84, CHARING CROSS ROAD

Based on the book
by Helene Hanff

Adapted for the stage by
James Roose-Evans

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helene's parents were both passionate theatre-goers. Her father had wanted to run away from college to go on the stage as a song and dance man. After two years he got stranded in Montana, wired home for money and his grandmother sent him a train ticket instead. When he came home he had lice and his grandmother threw him into the bath-tub, burned all his clothes, and told him he was through with theatre! So he became a shirt salesman, married and settled down in Philadelphia, which was a favourite try-out city for Broadway shows. He would swap shirts for free tickets!

So, as Helene said, "throughout the Depression, though the taxes on our house weren't paid, or the instalments on the old second-hand car, and though the prescription for my mother's new glasses went unfilled, every Monday night the Hanff family: father, mother, Helene and her two older brothers, all went to the theatre!"

James Roose-Evans's first impression on meeting Helene at the Garrick Club: "diminutive, in a black trouser suit, with silk blouse and cravat, her short, cropped hair framing the monkey-like face, she speaks in sharp, shooting phrases, like a small boy who, dressed as a cowboy, fires off toy pistols with glee. She is like a showbiz kid performing to entertain the adults. One senses, however, that this wise-cracking is simply her way of getting by, of surviving."

Underneath is a melancholy and loneliness.

At lunch, as she eats, she smokes: a mouthful of food, then a drag at her cigarette; another mouthful, another drag. The head waiter whispers to me, "You do realise, sir, that smoking is not permitted in the Coffee Room before 2.30?" "Yes," I reply, "but you try telling that to Miss Hanff!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For twenty years, from 1949, when she was thirty-two, until 1969, a struggling New York writer named Helene Hanff and the staff at the London antiquarian bookshop Marks & Co carried on a remarkable correspondence. It began with an innocent enquiry about fine book editions, but continued for two decades. Their letters, encompassing a period that went from Churchill's war to the Beatles's invasion, became a chronicle of an era as well as a record of a deep friendship.

84 Charing Cross Road is James Roose-Evans's unique adaptation for the stage of this cross-Atlantic correspondence, which he revised and developed further for the 2011–12 production. On a stage divided between Miss Hanff's cluttered New York apartment and the inviting mustiness of the Marks & Co bookshop, we watch as Miss Hanff and her friends "read" their letters, revealing beneath mundane book orders and witty literary repartee, their personal lives, and a warmth and caring that distance could not diminish. As one reviewer wrote, "It all seems so simple, just a collection of letters between people linked by their common love for books, but by the time you reach the end you will have looked into their hearts and shared the richness of their relationship."

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This revival production of *84 Charing Cross Road* ran at Salisbury Playhouse from 5 February 2015 and subsequently at Cambridge Arts Theatre from 2 September 2016. The cast (in alphabetical order) was as follows:

Megan Wells / Maxine Stuart	Lysette Anthony
Joan Todd	Jemma Churchill
Helene Hanff	Janie Dee
Frank Doel	Clive Francis
Cecily Farr	Alice Haig
Mr Martin	Ted Merwood
William Humphries	Samuel Townsend

Director: James Roose-Evans
Assistant Director: Martin Parr
Designer: Norman Coates
Lighting: Peter Hunter
Sound: John Leonard

CHARACTERS

HELENE

FRANK

ALVIN

CECILY

MR MARTIN

MAXINE

MEGAN

BILL

MRS TODD

PILOT

ACT I

The set comprises the shop, which takes up two thirds of the stage, and **HELENE***'s apartment, which occupies the remaining third of the space.*

The floor in front of **HELENE***'s desk is littered with screwed-up balls of typing paper, discarded efforts. Later she will tidy these up. Her apartment is cluttered, and there are orange crate bookshelves, a board for pinning up cards, mementos and cuttings.*

At no time during the play does the actress playing **HELENE** *have eye contact with the other actors or they with her. The occupants of the shop act in a naturalistic style when interacting among themselves, but when in communication with* **HELENE** *they must be acutely aware of her, and she of them, but never looking directly at each other.*

There are books everywhere, all over the floor, as well as on the shelves. There are mounds of catalogues, old torn books, ephemera of all kinds.

The table centre stage is set aside for especially rare old books, which are handled with care. Most of the stock will be leather-bound and of quality.

