

No Smoking

The No Smoking signs in the Barn Theatre are a constant reminder to me of how I gave up smoking in frightening circumstances.

Sutton High School is a posh school in Cheam road, Sutton. We were expected to wear our distinctive school uniform at all times. It was navy and mauve. I liked the hat, navy velour with a deep brim for winter and a cream straw in the summer. I still like hats.

I was standing in the bus shelter one afternoon, waiting to catch the bus home to Banstead. I had stayed late to do extra work. Right little swot.

It was time to relax. I lit up my du Maurier cork-tipped cigarette and leaned back against the shelter, puffing happily.

“Smart uniform you got on, miss. Recognise it anywhere, especially the hat.”

I froze. The voice was deep and authoritative. The speaker was bristling with silver buttons and stripes and a solid domed helmet that I was convinced held a radio. He was tapping his single-handed baton thoughtfully against his side.

It was an unexpected member of HM Surrey Constabulary. He was looking at me with undisguised disapproval.

“How old are you, miss?” he asked sternly.

My voice had gone down my thick black stockings and into my serviceable black lace-ups.

“Eleven, sir,” I croaked.

“And you are smoking in a public place, in your school uniform. What is your headmistress, Miss Charlsworth, going to think about this?”

Miss Lilian E. Charlsworth was a formidable headmistress, a big woman with a big character. She was something important in UNESCO and was always flying off to international meetings. We were terrified of her. She taught Latin. If you were good at Latin, she tolerated your misdemeanours. I was lousy at Latin, despite having a name you could conjugate.

He took the du Maurier from my fingers and stubbed it out. I was shaking with fear.

“What are you going to do?” I asked, still croaking.

“Never you mind. You’ll find out soon enough.”

I hardly remember the journey home. Banstead Downs was a no-mans land still riddled with trenches from the war. I would have to run away. I could not face school assembly next morning when I would be denounced and shamed in front of the whole school.

Supper was sawdust in my mouth. I tossed and turned all night in a cold sweat of fear. The journey to Sutton the next morning was a last trembling walk to the scaffold. I was finished. My school career was over.

I stood in the assembly hall with six hundred other pupils, not singing a word of the hymn, waiting for the axe to fall. But nothing happened. Miss Charlsworth had flown off somewhere to something important. She was miles away, talking in Latin probably.

So whenever a nosy form-filler asks me: “Do you smoke?” I say, with a certain pride: “No, I gave it up at eleven.”

Stella Thomas

Good Company in the New Year

The Good Theatre Company, last seen at the Barn with their acclaimed production of *A Man of No Importance*, return with a sparkling new production of *The Drowsy Chaperone* from 8th - 11th February 2012.

An adoring but agoraphobic lover of musical theatre, simply called ‘Man in Chair’, sits in his dingy flat in current day New York, feeling a little blue. Chatting with the audience he explains that he often picks up his spirits by listening to his record collection. As he places his favourite show *The Drowsy Chaperone* onto his turntable the show bursts to life in his room! *The Drowsy Chaperone* is an effervescent spoof of old musicals and a winner of two Tony Awards on Broadway and five Olivier Award Nominations.

Full of larger than life characters it will entertain you with its catchy tunes and madcap dance routines whilst the dry and humorous asides from ‘Man in Chair’ allow you to laugh knowingly at the paper thin plot. It’s the perfect antidote to cold February evenings and is suitable for the whole family.

Tickets available from goodcompanyboxoffice@gmail.com

It’s all Changed

When I started 36 years ago there was no working time directive, the lighting desk needed three people to operate it, actors were called by their surnames, gaffer tape was used sparingly, ASMs made the tea, the only ringing telephone you ever heard was in the foyer, sets were made of timber and canvas then held together by cleat and line, we were lucky if we got a few hours to tech, one never spoke to the director unless they spoke to you first, lighting was done off a wooden ladder or from a plank suspended from the top of two pairs of step ladders, sound came from records or if you were well off a reel to reel tape recorder, the closest we came to a power drill was a Yankee screwdriver, cock ups came from human error not technology, a truss was to wear, not to hang off, actors could project, we made things in house never bought them, heating was never turned on for set building, you never went into the dressing rooms unless invited, lights only moved if you moved them, stage managers wore DJs or white lab coats, if something needed moving you pushed it, hot water for tea came from a kettle and tea was the only drink offered, if it broke you fixed it not binned it, health and safety was never heard of, computers were out of an H G Wells novel, a nine o’clock start meant a nine o’clock start and technicians were treated with respect. So don’t give me that hard done face when I ask you to sweep the stage!

With thanks to Mark A Richards and Bruce Reed

Beach Boys Selling Fast

Saturday 10th December is nearly upon us and tickets for this show are selling very well.

The Beach Boys have often been called ‘America’s Band’ and the band’s unerring ability made them America’s first and best rock band with 36 US top 40 hits and 56 hot 100 hits including four number one singles.

Book now, don’t leave it too late! Get your tickets now by phoning 01959 561811 or by going online at www.barntheatreoxted.co.uk.