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What for example, about technique?
Can you be a great actor without
technique? Surely not. Yet all the
techniques in the world are no guarantee
of greatness. Then there is high
intelligence. Is that not another vital
attribute? And strength of character?
And doggedness?
The tradition among players is that
intelligence and character are
unimportant and doggedness doesn’t
matter compared to that spark of
genius which sets you above the rest
without you ever knowing why — and
without your admirers ever knowing
why either.

Edith Evans did not know. She
considered herself ordinary. At least
she said she did to a good friend in her
later years, Bryan Forbes, whose
carefully considered biography of the
actress has come out from Hannibal
Hamilton’s for £6.95 under the title
Moll’s Girl, a phrase of her beloved
father’s. And it is one of the many
qualities of Mr. Forbes’s study of a
challengingly private life — challenging
to the biographer, that is — that he has
cought different aspects of his
subject’s character with such effective
economy, Edith Evans seldom wasted
words.

This sense of economy may be
another clue to the mystery of what
makes a great actor. Paring down
offices — as other, minor, like the best
of fine draughts, Edith Evans could be
economical not only with words but
also with ideas. She could no more
have defined what it was that made her
great — and no other player of
distinction could dear her greatness —
than she could have accepted her
biographer’s assumption that “the
critic is the natural enemy of the artist”.
After it was the critics of her day
James Agate, Sir John Ewans — whose
writing sealed her qualities, and whose
authority as connoisseurs of classical
acting helped to create a public taste
for it.

Which brings me back to taste: the
artist’s instinct for knowing what he
can or cannot do best. And all
INTIMATIONS OF GREATNESS — continued

doing what he likes, not what merely makes him money. Doing work you despise is artistically ruinous. Edith Evans knew that.

This rigorous self-discipline made Edith Evans seem stern to outsiders than was really the case. She had the most envious respect for her art; and she was always dismayed by the tendency of even the better theatre managers to favor what she took to be their standards. Binkie Beaumont included.

What gives Mr. Forbes's book its unusual value compared to so many of its kind is his ability to show us both the public and the private life of a character who - rather surprisingly perhaps for someone so much in the theatrical limelight - kept herself to herself as often as possible. Not many people even knew about her marriage. Still fewer knew of its romantic, delicacy based inadvertently on absence which makes the heart grow fonder still. The husband's letters are those of a deeply sensitive, loyal loving and literate man who kept in touch, since his far from theatrical business took him often abroad, by correspondence and by reading theatre notices. Edith Evans was The Importance of Being Earnest. Again, there has been nothing since to compare with it. The first great hit was in high comedy; the second in farce. And tragedy? Well, I remember her Domette with Godfrey Tearle as Anthony. Some people could not take it seriously. The actress was 58 at the time. But to my mind age could not wither etc. etc.

Together they brought a degree of grandeur to a tragedy often bedevilled by skinned emotion and lightweight acting.

There was also the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet and Lady Pitts in Bridle's Danube Laurels and the Countess in Fry's The Dark Is Light Enough and the Countess in the film The Queen of Spades. All unforgettable. All stamped by greatness. By what? The definition is still elusive. Like the grin of the Cheshire Cat.

When George Henry Lewes proclaimed that in the art of acting the greatest is he who is greatest in the highest reaches of his art - we are bound to recall that Edith Evans did do her finest work only in exalted regions. What she did was to raise the height of any role she played. She gave it new depths, a new richness, her own stamp, and by doing I do not mean mannerism. It was the stamp of authority, the stamp of a great artist.

She could transmute and make immortal in the mind's eye of the playwright the art of playwrights from Shakespeare and Congreve to Wilde and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Get hold of Mr. Forbes's book if you doubt me. He writes fabulously. He animates his subject to be of much use as a critic. And the book is long. But it is stuffed with recent theatre history and with letters from Bernard Shaw, George Moore, St. Vincent Millay and Voltaire. And more than a hint of what it is that makes for greatness comes through the reticent nature and abiding professional integrity of the actress herself.

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GORDON CHATER

in

THE ELOCUTION OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

by

STEVE J. SPEARS

Directed by RICHARD WHERRETT
Designed by LARRY EASTWOOD
Lighting by JOE DAVIS

THE ELOCUTION OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN was presented by
the Nimrod Theatre, Sydney, Australia on Wednesday 25th August 1976.
By arrangement with The Rock Theatre of Paris

There will be one interval of 15 minutes
GORDON CHATER (Robert O'Brien)

Gordon Chater, who was born in England, is an erstwhile media star who made his mark in the world of theatre. His role as a stage actor in Australia, particularly in television and radio, has earned him acclaim for his comedic timing and versatile range. Chater has received several awards, including a Logie Award for Best Performance in 1977.

During World War II, Chater served in the Royal Navy. After the war, he returned to Australia and began his professional career in theatre. His first break came in 1946 when he starred in Sydney's Miranda Theatre and later in Sydney's Miranda Theatre and other venues.

From 1959-63 he toured for J. C. Williamson's - Australia's top commercial management - in Where's Ernie and The Merry Widow. Then in 1964 came his first leading role with the Phillip Brown Theatre - Top of the Hill. In all, he appeared in eleven shows for the Phillip management, including new musicals like The Merry Widow and Noises Off, as well as playing Dan'l in a popular Australian comedy, The Chilly Cold Ash, and Varietyns.

Chater's breakthrough came in 1965 when he starred in the title role of 'The Happy Man', which earned him critical acclaim and a broader audience. His performance was so successful that he was invited to appear in London's West End. In 1970, he appeared in The Cherry Orchard, a role that earned him a nomination for the Helpmann Award.

Chater's career has been marked by a string of successful productions, both in Australia and internationally. His versatility as an actor has made him a beloved figure in the Australian theatre world.
**STEVE J. SPEARS (Author)**

Steve J. Spears was born in Adelaide in 1961. His first major work - *Stud* - had its premiere in Adelaide in 1973. His novel, *African: A Savage Musical* - was premiered at the Pram Factory, Melbourne and was later toured through Australia under the banner of Steve's ad hoc theatre company, The Rock Theatre of Parks.

The Requiemation of the Little Prince Why Couldn't I Love as Performed by Young Mr at the Neath of the Great Depression of 1929 premiered at the Adelaide Festival Centre in 1976. The play was performed again at the fringe, directed by Richard Wherrett, in 1977.

There Were Giants in Those Days will be produced at the 1979 Adelaide Festival of Arts and Steve's next musical *New Jean* is scheduled for the Sydney State Youth Theatre's inaugural production at the Theatre Royal (1978). King Richard is scheduled by Sydney's Old Tutu Theatre Company for 1978.

The Eleccion of Benjamin Franklin has been awarded the Australian National Critics Award, National Professional Theatre Awards for Best New Play and Best New Talent, the Australian Writer's Guild Annie Award for Best Australian play and The Major Award for "works of particular merit".

Steve is now working on a play about the life and suicide of George (Superman) Reeves.

**RICHARD WHERRATT (Director)**

Richard Wherrett currently holds the 1977 Australian Critics' Award and the National Professional Theatre Award for Best Director. He was born in Sydney in 1940, and graduated from Sydney University in 1963. His theatre career began in England in 1965 at the ENS Acting School, where he was a full-time acting pupil for four years. He then directed frequently at the Lindsey Theatre Royal, LAMDA and NIDA, and various youth workshops including Manchester Library Theatre and London's Royal Court.

Back in Australia he was Associate Director with Sydney's Old Tutu Theatre Company for two years, directing *Emerging: The Man at Monte, Street's Possible Rise of Auster* and *Shakespeare's Allegory and Clasped, Sigismunda's Double Rev. and toured the hit Australian play *Legend of King of Malaya* to the South Pacific Arts Festival.

