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Mrs Pat

by
Anton Burge



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This text went to press during the rehearsal period and may differ slightly from what is presented on stage.

Author's Note

If a writer thinks of his plays as his children, then for me *Mrs. Pat* was the child who didn't want to leave home. First written over ten years ago, she went through various drafts, only to languish in the drawer marked unproduced. The piece was the first I ever wrote, and although other plays followed with larger casts, or more ambitious concepts, the idea of placing this – now somewhat forgotten – legend of the theatre in a monologue that focuses on a solitary night in her life, yet encompassing the whole of it, always caused me to hope that she might one day take her place centre stage.

I am delighted that Beatrice Stella Patrick Campbell, *Mrs. Pat*, has finally done so. Once considered the greatest actress of her time, she is now more remembered for her off stage wit, uneven temperament and devotion to her dogs. Yet there was so much more to a life that saw her create the first Paula Tanqueray and Eliza Doolittle, be a muse for George Bernard Shaw, appear in Shakespeare and Hollywood movies, and become one of the first actress-managers in the theatre. She worked alongside some of the greatest names in the business: Bernhardt, Forbes-Robertson and Beerbohm Tree, to name a few; she was a famed beauty, a champion of Ibsen, and somehow managed to combine a career that encompassed the progressive theatre with commercial West End triumphs. Her finances, though, were like her personality - unmanageable - and her glamorous public persona and sometimes malicious intellect (she was far too clever for the stuffed shirts she often found herself employed by or acting opposite), disguised the fact that she was hugely generous, supported husbands, family and friends, and paid her company well for their services. Such charity, changing fashions in the theatre, and running into trouble trying to smuggle her beloved dogs through customs took their toll on her career, and the end of her life was not the one such a trail blazer deserved.

My interest and admiration for the subject of this work is matched by Penelope Keith and Alan Strachan, without whom this project really would still be languishing in that drawer marked unproduced. And to them I offer my sincere thanks.

Anton Burge

October 2015

'Mrs Pat' was first produced by Chichester Festival Theatre at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester, on the 15th October 2015. The cast was as follows:

MRS. PATRICK CAMPBELL (STELLA) . . . . . Penelope Keith

Director . . . . . Alan Strachan
Designer . . . . . Simon Higlett
Lighting Designer . . . . . Jason Taylor
Sound Designer . . . . . Gregory Clarke
Video Designer . . . . . Simon Wainwright
Puppetry Consultant . . . . . Toby Olié
Costume Supervisor . . . . . Karen Large
Wig Supervisor . . . . . Matt George
Production Manager . . . . . Sam Paterson
Company Stage Manager . . . . . Robin Longley
Deputy Stage Manager . . . . . Christopher Lambert
Assistant Stage Manager . . . . . Harriet Saffin

ANTON BURGE



Actor and writer Anton Burge has written eight plays for women, all focusing on the lives of celebrated women of the 19th and 20th centuries, including *Whatever Happened to the Cotton Dress Girl?*, *G & I* (both New End Theatre, Hampstead), *Bette & Joan*, starring Greta Scacchi and Anita Dobson (West End and UK tour) and *Storm in a Flower Vase* (West End), both for Ann Pinnington Productions. Future productions include *Lady Mosley's Suite* (read at the Trafalgar Studios with Patricia Hodge and Emilia Fox) and *Curtsey: The Gesture of an Inferior to a Superior* (read at The Soho Screening Room with Sophie Ward and Sylvestra le Touzel).

He is also the author of a forthcoming book, *Portraying Elizabeth*, a study of actresses' interpretations of Elizabeth I from Sarah Bernhardt to the present day, including interviews with Eileen Atkins, Glenda Jackson, Greta Scacchi, Anna Massey, Harriet Walter and Miranda Richardson.

He is working on a biography of Bette Davis, *A Life lived in Melodrama*, and his first contemporary play, *Year of the Virgin*.

A new production of *Bette & Joan* opens on Broadway next year, as well as productions opening in Spain and Germany.

Bette & Joan, *Storm in a Flower Vase* and *Mrs. Pat* are all published by Samuel French.

