

Beatrice Thomson – Prolific Stage Actor and Aviator

CHRISTOPHER JOHN HOGGER

Beatrice Thomson was another great stage actor associated with Effingham. After training at RADA in her early twenties, she went on to perform in a huge range of plays in Britain, as well as some in Broadway. Besides acting she was interested also in theatre management and play-writing. Another strand in her life was as an aviator – she was proud of being Britain's first actress to become a qualified pilot. During the Second World War she toured the Far East with ENSA to entertain the troops, but paid a personal price for this by contracting a debilitating illness that interrupted her career for several years.

Early life

Beatrice Lindsay Thomson was the fifth of six children born to parents Benjamin Thomas Lindsay Thomson and his wife Esther Florence (née Bowker). All the children had 'Lindsay' among their forenames. Beatrice was born on 13 March 1900 and was baptised on 14 May at St Barnabas' Church at Clapham Common, her father being described in the register as a civil engineer. The family was then living at 117, North Side on the northern edge of Clapham Common.

The 1901 Census finds the family at this address with Beatrice entered as aged '1'. Her father described himself as a retired civil engineer. They remained at that address for at least six further years but by 1909 had moved to Lindisfarne, Copse Hill in Wimbledon. This is where Beatrice was living at the time of the 1911 Census. The house number was evidently 53. The Thomsons remained there until at least 1914. London's Electoral Registers give their address in 1918 as 10, Great Stanhope Street in Westminster but it is known from other sources that by October 1918 they were living in Effingham.

The Thomsons resided in Effingham as tenants of Effingham House, recently vacated by the family of the late Charles Edward Lambert. Electoral Registers show the Thomsons residing there from 1919 up to 1924. It is not known where Beatrice had received her education, nor how much time (if any) she lived at Effingham House. Her parents were very wealthy and may have assisted her financially to pay the expenses of living in London as she entered her twenties. What is known is that by the summer of 1921 she had enrolled with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) to train as an actor.



Figure 1 Effingham House, early 20thC.



Figure 2 RADA's new theatre in Malet Street, Bloomsbury, May 1920; © Historic England Archive bl24944.

Early acting career

Beatrix was already a RADA student at the time of the 1921 Census (19 June) which finds her staying in the household of her married sister Margaret Lindsay Usmar at 7, Old Court Mansions in Kensington. A short article in *The Era* on 21 December 1921 mentioned her in an afternoon performance at RADA.

The programme included 'extracts from the work done by the Final Division Students during the autumn term'. Diplomas were competitively awarded to some of these students by the appointed judges Sir Arthur Pinero, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Miss Lilian Braithwaite. Beatrix was one of eight students awarded one of these diplomas.

This performance took place on 15 December at the Academy's theatre in nearby Malet Street behind their Gower Street buildings. The theatre had been built in 1920, the same year in which RADA had been granted its Royal Charter. The Prince of Wales had opened the new theatre.

Beatrix's diploma, bearing the date 1921, was sold many years ago by the auctioneer Ewbank's together with other items including a pencil sketch of her made by the artist Charles Buchel.

On 11 April 1922 the RADA students gave a special matinée performance at The Globe Theatre of several items including the second act of Somerset Maugham's play *Caroline* in which Beatrix played the lead part and, by the accounts in the Press, acquitted herself well:

'The Caroline was Miss Beatrix Thomson who, with all her fellow players, shows a remarkably easy acquaintance with the airs and graces of comedy and handled the author's witticisms like old hands.'

[*The Westminster Gazette*, 12 April 1922]

'The Globe Theatre was full of theatrical managers on the look-out for budding histrionic talent when I looked in at the annual matinée of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art yesterday. Some exceptionally good work was to be seen, and I shall be surprised if we do not hear more of Miss Beatrix Thomson who was excellent in the title role of W S Maugham's comedy "Caroline."' [The *Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1922]

Her performance in this event was rewarded by her being awarded the Academy Silver Medal as reported on 13 April in *The Stage*:

'... admirable gifts of sparkling and vivacious comedy acting being shown by Misses Beatrix Thomson ...
... the Academy Silver Medal [was awarded] to Miss Beatrice [sic] Thomson ...'

Her talent had been spotted by the actor, director and impresario Basil Dean who, as reported in *The Daily Mirror* on 30 May 1922, had engaged her in his new production of John Galsworthy's play *Loyalties*, later made into a film in 1933. The grainy image seen in Figure 3 is the earliest one we have of Beatrix, then aged 22.

She evidently did well in this role, as shown by the following comments:

'A Modest Debutante'

Beatrix Thomson, who has taken up Meggie Albanesi's part in "Loyalties" at the St. Martin's with such success, implored me not to boom her as a star. "Wait," she said, "till I have learned how to act!" She had only four terms at the Academy (where she got the Silver Medal), but she has been very greatly helped by Irene Vanbrugh and Sybil Thorndike. And now Mr. Basil Dean has engaged her on a long contract, and she will probably have a part in the Barrie play which he is going to revive.

British Acting.

In view of the theatrical slump, it is particularly instructive to note that managers who have relied on all-British productions have weathered the storm best. I am also glad to find that some managers are looking-out for new home-grown talent. British acting is

good enough for any play, but most of the plays are not good enough for British acting.



Miss Thomson.

New Talent.

The young actress, Beatrix Thomson, whose abilities I was prophetic enough to praise when she played at the matinee of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, has, I hear, been engaged for a Basil Dean production. Her career will be watched with interest. She is sister to Gordon Thomson, the Cambridge oarsman.

Figure 3 Beatrix praised at age 22.

"It's a wonderful stroke of luck to come straight home from school into this fine play with this fine company under such a splendid management, and now my hard task is to prove myself not quite unworthy of my good fortune. They're all trying to spoil me, but heaven knows I have a shrewd idea how much I have to learn."
' [The Pall Mall Gazette, 24 June 1922]

Dean's production of *Loyalties* ran from 3 March 1922 until 24 February 1923 at the St Martin's Theatre in the West End, with Beatrix playing the major role of 'Mabel Dancy'. Altogether there were 407 performances.

The next engagement for Beatrix appears to have been in early 1923. On 15 February a brief announcement was made in *The Stage* that she was to appear (but not in the leading role) in A A Milne's comedy *The Great Broxopp*, with 'rehearsals now in full progress', again under the production of the Reandean Company which Basil Dean had founded in 1919 with Alec Rea.

The play was performed at St Martin's Theatre, with Beatrix playing the character of 'Norah Field', the first performance being on 6 March. The run ended on 7 April after 37 performances.

Beatrix appeared soon afterwards with a significant role in another of Dean's productions, this being the play *R.U.R.* written by Karel Capek. The initials stand for 'Rossum's Universal Robots' and the play tells the story of how events unfolded when a factory began making humanoid robots from synthetic organic matter. It was this play which first introduced the word 'robot' to the world's languages. The play and its performance received much enthusiastic discussion in the media. Beatrix played the part of the robotic typist named 'Sulla'. The opening night at St Martin's Theatre on 24 April 1923 was reported extensively in *The Stage* on 26 April and complimented Beatrix as follows:

'St Martin's. "R.U.R."

On Tuesday, April 24, 1923, was produced here a fantastic melodrama, by Karel Capek, adapted by Nigel Playfair, entitled "R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)" ... a typist – Robotess – and a clerk, whom Domain [the factory's Manager] had ignorantly called Sulla and Marius, were played and made up capably by Miss Beatrix Thomson and Mr Gilbert Ritchie.'

The complete Programme can be viewed on the website of Effingham Local History Group (ELHG).



Figure 4 In "Loyalties"; *The Sketch*, 22 December 1922.