The lights come up first on the shop where **CECILY** *is standing on a stepladder looking for a book.* **FRANK** *is upstage going through the order book, and* **MEGAN** *at one point will enter with mail for him, one letter of which is the one from* **HELENE.**

Through the windows of the shop – with books displayed on shelves – we can glimpse the street outside. A sign which reads "CLOSED" on one side and "OPEN" on the other hangs on the glass-panelled door of the shop, and there are the usual prints clipped to a string across the door.

Far upstage is a recess with a desk where **MR MARTIN** *works, and also* **MEGAN**. *There is an old-fashioned telephone on this desk.*

On the other side of the stage **HELENE** *is smoking and reading a copy of* The Saturday Review of Literature, *where she notes details of Marks & Co and begins to type.*

HELENE Apartment 1a, 14 East 95th Street, New York City, New York, October 5th 1949, to Marks and Company, 84 Charing Cross Road, London WC2. England!

FRANK *is now moving downstage to his desk with* **HELENE***'s first letter to him.*

Gentlemen! Your ad in *The Saturday Review of Literature*...

FRANK *slits open her letter with a paper knife, looks at the address and reads.*

says that you specialise in out-of-print books.

The phrase "antiquarian booksellers" scares me somewhat, as I equate "antique" with "expensive". I am a poor writer with an antiquarian taste in books and all the things I want are impossible to get over here except in very expensive rare editions or in Barnes and Noble's grimy marked-up schoolboy copies.

I enclose a list of my most pressing problems.

FRANK *hands the list to* **MEGAN**, *who beckons* **CECILY**, *who goes to look for the Bibles.*

If you have any clean second-hand copies of any of the books on the list, for no more than five dollars each, will you consider this a purchase order and send them to me. Very truly yours...

MEGAN *looks up as though to register the name.*

Helene Hanff. *(Pause) Miss* Helene Hanff.

CECILY *now has two Bibles in her hand but is searching for others.*

FRANK Dear Madam: In reply to your letter of October 5th we have managed to clear up two thirds of your problem.

MEGAN *crosses to him with the Hazlitt and Stevenson.*

The three Hazlitt essays you want are contained in the *Nonesuch Press* edition of his selected essays, and the Stevenson is found in *Virginibus Puerisque*. We are sending nice copies of both these by book post...

Having checked them, he lets **MEGAN** *take them upstage to prepare an invoice.*

And we trust that they will arrive safely in due course and that you will be pleased with them.

BILL *enters. He stands beside her as she completes the invoice, which she slips inside the top book and hands to him to take out to parcel up in the outer office.*

The Leigh Hunt essays are not going to be so easy but we will see if we can find an attractive volume with them all in.

CECILY *is now standing at his side with an armful of Bibles, and he will select the one he wants. She then replaces the unwanted Bibles.*

We haven't the Latin Bible you describe but we have a Latin New Testament, also a Greek New Testament,

ordinary modern editions in cloth binding. Would you like these?

__MR MARTIN__ enters. He shows __FRANK__ two books he has acquired from a sale, and then takes __MEGAN__'s place at desk area upstage, where she was standing in for him. She sits at centre table, examining a book. __CECILY__ exits.

On __HELENE__'s side of the stage her door bell rings and she goes to answer, calling out before hand, "Who is it?" and a voice comes back, "It's Alvin, Miss Hanff".

She opens the door and takes the package from the unseen porter.

ALVIN *(offstage)* A parcel of books arrived for you, Miss Hanff – all the way from Great Britain!

HELENE Oh, thanks Alvin, thanks for dropping them off.

ALVIN No problem, Miss Hanff. A real pleasure.

In the shop, while __HELENE__ unwraps the parcel, the telephone rings and __MR MARTIN__ deals with the call. The date is November 3rd 1949.

HELENE Gentlemen! The books arrived safely. The Robert Louis Stevenson is so fine it embarrasses my orange crate bookshelves. I'm almost afraid to handle such soft vellum and heavy cream-coloured pages. Being used to the dead-white paper and stiff cardboard-y covers of American books, I never knew a book could be such a joy to touch.

She puts down the __STEVENSON__ and crosses to her sofa to get her handbag. She removes six dollars from her purse.

