

# LOCKED ROOM MYSTERIES: RATTIGAN ON THE EDGE

Terence Rattigan's rise and fall and rise again is a remarkable example of the fragility of theatrical reputations.







By the early 1950s, when *The Deep Blue Sea* had its premiere, no playwright in Britain was so deeply admired by the critics and audiences alike. Rattigan had burst into the public consciousness, seemingly out of nowhere, with *French Without Tears* in 1936, an exquisite joyful comedy about British expatriates trying and failing to learn a foreign language. Although he continued to write expertly light comedies over the next two decades, a richer, deeper emotional tone became increasingly evident in plays like *After the Dance* (1939), *The Winslow Boy* (1946), *The Browning Version* (1948), *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) and *Separate Tables* (1954).

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The emotional power of these plays was not, for Rattigan, contradicted by their tight formal construction. He had always paid precise attention to the mechanics of stagecraft; while this is perhaps more obviously needed in the comedies, there is an exquisite theatrical choreography at work in all his plays. Whether it is a farce like *While the Sun Shines* (1943) or a drama like *The Deep Blue Sea*, Rattigan moves his characters through space with the skill of a chess grandmaster and it is through this that he creates his most powerful effects.

This is resolutely theatrical craft; Rattigan makes no pretensions to be a literary writer. He is interested in how a story unfolds in three-dimensional space before a live audience and there are few writers who can do that with his confidence. In *While the Sun Shines*, one of the funniest lines, that can bring an audience





to tears of laughter, is 'Oh, it's you, Mabs'. It's nothing on the page but in performance it absolutely sings. In the last scene of *Separate Tables*, we watch dinner being served to the various residents at a seaside guest house. There is not a line of dialogue in the scene that is not the ordinary business of a meal service or idle small talk between the characters about the weather, the racing, the cricket. And yet the scene, as everyone sitting on the edge of their seats realises, is about the downfall of a tyrant and the triumph of justice. And what's the turning point, the moment that shows that compassion has prevailed? It is the line: 'No, Mummy. I'm going to stay in the dining-room, and finish my dinner'. It looks like nothing, but I have seen audiences respond to it with tearful applause.

But soon his virtue would become his vice. A new generation of writers, directors, critics – inspired by new writers like John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney – and new theatres – like the English Stage Company at the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop at Stratford East – started to scorn Rattigan's stagecraft as artificial, mechanical, laboured. Strangely, the very processes that produce his most powerful effects were now held to be a sign of stiff-upper lip repression, icily unemotional. In fact, it is not that plays had abandoned formal construction,

they had just changed how they do it. Osborne himself described *Look Back in Anger* as a 'formal, old-fashioned play' and it *is* in some ways, with its three-act structure with strong curtain lines and plot reversals; but, as Osborne also knew, his central character, Jimmy Porter, clashed with the structure, his articulacy overwhelming the narrative drive, giving a sense of a powerful generational voice breaking through the formality. It was a new way of making a play, but it was a dramatic trick all the same.

The effect was to bring about a sharp decline in Rattigan's reputation. His plays started to be reviewed badly. Was his stagecraft just a little too neat? The construction a little too well-carpentered in a way that suggested insincerity or, worse, cynicism? Was there not something a little 19th-century in his adherence to the principles of the 'well-made play'? It took until the 1990s to prove that wrong, when a new wave of directors, less concerned to fight the battles of the 1950s, started to rediscover the plays, stripping them of some of the period clutter and laying bare, beneath the superficialities of cigarette holders and French windows, stories of thwarted desire and profound human pain. The Almeida's rediscovery of *The Deep Blue Sea* in 1993 led the way, and in the years since then anyone



who wanted to sample Rattigan's work has had the choice of – by my count – almost 60 productions of 20 different plays. Rattigan's centenary in 2011 was a remarkable celebration with a dozen major revivals, new editions of the plays, television documentaries and a film season at the BFI. Such a thing would have been unthinkable 40 years earlier.

There is, happily, no such thing as a definitive production of a play. The better a play is, the more it will reveal of itself in multiple productions. Something that has become more and more apparent as the plays have multiplied through numerous revivals is the subtlety of Rattigan's sense of space. Most of his plays are set indoors in somewhat bourgeois locations: chi-chi Mayfair apartments, genteel hotels, public schools, the Albany, the homes of ambassadors, industrialists, and government ministers. (Though let's not forget the more down-at-heel locations of *Flare Path*, *Separate Tables* and, indeed, *The Deep Blue Sea*.) It was his attraction to these kinds of places that has unfairly had Rattigan pegged as a rather conservative writer. In fact, his gaze at these spaces and the kinds of behaviour they afford is not a friendly one. As a young man, Rattigan's politics were radical and, even though he drifted to the political centre, he never voted Tory (unlike, may I say, his nemesis John Osborne).

More important, though, it would be easy to think that his fondness for domestic interiors bespeaks a narrowness to his horizons, a restricted canvas, a turning away from the broader social landscape to an entirely personal, individualistic one. But this is to misread the subtlety of his use of space. While it is true that many of Rattigan's plays are set indoors, let's not forget that he once said that the stage direction he most enjoyed writing was 'Scene 4: A Pavilion in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon'. There is a wonderful, preposterous freedom to Rattigan's writing, something so utterly unconfined that should alert us to the thought that his interiors always imply an exterior. Look at the way Hester, in *The Deep Blue Sea*, observes the street outside her west London rooming-house. Think how *Separate Tables* gradually paints in the world outside the hotel (the cinema, the esplanade). *Cause Célèbre* moves slowly from private passion

to public exposure and finally to a natural landscape where Alma (and maybe Rattigan) makes peace with the world before she dies.