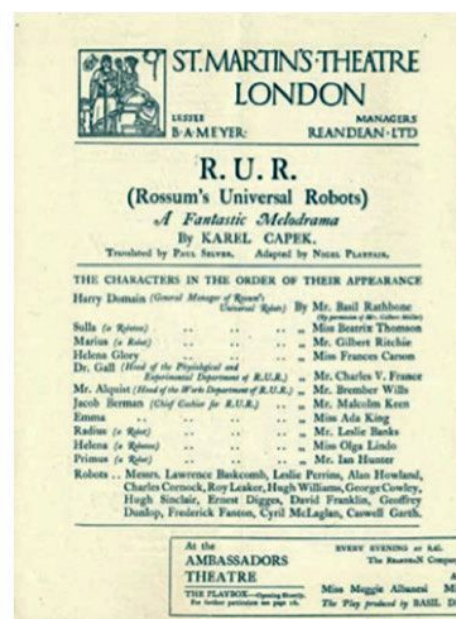
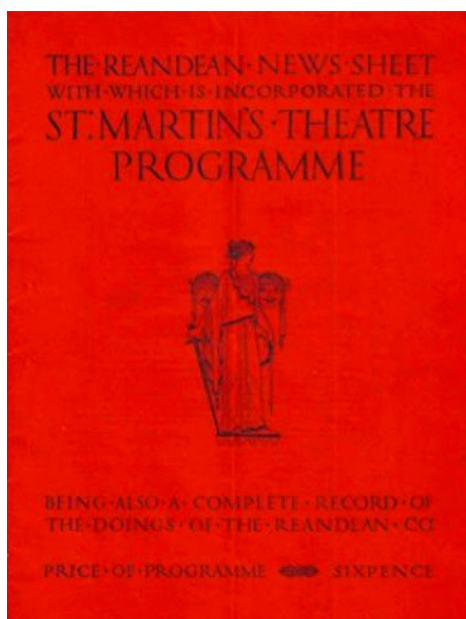


Figure 5 Cover and first page of the Programme for *R.U.R.*



Figure 6 Scenes showing Beatrix in *R.U.R.* in *The Sketch*, 16 May 1923.

The *R.U.R.* production ended at St Martin's on 11 August after 127 performances and then moved to the provinces. In October, for example, it was running at the New Theatre in Cardiff.

According to RADA's records Beatrix graduated in 1923, being awarded the RADA Diploma (Acting).

In early 1924 Beatrix was engaged by Dean for another Galsworthy play *The Forest*, as an alternate or understudy to Hermione Baddeley for the role of 'Amina'. This show ran at St Martin's Theatre from 6 March until 26 April, totalling 58 performances. Baddeley was highly acclaimed in the reviews.

The Daily Mirror said, in its review on 7 March, that the opening night 'was regarded as the theatrical event of the season'. It is not known how many performances, if any, Beatrix appeared in.

Beatrix next acted in George Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* at The Everyman Theatre in Hampstead. It opened on 9 July 1924. Her part was a rather minor one, playing the part of a young girl 'Leo'. Reviews were mixed:

'It will be surprising if *Getting Married* does not pack the Everyman. It remains astonishingly fresh. ... Mr Claude Rains as the intellectual coxcomb Hotchkiss is also first-rate. He is an actor of very considerable possibilities. Unfortunately the heat-wave caused him to stream with perspiration, although he was supposed to be as cool as a cucumber.' [*Sunday Pictorial*, 13 July 1924]

'... Miss Beatrix Thomson making a mere flapper of the two-men desiring Leo, and either gabbling off her words, or mumbling through her teeth.' [*The Stage*, 17 July 1924]

'On the first night *Getting Married* was warmly received. The satire seemed more brilliant than ever. ... Apart from Miss [Edith] Evans, the acting of the women at the Everyman was weak, but most of the men were excellent. ... Mr Claude Rains (in spite of his over-long trousers) as Hotchkiss was particularly good. The only serious fly in the Everyman was the fact that, despite the heat of the night and provision of jugs of lemonade on the non-alcoholic refreshment counter, the management had omitted to provide more than two (or was it three?) tumblers.' [*The Sphere*, 19 July 1924]

'... Miss Irene Rooke as the gentle Mrs Bridgenorth, and Miss Beatrix Thomson as the flippant, foolish Leo were all good. ... Go to Hampstead. Such good stuff should not be missed.' [*The Sketch*, 30 July 1924]

Getting Married had 33 performances, ending on 9 August. Beatrix may not have had her mind wholly focused on her part. Instead, her thoughts may have been directed more towards her co-actor in the play, the above-mentioned Claude Rains; because a few months later she would marry him.

First marriage

William Claude Rains was just over ten years older than Beatrix and had already become an accomplished actor both in Britain and Australia by the time she first entered RADA. He had also already been twice married and divorced. During the early 1920s he was giving widely acclaimed performances as well as teaching at RADA.

Among his students were several future giants of stage and screen, including John Gielgud and Charles Laughton. Beatrix had also been one of his students. It was known that young women were easily attracted to him, and Beatrix was no exception.

An account of how they came to marry is given in the book *Claude Rains: an Actor's Voice* written by the late David John Skal (1952-2024) in association with Jessica Rains, published in 2008 by The University Press of Kentucky. Skal notes Rains' description of Beatrix as an 'elfin, charming tiny thing', as a good actress and rich. Rains called her 'Trixie'.

The wealth of her family was evident from their home at Effingham House displaying masterpieces of art, including paintings by Goya.

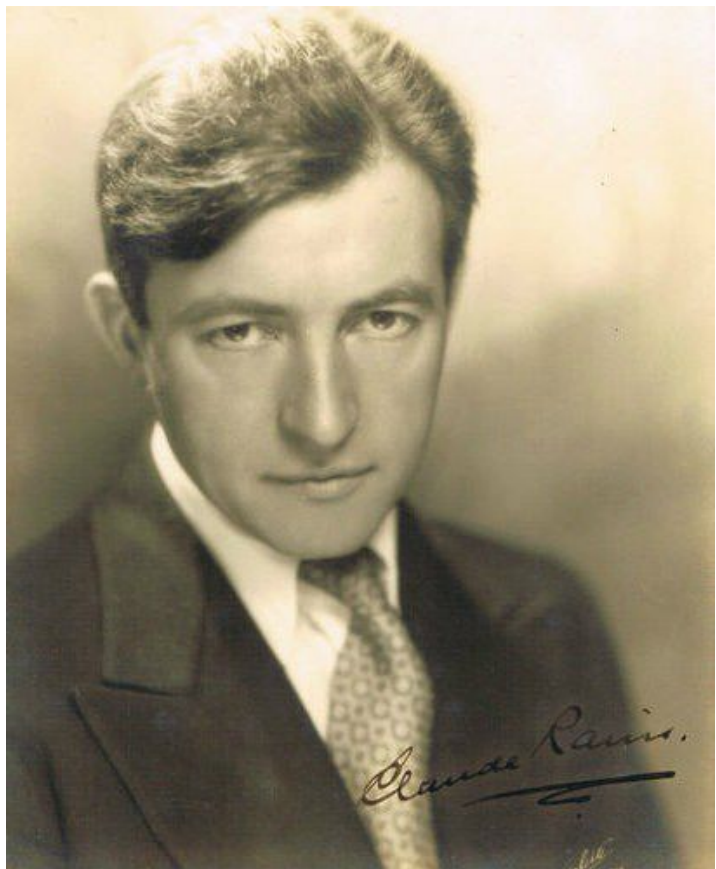


Figure 7 Claude Rains, from IWM Lives of the First World War.

Skal wrote:

'Rains was a bit surprised when Beatrix approached him privately one day. "She wanted to take me home for a weekend. She thought I had a glamorous life." They drove down to Effingham one night after a performance to meet her family. "I don't know if they ever really accepted me," Rains said. But he had his own clear opinion about Beatrix's brother Gordon. "Terrible snob, the brother. Never did any work, just went to the Devonshire Club and rowed in the Oxford-Cambridge boat race." His oars and cups were prominently displayed in the house.'

Rains recalled that when he awoke in Effingham House (then usually called The Manor House) the next morning in one of the guest bedrooms it was to find the family's butler holding and contemptuously staring at a shirt which still bore earlier stains from Rains' stage makeup. The dismissive description of Beatrix's brother Gordon (Lindsay Maxwell) Thomson should not be taken as a complete account of his character since, even if some elements of it were true, Gordon had some very significant earlier achievements to his name.

