturday June 7th 2014

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 0208 954 4110

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : Dave Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk