

# Léonie Elsie Stephen 1925-2017

## A TRIBUTE

Mum's was a long life, 91 years with performance, theatre, and drama running through almost every one of them.

More acting up than acting, one of her earliest memories aged about three, was being shut out of the home whilst her grandparents were taking an afternoon nap and running round the house screaming at the top of her voice; early indications of a theatrical temperament, Léonie was not one to be ignored.

By the time Chris and I arrived stage acting was long in her past. But the stories she told of poltergeists and ghosts having to be exorcised whilst working at Stratford-upon-Avon and getting locked into Peterborough Cathedral an hour before curtain up whilst in rep, necessitating yet more screaming for attention, filled many a bath time.

Her theatre career was relatively short lived, less than ten years all told. I watched some clips from that infamous BBC Omnibus 'Dame Henrietta's Dream' and was reminded that she was often cast as a man, due to the shortage of actors between 1941 and 1950.

If not a man she would play dotty women like Miss Prism or frauds like Madame Arcati, rarely did she play the romantic heroine. Anyone looking at photographs of her during the 1940s would find the casting strange as she was quite the glamour puss.

After a short time managing hotels, she was employed by Frances Stephens as deputy editor to Theatre World. The circumstances that led to this timely appointment can only be described as serendipitous. Taking the place of her flat mate who wanted to go out with her boyfriend, Mum accompanied Frances to the theatre and was able to hand her notice into the Cumberland Hotel soon after.

The role of theatre critic played to Mum's great strengths: her command of the language and her encyclopaedic knowledge of theatre from the Ancient Greeks right through to contemporary dramatists. Most of all it satisfied her passion for live performance in all its forms.

She was highly thought of as a critic and when Theatre World closed in 1961 Ossia Trilling, "one of the most assiduous chroniclers of theatre on a world-wide scale", approached her to write for him on a freelance basis. The Trilling-Stephen collaboration lasted for 30 years.

She also provided reviews of

the Hampstead Garden Suburb Theatre for Suburb News until she was well into her eighties, standing down when she felt it was time for new blood. She always made a point of finding what was good in a production without being condescending and did the performers the courtesy of making constructive criticism.

Some people will try any food whilst others stick to what they know. Mum was like that with the theatre, traditional, experimental, outré, grand opera, club theatre she would try it all. She was virtually unshockable, I don't think there was ever a time when she walked out of a performance, but as we got older she would hand on tickets of things she had seen enough of.

Memorably she gave me her ticket to 'View from the Bridge' at the Cottesloe theatre. I was spellbound by the production and raved about what I had seen when I got home. The next morning at breakfast she peered over her glasses in that severe way she sometimes adopted and remarked that, "it seems I did miss something rather special last night." Michael Billington had confirmed that the performance of Michael Gambon had been exceptional. Underneath she was pleased that the theatre had elicited such a response from her daughter.

She was also generous with her time and for many years she gave after-school drama classes at Brooklands, drawing on what she had learned at the Old Vic Theatre School and RADA. Charlotte Weinberg reminded me recently of just how helpful these were to her small, slight daughter Ruth, who, when cast as a giant, grew in confidence.

After Mum fell and damaged her shoulder in 2015 she bemoaned the fact that she would probably never go to the theatre again. She reckoned without Joy, who nobly took her to the Almeida, the Royal National Theatre and as recently as Boxing Day to the Haymarket to see Phantom of the Opera.

No reflection on Mum's life would be complete without mentioning William Shakespeare. In her last hour we sat round her bed discussing the plays she had taken us to and the earliest memories we had of the theatre. This led, to which plays she had enjoyed most.

Mum, sensibly, did not hold with favourites but she was prepared to make an exception for Shakespeare because of the breadth of his work and the beauty of his language.



Of his 38 plays there were:

- Some that were rarely performed for 'Good Reason'.
- Some that were not performed enough and
- Some that came around far too frequently.

She admired the propaganda of the history plays, would scold me when I rubbished the Scottish Play, but also conceded that Hamlet was the finest of the tragedies.

But most of all she loved the Last Plays, Cymbeline, Pericles, The Winter's Tale and the Tempest for their themes of: forgiveness, reconciliation, hope and love.

Principles that were important to her and for which, amongst many other qualities, I will remember her.

VANESSA STEPHEN

### The editor adds:

Some will remember we published an article about Léonie in our series 'In conversation with' on the occasion of her 90th birthday in our Autumn 2015 issue (SN124, page 6), which can be found at <http://hgs.org.uk/suburbnews/sn124/index.html>.

There was one anecdote mentioned at Léonie's funeral I would like to share with readers, which was told to those present

as follows, "a Léonie-ism that sticks in my mind is when she was regaling us with the woes of her travel arrangements to the theatre. After one particularly

### LÉONIE: A MEMORY

I first met Léonie in the summer of 1995 when I was co-opted on to the Trees & Open Spaces committee.

She had been Chairman of T&OS and would be again, but at the time was Chairman of the Residents Association. I was soon co-opted to RA Council too so was in a position to see that she ran a tight meeting; you could always hear what she said (RADA trained of course) and she didn't put up with time wasters.

As Chairman she featured in the BBC documentary about the Suburb, but I don't think she enjoyed being Chairman as much as she should have. Her Executive committee was made up of some of the more opinionated members of Council and quite likely they didn't like seeing a woman in charge. From what she had to say about it, I think at times it was a bit of a battle.