Beatrix married Rains at the Windsor Register Office on 24 November 1924. It is possible that she was staying briefly at Long Walk House in Windsor, the house to which her parents moved after departing from Effingham in about 1924. So far no contemporary newspaper report of their wedding has been found, which is consistent with the fact (as later admitted by them) that they had kept their marriage a closely guarded secret. They moved together into part of a three-storey house, No 28 Camden Grove in Kensington, the same house in which the author James Joyce would later live for nearly a year after marrying Nora Barnacle in 1931. Skal writes that the Rains occupied the property's basement flat but Electoral Registers record them as occupying both the basement and the ground floor (which seems far more likely) up to 1926.

Claude's acting continued without interruption after the wedding, but Beatrix appeared in just one more show in 1924, a new play by W. Lemon Hall entitled *The Tyranny of Home*. It was given 7 performances over the period 16-24 December at The Everyman Theatre. Beatrix played a minor role as 'Winnie Glanville' and '... with little to say, managed to get a good deal of character into the part of a young girl.' [*The Era*, 24 December 1924].



Figure 8 No 28, Camden Grove; the Blue Plaque is for James Joyce.

The mid-Twenties

The next year, 1925, would be a busy one for both of them. For Beatrix her first engagement in 1925 was a significant part in a revival of Sheridan's play *The Rivals* in which she played one of the central characters, 'Julia Melville'. Claude was also in the cast playing another important role, as 'Faulkland' who is in love with 'Julia' but ever doubting her fidelity. (There would be something prophetic about this for Claude's marriage to Beatrix).

The casting was further complicated, in principle, by the inclusion of Claude's two former wives, Isabel Jeans and Marie Hemingway. The theatre reviewers discreetly refrained from mentioning this. The production, at The Lyric in Hammersmith, ran from 5 March until 23 May, involving a punishing 93 performances delivered in a span of just 80 days. By the end the actors must have been drained.

Claude's performance was highly acclaimed in most of the reviews:

'Mr Claude Rains played Faulkland purely for comedy, and the result was a tremendous success.' [*The Daily Herald*, 6 March 1925].

'Mr Claude Rains gives a popular and effective performance, yet one is bound to say there is a subtlety in the character which he does not satisfy.' [*The Daily Mirror*, 6 March 1925].

'Perhaps the most outstanding acting success was that achieved by Claude Rains, who gave a masterly study of the love-torn Faulkland.' [*The Western Mail*, 7 March 1925].

The critics seem not to have commented on Beatrix's performance. However, *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* published an article on 14 March extolling instead the 'absolutely exquisite' part played by Claude's first ex-wife Isabel Jeans and analysing in great detail what she had worn, having only this to say about Beatrix:

'Very attractive, too, as worn by the Julia of Beatrix Thomson, is a similar hat of delicately mauve straw ...'



"OH THAT I SHOULD LIVE TO HEAR MYSELF CALLED SPINSTER"
Lydia Languish (Miss Isobel Jeans) bemoans her fate to Julia (Miss Beatrix Thomson)

Figure 9 Isabel and Beatrix (at right) in *The Rivals*, from the *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 14 March 1925.

Beatrix appeared next in *Caste* playing the part of ‘Polly Eccles’, the sister of a ballet dancer ‘Esther’ who becomes a penniless widow shortly after having made an inappropriate marriage. The production was staged at The Everyman Theatre, being performed 14 times during 3-15 August. It had good reviews:

‘The outstanding performance was that of Miss Beatrix Thomson as Polly Eccles.’ [*The Westminster Gazette*, 4 August 1925]

‘Miss Mercia Swinburne is a sweetly sympathetic Esther – how could she be otherwise? – and Miss Beatrix Thomson and Mr. S. Victor Stanley are both amusing and eminently likeable as Polly and Sam.’ [*The Stage*, 6 August 1925]

‘The spontaneous outburst of applause at the end of the performance, when the curtain had to be raised time after time, must have been most encouraging to every person concerned in its production.’ [*The Hendon, Finchley, Edgware and Mill Hill Times*, 7 August 1925]

‘Miss Beatrix Thomson’s Polly was as bright and gay as could be.’ [*The Era*, 8 August 1925]

Only a fortnight later Beatrix was back on the stage in another production at The Everyman, playing the role of ‘Biddy Bellingham’ in Purdell’s and Henderson’s play *I’ll Tell the World*, in which a father who disapproves of his daughter’s friends hosts a party to which they are all invited and encouraged to say what they like, after which he opens a cabinet to reveal that all they have said has been broadcast to the world by a hidden piece of apparatus. Biddy, being one of those friends, has feather-brained pretensions to being ‘arty’ yet knows nothing about art. The show was reviewed favourably, seeing 17 performances at The Everyman from 28 August until 12 September, after which it ran for a further fortnight at the Golders Green Hippodrome:

‘The Piece had an entirely favourable reception at the Everyman, and should win success both at Hampstead and elsewhere. ... Miss Beatrix Thomson, as Biddy Bellingham, who becomes human when Shipley, who had proposed to her, is exposed ...’ [*The Stage*, 3 September 1925]

In November 1925 Beatrix appeared as ‘Imogen’ in Reginald Berkeley’s mystery play *The World’s End* which was given a single performance on the 8th at the West End’s Aldwych Theatre:

‘... Mr Reginald Berkeley has reiterated the familiar truth that if people were granted their highest ambitions they would not be any happier ... This curious mixture of realism and fantasy had the advantage of being exceedingly well produced by Mr. Norman Page, and finally acted by the loyal company that was willing to take so much trouble for a single performance. Every part was beautifully acted. ... Miss Beatrix Thomson had some fine moments as the young girl ...’ [*The Era*, 11 November 1925]

Beatrix’s last stage engagement in 1925 was at the ‘Q’ Theatre where she took the leading role of ‘Flora MacLeod’ in John Brandane’s tense drama *The Lifting*, set in the Hebrides in the mid-18th century. Flora is the sister of a man who has been accidentally killed by the friend of a man wrongly condemned to execution as the victim’s purported murderer:

‘There are some scenes of quite striking beauty in *The Lifting* which was hailed with marked favour at Kew Bridge on Monday evening. ... As the two girls, Misses Beatrix Thomson and Beatrice Lewisohn nicely accentuate the tenderness of the one and the spitfire wildness of the other ...’ [*The Stage*, 17 December 1925]

In their reporting of *The Lifting* some publications took the opportunity to draw attention also to the recent revelation that Beatrix and Claude had married a year previously and had kept this fact secret from the public. The article in Figure 10 quotes Beatrix as saying that the couple felt they had been ‘very clever’ in this but no explanation is offered as to the reason for being secretive. It may have been for professional reasons, to prevent the fact from influencing casting decisions. It is not clear whether the disclosure was made at this time deliberately by the couple or they had felt compelled to confirm it owing to its discovery by someone else.

In early 1926 Beatrix gave one of her finest performances yet. She had been assigned the part of ‘Trina’ in Chekhov’s long and emotive play *The Three Sisters* in a production at the Barnes Theatre running for at least three weeks from 15 February. John Gielgud, who had trained at RADA with Beatrix under Claude

Rains, was also in the cast. There were many reviews in the Press, all highly praising, and the show was acclaimed as being, at that time, the finest anywhere in London, the acting all of the highest standard.

THIRD WEDDING OF MR. CLAUDE RAINS.

SECRET KEPT FOR A YEAR.

The marriage of Mr. Claude Rains, the actor and producer, and Miss Beatrix Thomson, a young actress, which took place at a Windsor register office about a year ago, was disclosed last night.

Mr. Rains is now playing in "The Madras House" at the Ambassadors Theatre and Miss Thomson is rehearsing the leading part in a new Scottish play "The Lifting," which will be produced at the "Q" Theatre on Monday.

"Our wedding was known to only a few very intimate friends," Mrs. Rains told the Westminster Gazette last night, "and we feel that we have been very clever in keeping the secret so long."

"I first met my husband when I was studying for the stage at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art at which Mr. Rains was one of the coaches. When I left he engaged me to play the leading part in "Loyalties" at the St. Martin's Theatre. I was only 21 at the time."

Mr. Rains started his career as a call-boy at His Majesty's Theatre and worked his way up to become prompter and eventually stage-manager. Since then he has become well known as an actor and producer.

This is his third wedding. His first wife was Miss Isabel Jeans, who played in "The Man with a Load of Mischief" at the Haymarket Theatre until recently, and his second wife was Miss Marie Hemingway, who has been playing an important part in "No No Nanette."

