



SEPARATE TABLES by Terence Rattigan

A Resource Extra for students, teachers & individuals

Set in 1953, SEPARATE TABLES is a detailed study of the lies, class judgements and repressed passions of the long-term residents of the Beauregard Private Hotel. Made up of two linked one-act plays, "Table by the Window" and "Table Number Seven", SEPARATE TABLES explores the seedy gentility of the guests, who live by the strict social rules of a bygone era.

TERENCE RATTIGAN

Terence Mervyn Rattigan was born in 1911 in London. Regarded by many as one of the 20th century's finest playwrights, his works include *French Without Tears*, *After the Dance*, *Flare Path*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *Ross* and *In Praise of Love*.



Many of Terence Rattigan's plays are concerned with the theme of concealment - concealment of emotion or character. It is perhaps not coincidental that his own life was filled with concealments of one kind or another. Frank Rattigan, Terence's father, was a British diplomat and a womaniser. He managed to hide a series of affairs from his wife, until a misjudged relationship with the future Queen of Greece brought his diplomatic career to an end. Despite this and although subsequently living on a small pension, Frank continued to 'play' the part of an elder statesman and of course continued his affairs. As a young Harrow student, Rattigan's homosexuality was fashionable, but out in the real world he would go to great lengths to hide it, especially as he grew in stature. The effect of this level of concealment is evident in SEPARATE TABLES. The characters are familiar to each other and yet their physical separation from table to table is nothing compared to the emotional separation of their shrouded lives and hidden past.

He revelled in the experience and was captivated by his colleagues.

There are two newspapers featured in SEPARATE TABLES, the left-wing 'New Outlook' that John Malcolm writes for, and 'West Hampshire Weekly News,' the local newspaper. Research the politics and culture of the period in which SEPARATE TABLES is set and write an article which might feature in one of these publications. Think about what the tone and writing style of each article might be like.

Rattigan believed in craftsmanship. He believed in detail and structure. His plays tend to be light and gentle, but they find their emotions in the depths of the character and cleverly crafted narrative.

In 1956 his very distinctive and, up until then, very popular style of writing was overshadowed by a theatrical revolution. With the arrival of John Osborne's LOOK BACK IN ANGER came a new wave of brash young writers, armed with their ready condemnation of the generation before them. Rattigan attended the premiere of Osborne's play. He was, after all, one of the most famous writers of the time and the most prosperous. He must have hated it. It was everything his plays were not. It was angry, politically charged and socially edgy. Back in the early 1950's, Rattigan had expressed the view that "the only theatre that has ever mattered is the theatre of character and narrative. I don't think that ideas per se, social, political or moral, have a very important place in theatre". As you can imagine, this view did nothing to endear him to the 'new wave' of young writers who saw his work as period and precious. Neither did his view of that first night of

In SEPARATE TABLES, the characters often hide what they really want to say. The truth may be revealed in other ways, sometimes through action, or outside circumstance, and sometimes through the subtext of their words. Try writing a scene where one character has a secret. They want to tell the other character but they cannot. Think about how their secret may be revealed in other ways.

Rattigan's fame and success was assured well before the war, but it was his time in the air force that helped him mature as a perceptive creator of character. For the first time in his life he was surrounded by men from all backgrounds, all classes.

LOOK BACK IN ANGER. He said that John Osborne was saying "Look Ma, I'm not Terence Rattigan".

As the 1960's began to swing and youth culture emerged, Terence Rattigan's work was dismissed as irrelevant. He was seen as a man who could only create plays for middle-aged, middle-class,

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: Read the opening scenes of both SEPARATE :
: TABLES and LOOK BACK IN ANGER. :
: Discuss the differences in their style and :
: subjects. :
.....

unmarried women. This was a tragically misplaced view of such a delicate and brilliantly crafted body of work. It is however, a view that was to see him cast aside for thirty years.

Rattigan was never really to recover from this isolation. At first he made things worse by making

ill-advised comments in the press, and almost pandered to his image as a conservative who dismissed new ideas. He published a collection of his plays in which he wrote in the forward "The prototypical theatre goer is a nice respectable, middle class, middle aged maiden lady with time on her hands and the money to help her pass it". He named her Aunt Edna, and he believed that no author should ignore her (see below).