In 1974 he became one of the three Resident Directors of Nimrod Theatre. He has also directed the works of Australian playwrights Max Bufo, Mark De Groote, Steve J. Spears and Michael Coo, directed new productions of Shakespeare and Chekhov, and introduced Sydney to Peter Handke's *Enfant, My Father, My Tutor, and The Rise and Fall of Lenz Constance*. He directed for the filmed *Brod's Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* based on Byron's letters, for the 1976 Adelaide Festival, where he returned this year as producer Tom Gingery's post-Vietnam hit *Rock'N'Roll - Rock'N'Roll*; most recently he has directed David Hare's *For Heaven* at Nimrod. Mr. Wherrett was Artistic Director for the 1977 Australian National Playwrights Conference and has written several serials for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

**LARRY EASTWOOD (Designer)**

Larry Eastwood, in 18, an Englishman who trained at the ENS Acting School. He came to Australia in 1970 to take up the positions of Production Manager and Building Designer for the Nimrod Theatre. He has designed more than fifty productions for Nimrod including *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*, both of which toured Australia, whilst *Hamlet* was televised by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Mr. Eastwood has worked at Nimrod for 10 years and of 1976 to full-time for Nimrod. He has been designed *The Norman Conquests* for the Old Tutu Theatre Company, Constant Research for the Dance Company of New South Wales and has worked on the feature film *The Long Weekend* as Production Designer and Assistant as Art Director.

**JOE DAVIS (Lighting Designer)**

Joe Davis trained at Strand Electric in 1970. Having spent a few years as a professional electrician for Julian Wyllie and D.B.0. Cochrane he started working as a lighting designer for Nimrod. In 1973 he joined H. D. Watters Ltd. and was their lighting designer for 10 years. He was the founding Chairman of the Society of Australian Lighting Designers, of which he was elected the President for 10 years. For 20 years he was personal lighting designer to Marlene Dietrich. He is a Director of Theatre Sound and Lighting (Sydney) Ltd. which has been responsible for the lighting of over 500 productions and last year celebrated 50 years in the theatre.

Among his London credits are *The Lady's Not For Burning, Under Milk Wood, Irma La Douce, October*, *Andrew Undershaft*, *The Lost Story*, *Yorick*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Empress*, *Cats*, *Celebration*, *Breakneck*, *Phantom*, *Duck Variations* and Sexual Perversity in Chicago and *Watson* at the Moon.
NIMROD THEATRE

Sydney's Nimrod Theatre was founded in 1970, and like all good entrepreneurs, it's a little bit special. It's still doing what it does best, being nimble, professional and exciting in theatre in Australia. Nimrod can probably claim to be in the forefront of the surge of the last ten years which has proved beyond all question that Australia is well and truly capable of creating plays of world class - which can find support from commercial impresarios like these from Sydney to London to New York.

Nimrod helps launch David Williamson on the world map - it shared with him the 1972 George Devine Award, and has premiered the plays of Ron Eble (President Wilson in Paris, The Christian Brothers) since produced in London. Since 1970 Nimrod has mounted sixty productions, sixty-five selling Australian plays and fifty of these first produced at Nimrod. Most are available in the Currency Press publications distributed by Cambridge Press in England, as those by Alex Buzo, Peter Kenna and Jim McClure.

Among the numerous writers presented have been Edward Albee (All Over), David Hare (Flamboy), David Rocklin (Adrenal), Tom Ettinger (Flamboy), and Matthew Williams (The Spire). An annual look at the so-called classics has included productions of The Doctor's Dilemma, The Seagull and a long running Australian-Made About Nothing.

The Company began by converting a small triangular warehouse into a 140 seat auditorium around a diagonal mezzanine stage. Thus in 1974 it moved into a converted Carlton Surf Factory which was transformed into a 300 seat studio theatre. Two years ago a second season, with its 100 seat space was opened within the building. It was here where the production of Benjamin Franklin before transferring to a larger venue was a tour of Canberra, Hobart, Penrith, Adelaide and Hobart in excess of 320 performances.

Nimrod is unusual in Australia in having three resident artistic directors. The company is expensively successful, often in projects which others have thought too expensive. Last year Nimrod played to an average 80 per cent of capacity. It earned more than three quarters of its income from the box office and by securing successes on national tours, which augur for the modest fares and fees there.

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MAY FAIR THEATRE

The May Fair Theatre is unique among London's West End theatres in that it is contained within the walls of an hotel. The May Fair Hotel has stood in Stratton and Berkeleys Streets since 1927. One of the popular features of the Hotel during the 1930s and 40s was The Candlelight Room. Here both Harry Roy and Ambrose with their bands played for patrons.