Both marriages were dissolved.

Figure 10 Revealing the secret marriage; from *The Westminster Gazette*, 10 December 1925.



THE COLONEL MEETS THE THREE SISTERS AFTER MANY YEARS: VERSHININ (ION SWINLEY), MASHA (MARGARET SWALLOW), OLGA (MARGARET SHERIDAN) AND IRINA (BEATRIX THOMSON).

Figure 11 *The Three Sisters*; from *The Sketch*, 24 February 1926.



VASSILY SOLYONY AND IRINA: MR. ELLIOTT SEABROOK (THE WELL-KNOWN LANDSCAPE-PAINTER) AND MISS BEATRIX THOMSON.

Figure 12 *The Three Sisters*; *The Sketch*, 24 February 1926.



Figure 13 *The Three Sisters*, from *The Sphere*, 27 February 1926.

Here is a selection of extracts from the newspapers commenting on *The Three Sisters*:

'Mary Sheridan, Beatrix Thomson, and Margaret Swallow as the sisters are so true to the author's conceptions that we do not think of them as the clever actresses they are but as the ill-fated sisters intended.' [*The Westminster Gazette*, 17 February 1926]

'No one should miss the beautiful production of this play at the Barnes Theatre. Its appeal is universal ... The play was so perfectly acted that to mention one player and not another would in some slight measure damage the harmony of the whole.' [*The Daily Herald*, 17 February 1926]

'... for power and acting and imaginative producing, this is the most remarkable play now running in London.' [*The Westminster Gazette*, 18 February 1926]

'London's Best Plays ... Particularly moving are the performances given by Beatrix Thomson in *The Three Sisters* ...' [*Sunday Pictorial*, 21 February 1926]

'Its acting is up to the high standard which Mr. Ridgeway [the producer] has set himself, and the sisters of Miss Beatrix Thomson, Miss Margaret Swallow and Miss Mary Sheridan could not be improved upon.' [*Truth*, 24 February 1926]

'The Three Sisters ... at the Barnes Theatre is meeting with an enthusiastic reception by crowded audiences.' [*The West London Friday Observer*, 26 February 1926]

In June Beatrix was back at The Everyman playing the role of 'Gilberte' in Jean-Jacques Bernard's complex and passionate play *The Years Between*, in a run which began on the 14th. It was the first occasion on which one of this French dramatist's plays had been translated for the English stage. 'Gilberte' is a daughter married to a man who is also loved covertly by her own mother. The reviews were mostly excellent although the play's subtlety was evidently lost on some:

'Audience perplexed by hazy plot. ... The Years Between, by Jean-Jacques Bernard, is an irritating play. ... This haziness may have been induced by translation. ... I am doubtful also as to the necessity of those fiercely acted emotional storms that so spoil the looks of beautiful Beatrix Thomson.' [*The Westminster Gazette*, 16 June 1926]

Others were far more positive:

'One of the most subtle, touching and beautiful plays that have been seen in London for a very long time was produced last night at the Everyman Theatre. Miss Beatrice Wilson and Miss Beatrix Thomson, as the mother and daughter, force one to use a strong phrase and to say that they approach perfection. Certainly one could not imagine the parts better acted.' [*The Daily Herald*, 15 June 1926]

'Miss Beatrix Thomson enables us to watch the daughter searching in distress for a key to the mystery which threatens, she knows not how or why, her own happiness; her performance appears, when the play is done, as a long and subtle prelude to the final discovery.' [*The Times*, 15 June 1926]

'The great thing is that The Years Between is a deeply interesting play, providing immense opportunities for emotional acting, and that it was received with the utmost favour at Hampstead on Monday. ... Miss Beatrix Thomson, as the daughter, is better in the earlier scenes than in the big emotional passage at the finish. She gives, however, a very skilful portrait of the kind of young wife whose innocence would naturally lead her to suspect the worst. Miss Winifred Oughton satisfactorily completes the short cast as a servant.' [*The Stage*, 17 June 1926]

The above mention of Winifred Oughton is interesting in that she came to live near Effingham Junction in East Horsley around 1934, a move which may have been influenced by Beatrix, although there were several other major artistes also living in and around Effingham in this period.

It appears that Beatrix performed in one further London production in 1926. The play *Pillars of Society* by Ibsen was staged at The Everyman during 13-24 July with Gwendolen Evans playing the role of 'Dina Dorf', with Beatrix possibly as her alternate or understudy.

The Everyman (pictured in Figure 14 in about 1920) was a small and intimate theatre and usually staged plays not requiring, or not suitable for, the larger formats offered by the mainstream theatres in the West End. The 1926 production here of Ibsen's play was very well received and might have concluded its run in July had there not occurred a significant failure at the West End's Royalty Theatre, where another play had been withdrawn after just a small number of performances. The outcome of this was that *Pillars of Society*, having been so successful, was transferred to the Royalty for a second run of two weeks, spanning 5-21 August.

At least five of the roles were re-cast for this run including making Beatrix the principal actor for 'Dina Dorf'. She was well received:



Figure 14 The Everyman theatre in Hampstead, c1920.

'Miss Beatrix Thompson [sic] deserves praise for her fine performance of Dina.' [*The Era*, 16 August 1926]

"Among the newcomers [i.e. those brought into the second run by the re-casting] I liked Miss Beatrix Thomson, who now plays Dina Dorf." [*The Sketch*, 18 August 1926]

Broadway

As 1926 drew to a close Beatrix was given an exciting new opportunity – she was engaged as the leading lady for the role of 'Tessa' in *The Constant Nymph*, a play adapted by Basil Dean and to be staged under Dean's direction at the Selwyn Theatre on New York's Broadway.



Figure 15 From *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 19 February 1927.

According to Skal [*op cit*] Claude was pressured somewhat against his will by Beatrix's brother (Gordon, presumably) to accompany her to America because of her reluctance to undertake the journey alone. Rains accepted a minor role in the same production, a rather lowly position considering his status in Britain.

In New York they took up residence in Madison Avenue at the New Weston Hotel. Beatrix received generally good reviews in *The Constant Nymph* and the production, which had opened on 9 December, continued into April 1927.

'It [*The Constant Nymph*] has already been running in New York, where the roles of Lewis and Tessa are being filled by Mr. Glenn Anders ... and Miss Beatrix Thomson, the English actress, who won great praise in the Russian plays last year at the Barnes Theatre.' [*The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 5 March 1927]

After the run concluded the Rains went back to London and terminated their Camden Grove tenancy before returning to America. There, the show was taken to other venues outside New York, but with Rains now taking the leading male role. They obtained more excellent reviews before returning to New York for the winter. They were now living on East 86th Street and both performing in Don Marquis's play *Out of the Sea*, with Rains playing 'Arthur' and Beatrix 'Isobel'. It opened at Werba's Brooklyn Theatre on 9 November and moved to the Eltinge Theatre in Manhattan on 5 December. Reviews were mixed:

'... much of the piece was received with rapt attention. ... Miss Thomson is not as well fitted as she was in *The Constant Nymph*; her Isobel lacks mystery.' [*The Stage*, 22 December 1927]

Skal states that in the spring of 1928 the Rains moved to West 57th Street. Claude was getting consistently good reviews but Beatrix less so. They undertook various joint and separate engagements, including a spell in Connecticut, before returning to New York.

Marriage troubles

During 1928, whilst in New York, Claude now aged nearly 40 met a young would-be actress named Frances Propper, aged just 18, and began sleeping with her. Skal writes that according to Claude, 'I was lonely, and she was weary of virginity'. Matters must have been getting difficult in his personal dealings with Beatrix who was living mostly apart from him.

By late October Beatrix was embarking on a new production, a three-person play *The Unknown Warrior* in which she played the part of 'Aude'. It opened at Broadway's Charles Hopkins Theatre on 29 October but had only 8 performances owing to Beatrix being compelled to withdraw in order to comply with the requirements of the American Actor's Equity Association. Skal does not mention this fact, merely recording that she had told Claude that she no longer loved him and wished to return to Britain.



America's Tessa

Miss Beatrix Thomson, who is appearing on Broadway in the very successful New York production of *The Constant Nymph*

Figure 16 From *The Graphic*, 12 March 1927.

