Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Patricia Morison, 1915-2018 An Appreciation

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 30th, 2018

Dear Readers, The following is a slightly redacted version of a piece that ran in culturalweekly.com on March 19, 2015 — Patricia Morison's 100th birthday — even though the celebration had taken place ten days before. We've kept the headline below, because it never stopped applying to the late and lovely Pat who passed away of natural causes on May 20 at the age of 103.

BEAUTIFUL, INCANDESCENT, WUNDERBAR

It was an ordinary date for an interview, like so many others before it and after. The time was the early 1970s and the big question on my plate that day was this: What is as distinguished a performer as Patricia Morison doing in *The Sound of Music* at the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera playing Elsa Schrader, described as the "wealthy and sophisticated" would-be *fiancée* of Captain von Trapp?

Surely the celebrated star of *Kiss Me Kate* and *The King and I* on Broadway should be doing something… starrier. But anyone who knew Patricia Morison, also knows that there was no role too small. Eileen Patricia Augusta Fraser Morison — her full name, and the Morison with one "r" if you please — brought her star quality to everything she did. That included singing "Brush Up You Shakespeare" and "I Hate Men" at a special Broadway Cares function in New York at the tender age of 99. Aside from that outstanding voice, she possessed a humility about herself and her talent that was at once transcendent and infuriating. She was so much more than she ever thought she was. Which only made her easier to cherish and admire.

On March 9, 2015, she was again a star—her name, as you can see, in great big letters on the Pantages marquee in Hollywood and the rightful center of attention at a joyful private celebration of her 100th birthday in the Pantages lobby. Age had not withered her grace, her innate kindness or inner beauty, even if it had done damage to her knees. She remained an undisputed lady and a star as she wafted into her second century.

Her good friend, director John Bowab, joined by Pantages general manager Martin Wiviott, were the hosts that evening. as they will be again on Monday, June 11, 6pm, when they will be hosting a celebration of Pat's life.

Pat herself, lovely and smiling, had been visibly overwhelmed by all the attention. A week later, at Pasadena's University Club, she became the focus of a special fund-raiser for the Pasadena Playhouse. A magical afternoon, heightened by a terrific selection of rare video clips from shows and films that Pat had starred in, with John Bowab leading a Q&A in which he gently coaxed a few funny stories out of her.

One of them, often repeated, touched on her professional relationship with the womanizing Yul Brynner when she joined the company of *The King and I*. Pat had been Rodgers' first choice to play Anna after the death of Gertrude Lawrence in 1952, but she was doing *Kate* in London and had a year to go on her contract. When she eventually joined Brynner for four months on Broadway in 1954 (before going on the road with him and the show for another three years), he invited her to join him for dinner.

"I said no," she explained, "because I'd been instructed to say no." That didn't stop Mr. Brynner who asked her to drop by his dressing room on her way out. She knocked on his door. "Come in," he said. She did, only to find him sitting naked in front of a mirror.

Unfazed, she asked, "You wanted to see me?" With the shoe now on the other foot, Brynner explained he was tanning his body for the role. "I understand," said Pat who, with her customary dignity, moved on.

"But," she added, "we became the best of friends."

Patricia Morison and Yul Brynner in *The King and I* on Broadway.

That Pasadena afternoon was topped by Bowab asking if she would perform a couple of songs. "As long as I have a voice, I'll sing," she replied. The rapt audience was treated to *Kiss Me Kate*'s "So In Love" and "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." The body had reached its 100th year, but the glorious, full-throated voice heard that Sunday was 25 years young.

*

The interview that had brought us together in the 1970s developed into far more than just an interview. I had been at the *Los Angeles Times* for only a couple of years when I scored that assignment. It was doubly exciting because, when I had arrived in the United States as an eager immigrant and student of theatre, I had spent my first days in New York seeing every show I could on Broadway, buying standing-room-only tickets and quaffing it all down. And there she was, a golden-voiced, fuming, vigorous, striking beauty as that virago Kate in Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*—and her subdued gracious self, as I was destined to find out, in almost everything else she did on stage or off.

Patricia Morison confering with her good friend, composer and lyricist Cole Porter.

So meeting her in person, one on one, 20 years later was a thrill. The interview about *Sound of Music* was pleasant enough, but I don't even remember her answer to my question, because what transpired that day was more than just a polite exchange of words for the newspaper. Something drew us together and that visit turned out to be the start of a close and deeply valued 46-year friendship.

Over the years, we enjoyed many intimate dinners together at her table. They included my sweet late husband and Pat's close friend, Isabel Borchert, a tiny Lebanese spitfire who was the widow of Pat's vocal coach. The no-nonsense Isabel had appointed herself the protector of Pat's privacy and celebrity—and guarded both more fiercely and with greater affection than any helicopter mother.

Alfred Drake & Patricia Morison in *Kiss Me Kate* on Broadway.

These dinners frequently included at least one or two other guests who were as devoted to Pat as we were. Isabel and Pat lived on different floors of the same building at Park La Brea Towers, and Isabel was the exceptional chef who masterminded these gatherings. No one was allowed in the kitchen, not even Pat, who was only permitted, now and then, to carry something to the table. But the alchemy of the succulent dishes Isabel concocted in that little galley—often made with special ingredients sent by relatives in Lebanon—produced, without a doubt, the best Lebanese *cuisine* in the city.

These lively suppers, full of conversation and laughter and mercifully restricted in size by the spatial limitations of the small dining room, are etched in my memory as a string of pearls. There were many other events and parties and opening nights and fund-raisers and benefits, plus frequent casual lunches in the Florentine patio of the much-missed Panevino Restaurant on Beverly Boulevard. There the owner always received Pat like the queen that she was—and the rest of us, in his eyes, as her attendants for the day, equal recipients of his largesse just for being within her radius.

Patricia Morison.

The world keeps churning and changing, but Eileen Patricia Augusta Fraser Morison will forever retain her magic and her equanimity in our collective memory. And it is easy to see why. This Manhattan-born daughter of a stylish English mother who loved to write (and wrote well), and a father who wrote a play quite late in his life, and then appeared in it, had not uttered an angry word or been anything but gentle, grateful, elegant and classy for the entire time that we knew each other. Right up to the end.

Some might call that a perfect score. I call it a perfect and indelible friendship.

A celebration of Patricia Morison's life will be held in the Pantages Theatre lobby on Monday, June 11, at 6pm. Anyone wishing to attend should RSVP to 310.659.7455 or beaupro1@gmail.com no later than 6.9.18, with name & number of persons in the party.

All photos from the public domain and Ms. Morison's private collection.

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 30th, 2018 at 2:18 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.