

Roundabout Theatre Company

The
Deep
Blue
Sea



From Page To Stage Production Guide

The Deep Blue Sea

by **Terence Rattigan**
directed by **Mark Lamos**

PRODUCTION GUIDE

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WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

Do you know what 'le vice Anglais?' — the English vice — really is? Not flagellation, not pederasty — whatever the French believe it to be. It's our refusal to admit our emotions.

-Terence Rattigan

In each of his plays, Terence Rattigan wrote that the curtain should fall slowly at the end of each act. This poetic gesture metaphorically speaks for how his plays are experienced by the audience — they are gently let in and out of a world that doesn't stray far from our own. The struggles and questions that the characters experience are so vivid and "real" that the curtain is merely a languid reminder of our gaze: an eyelid that slowly closes off the world of the theatre and brings us gently back to our own perspective with a new informed reminder.

The struggles and despair of a failed marriage and in particular the question of identity, are issues that have pervaded theatre, film and television in our time but Terence Rattigan hit on something special with his play *The Deep Blue Sea*: written and set in 1950s England, the play's presentation of these issues were eye-awakening, and brutally honest as portrayed by his characters. He denied the English, upper-crust morality by showing his characters in the midst of true struggle. The English pleasantry was there in the setting but removed from the central issue. Rattigan's poetry was in his structure; his plays were of the well-made variety but his characters jumped from the stage and moved slowly and deeply into the consciences of the audience — as deeply as the slowly falling curtain would allow.

The opening image of Hester Collyer lying on the floor as the gas stove leaks fumes into the room is one such poetic link to the well-made play formula. There is mystery but also extreme emotional honesty that was new for the stage. It was showing the struggle of a woman finding her social position in English 1950s society. Emotions overwhelm Hester and she is led to a brazen act out of loss for a solution and fear of facing the consequence of not having a man who loves her. She is at a point where many modern women find themselves — in this way Rattigan was ahead of his time — how does one define oneself within a structure that doesn't even have the words to create the definition? A woman who left her husband and moved in with her lover was not thought upon highly. It was an act that caused those who dared to do it to suffer extreme consequences. Hester epitomizes those consequences: despair and social stigma.

This issue of identity and personal struggle shows itself on TV every day in the form of talk shows and soap operas. People literally scream out the answers to other people's problems, going so far as to hit them over the head with a chair if they don't conform to their opinion. Identity politics are everywhere. However, the honesty in those shows is clouded by the form. The form isn't honest. The curtain doesn't fall slowly. What makes *The Deep Blue Sea* so effective in dealing with questions of personal struggle and definition of character is its gentle discovery and its ability to lend the audience the tools to formulate their own opinions about the issues. The story affected the audience's 1950s English sensibilities and does so for American audiences today; we are timeless and universal in our need to define our selves and our social positions.

WHO'S WHO

HESTER COLLYER (played by Blythe Danner): a woman in despair over the confusion in her love relationships. She has recently left her husband and is living in a boarding house with another man, Freddie Page, who's love and devotion is questionable.

PHILIP WELCH (played by Ben Shenkman): a helpful young office worker who lives in the boarding house with his wife, Ann.

MRS. ELTON (played by Sandra Shipley): a caretaker/housekeeper of the apartments who likes to know everything that is going on. She is just over the hump of middle age.

ANN (played by Vivienne Benesch): Philip's young wife who is also an office worker. She is more knowledgeable and capable than Philip thinks.



A Royal Air Force Pilot



Kenneth Moore and Peggy Ashcroft in the first production of *The Deep Blue Sea* in 1952

MR. MILLER (played by Olek Krupa): an uncertified doctor in his late 30's. He is a tough and sometimes brutally honest man.

SIR WILLIAM COLLYER (played by Edward Herrmann): a forceful-looking figure in his mid-40's. He is a judge and estranged from his wife, Hester.

FREDDIE PAGE (played by David Conrad): a drinker and a golfer. He's in his late 20's and currently living with Hester. He used to be a fighter pilot with the Royal Air Force.