Claude failed to dissuade her and sank into misery. Equity's issue with Beatrix was reported in the Press after she had got back to England. The problem arose from Equity's rule that when a British artist in America had completed a run, irrespective of its duration, there had to follow a period of at least 6 months before they could embark upon another one there. In this instance, Beatrix had taken on this new work too soon after her most recent engagement. Beatrix was just one of many British actors who fell foul of this rule.

'I appreciate Equity's point of view,' Miss Thomson said, 'but it is very hard on English artists like myself, who have made a home in America. Although I have been in the States for two years, I have only worked about 50 weeks in all. I am barred from working either in America or Canada until May at the earliest. That is a bad season to open in, and it means that I cannot work in America again until next autumn. As I did not want to be out of work all that time, I decided to come back to England, at least for a time. I may work here till I can return to the States.' [*The Evening Telegraph*, 7 January 1929]

Given the situation with Claude, it may be that even had the Equity problem not arisen she would have left America anyway.

Claude now distanced himself further from Beatrix by taking on a different apartment at 158 East 33rd Street, and continued in his career with notable success. Beatrix meanwhile was preparing in London for a production of *Two Women*. In the summer of 1929 Claude visited Beatrix in London, but found that there was no prospect of patching things up with her; they agreed to separate. He returned to America and to Frances Proper.

In 1934 he filed a divorce suit against Beatrix in the American courts citing her desertion as the cause and was duly granted a *decree nisi* in January 1935 made absolute in early April. A few days later, on 8 April, Claude married Frances.

Beatrix, however, decided to challenge the American court decision and hence also the marriage to Frances, claiming that Claude had married the latter bigamously. This claim had the potential to damage significantly his reputation and career. Moreover, she filed a countersuit against him and Frances, engaging heavy-hitting lawyers for the purpose. Skal records that in the English newspapers Beatrix queried whether she was 'free to make my own life'. He writes 'Beatrix had answered the question to her own satisfaction when she left Rains for another man in the first place', but this seems to overlook Claude's apparently prior dalliance with Frances. Skal's sources for all this dirty washing lay mostly within a large collection of Claude's memorabilia to which he had access after the latter's death, but he appears not to have had the benefit of any comparable materials surviving from Beatrix. His conclusion that Beatrix was acting out of a 'vindictive streak' must therefore be one-sided. None of us can ever know the full truth of such happenings. Skal's condemnatory language in describing Beatrix's behaviour seeks to convey to us something about the woman, but the fact of Claude eventually having to divorce no fewer than five wives (including Frances) in his lifetime may also tell us something about the man. Indeed, other sources present many unsavoury anecdotes about Claude to which Skal makes no reference at all.

Beatrix eventually won her action against Claude and was granted a divorce under English law, obtaining a *decree nisi* in late 1936 with finalisation on 26 July 1937, receiving also (according to Skal) a settlement of \$25,000. Her address at that time was given as Southwick Street in Marble Arch.

The end of the Twenties

Beatrix resumed work rapidly after her return to England. Her first engagement in 1929 was in Cosmo Hamilton's play *Two Women* presented by the Lyceum Club Stage Society. It was performed at The Savoy on 13 January. Beatrix played the role of 'Mary Hubbard'.



Figure 17 From the *Daily Herald*, 19 December 1936.

'Miss Beatrix Thomson, although her material was not very worthy of her, gave an exquisitely beautiful performance as Mary Hubbard. She made the character quite credible and lifelike, a by no means easy task.' [*The Era*, 16 January 1929]

'... the tender, gentle and delicately charming Mary of Miss Beatrix Thomson.' [*The Stage*, 17 January 1929]

Ernest Raymond's highly dramatic play *The Berg*, presenting moving scenes aboard the sinking *Titanic*, was staged at the 'Q' Theatre for a run starting on 4 March and then for another in the West End at His Majesty's Theatre starting on the 12th. Beatrix played the part of newly-married 'Monica', her husband in a state of collapse when facing their separation as the liner begins to sink.



Figure 18 From *Britannia*, 29 March 1927.

The play, and she, received excellent reviews:

'The acting is magnificent.' [*The West Middlesex Gazette*, 9 March 1929]

'A lovely silver evening gown embroidered with diamanté was worn on the stage by little dark-haired Beatrix Thomson who, during the intensely pathetic scene with her young husband (Wallace Geoffrey) in the second act, moved the audience to tears which were a much greater tribute than even their enthusiastic applause!' [*The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 23 March 1929]

'A beautiful play, beautifully acted ... Mr. Wallace Geoffrey, appealing in his solicitude for his young wife, and tragic in his collapse under stress ... Miss Beatrix Thomson as the young wife, as emotional as her powers would permit.' [*The Sketch*, 27 March 1929]

'Miss Beatrix Thomson wrings our heartstrings as the young wife who is expecting to become a mother.' [*The Illustrated London News*, 30 March 1929]

On 14 July Beatrix gave, by all accounts, a truly superb performance as the leading lady in the nine-scene play *The Subway*, presented by the Lyceum Club Stage Society at The Garrick. She played the role of 'Sophie Smith', a clerical drudge in a soulless office condemned to travel at the end of each day to an equally dreary home. She comes to a tragic and horrific end. The reviewers said:

'There is a young, inexperienced girl, longing vaguely for beauty and companionship, hating her life with its drab office work and hours spent in travelling in the subway ... given a part deep with possibility, Miss Beatrix Thomson made a brilliant success of the young girl.' [*The Era*, 17 July 1929]

'The performance ... was rendered noteworthy by a very beautiful and sensitive representation of a shop-girl victim of that modern juggernaut, the New York Subway, given by Miss Beatrix Thomson.' [*The Stage*, 18 July 1929]

'Miss Beatrix Thomson, who played the part of the shop girl, gave the greatest performance of her career, and was altogether admirable ... let us hope those managers who saw Miss Thomson's brilliant performance may at last realise that we have there a really very great actress, and will give her a part worthy of her talents.' [*Kensington Post and West London Star*, 26 July 1929]

Meanwhile, Beatrix had been acting in a long run of G B Stern's play *The Matriarch* at The Royalty, which opened in mid-May and continued into August. As the leading lady, she played 'Toni Rakonitz', the Jewish grand-daughter of the despotic Anastasia.

'In a big cast Beatrix Thomson has her first big chance on the London stage, and she does not miss it. The final scene with her young lover, when he throws her over because he sees in her the Matriarch over again, was played with power and understanding.' [*The Courier and Advertiser*, 10 May 1929]

'A powerful performance is given by Beatrix Thomson as Toni ...' [*The Sporting Times*, 18 May 1929]

'Miss Beatrix Thomson lights the lamp of Toni's burning ardour with sensitive understanding.' [*The Tatler*, 12 June 1929]

'The Matriarch, at the Royalty, reaches its 100th performance tomorrow. Miss Beatrix Thomson was absent one night through illness ...' [*The Stage*, 1 August 1929]



Figure 19 From *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 25 May 1929.



AN IOU WRITTEN ON THE FAMILY TREE

Toni (Miss Beatrix Thomson) signs an I O U for her Uncle Ludovic's debt to Isaac Cohen (Mr. Abraham Sofaer) on the back of the Rakonitz genealogical table, of which she is so proud. A well-cut little cameo of Jewish sense and sentimentality

Figure 20 From *The Graphic*, 25 May 1929.

Airborne

In late 1929 Beatrix obtained a pilot's certificate. She took great pride in being Britain's first actress to have been granted one. We do not yet know when she had taken up her interest in flying nor what her motivation was. She may have taken inspiration from her brother Gordon who had been decorated for his flying service in the Great War. The photographs in Figures 21-22 were taken on 29 December 1929 after she had made her first solo flight at Hanworth Aerodrome, whilst Figure 23 shows her in 1930 with her instructor, the highly distinguished Capt Harry Methuen Schofield. Her flying was based at the Hanworth Park Club, the headquarters of National Flying Services Ltd.



Figure 21 Beatrix after her first solo flight; 29 December 1929.



Figure 22 Beatrix after her first solo flight; 29 December 1929.