He was diagnosed as having leukemia in 1962 and had a series of recoveries over a two year period, before the illness returned in 1968. He was living in Bermuda by this stage (his dislike of 'swinging' Britain being what it was). Interestingly, during this time he briefly enjoyed a time as the highest paid screenwriter in the world. The films may have been lucrative, but they were almost instantly forgettable. He did experience a small revival of his reputation in the early seventies. It coincided with him being knighted, and it even led him to returning to live in England until his death in 1977.

ENTERTAINING AUNT EDNA

Aunt Edna became perhaps Rattigan's best known character. Aunt Edna knew what she liked, and she knew even better what she didn't. Aunt Edna didn't like plays which dwelled too much on the unpleasant side of life, and she didn't like artistic experimentation or cleverness for its own sake. Of Picasso, for example, she might say "those dreadful reds, my dear, and why three noses?".

To many, Aunt Edna came to represent everything that theatre should not be. A triple-bill of Absurdist plays in Ealing advertised themselves as 'Not for Aunt Edna'.

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: Discuss Rattigan's views on Aunt Edna. To :
: what extent do you feel a writer should try and :
: please their audience, and to what extent :
: should they try to challenge them instead? :
.....

Rattigan, however, felt it was important for playwrights to keep their audience in mind, commenting that 'a novelist may lose his readers for a few pages: a playwright never dares lose his audience for a minute.' Should a playwright displease Aunt Edna they would be 'utterly lost'. Critics took these comments to imply that Rattigan simply pandered to the limited expectations of his audience. They did not like the idea that he carefully constructed his plays, indeed the term 'well-made

play' was soon to become a term of derision. Many felt Rattigan aimed to please rather than challenge his audience, and his plays suffered because of this.

SEPARATE TABLES was Rattigan's first major play to open in Edna's wake. The controversy surrounding his comments about her was evident in many reviews of the play. Kenneth Tynan's review took the form of an essay between Aunt Edna and a Young Perfectionist. It ended with the exchange

AUNT EDNA: Clearly, there is something here for both of us.

YOUNG PERFECTIONIST: Yes. But not quite enough for either of us.

However, Rattigan himself had commented that, 'although Aunt Edna must never be made a mock of, or bored, or befuddled, she must equally not be wooed, or pandered to or cosseted'. His aim was to both satisfy and surprise the Aunt Edna's of his audience.

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: Rattigan commented that 'Aunt Edna is :
: universal... and I have no doubt that she is also :
: immortal.' Think about modern audiences. Do :
: you think Aunt Edna still exists? How else :
: might you characterise a modern theatre :
: audience? :
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CENSORSHIP OF BRITISH THEATRE

Throughout much of its history, British Theatre has been the subject of intense regulation and censorship. For many years theatre was outlawed by the church which looked upon it as a pagan ritual, and during the reign of Oliver Cromwell theatre was totally banned throughout the realm. Even once Charles II permitted theatre to openly exist in England, only two theatres (the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and Theatre Royal Covent Garden) were permitted to put on 'straight' drama, whilst all others had to rely on mime or music to tell the story of their productions.

The power of censorship over the theatre lay in the hands of the Lord Chamberlain in his role as arbiter of the King's will. In 1737 these powers were set down in a bill which stated that any play scheduled for performance in England was subject to censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's office.

The bill was reinforced in 1843 by the Theatrical Regulation Act. Before going into rehearsal and receiving a license to perform, every script had to be submitted, read and its contents approved. The powers of censorship were entirely discretionary and could be applied wherever the Lord Chamberlain was 'of the opinion that it is fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum or of the public peace so to do to forbid the acting of any play'. Guidelines suggested that the powers be used to prevent any profanity or lewd or improper language, any indecency of dress or action, offensive representations of living persons, and anything else which in the Lord Chamberlain's opinion might tend to induce riot or a breach of the peace. Anything mocking of royalty or the government of the day was particularly frowned upon. Included within this power of censorship was the right to prevent the staging of any play that mentioned homosexuality (it should be remembered that homosexuality was not legalised until 1967).

Although the skilled playwright could often avoid censorship by the clever use of inflective and innuendo, grumblings eventually began to arise

amongst the theatre community, and the practice of censorship was finally abolished under the revised Theatres Act of 1968.

Whilst writing SEPARATE TABLES in 1953, Terence Rattigan originally conceived the Major's offence to be a homosexual one. He later claimed that he had been so eager to address the battles being waged around homosexuality in the 1950s that for a while he forgot about the censorship. However, in order to ensure that the play was staged in the West End, Rattigan realised that he would have to adapt the nature of the Major's crime, and so persistently importuning male persons on the Esplanade became pestering women in a local cinema.