A Britisher, whose girl lives upstairs, translated the one pound seventeen and sixpence for me and says I owe you five dollars and thirty cents for the two books. I hope he got it right. I enclose a five-dollar bill and a single...

She has taken an airmail envelope and is putting the dollars inside.

Please use the seventy cents towards the price of the New Testaments, both of which I want. Will you please translate your prices hereafter? I don't add too well in plain American and I haven't a prayer of ever mastering bilingual arithmetic!

She licks the envelope flap.

Yours, Helene Hanff.

She seals the envelope and is about to drop it in her 'box' when a thought strikes her.

P.S. I hope "Madam" doesn't mean over there what it means here!

She drops the letter into her 'box'.

FRANK Dear Miss Hanff! We are very happy you liked the Stevenson so much...

MEGAN *looks up and moves towards* **FRANK.**

We are sending off the New Testaments, with an invoice listing the amount due in both pounds and dollars...

He is handing the Bibles to **MEGAN.**

And we hope you will be pleased with them.

Your six dollars arrived safely...

MEGAN *is moving away but on the "six dollars", she stops and turns back to take the dollars from* **FRANK.** *They exchange a comic look of despair.* **MEGAN** *then hands the dollars to* **MR MARTIN,** *who looks at them with curiosity, as also does* **CECILY,** *who returns at this moment.* **CECILY** *takes the two books from* **MEGAN,** *who has made out an invoice, standing at the table beside*

MR MARTIN *to do this.* **MEGAN** *then returns to centre table and* **CECILY** *exits.*

But we should feel very much easier if you would send your remittance by postal order in future, as this would be quite a bit safer for you than entrusting dollar bills in the mails. Yours faithfully, F.P.D. *(Pause)* For Marks & Company.

HELENE *rises and moves to front of desk with the Bible.*

What kind of a black Protestant Bible is this? Kindly inform the Church of England they have loused up the most beautiful prose ever written. Whoever told them to tinker with the Vulgate Latin? They'll burn for it, you mark my words! It's nothing to me, I'm Jewish myself. But I have a Catholic sister-in-law, a Methodist sister-in-law, and a whole raft of Presbyterian cousins (through my Great-Uncle Abraham, who converted) and an aunt who's a Christian Science healer, and I like to think none of them would countenance this Anglican Latin Bible if they knew it existed. As it happens, they don't know Latin existed.

MR MARTIN *exits.*

Well, the hell with it. I've been using my Latin teacher's Vulgate, what I imagine I'll do is just not give it back till you find me one of my own.

She takes four dollars out of her purse, takes an airmail envelope and puts dollars inside.

I enclose four dollars to cover the three dollars eighty-eight cents due to you, buy yourself a cup of coffee with the twelve cents. There's no post office near here and I'm not running all the way to Rockefeller Plaza to stand in line for a three-dollar-88-cents money order. If I wait till I get down there for something else, I won't have the three dollars eighty-eight cents any more. I have implicit faith in the US Airmail and His Majesty's Postal Service.

She puts the letter in the 'box' then checks her notebook at the side of her typewriter.

Have you got a copy of Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*?

MEGAN *looks up at this.*

I think there are several volumes. The one I want is with the Greek Conversations.

There is in fact a set of Landors on the table at which **MEGAN** *sits. She picks up one, consults it. Takes another, checks the contents – yes, it is the one with the Aesop and Rhodope conversations. She brings it to* **FRANK**.

If it contains a dialogue between Aesop and Rhodope that'll be the one I want. Yours, Helene Hanff.

She seals envelope and drops it into the 'box'.

FRANK Dear Miss Hanff: Your four dollars arrived safely and we have credited the twelve cents to your account.

MEGAN *now hands the volume to* **FRANK**. *He checks it, and then takes it, handing the dollars to* **MEGAN**.

We happen to have in stock Volume Two of the *Works and Life of Walter Savage Landor,* which contains the Greek dialogues, including the ones mentioned in your letter, as well as the Roman dialogues. It is an old edition, published in 1876, not very handsome but well bound and a good clean copy, and we are sending it off today with invoice enclosed.

He has moved upstage and handed the book to **MEGAN**, *who makes out an invoice. He turns back.*

I am sorry we made the mistake with the Latin Bible and will try to find a Vulgate for you. Not forgetting the Leigh Hunt. Yours faithfully, F.P.D. *(pause)* For Marks & Company.