A TALENTED YOUNG ACTRESS TAKES TO THE AIR: BEATRIX THOMSON WITH HER PILOT-INSTRUCTOR, CAPT SCHOFIELD, AT HANWORTH.

Women are again showing their prowess in the Alps this winter in curling as well as ski-ing, and our upper picture shows a match in progress for an International Cup at St. Moritz. Below is seen Miss Beatrix Thomson, the young actress who took the name part of "The Constant Nymph" in America, and has lately been playing the youthful lead with Mrs. Patrick Campbell in "The Matriarch." Miss Thomson is learning to fly at the Hanworth Park Club, the headquarters of National Flying Services, Ltd., in Middlesex.

Figure 23 Beatrix with her instructor Capt Harry Methuen Schofield, 1930.



Figure 24 Beatrix at the Reading Air Pageant with Air Vice Marshal Sir William Sefton Brancker, 1930.

In April 1930 she attended, and evidently flew at, the Reading Air Pageant, which was held to mark the opening of a new club-house and hangars of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Aero Club. She is shown at the pageant in Figure 24 in the company of Air Vice Marshal Sir William Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation, who later that year on 5 October was killed in the catastrophic crash in France of the R101 Airship. The author of an article in *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* published on 18 October wrote 'I remember his enthusiastic comments over the flying ambitions of Miss Beatrix Thomson, the actress, and how eager he was to see more people making flying a hobby for week-ends and spare time.'

Her initial flying certificate did not allow her to take passengers into the air with her. A newspaper article of 1933 mentioned this and also gave a colourful account of her earlier solo flights:

'Actress Airwoman

Beatrix Thomson, who is to play the Princess in C. B. Fernald's play "The Princess in the Cage", which will be produced at the Westminster Theatre on February 22nd, is the only British actress who flies an aeroplane.

She has not yet qualified for the certificate which would entitle her to pilot a passenger-carrying machine. She has, however, made a number of solo flights. On the first of these she looped seven times.

Scared Him

Her instructor meanwhile was in a fever of anxiety. When she landed he gave her a piece of his mind. "I never heard of such a thing," he said, "a pilot on a first solo flight looping!" "And I thought you'd be proud of me," answered Beatrix demurely, "I was doing credit to your instruction.' [*The Daily Mirror*, 11 February 1933]

The Thirties

The Thirties was another busy decade for Beatrix, much of her time devoted to stage acting but also taking her first steps as a playwright and film actor. The above account of her in the Twenties is sufficiently detailed to demonstrate the high regard in which her acting was held almost universally. For this next decade a selection of her work is presented more briefly in summarised form. She also appeared in, or managed, many other works during this period which are not listed here.

The Way Out – Comedy Theatre

‘Beatrix Thomson commands a great deal of sincere emotional power as the much-tried wife.’ [*The Daily Mirror*, 24 January 1930].

Wooden Shoes – Kingsway Theatre

‘The adapter, Beatrix Thomson, has seen to it that she plays a part which runs the gamut of the emotions, and does it very well.’ [*The Bystander*, 26 November 1930]

Lilies of the Field – Grafton Theatre

‘These latest and youngest theatre managers, Helena Pickard and Beatrix Thomson, received endless congratulations after their opening performance at the tiny Grafton Theatre.’ [*The Daily Mirror*, 7 May 1931]

I want! – Grafton Theatre

‘Miss Beatrix Thomson ... did work of emotional value as the embittered secretary ...’ [*The Stage*, 18 June 1931]

East Lynne – Grafton Theatre

‘Miss Thomson’s concern for her falsely-accused brother ... hidden beneath a cloak of seemly reticence, was real and moving.’ [*The Sketch*, 7 October 1931]

The Dreyfus Case – (film) Empire Theatre and others

‘Beatrix Thomson, the only woman in the cast, gave a sympathetic rendering of the role of the unhappy but devoted wife of Dreyfus. The film is an all-British production.’ [*Northern Daily Mail*, 17 November 1931]

Somebody Knows – St Martin’s Theatre

‘Only Lily (finely played by Beatrix Thomson) “comes alive”.’ [*The Bystander*, 25 May 1932]

Charity Show – Scala Theatre

‘When so charming a theatrical manager as Beatrix Thomson chooses to make a gesture of gratitude, one takes it as a matter of course that it will be as novel as it will be gracious.’ [*The Era*, 8 June 1932]

Playground – Royalty Theatre

‘Beatrix Thomson is the one player with anything of an emotional chance, and she takes it forthrightly, laying bare the Cockney barmaid’s feelings with appealing realism.’ [*The Era*, 23 November 1932]

Love for Sale – (her own play) St Martin’s Theatre

‘On Sunday May 14 1933 the R.A.D.A. Players presented at the St Martin’s a play, in three acts, by Beatrix Thomson ... a talented young actress ...’ [*The Stage*, 18 May 1933]

Clean Hands – Piccadilly Theatre

‘Rosemary was played with much sincerity and also charm by Miss Beatrix Thomson in a role affording her good chances for emotional work.’ [*The Stage*, 15 June 1933]

The Voyage Inheritance – Sadlers Wells Theatre

‘Alice Maitland, who finally decides to throw in her lot with Edward *quand meme*, was presented with some effect by Miss Beatrix Thomson ... in one of the strongest scenes of the play.’ [*The Stage*, 10 May 1934]

The Night Hawk – Q Theatre

'Miss Thomson has the extraordinary power of digging deep into the heart of the abandoned among women.' [*Acton Gazette*, 17 August 1934]

Magnolia Street – Adelphi Theatre

'Probably one of the most successful adaptations of a novel ever made ... Miss Thomson the typical heartless strumpet.' [*The Scotsman*, 9 March 1934; *The Stage*, 15 March 1934]

There Go All of Us – Grand Opera House, Belfast

'Beatrix Thomson in a role that demanded such talent as is seldom found gave a performance that can only be described as moving.' [*The Northern Wing and Belfast Post*, 30 April 1935]

Duet by Accident – (her own play) Q Theatre

'It says much for the skill in theatre-craft of Beatrix Thomson that she has succeeded admirably in the formidable task of writing a full-length two-character play which never loses interest.' [*The Stage*, 12 December 1935]

For the Defence – Duke of York's Theatre

'... there is the frail charm of Barbara Keeble, excellently portrayed by Beatrix Thomson. She has a part which could so easily be over-acted but she carries it through with a restraint and understanding ...' [*Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald*, 5 October 1935]

Crown v Stevens – (film) various cinemas

'It looks as though the producers have discovered a new British star in Beatrix Thomson, who gives a vivid performance as a murderess. Already a favourite on the West End Stage, nothing is more certain that that she will become equally famous on the screen.' [*The West Middlesex Gazette*, 15 August 1936]

Mingled within these activities there were, of course, other things happening in Beatrix's life. During the run of *Somebody Knows* in 1932 she had a bad car accident, forcing her to withdraw for several days. Her car had skidded into a telegraph pole when she swerved to avoid a motor-cyclist. The *Charity Show* she staged in June of that year was held in aid of the Osteopathic Association Clinic in recognition of the treatment she had received.

ELHG's website shows two embedded Getty images of her. One was taken on 21 November 1932 when she was described as shortly to appear in the play *Magnolia Street*, but that play was delayed and not staged until early 1934. The other shows her name liberally displayed at the Vaudeville Theatre in September 1934 during the run of *The Night Hawk*.

In 1934 Beatrix was living at 2, Shepherd Market in Mayfair, but Electoral Registers for 1935-39 give her address as No 19 just around the corner in Hertford Street. She clearly had the means to live in one of the most expensive parts of London.

From the start of the Thirties Beatrix was broadening her interests in the performing arts and in 1931 she teamed up with another very fine actress Helena Pickard, also born in 1900 like Beatrix. She too had been on Broadway besides London's stages. Together they took out a lease on a small basement, formerly a cinema, in Tottenham Court Road and converted it for use as the 'Grafton Theatre' where during 1931-32 at least they managed – and often acted in – many small-scale productions, some of which are listed above. Figure 25 shows



Figure 25 Helena and Beatrix in *The Tatler*, 13 May 1930.

Helena and Beatrix on the Grafton's opening night when *The Lilies of the Field* was staged.