During the latter part of 1962 work began to convert The Candlelight Room into the intimate Theatre that is now the May Fair. The 20ft. wide stage and 310 seats were provided for, and above, parts of two floors of bedrooms were converted to allow for the flying and hanging of scenery plus, of course, the usual theatre backstage facilities and dressing rooms.

The Theatre was opened on 17th June 1963 by Sir Ralph Richardson who starred in the opening production of Pirandello's
"Six Characters in Search of an Author." The Theatre, which is controlled by Grand Metropolitan Hotels, was only the fourth to be opened in London since 1940 and was designed to make it totally adaptable and capable of being used outside the three or so hours a day for the usual evening’s play. The only possibility in the design of the Theatre was that of turning it into a cinema. And that was deliberate as the Hotel already contains the Starlight Cinema!

During the last ten years the Theatre has played host to commercial presentation’s for sales conferences and seminars with, of course, the full facilities of the Hotel being available to delegates. Many famous faces have appeared in these shows, among them: Michael Aspel, Jimmy Edwards, Gerry Marsden, Lady Hambert, George Fame and Bruce Forsyth.

Other daytime and Sunday activities have included a number of television ‘chat shows’ among them a series with Eamonn Andrews and several programmes with David Frost and Michael Parkinson.

Two even more usual shows staged here have been a bridge competition relayed to the audience on a scoreboard resembling a bingo card with commentary by Omar Sharif and a 15-minute show launching a new shoe fabric at a cost of £5,000.

Whilst these activities have been taking place the Theatre has firmly established itself in the West End with its stage attractions. Since “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” two shows have had extremely long runs. “Beyond the Fringe” transferred from the Fortune Theatre to play for a further two and a half years and on 7th September 1970 Christopher Hampton’s “The Philanthropist” starring Alec McCowan opened having had a season at the Royal Court Theatre. Alec McCowan was succeeded by George Cole and then Nigel Hawthorne and in all the play ran for over three years, closing finally on 27th October 1973. In between these long runs a number of revues and seasons of plays have been staged together with an annual Christmas matinee presentation of “Sorry!” which played to capacity audiences for 11 years running.

Since “The Philanthropist” productions have included seasons of “The Farm” from the Royal Court, “The Ride Across Lake Constance” from Hampstead Theatre Club and Roy Dotrice’s remarkable solo tour de force as John Aubrey in “Brief Lives.” More recent successes have included “Hinge and Bracket” and Michael Frayn’s “Alphabetical Order!” (again from Hampstead Theatre Club) and James Bolam, Jaine Asher, Stephen Moore in Christopher Hampton’s “Treats.” In January 1977 Michael Codron presented yet another successful transfer from The Hampstead Theatre Club “Ooga, Fish, Stax & VI” which ran for 9 months, and earned Alison Flack the award of Best Actress in a new play in The SWET Awards.

To sum up, the Mayfair Theatre is a splendid example of a building used to its fullest advantage at the same time providing good entertainment whilst offering all the facilities of the Mayfair Hotel to further the enjoyment of patrons.

Monological Monica

by Adam Benedick

BERYL REID has just been on the box. It wasn’t one of those quiet appearances. We can all forgive them. A minute or two is nothing. Well, almost nothing. It is certainly nothing to take seriously. But this wasn’t a quiet appearance. If anything she was the host. I am sorry. I would rather not talk about it.

Where I like Beryl Reid is on the stage. There can be no doubt there. She was trained for it. She liked it. And we all like her on it. As playwrights we trust that she will soon be back.

Meanwhile, where does her art stand? Highly with me, especially when it’s allowed to stand alone. It thrives when made monological. Ffiss Reid has stood alone for much of her career, Not that she has lacked companions on stage. Far from it. Others have often buttied in. She likes that. It brings out her monological skills as a corollary. Even an imaginary dog will do. It is the memory of an imaginary dog in a sketch at the St. Martin’s Theatre a quarter of a century ago that starts me on a slow glow of nostalgic admiration for her art.