As an ex-actress Léonie went to the theatre a lot. She had worked for a theatrical magazine in the 1950s and wrote reviews of Garden Suburb Theatre productions for Suburb News. She also enjoyed cinema. I remember she dragged me to a Johnny Depp film because she fancied him. "Such a good looking young man," she said.

exhausting journey, with delays and wrong routes, she complained to us, and I quote, 'It's terrible, every time I go to the National Theatre, there's a drama!'

Quite a lot of good-looking young men seemed to feature in her conversation. Mostly actors, but there was a particular neighbour she used to watch when she was stuck at home with small children. If you used to reverse your beloved car to the pillar-box in Erskine Hill you know who you are.

I never met anyone who made friends as easily and it was easy to feel as though she was your best friend. She once went on a river cruise in Russia with her great friend Joan Beales. Joan, like me, finds it hard to make new friends, and came back having enjoyed Russia but complaining bitterly that Léonie spent the whole trip chatting cosily to complete strangers. And, in 2005, when Joan and I, together with Sally Lewis, decided that Léonie deserved a party to celebrate her 80th birthday all her friends (even those who couldn't be there) contributed generously towards the cost of a surprise party.

A surprise party is not something I would inflict on most people but I think Léonie enjoyed herself that evening. Which was lucky because the next day she was rushed off to the Royal Free for a heart bypass and ended up in intensive care.

GEORGINA MALCOLM

# Norma Ray Milner 1930-2017

## JANE'S TRIBUTE

Norma was an only child: born on 21st July 1930 in London. She spent her early years with her parents in Hendon and when she became a young teenager she joined the St Mary's Parish Church Youth Club in Hendon. It was there that she met Michael Milner, my Dad.

She left school shortly after the War at the age of 16 and, having developed excellent secretarial skills, she became highly employable. At that time her first job was working in the offices at Lord's Cricket Club, being one of the first two women ever to be employed by the MCC. She loved her time there, rubbing shoulders with the cricketing stars of that era, where she even assisted Denis Compton by typing notes for his first book. Her second job was equally glamorous, working as a PA to the General Manager of ABC Cinemas.

These two first jobs made Mum a highly popular lady, as she always managed to get her hands on free tickets to the cricket and cinema!

Mum and Dad's love for each other blossomed at this time, and in 1953 they married back in St Mary's Church in Hendon. Dad's job took them up to Newcastle where they enjoyed their early married life and it wasn't long before they started a family with the birth of their first child, me, in 1955.

Soon they returned back South, living in Surrey where the family grew rapidly with the arrival of three more children, Sally, Julian and Nicholas. With three children under 3 years old, an older daughter, and a husband often abroad travelling on business, Mum's life was busy.

Dad's career was progressing rapidly, and in the late 1960s the family returned back up

North to Teesside. Even with such a young family, it was here that Mum first started to show her exceptional sense of charity and civic duty. She volunteered at the local Family Planning Association and delivered Meals on Wheels to the needy.

The family came back South again in 1971, this time to live in North Square; there was enough toing and froing to make you feel dizzy. Here she took on new commitments within the community. She volunteered at the Citizens Advice Bureau in Hampstead, and also acted as a counsellor for the students at the English as a Foreign Language department just across the road from here in The Tea House at the Institute.

In 1975, Dad's work took him to Houston, Texas. Always supportive and by his side, Mum went to live out there too, for two separate stints lasting around three years each. In America, Mum couldn't resist more charity work, and while there she volunteered in a Unicef shop. She joined handicraft groups too, and whilst in Texas she perfected all those quilting, patchwork and knitting skills that we know so well.

Whilst in the States in the 1980s, Mum tirelessly returned every six weeks to visit her Mum, Nana. There were no ready-made meals in those days, so she cooked vast quantities of homemade meals, individually packed and frozen, and then delivered them in person to her. Once they were all eaten up, that cycle would be repeated all over again. What dedication to her Mum!

Mum and Dad permanently returned to the UK in 1987 and soon afterwards Mum became increasingly involved in Suburb community life. She became Chair of the House Committee at



Abbeyfield, which was a major commitment, endlessly helping where she could, liaising with hospitals, recruiting and supporting staff, organising her legendary quizzes. Some of you, or your own parents, will have witnessed this first hand, perhaps even helping yourself.

Mum also joined Dad in volunteering for the British Heart Foundation, arranging a number of fund raising activities.

More recently she became an active volunteer at Fellowship House, and became a local committee member for the charity Combat Stress. She was active in these two charities almost up until the day of her death.

In recognition of all their wonderful contributions to local life, both Mum and Dad were made Honorary Life members of the Residents Association in 2010.

Norma was a devoted daughter, wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. And, above all, she gave unstinting love and support to Dad. She unquestioningly accepted the many moves around this country and America, which his career required, and, each time, she created a warm and welcoming home in a new environment.

His jobs involved extensive international travel and therefore she was frequently left alone to cope with all the issues of life at home which she accepted without resentment or complaint. Dad often says he could not possibly have achieved anything without her constant support and love.

We will all miss Mum deeply. She lit up the lives of everyone she met. Her tireless selflessness was a true inspiration. Her love towards everyone was endless. She touched the hearts of so many people and for this we are truly grateful.

**FROM JULIAN'S TRIBUTE** Mum's glass was NEVER half-empty. Actually Mum's glass was NEVER half-full either.

Mum's glass was always full right to the top. It even overflowed. Overflowing with: Selflessness, Devotion, Warmth, Thoughtfulness, Love for all, Charity, Infectious laughter, Pride, Humour, Stoicism.

Self-pity had no room in her glass. Mum only knew how to ask one question: "What can I do for you?" What can I do for you: as a wife, as a Mum, as a Grandma and Great Grandma.

And finally for the community: What can I do for you?

**G Cohen**  
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