Even more than that, what I find particularly interesting is how Rattigan is drawn not so much to interior spaces or implied exterior spaces, but ambiguous zones *between* the private and the public. Spaces like *Separate Tables*'s hotel dining room are neither fully private, nor fully public. What is so powerful about these intermediate zones is that the rules of behaviour are ambiguous; they can be contested, challenged. All kinds of paradoxical inversions of the usual social rules can appear. The unspoken decision of the residents to offer their tacit support for Major Pollock is a privately public decision to keep his newly public desires private.

These spaces are not always liberating; they can sometimes be moments of intense personal suffering. There's a great scene in *Love in Idleness* (1944), where a woman has to break the news to her lover that, in deference to the feelings of her son, they must part. The scene is short and made more abrupt by the arrival of guests to a long-planned party. Although both are reeling with grief at the unwanted end of their relationship, this intrusion of the public into the private and its transformation into an ambiguous in-between state forces them to perform, for a last time, their relationship. In this liminal – semi-private, semi-public – space, true feeling is transformed into a mask that masks true feeling.

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Another party is the centrepiece of *After the Dance*, set in the glamorous apartment of David and Joan Scott-Fowler. This time it is the female partner who has just learned that her relationship is over. She wanders through the





party, unable to express her broken feelings, until she walks into another space that hovers ambiguously between the private and public: a balcony. It is from there that she jumps, killing herself. Earlier in the play, when David's lover, Helen, comes gauchely to explain their affair, Joan puts on a display of insouciance that wears increasingly thin as the scene goes on. One senses that her grief is building in pressure as she politely ushers Helen out. But Rattigan engineers one final trick, by having the door stick slightly, thus fractionally delaying Helen's exit. Doors are, of course, a gateway between the private and public and therefore a place

of anxiety in a world of public manners and private pain.

We see this again in *The Deep Blue Sea*, the way that a closed door can be a sign of domestic contentment, but a locked door may be hiding something much darker. And look at how Rattigan builds a clear sense of the doors and hallways and stairwells outside the apartment. 'Voices carry on the stairs of this house,' says Mr Miller, a man who is all too aware of how reputations can be won and lost by loose tongues. And the most shattering moment of the play is where all the proprieties of the private and public collapse into each



other with a moment of painful emotional abandonment shouted down the stairs of the tenement block.

Rattigan was all too aware of the risks and possibilities afforded by these ambiguous realms. Allowing himself the public profile of a carefree bachelor man-about-town that disguised his semi-secret homosexuality, he knew the risks of exposure – of the private being made public – but also the erotic possibilities of the hint, the double meaning, the seductive deployment of a code – of the public being made private. This no doubt gave him a particularly forceful perspective on the intensities of this blurred and contested zone.

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Some critics have tried to erase that ambiguity by insistently 'outing' Rattigan's plays, demanding that they declare their secrets immediately and confess their hidden sexuality. In the late 1950s, the backlash against Rattigan's status took precisely this form: the *Sunday Times* review of *Variation on a Theme* (1958), for example, had the headline 'Are Things What They Seem?'. The unspoken implication was that these plays, with their apparent heterosexual characters, were 'really' about gay men and Rattigan was trying to pull the dramaturgical wool over our eyes. (A similar attack was mounted in the US against playwrights like Tennessee Williams, William Inge and Edward Albee.) More recently, gay critics like Nicholas de Jongh have criticised Rattigan for the same thing, but now accusing him of a kind of closeted cowardice for failing to write the plays as he 'really' meant.

The myth has arisen that *The Deep Blue Sea* was originally written with an all-male

cast about gay relationships. It is true that the original inspiration for the play was the death by suicide of one of Rattigan's former lovers but no 'gay' draft of the play exists in the Rattigan archive and, in any case, it is impossible to imagine Terence Rattigan, at the height of his success, writing an entire play that could not be put on in a commercial theatre; the Lord Chamberlain would simply not have allowed it. More importantly, as we now surely realise, Rattigan is peerless among 20th-century male playwrights in his empathetic observation of men and women in and out of love.

Harold Pinter was once asked how he wrote his early plays and he replied: 'I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and a few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room and saw two people standing up and I wrote *The Caretaker*'. Pinter was notoriously impatient with people asking him to explain his plays, so it is quite possible that his answer was deliberately facetious, but it also seems to me that his plays *are* intensely alert to the brutal complexities of these minute domestic arrangements. Rattigan was a great admirer of Pinter and his work shows a complementary attention to the numerous zones of intensity and risk in the interfaces between the public and the private.

By setting his plays so often on the borders of the private and public, Rattigan explores the intertwining of the individual and society, the way that the pressures of social conformity and intrusive moral scrutiny bear down on and shape ordinary lives. These apparently private, domestic plays in fact open up, reaching out to offer a vision of society, from the perspective of lives lived at the boundaries between love and judgment.

### DAN REBELLATO

Dan Rebellato is a playwright and Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is also the editor of Terence Rattigan's plays for Nick Hern Books. Alongside Alan Brodie, Dan explores the early inspiration and reception of *The Deep Blue Sea* at a special event, *A Slow Evolution*, on Saturday 27 July at 10.30am in the Minerva Theatre.