HELENE December 8th 1949.

Sir: Well, it feels witless to keep writing "Gentlemen" when the same solitary soul is obviously taking care of everything for me.

FRANK *reacts to this. He stands at the side of his desk, reading a catalogue.*

Savage Landor arrived safely and promptly fell open to a Roman dialogue where two cities have just been destroyed by war and everybody was being crucified and begging passing Roman soldiers to run them through and end the agony. It'll be a relief to turn to Aesop and Rhodope, where all you have to worry about is a famine.

I do love second-hand books that open to the page some previous owner read most often.

The day Hazlitt came he opened to a page that said, "I hate to read new books" and I hollered, "Comrade!" I enclose a dollar...

FRANK *looks up at this.* **HELENE** *finds an envelope and places it inside.*

which Brian, British boyfriend of Kay upstairs, says will cover the eight shillings I owe you, you forgot to translate!

She moves to front of desk. **FRANK** *is quietly at work.*

Now then! Brian told me you are all rationed to two ounces of meat per family per week and one egg per person per month, and I am simply appalled.

She ferrets among a pile of scripts on the floor and finds the catalogue. She squats or kneels.

He has a catalogue from a British firm here that flies food from Denmark to his mother in England, so I am sending a small Christmas present to Marks & Company. I hope there will be enough to go round.

I am sending it care of you, F.P.D. – whoever you are!

*Music of "**JINGLE BELLS**". The others enter on the word "sending", led by* **MEGAN**, *who holds a large cardboard box covered with customs labels. They approach* **FRANK**, *smiling, and set the box on the table at the side of his desk.*

Noel, Helene Hanff!

Music swells. **FRANK** *takes scissors and cuts the string. They open the parcel, and brightly coloured parcels, in Christmas wrapping, emerge: (two tins of pork sausages, tins of bacon, of cheese, a tinned cake, a packet of dried eggs, and tins of jam.)*

Then, on cue, **MEGAN** *lifts out a large tin of ham.*

F.P.D! Crisis! I sent that package off. The chief item in it was a six-pound ham. I figured you could take it to the butcher and get it sliced up so everybody would have some to take home. But then I've just noticed on your invoice...

The actors freeze, looking front, as though listening to **HELENE.**

it says, "B. Marks, M. Cohen, Proprietors". *Are they Kosher?* I could rush over a tongue. *Advise please!*

They all laugh.

FRANK Dear Miss Hanff: Just a note to let you know that your gift parcel arrived safely and the contents have been shared out between the staff. Mr Marks and Mr Cohen insisted that we divide it up among ourselves and not include the bosses.

Music out. **CECILY** *exits with box, and* **BILL** *follows* **MR MARTIN** *out.* **MEGAN** *goes to* **MR MARTIN***'s table, holding her share of the parcel.* **FRANK** *places a tin of jam, only the top of the wrapping torn off, on his desk.*

I should just like to add that everything in the parcel was something that either we have never seen or can only be

had through the black market. It was extremely kind of you to think of us in this way and we are all extremely grateful. We all wish to express our thanks and send our greetings and best wishes for 1950. Yours faithfully, Frank Doel.

He turns to exit.

HELENE Frank Doel!

FRANK For Marks and Company!

He exits, pausing en route to show **MEGAN** *his present.* **HELENE** *continues working. She puts a piece of paper in the machine and types.*

MEGAN *exits.*

Light change, spring 1950.

HELENE *looks up from her typing.*

HELENE Frank Doel? *(pause, sound of a New York siren.)* Frank Doel?

She pulls the paper out of the machine in despair, screws it up and throws it on the floor. She rises.

Frank Doel, what are you *doing* over there, you are not doing *any*thing, you are just sitting *around*!

FRANK *enters from the outer office, holding* **HELENE***'s latest letter. He hurries to his desk for a paper knife and opens it. He throws the envelope in the wastepaper basket. He reads the letter with secretive delight.*

HELENE Where is Leigh Hunt? Where is the Oxford *Verse?* Where is the Vulgate and dear goofy John Henry Newman? I thought they'd be such nice uplifting reading for Lent, and *nothing* do you send me. You leave me sitting here, writing long margin notes in library books that don't belong to me; some day they'll find out I did it and take my library card away.