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It has been suggested that even in the original script, the homosexual nature of the Major's crime would be clear to those members of the audience who wished to know. Look at the original script. Do you think that this is true? Can you see any hints or innuendo?

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It was only whilst preparing for the Broadway premiere of SEPARATE TABLES in 1956 that Rattigan decided that since no legal prohibition against homosexual representation existed on the New York stage, this was a good opportunity to restore Pollock's 'real crime'. He therefore wrote five new passages which entirely alter the story of Pollock's arrest. However, Rattigan's American producer, Bob Whitehead, was uncomfortable about the changes as there has recently been several plays on the subject in New York and it had 'almost become a cliché on the Broadway stage', and so the alternative scenes remained unperformed and unread until they were rediscovered in the 1990s.

The Royal Exchange production will use the amended version of "Table Number Seven" which Rattigan wrote for the American premiere but was never performed. It will be the first time that this version has been produced as full production with "Table by the Window" in the UK.

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In the final scene of SEPARATE TABLES, very few words are spoken. The meaning of the scene is revealed largely through gestures and glances. In a small group, try 'passing' a series of glances. Try and give different meanings to the ways you look at each other- can you convey love, fear, suspicion or friendship in a glance? See if you can build on these glances to create a short scene that is largely non-verbal.

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TABLE BY THE WINDOW and TABLE NUMBER SEVEN focus in on the lives of two of the permanent guests at the Beauregard Hotel. The play is rich with other characters, each with a potential story of their own. Try creating your own story for characters like Mr. Fowler, Miss Meacham or Mabel.

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SOUND DESIGN FOR SEPARATE TABLES

Taken from an interview with
Royal Exchange Sound
Designer Peter Rice

My role as Sound Designer for SEPARATE TABLES has been to find music and sound effects which complement the design concept that the Designer and the Director have chosen for the show, and support the environments in which the scenes and acts take place. We have taken a deliberate decision to limit the amount of sound in SEPARATE TABLES in order to reinforce the idea of solitude and loneliness in the whole piece – the lack of things is quite important in this play.

The use of music in SEPARATE TABLES will be pre and post show, during the interval, at the beginning and end of scenes, and to cover the scene changes. As soon as you read the script for a play you begin to get a sense of what's appropriate for the show and what's not. Within SEPARATE TABLES there are various themes that need supporting by all elements of the design, so straight away it is possible to identify certain types of music that will and won't fit with these themes.

Taking the idea of solitude as a starting point, I have decided to use music with a single, lone instrument; and as sound in this theatre needs to be quite large, I have decided to use a piano. I began by listening to a whole load of different music to find pieces with the right 'mood'. We have about 1000 CDs in the Sound Department, so eventually I narrowed my selection down to 5 or 6, and began to sift out particular tracks.

In discussion with the Director we identified three pieces of music that we want to use. My role was then to produce a number of different edits of

these. For example, I've edited one piece of music specifically to fit at the beginning of the show (about 40 seconds long). Within this piece we have identified various cue points for the house lights to come down, the stage lights to go up, and to bring the actors on at different points to create a tableau.

We aren't going to use a huge number of sound effects in SEPARATE TABLES, although there will be some (babies crying, clocks ticking, kitchen noises etc.). As the Sound Designer, it is my job to find and record all of the sound effects we need. We have about 8,000 sound effects on CD, so you generally take the majority of things from these CDs and then manipulate them to suit your needs. For example, for the storm sequence in the second act I've taken about 5 different types of wind and 4 types of rain and blended them together to try and create the sound that would occur outside those particular windows, imagining there's an overhang, so you'd get dripping down the guttering, pattering on the roof, as well as heavy rainfall on the street.

Having selected the music and the sound effects, there is then the opportunity to experiment with the sources of the sound within the auditorium (and outside in the Great Hall). I have had to decide where the speakers need to be to cater for all the cues that there are, and identify what equipment is needed. For example, at one point there's a baby that cries in a pram, so we're going to put a remote speaker in there, hidden in the swaddling.

A full version of this rehearsal diary is available to download from the Royal Exchange website at www.royalexchange.co.uk

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- BERNARD SHAW, G., 1950. The Play of Ideas. *New Statesman And Nation*. 6 May 1950
- DE JONGH, N., 2001. *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968*. Methuen
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- REBELLATO, D., 1999. *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*. Routledge
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- TYNAN, K., 1964. *Tynan on Theatre*. Penguin

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