Occasionally Beatrix took roles in films. Those most commonly cited are *The Dreyfus Case*, *Crown v Stevens*, *The Story of Shirley Yorke* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The best of these was probably *Crown v Stevens* in which she played the part of a woman being tried in the courts for murder. None of them was especially memorable by today's standards. The studios where they were being made were taken over by an American corporation which blocked the films from being shown in America. Consequently they were shown only in Britain.



Figure 26 Beatrix in a screenshot from the film *Crown v Stevens*, 1936.



Figure 27 Beatrix photographed by Madame Yevonde, probably in about 1936.



Figure 28 Beatrix photographed by Bassano Ltd, 1936; from the National Portrait Gallery NPG x83490.

Beatrix had written at least one play, *Love for Sale* in 1933, but a few years later she returned to writing in earnest and produced a suite of four plays, staged at the Richmond Theatre during 1938-39. The photograph shown in Figure 29, referring to these works, was published in 1938.



ACTRESS-PLAYWRIGHT: Beatrix Thomson, who has so often delighted London with her fine acting, is also a talented writer, and four varied new plays of hers are being presented in succession in a short season which began at the Richmond Theatre on February 7

Figure 29 Beatrix in *The Sphere*, 12 February 1938.



Figure 30 A very rare original print signed by Beatrix which ELHG was able to purchase for its own archives. It is signed 'Beatrix Thomson 1938'.

Beatrix's decision to write the play *The Sons of Adam* established that her motivation in stage production was not confined to mere entertainment but was rooted in a wider awareness of what was happening in the world and the calls it made upon personal and collective conscience.

The Sons of Adam was a raw and topical exploration of the persecution and extermination of Jewish peoples. Beatrix was offered several West End venues for it:

'[She] had been inspired to write it by the plight of the thousands of refugees pouring out of Germany and Austria, and the story is closely bound up with this theme.' [*The Birmingham Mail*, 16 February 1939]

War was coming.

Wartime

In September 1939, after War had been declared, the Government drew up a National Register having some similarity to the standard Census. In this register Beatrix is found with a few other individuals at the address 14, Money Hill Road in Rickmansworth, Herts and described as an authoress.

The National Portrait Gallery has a note (with some photographs it holds of her) that she 'volunteered her services at an aeroplane production plant during the Second World War', but whether that relates to her having this Hertfordshire address is not known.

It seems that she was also retaining at least one residence in London, as the London Post Office Directory for 1940 lists her at Flat 19 within No. 20, Grosvenor Square W1. On 6 March 1940 she performed in the play *Belle Vue* at the Chancery Theatre in South Kensington, but nothing is known of her activities during the remainder of 1940.

In early 1941 it was announced in the Press that Beatrix was to remarry, to Capt Robert Gerald de Quincey, as reported by *The Manchester Evening News* on 8 February 1941.

Her address at this time was given in the Press as Barley Mow Cottage in Horsell, Woking, but this may have been the home of a family member. However, this intended marriage did not take place and Capt de Quincey instead married someone else in 1947.

Whatever the reason for the apparent hiatus in 1940, Beatrix did some stage work during 1941. In January she and Gwendolen Brogden with others contributed to a well-received concert of entertainment for a Home Guard platoon in Worplesdon, Surrey. In December she was the leading lady in several performances of the play *Trousered Apes* at the Prince's Theatre, Bradford and the Palace Court in Bournemouth and probably elsewhere, obtaining some good reviews. The play was advertised as 'Prior to Presentation in London' but appears not to have been staged there. Also in December, for five nights, she acted in *Set to Partners* at the Theatre



Yevonde

MISS BEATRIX THOMSON

There can hardly be many busier present-day playwrights than this famous young actress, for she has four brand-new plays on the hooks, all to be presented during the four-weeks' season which opened at the Richmond Theatre on February 7th. Their titles are: "Special Delivery," "Set to Music," "Woman Alive," and "Sons of Adam." Miss Beatrix Thomson is one of the outstanding products of the R.A.D.A., and made her first success under the banner of Basil Dean in "Loyalties" in 1922

Figure 31 Beatrix in *The Tatler*, 9 February 1938.

ACTRESS TO MARRY	MISS BEATRIX LINDSAY THOMSON, actress and playwright, is to marry Captain Robert Gerald de Quincey, youngest son of Mrs. M. K. de Quincey, of Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Miss Thomson, a daughter of the late Colonel and Mrs. B. T. L. Thomson, was formerly the wife of Claude Rains, the film actor. Mr. Rains obtained a divorce in the New Jersey Courts in 1935 on the ground of desertion. Miss Thomson obtained a decree nisi in the English courts in 1936. Three years ago she made theatre history by presenting four of her own new plays in consecutive weeks at the Richmond Theatre.
	

Figure 32 *The Manchester Evening News*, 8 February 1941.

Royal in Brighton. In early 1942 she obtained excellent reviews for her acting in the play *Ducks and Drakes*, performed firstly at London's Apollo Theatre and then on tour at, for example, the Theatre Royal in Brighton, the Prince of Wales in Cardiff and the Grand Theatre in Blackpool. During the summer and autumn of 1943 she played with great success the part of a cabaret singer in the comedy *Time for Bed*, appearing at such places as Hammersmith's King's Theatre, Brighton's Theatre Royal, Cardiff's Prince of Wales and the Exeter Theatre.

Illness and decline

In 1939 Basil Dean had formed ENSA, the Entertainments National Service Association. The organisation provided entertainment to British armed services during the Second World War.

In March 1945 newspapers were reporting that Dean had recently returned to England after his 25,000-mile tour of India, Burma, Iraq, Egypt and Italy. At that time his star entertainers in India included Beatrix and Joyce Grenfell, and his first mobile entertainment unit of half a dozen performers had just left Calcutta bound for a three-month tour of Burma. It is certain that Beatrix visited Burma with ENSA but not clear whether she had already done so in 1944 or was now about to do so in 1945. A report in *The Stage* on 4 July 1946 stated that Beatrix 'had just returned to London after two adventurous years in the Far East.'

Whichever the case, in Burma she contracted a serious, disfiguring facial condition that was to interrupt her acting career. The story was told in various newspapers some years afterwards. Figure 33 shows an example, told partly in her own words, published in the *Sunday Advocate*, Barbados on 17 February 1952. Here it is claimed that her condition emerged in 1944. Elsewhere it was claimed that it was contracted during an ENSA tour in 1945.

It is clear from all such reports, however, that Beatrix suffered greatly from this illness and was forced to suppress her career for several years, choosing to 'live in seclusion in Surrey', possibly with brother Gordon. The illness was never diagnosed with certainty. A doctor who described it as some kind of bacteria-induced allergic urtication put her on a long course of vaccine injections which by 1952 had cured it. She had also undergone some operations.

The Shadow Has Gone From A Lovely Face

BEATRIX THOMSON

If on looking in the mirror one morning you saw a strange and horrible distortion of your face, what would you do?

If, instead of the familiar face, you saw an incredibly swollen, balloon-like face covered with disfiguring weals and blemishes.

That was what happened one day in 1944 to pretty Beatrix Thomson, the actress.

Mystery Germ

For the next six years she was to suffer at intervals the same horror, never knowing from hour to hour when the transformation would strike again.

A mysterious agency was at work in her blood-stream. She had picked it up in Burma while entertaining troops.

Now she has been cured after doctors had said she was incurable.

And yesterday, after her come-back to the stage, she told the story of those six terrible years.

"When I looked in my mirror that first day the reflection was horrible. My face and throat were all puffed up.

Always Hoping

"It went away, but only to return again and again. I began to feel like a leper.

"I was even told that death might come at any time. When my tour with the troops finished I couldn't face coming home.

"So I went from place to place, searching for a cure, and always hoping. Eventually, in 1946 I did return home and went to live in seclusion in Surrey.

"Sometimes I ventured out. I might be sitting in a restaurant or watching a show with friends. Then suddenly my face would undergo that hideous change as people watched it.

"Usually I left hurriedly, utterly humiliated."

It was by chance that Miss Thomson found a young physician who suggested a long course of vaccine injections.

He diagnosed that she was suffering from a rare allergy, urticaria caused through bacteria of some noxious substance in the body.