Accents are her speciality. Goodness knows how wide the range is. It sounds comprehensible. Is it accurate? I dare not say. My spell is in Lancashire and Yorkshire, Staffordshire and the east Midlands after a childhood in north London with expeditions to Essex, Sussex, Kent and Hertfordshire. Instilled in later life Hypocritical assumptions that I could spot a voice’s origins at a murmur. But not any longer. Not since Miss Reid. Her ear sounds too exact. Or at any rate intimidatingly assured. Sometimes you feel she has invented a new region, always that she knows where she is, even if you do not.

Guess where she was born. You wouldn’t with more hints than she lets out in her acting. It was in fact Hereford. But she was educated (and this sounds unlikely) in north Manchester at Withington and Levenshulme high school. Before her sixteenth birthday she was on the stage in a consent party at the Finsbury Hall, Ilkley. How long she was on “on” we do not know or whether she was told to get off or whether there was even any question of either question arising in the presumably modest circumstances in which most girls of fifteen first find themselves on stage. Her admirers are bound in wish they could have seen her there. For Miss Reid has an endearing and distinctive personality. It shines out at the audience. It is sufficient unto itself. You have no need to look elsewhere to brighten.

This artistic independence can be fine. It can be awkward. When others are about the weekends are filled in. They want attention too. They may not get it. Indeed it is unlikely they will get it. For Miss Reid. And that can create confusion if we ought to be watching the others as well.

Mostly it doesn’t matter. It used never to matter. In the radio series Educating Archie she became so wildly known as the wailing schoolgirl Monica it was of no importance because radio is such a different medium from the theatre. The producer has greater power over than in the cinema or on television.

continued swarle
MONOLOGICAL MONICA — continued

But on the stage a personality like hers can be disruptive. It can turn things upside down. For fourteen years in revue, doing her own turn in assorted sketch at places like the Dr. Martin's the New Wellsington and the Lyric Hamneramnth, Bevily Reid was an individual joy. She knew her audiences and they knew her. And it wasn't long before she became a minor cult with her saucy saucer eyes and mock-childish manner and old-girlish looks at warning holy-fairy.

She made considerable contributions to the success of such revues as One To Another and On The Avenue and in a Hillsorts tour she once did with Jimmy Edwards revealed a new theatrical partnership. Then after Dick Whittington at Golders Green came that moment which rearranges many actors' careers. Miss Reid went on suddenly legitimate. She was in her mid-forties with a vivid radio and revue reputation (though revue was losing its old appeal by then).

And unexpectedly she came loping across the stage of the Theatre Royal, Bristol, as the figure in a radio series whose leaden domination of her household companions was giving the dramatic impulse to Frank Marcus's next play The Killing of Sister George. There was something slightly shocking in the theme of the time (which the film of the play exploited more crudely), but Miss Reid took it all the risk of serious shock out of it because she is shockingly unassuming as an actress. Her voice has a way of sweeping and soothing with such an affected dignity, as she men laughing at the character too, that any hope of moving about her feelings reaches because she never really shows them.

As everybody knows The Killing of Sister George had an immense success, both in London and New York where Miss Reid won what is known as a Tony Award for her acting through herself. I wouldn't have called it acting at all but skillful rendering which was all the more effective for being out of her usual music hall context. If there was any serious acting in the play of Sister George it came from Eileen Atkins as the younger companion.

But Miss Reid's was surely an effective performance; and it led to other opportunities for "straight" acting. For example, as Madame Arcati in Elfdora Spiritual (Sister George used a bicycle too) and as the Nurse in a tour of Romeo and Juliet and later at the National in a dual revival of Godber's and Campbell's

There has however been one unquestionably successful piece of work straight acting for the stage - as straight as Miss Reid knows how. This came in the revival of J. B. Priestley's Entertaining Mr. Sloane. Miss Reid played the shockingly solicitous landlady who makes ambiguous advances to her lodger. In the film of the play she was equally delightful.

Is it possible that in the cinema the tricky business of acting with others for a performer trained to perform solo can be disguised by the editing? With a play of such broadly humorous humour brought up to create an immediate impact which has come to see and were you either a team or an author's play, it cannot be easy to slip directly into the backgrounds.

Such talent either times or flickers out. Half measures are unforgivable. We may be sure Miss Reid will never settle for half, which is why it is hard to place her in a play unless it is a vehicle for her. Give her a front seat, though, and you can count on her riding to success.
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