THANKS

The author would like to thank: Chichester Festival Theatre, Alan Strachan, Penelope Keith, Stephen Wicks, Emily Hayward, Deborah Smith, Sarah Wolf, Katie Langridge, Simon Higlett, Emma Anacootee-Parmar & Alix Harvey-Thompson.

The play is dedicated to the memory of Miss Mapp

For Penelope and Alan

CHARACTER

Mrs. Patrick Campbell (Stella): Legendary actress, imposing, temperamental, verbose. Once described as a relic of a bygone era, 75.

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The play is set over the course of one night on a platform at Toulouse Station, France in 1940.

****

The music played throughout is:

Ravel's String Quartet – Section: Assez vif'. Très rythmé

ACT ONE

Winter 1940. Music. Sounds of trains, guards, whistles etc. Lights up very slowly: Toulouse Station in the evening. An announcement is made that the train from Toulouse to Pau will be delayed in arriving and to await further announcements. On a dim stage a bench is gradually lit; in the distance: porters' trolleys and luggage, and a waiting room just visible. The vast iron framework of the station rises up into the night. Situated next to the bench are a large, standing, travelling trunk, Three hat boxes – one of which is black and vast – a typewriter, smaller trunk and a small suitcase. Other pieces of luggage are nearby. Out of the noise the voice of **MRS. PATRICK CAMPBELL** *(***STELLA***) can be distinguished, calling for a porter.*

STELLA *(off)* Porter! …Porter! …*Porter*! *(etc… Silence for a moment.)*

STELLA *appears through the steam, a figure of decayed magnificence, in pursuit of the elusive porter. She wears a dark cloak with fur collar, upon which is pinned a bunch of wilting violets), a hat, and she carries an aging, monstrous looking Pekinese dog – Moonbeam – under one arm; her hands are encased in tattered gloves. She uses a cane (more for effect than necessity).*

Dear, dear… really! Porters today! Never to be had when one needs one; they are all prompt exits and no entrances! *(she enjoys her joke)* Naughty! I don't know why they shun me. Embarrassment? Recognition? Not wishing to be bathed in reflected glory? Yet, I am their friend, famed for the fact that I have always preferred porters to sentiment at railway stations! I could certainly use one now. *(spotting the porter again in the smoke)* Ah, there's the devil! *(she whips towards him, still clutching the overweight Moonbeam)* Porter! Don't elude me! Monsieur, then? *Monsieur*! *(she is snubbed)* Impudence – ignored! Even when addressed in their mother tongue! My fading charms play to an unresponsive audience, it would seem. *(she gravitates to the bench)* Such fickle people. The French. Of course we English have never taken to them.

(she removes her hat and places Moonbeam upon it, on the bench. Looking in the direction of the waiting room) Oh, oh, I see, I do have an audience. Of one! Like a wet matinee in Malvern. A lonely spinster, no doubt. Well, look, Madam, as much as you like: he is rather partial to crushed velvet – it makes for a better nap. I do hope she won't be travelling on the same train – I'm afraid any wish for companionship would only lead to disappointment. There, she has turned away. Au revoir! Such a gossipy nation. *(beat)* Damn this delay! I pray, though, it won't be cancelled. So few allowed to travel… but… well, we must hope! However, it is moments such as these that make one wonder if one can really stand up to this life.

She leans wearily against the trunk, as if it were a sort of lectern, and pats it gently.

(in profile:) I should be accustomed to it, I know: many are the hours I have endured such as these. But, this is different is it not? This isn't a linger at Crewe station – the waiting room there, full of the theatrical living dead, all passing the time before their connections! No, this is something much worse. This is… flight! This is escape! But I must calm myself. If only I had some oil of lavender… or a dash of something to steady my nerves. The step, the gesture, the word.

My lecture, yes… Yes! I will think of that. When I tour my lecture: *(she pushes the wheeled trunk centre and resumes her pose)* 'Mrs. Patrick Campbell on the Art of Acting and Beautiful Speech'. I am forever in such a predicament – waiting – and that is how I must see tonight, as merely one of life's predicaments, to be dealt with, overcome and laughed at. Like that stumble from the taxi cab, the leading man with sour breath or the fag, fag, fag of age!