JACKIE JACKSON (played by Rick Holmes): Freddie's friend and drinking buddy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terence Rattigan (1911 - 1977)



Terence Mervyn Rattigan was born in London, England in 1911. His father was a diplomat and his mother was a supporter; she supported her husband and pertinent social causes that seemed to need her attention. Because of their socially prominent position and their desire for their son to follow in their footsteps, Terence's education was very important to the Rattigans. They sent him to the best schools in London. It was in these schools that Terence developed his undying love of theatre. From the age of eleven, he never swerved from his focus on writing plays. He knew that someday he would be a "famous playwright". This was not what his Father had in mind and it created an irreparable rift in their relationship. However, despite his father's severe disapproval, Rattigan continued with his writing which began to be recognized when he was still a very young man. When he was an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1930's, the first play that he sent out to publishers was accepted. From that point on, his career was recognized, popular, and prosperous.

Rattigan's fascination with theatre was obsessive and highly productive. Through the five middle decades of the twentieth century, Rattigan's writing was based on what he observed: school, college, World War II when he was an airman, and his "revolutionary" but closeted life as a gay man in an historically unaccepting time period. These acute and personal

observations loaned the audience an easy entrance into his plays. The content was real to them and the style in which he wrote was accessible and dramatically intriguing. Rattigan believed that plays were about people, not things or ideas.

The 1950's, Rattigan's golden decade, saw the production of many of his plays that were "highly concentrated tragic-ironic dramas of characters". Of these, *Separate Tables* (1954) and *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) were his most successful. Yet, despite his public success, Rattigan's personal life was rocked with difficulty. His father's death and some of the critics who labeled his writing "old-fashioned" affected him deeply. Also, his straddling of the worlds of homosexuality and heterosexuality became difficult despite his ability to channel his struggle (in a disguised manner through many of his deeply despaired female characters) into his plays. It wasn't until the censorship laws were revoked in 1968 that there was official freedom to deal directly with homosexual problems. And audiences loved the way that Rattigan's characters faced their problems—with courage and a deep vulnerability.

By his death in 1977, Rattigan had received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and knighthood granted by Queen Elizabeth in 1971 as well as critical acclaim and outstanding audience appreciation. All of these accolades chronicle a fully-realized career as a famous playwright; an ambition that he only dreamed of as a young boy of eleven.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

French Without Tears, 1936

Flare Path, 1942

While the Sun Shines, 1943

O Mistress Mine, 1944

The Winslow Boy, 1946

The Browning Version, 1948

Harlequinade, 1948.

The Deep Blue Sea, 1952.

The Sleeping Prince, 1953.

Separate Tables, 1954.