His treatment was successful, but the mystery of the cause of the illness itself remains.

—L.E.S.

Figure 33 Beatrix's illness described in the *Sunday Advocate*, 17 February 1952.

Beatrix was probably not working significantly in the immediate aftermath of the War although her films, such as *Shirley Yorke*, were doing the rounds in the cinemas. In 1952 she was acting again in *The Enemy of Time*, a play whose theme involved – perhaps appropriately – facial rejuvenation and plastic surgery; this was performed at the King's Theatre in Southsea with 'a full West End cast' and so may have been performed in London as well. Her obituary in *The Times* on 4 March 1986 remarked that in the 1940s and 1950s 'she concentrated on her second love, writing, achieving productions at several of London's fringe theatres'.

New pathways and remarriage

In 1952 a company named Orion Productions was presenting a play *Royal Command* at numerous venues. Among its directors was former Lieutenant Peter Lupino, who had been in the Royal Naval Reserve during the War. He was born in 1912 into the Lupino family well-known for its work in England's theatre world.

In particular he was the son of the comedian and film actor George Barry Lupino-Hook ('Barry Lupino'). It appears that he and Beatrix were good friends. In adult life he rendered his full name as Peter Don Studholme Borrett Lupino in recognition of the fact that as a young child he had been adopted by the actress Carolina Maria Lupton (stage name 'Marie Studholme') whose second marriage was to Harold Borrett. She was reputed to have been the most photographed stage beauty.

In 1956 an application to London County Council was made for a licence to conduct the business of an employment agency for theatrical, variety and cinema artists. The directors of this company were to be Beatrix together with S B Goldsmith and Peter Lupino, whilst its premises were to be No 2, Mount Street in Berkeley Square.

Meanwhile, Beatrix had taken up an entirely new career, as shown in Figure 34. The writer Eileen Ascroft had probably known Beatrix from the early Twenties, as Eileen's parents had then been living at Flower Cottage on Effingham Common. Beatrix's new business, making floral arrangements for sale, is described here as having been 'lucrative' but for how long it continued is unknown.

However, Beatrix was still active to some extent in acting, taking a small part in the TV play *Night Was Our Friend*, broadcast as part of the BBC's Sunday Night Theatre on 7 August 1955.

In 1958 Beatrix and Peter married in Westminster.

London's Electoral Registers show Beatrix and Peter living at the aforementioned address in Mount Street, but by 1962 they had moved to Weyside Cottage in Red Lion Lane, Farnham, the address at which her brother Alexander had been living when he died two years later.

In Farnham Beatrix and Peter became important supporters of the Castle Theatre.

In 1969 she appeared in the West End's Duchess Theatre acting in Ackland's play *The Old Ladies*. In 1971 the great actor Michael Redgrave inaugurated the building of a new venue in Farnham, the Redgrave Theatre, and as part of a public campaign to raise money for this a three-week run was staged at the Castle of the play *Relative Values*, in which Beatrix played 'the Countess of Marshwood'. In the photograph of this production in Figure 36 she is seated right-most on the sofa.

THE GIRL WHO BEGAN AGAIN

HOW much courage does it take to see a career crash through no fault of one's own, and then set to work to build a new one?

Too much for many people. One meets them everywhere. The physical or mental invalids who "could have achieved so much" if it hadn't been for this or that.

I met a woman with real courage. As Beatrix Thomson she was a well-known actress but during an ENSA tour in the Far East in 1945 she contracted a rare germ, which necessitated six years of operations and treatment on her face.

This small-in-size but large-in-spirit blonde then turned to a new career, creating long-lasting flower decorations for restaurants and hotels.

* * *

I've seen the first fruits of her creative fingers. And very beautiful they are. What started as a hobby has now turned into a lucrative business with two assistants.

Miss Thomson uses real stems, wood, bark, leaves, grasses and flower petals for her arrangements. These she wires into position and paints them in their natural colours. She services her flower decorations and guarantees them a life of three months.

—EILEEN ASCROFT.

Figure 34 Beatrix's new interest; *Evening Express* (Aberdeen), 22 June 1954.



Figure 35 Lt Peter Lupino RNVR, 25 August 1943, Liverpool; Imperial War Museum: © IWM A 18980.



"Relative Values" at the Castle, Farnham, with left to right (standing) : Peter Mackriel, Judith Lee, Rex Robinson, Geoffrey Beevers and Dorothy Edwards, and (seated) : Brenda Duncan and Beatrix Thomson.

Figure 36 Beatrix at the Redgrave Theatre; from *The Stage and Television Today*, 1 July 1971.

She had evidently lost none of her stage capability:

‘The part of the Countess of Marshwood in Noel Coward’s comedy “Relative Values” is an admirable one for Beatrix Thomson to choose for her return to the stage at the Castle. The illness that put an end to her acting career after the war is happily a thing of the past and she is in this play completely at home on the stage. The role of the Countess suits her admirably and her experience enables her to give an assurance to the part that might well elude a less polished performer.’ [*The Stage and Television Today*, 1 July 1971]

This may have been her last act upon the stage and we do not yet know any more of her life in her final years. She died on 23 February 1986, leaving a net estate of just under £3,000. Obituaries published in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Stage* paid unreserved and handsome tribute to her acting, writing and theatre management career, especially in the pre-war years. *The Times* stated:

‘Beatrix Thomson’s contribution to the pre-war movement to popularise thoughtful and unusual theatre, and the skill and charm of a unique personality, will not be easily forgotten by those with memories old enough to recall London’s West End between the wars.’ [*The Times*, 4 March 1986]

Peter died on 15 December 1994 at Bishops Heights, a nursing home in Beales Lane, Farnham. His net estate was just over £12,000.

In 1998 some of Beatrix’s possessions were auctioned by Ewbank’s. They included the diploma she had been awarded in 1921 when still a student at RADA and a pencil sketch of her by the British artist Charles Buchel (Karl August Büchel). In 2017 an album was auctioned by Toovey’s and described as containing a ‘portfolio of flower photographs by Miss Beatrix Thomson, wife of Claude Rains’.

It is not yet known where her or Peter’s last resting places are.

Retrospect

Born into an exceedingly rich family, Beatrix could well have chosen to live a life doing little other than basking in that wealth and marrying well. Instead she chose to make something more of her life and moreover to do so in a challenging field. Learning scripts and stage choreography to perfection, travelling to venues with cramped and frenetic dressing rooms, walking out onto stages under the bright lights in view of hundreds of expectant strangers, dealing with the ensuing reviews and all else that goes with such a public-facing role – this is a path which must command respect. And more than that, Beatrix held down this way of life for over twenty solid years, hardly ever receiving a poor review and giving pleasure and entertainment to thousands of people, here and abroad.

She was a daughter of Effingham to be proud of.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: from the late Mary Alfreda (née Bridger) Rice-Oxley

Figure 2: by courtesy of the Historic England Archive, Ref: bl24944; © Historic England.

Figures 3, 17, 32: by kind permission of Reach plc / *Mirrorpix*

Figures 4, 6, 9, 11-13, 15, 16, 18-20, 23, 25, 29, 31, 36: under Licence from the Mary Evans Picture Library;

© Illustrated London News Ltd. / Mary Evans

Figures 5, 30: from ELHG-owned archives

Figure 7: © Imperial War Museum: Lives of the First World War; Claude Rains ID: 8541844

under IWM Non-Commercial Licence

Figure 8: from Google Street View

Figure 10: from the British Newspaper Archive, courtesy of The British Library Board

Figures 14, 24, 26, 27: from the internet, unattributed

Figures 21, 22: originally taken by the Planet News Archive, then acquired by the Science and Society Picture Archive, then by Getty Images, Inc; but Getty no longer lists them so presumed now to be public domain

Figure 28: National Portrait Gallery, Ref: NPG x83490; licensed from NPG Creative Commons

Figure 33: from the Digital Library of the Caribbean: <https://www.dloc.com>

Figure 34: Image © D.C.Thomson & Co. Ltd (Newspapers), courtesy of The British Library Board

Figure 35: © Imperial War Museum; Lt Peter Lupino RNVR, 25 August 1943, Liverpool; IWM: A 18980 under IWM Non-Commercial Licence