When I tour my lecture, I travel not only over England, but also the United States of America, and many is the hour I have waited – with my poor Moonbeam – at the mercy of the organization of the transportation that goes by the appellation of the railways!

A beat. She looks about her; as she speaks the lighting changes to something more intimate and theatrical, as if she were addressing an audience.

I like to stand at my lectern, thus, in silhouette, keeping the head up, fashioning a better profile. I wear a white robe, pearls and have my hair up very high, and I always begin with Lady Macbeth "I have given suck!"

Though I wouldn't be doing any of it if I didn't have arrears to pay! Always borrowing from Peter to pay off Paul. No! I simply wouldn't.

I'm not sure the audience would either. They come for a glimpse of tattered splendour, I'll be bound, a taste of a bygone world. My beautiful self of recent memory, encased in what one now observes. The voice once compared to an instrument, now a basso profundo! And my gestures hailed for their grace and passion are …imitated, even ridiculed.

But seesaw! Every one of us has to do it, even the sainted Ellen Terry, even dear Dame Ellen had to pack up her box of *maquillage* and go in search of monetary remuneration. The only one who didn't was that devil Alexander: he was shrewd, he was cunning. He was a fox! I wager George Alexander never saw Crewe station on a wet Sunday evening!

So, I push myself to the front of the stage, in the hope – for a moment at least – that the illusion will still pass muster…

During the course of my talk I speak of others who have brushed the hem of my career: some more classical than I, perhaps, others more… what is that American term? Oh, my memory… Legitimate! But none move or thrill an audience as I. When I want to. *(a beat)* Oh, yes, I am governed by demons, and sometimes they allow me to let the genie out the lamp, and sometimes… they don't.

Of this band of my theatrical brothers and sisters – for we mustn't forget the female of the species during my talks; experiencing greater obstacles to attain our moment in the sun – of the band I will not mention, Alexander. I refuse to, though he was a part of my life, I admit, regrettably… His arrogance still stings. I can tolerate much, but never arrogance!

Speaking of arrogance: I do mention Mr. George Bernard Shaw, the work, but not the ego, which I am sure would irritate dear Joey – I christened him Joey because he is such a pantomime clown! Though he can never see it. *(to herself)* And a devil not

to let me have those letters. My letters! A devil not to let me publish our correspondence, so the world must, must read how he loved me, and cast me aside. Some may suggest he was in awe of my celebrity, granted. Some might say I only want to publish for the money – open to discussion. But should it not be read how love and adoration shift and alter as one celebrity rises, and the other falls. Those letters should be published as a warning to others!

(returning to her former style) I then favour my audience with some passable cockney – Shaw's Eliza Doolittle – after this I bash away at Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, snippets of Juliet – not the tricky ones – and Ophelia. Then I give in to my listeners and complete my lecture with Paula Tanqueray. The mere mention of her name brings an ovation of appreciation. I know *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* by Arthur Wing Pinero to be the greatest play of the last century. And so does my audience. This is more than a mere 'woman with a past' story. What a past! What a woman! Even Alexander, who produced, directed and – regrettably – cast himself as my husband in the original production, even he knew the part called for delicate handling from more than a mere actress of the day. They were all considered, trotted out like ponies, and cast aside as unsuitable, the search for Paula Tanqueray made the hunt for Scarlett O'Hara seem a mere glance about for a new chorus girl!

The success of the play changed my life forever. I was the toast of London! And like Miss Vivien Leigh now, a star. And much as he hated it Alexander was stuck with me… I was told later he kept a calendar and crossed the performances off until he was free of me! *(she laughs)*

Society picked me up! That genius Mr. Pinero introduced me to Mr. Beerbohm Tree, Mr. Tree introduced me to Burne-Jones, he to the Duchess of Rutland, she to the Hon. Mrs. Percy Wyndham; through her I met Mr. Aubrey Beardsley and he, well, he introduced me to Oscar Wilde. And on it went. Beardsley said Wilde was 'dying' to meet me, and why not, I ask you? The rest of London was. What do I care what these boys do as long as they don't do it in the streets and frighten the horses! I think Oscar was rather disappointed that my name was actually *Mrs.* Patrick Campbell: when I informed him

I truly did have a husband, he merely replied "How suburban!" And I loved him ever after.