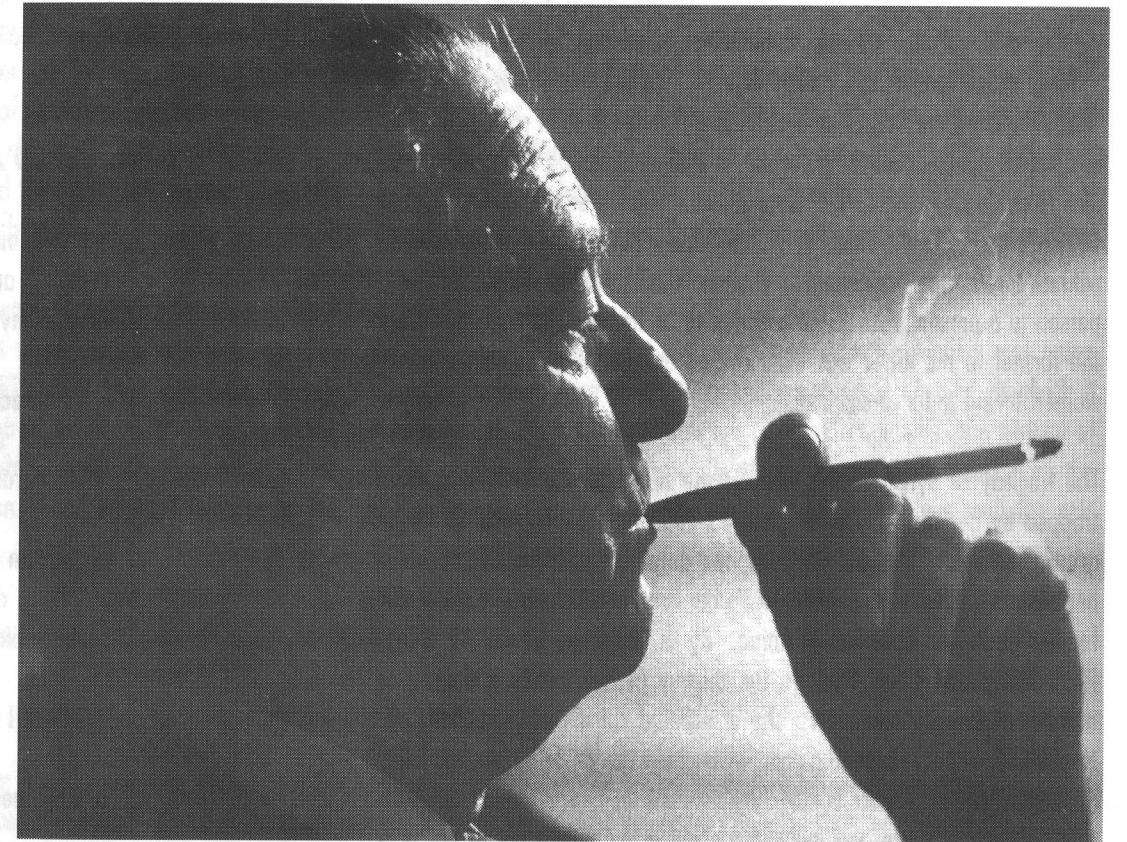
Ross, 1960.

Man and Boy, 1963.

RATTIGAN'S STAGE CRAFT

The Well-Made Play

To young playwrights, Terence Rattigan's advice was "learn your job." This meant to know the craft of playwriting and how to make a good play. To Rattigan, "artistic construction is of the greatest interest." His plays fall under the category of the well-made play—structurally they follow a formula that was first delineated by two French masters, Scribe and Sardou in the eighteenth century. A well-made play has "certain ingredients arranged in a highly patterned chronology" that kept the first act as the slow-paced beginning when the audience is given teasing bits of information about the characters and their situations. Toward the end of the first act, the plot gathers momentum of exposition, complication, climax, denouement, and conclusion". This simply means that the first act is generally slow as the audience is given little bits of



information about the characters and situations that are slightly complicated by the knowledge of a secret. Toward the end the plot gathers momentum with a significant step taken by the protagonist (in this case, Hester) and the final act discloses the secret in a "flurry of excitement".

In the theatre of Sardou and Scribe, characters "are puppets manipulated for the sake of creating a breathtaking situation." They were simply used to carry the function of the structural device. Rattigan was able to triumph over this two-dimensionality and bring living beings to the highest point of dramatic tension without sacrificing the depth and integrity of their personalities. In this way, Rattigan utilizes the structure of the well-made play but transforms it to serve the artistic fullness of his courageous characters.

Consequently, Rattigan mastered the structure of a well-made play but was able to rise above the textual simplicity of it by creating characters that spoke to the audience of England in the 1950's—they seemed "real". And it is this "realness", Rattigan's fullness of form that gives his plays their lasting quality. *Deep Blue Sea* is truly a well-made play.

SYLVIA PLATH

- A Real Life Counterpart to Hester Collier

Sylvia Plath was a poet who possessed strikingly similar characteristics to Hester Collier in *The Deep Blue Sea*. They both shared the tragic sense of feeling trapped in their roles as women in a socially uncompromising society as well as believing that taking their own lives would provide their only solace. The fictional character Hester Collier, and the real woman Sylvia Plath both lived in the 1950s, when a woman's role was beginning to change from being a complacent non-person to a person whose voice needed to be heard. The transition from the former to the latter was what caused emotional upheaval for many women trying to be recognized.