It seems a lifetime ago. And in fact is. Yet, I play her still. 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray' is still in my repertoire… though the lines muddle me of late.

The sad reality of still playing Paula is that I have to say, about another character in the play, "She's six and forty, and I wish nothing worse to happen to any woman". But indeed there are worse things that can happen to a woman: playing that line night after night when you yourself are four and sixty! *(she observes a porter pass. The lights revert to the station lighting as before)* Yoo-hoo! Porter! Porter! *(she is too late)* Wretched man, what a wretched, miserable, ugly, little man. Well, I care not – when the train comes, they will have to wait a moment longer for the rest of my luggage. *(she gestures with her stick, pointing it from one spot of the platform to another)* If the train ever comes… many are cancelled. Some materialize in disguise, appearing to go to one destination, but actually on the way to another. No one it seems can be trusted…, not even a train, any more. *(a beat)* It's so shamefully cold… *(she moves about the platform to keep warm)*

I'm sure my lecture audiences think me very old hat – banging on about sloppy diction and the lowering of standards. The talkies are the worst – bring back silent pictures, I say! Most actors are perfectly acceptable in silents. Except the ugly ones. And poor speech is not just prevalent in the acting profession – why, I was in church recently and the vicar tried to impress his congregation with: *(imitates the vicar's nasal twang)* "Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!" It was such a pity, as he was actually a rather beautiful specimen. I told him afterwards – as I pushed the plate back – "I would have left something, Father, but for the fact that you opened your mouth!"

Joey, ahem *Mr.* Shaw, says I make up for everyone else by *over articulating* myself! Still, it keeps us out there, don't you know. What they call in the public eye. *(petting the dog as he sleeps)* Doesn't it, Moonbeam, my beautiful baby, and it pays for any little treat you might require. Besides, what does Joey know about it? One can barely hear him as he mumbles into that disgusting beard of his! No, if one has great things to say, then better that they be audible. Even when dealing with members of

what is now termed 'The Press', I can't advise strongly enough: be clear, or one runs the risk of being misquoted! *(she edges the suitcase and a couple of her hatboxes about the platform as if they were members of her audience. Her attention moves from one to the next and back again. Sounds of chatter, popping flashbulbs; occasionally she poses for her picture)* I like to scatter these reporters about me – not too close – and remind them great artistry is acquired through instinct rather than profession. Anyone can work at it. Few of us are born.

Grandly she sits on the bench next to Moonbeam; the lights change, moving from box to box etc. as **STELLA***'s attention moves with each question.*

I suppose it is only natural that people should be fascinated, but, sometimes such curious questions are darted at me: from the American Motion Picture Star: Have I met Ruth Chatterton? "Well, yes", I reply, "as a matter of fact I have", though I didn't know her from Adam. "She is a famous moving picture star", I was told. Not quite top drawer, in my opinion. "What are my favourite flowers and scent?" from *The Daily Telegraph* is much more to my liking. "Violets," I answer. "And scent? The bouquet of sweet Moonbeam's paw". And my favourite question: "Who is your preferred leading man?" I reply, as I always do: "Why, Madame Sara Bernhardt, of course!" I had a real stinger recently, not from the Press at all, but from a young schoolgirl, loitering at the stage door, with her mother. *(she addresses the upright suitcase)* "Where do you find the inspiration to play so many wicked women?" I mean, really! *(her gaze shifts again)* And from Le Figaro, of course, those scandalmongers, "How old are you?" *(she bristles)* I find when it comes to age a perfectly good sticking point is forty! Even if that does make my children illegitimate!

(she rises and the lights revert to the general light of the platform) Of course, what they always ask is: how did it all begin? *(gestures with her cane)* How did I get from there to here? And how did I?

Born Beatrice Rose Stella Tanner, in Kensington, on February the 9th – I don't tell them 1865 – making me an Aquarius: a diplomat, and a talker. I was the baby of a family of six: wearing other people's costumes is second nature to me. My father was English, my mother a romantic Italian. From her I inherited a

love of beauty. And from him, the ability to lose fortunes! He spoke not a word of Italian, she not an utterance of English. I can recommend no finer formula for marriage! I grew up neither sweet nor amiable, am impatient with fools and yet – and this is the truest fact about me – I am made up of three parts fool.

When I decided that the stage was my calling, if one intended to be a respectable actress, as I most certainly did, one used one's married name, as did Mrs. Theodore Wright, Mrs. Beerbohm Tree, Mrs. Kendle, Mrs. *Kemble* and so I… I became Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Now, however, it is merely 'Mrs. Pat'– 'Mrs. Pat'. A term of massive affection, I know. I always insist on *'Mrs. Patrick Campbell'* whenever I am billed, though. Why, only recently, while in Hollywood making a talkie – don't you know, such a vulgar experience – Mr. Irving Thalberg, the head of the studio Metro Goldwyn Mayer, enquired if I would be billed as Stella Campbell! "Stella Campbell!" I replied. "If May Whitty can smack Dame before her name" – a Dame for her charity appearances, I believe, not for art – "I'm sure I can be a simple 'Mrs.'!"

I was making a picture with Mr. Thalberg's wife, Norma… something or other… Shearer, I think? It's not of importance, though I was told she was the leading lady at the studio. "Are you sure?" I replied. "Oh, yes," I was informed. "She works tremendously hard." I could only imagine. *(she collects up Moonbeam)* Of course, the real leading player was Moonbeam. You were marvellous in it, my angel. I make sure he's in all my pictures, whatever the story.

As she speaks the lighting creates the effect of a bright follow spot, a projector runs.

But, oh, the lights, the early hours, making one look older than God, and the obtuse people! *(fade in party music)* Mr. Thalberg asked me, after the screening party – an inglorious affair – what I thought of his wife. "Well, Mr. Thalberg," I said "She's quite, quite charming, such a dainty creature." "Oh, yes, she is," replied he. "Such tiny hands," said I. "Oh, yes, she has," he agreed, warming to me at last – I could taste another contract coming my way. "And such a tiny waist," I continued. "Yes, hasn't she?" He purred, to which I added: "And such tiny, tiny,

tiny eyes!" I haven't worked with them since! Well, how was I to know she had a stye? Not that it matters – Hollywood bores me. I've made other pictures there, but they don't want my style of 'Art', they just want Jean Harlow, and we all know what that name can be confused with!

The follow spot and music dim.

I believe, and I tell my lecture audience this always, "beautiful speech is a habit of mind, an art and a personal matter" And most of the people connected with talkies have no art! Why, a cameraman, on the last picture I made there, called me "Babe!" Babe! The ignominy of it. He then presumed to ask of Moonbeam "What's the little feller's name?" "Titty Bottles!" I replied, which seemed to shut him up! *(as she speaks she replaces Moonbeam on her hat momentarily, then picks up the small suitcase, puts it on the bench, props it open and places him inside it, wrapping him in a coverlet)* This beastly cold. Must we wait here all night? Don't the French understand I have treasure to transport? Such an inconsiderate nation… rather like the Americans. *(she sits on the bench)*

"A screen test, Mrs. Campbell, you'll have to undergo a screen test, if you want to go to Hollywood," my agent had informed me. *(she turns on the bench and her face picks up the light; again, the projector runs)* With my chin of sixteen dewlaps, I was declared a ruin! As I left the sound stage I heard the cameraman mutter, "And you say she was known as a beauty? She looks like a burst paper bag!" *(pause. She stares into the light)* It is hard to reconcile the eye's memory to the reality of what is now staring back at it. I never regret the loss of my looks, I just regret the expectation of them: as the curtain rises, yet another audience's memories are shattered! *(the lights change. She rises angrily)* Screen tests indeed! I, who have played opposite Bernhardt, made Ibsen's name and been loved by that scoundrel Mr. Bernard Shaw! I, who have been muse to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Pinero, Sardou! And Hollywood insists I make a screen test!

Perhaps I should submit to the challenge of a cosmetic surgeon, like that fright Mary Pickford: she can't snap her mouth open, but gee, does she look swell in them close ups!

She opens the trunk. It is crammed with clothes, letters, books and other memorabilia all spilling over. She pulls a hand mirror from a drawer.

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