The tragedy of Sylvia Plath's story is the fact that she felt increasingly trapped by her own and other people's expectations. In addition to the growing strains of a rocky marriage, she desperately struggled to achieve her desires and excel as a writer while her two young children were pining for her undivided attention at home. By the time she turned 30, Sylvia Plath had reached her limit; to the dismay of her family and growing number of literary supporters, she committed suicide. Sylvia Plath and Hester Collier both reached a point where they couldn't contemplate living anymore. The difference is that Sylvia's spirit only survived in her novels and poems and Hester was able to try and bring herself out of her dark and consuming despair.



TO A JILTED LOVER

Cold on my narrow cot I lie
and in sorrow look
through my window-square of black:

figured in the midnight sky,
a mosaic of stars
diagrams the falling years,

while from the moon, my lover's eye
chills me to death
with radiance of his frozen faith.

Once I wounded him with so
small a thorn
I never thought his flesh would burn

or that the heat within would grow
until he stood
incandescent as a god;

now there is nowhere I can go
to hide from him:
moon and sun reflect his flame.

In the morning all shall be
the same again:
stars pale before the angry dawn;

the gilded cock will turn for me
the rack of time
until the peak of noon has come

and by that glare, my love will see
how I am still
blazing in my golden hell.

ENGLAND IN THE 1950s

The 1950s were a transitional time for England. On the surface, people seemed to be happy and enjoying their peaceful prosperity. However, in reality, it was the start of the Cold War. In 1949, Britain became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance of Western nations against the communist powers. As many of the characters in *The Deep Blue Sea* exemplified, they were trying to uphold their roles and their relationships in the midst of an underlying wave of change.

At this time, the great English empire was beginning to show signs that it was crumbling. The country had yet to recover from the destruction suffered during World War II. In 1952, when *The Deep Blue Sea* was written, Kenya, one of the British Empire's territories in Africa, revolted. Later in the decade the British had problems with other territories trying to revolt in the Middle East. This meant that England, the center of the

British Empire, was slowly but surely losing its power and its far-reaching stronghold around the world.

Another problem that England faced in the 1950s was the problem of unemployment. As is exemplified in *The Deep Blue Sea*, Freddie, Hester's lover, was a military pilot whose glory days were during the war, and following the war had difficulty finding direction in his life. This lack of employment, and subsequent increase in poverty was a problem that much of England faced

Despite the economic and social transitions that the country was going through, an overriding sense of optimism pervaded. Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1952, which strongly asserted England's long history of tradition, power and strength to the world. People were focusing on the family and creating comfortable positions for themselves, and the arts were flourishing with successes, not least of all from Terence Rattigan.

ACTIVITIES:

BEFORE THE PLAY: Read Sylvia Plath's poem and think about the following questions: Whom is she speaking to? How do you think that she is feeling? Would the poem be any different if it was written from a male point of view? What would you propose that the speaker do in order to make him/herself feel better?

AS YOU WATCH: Pay attention to the opening image of *Deep Blue Sea* and the other characters' reactions to the situation. Follow Hester's journey from the beginning of the play to the end. How does she change? What helps her to change? How is her emotional journey similar to the emotions explored in the poem by Sylvia Plath?

AFTER THE PLAY: Write a poem from the point of view of one of the characters. Model it after the Sylvia Plath poem using descriptive images and depth of feeling.

WEBSITE:

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

SOURCES:

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Stanton, Stephen S. Introduction, "The Well-Made Play and the Modern Theatre" in *Camille and Other Plays*. New York.

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WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The upper lobby of the Roundabout Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. Roundabout's lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display. Also, take the time to review the display about the show.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in *From Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation
And Enjoy The Show!*

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THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:*

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