

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Patricia Morison: Beautiful, Incandescent, Wunderbar

Sylvie · Tuesday, March 17th, 2015

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 — and knows — Patricia Morison, also knows that there is no role too small. Eileen Patricia Augusta Fraser Morison — her full name, yes, and the Morison with one “r” if you please — brings her star quality to everything she does. That includes 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 possesses a humility about herself and her talent that is at once transcendent and infuriating. She is so much more than she ever thinks she is. Which makes her only easier to cherish and admire.



Patricia Morison at 100. Photo by Carol Summers.

On March 9 of this year she was again a star — her name in great big letters on the Pantages marquee in Hollywood and the rightful center of attention at a joyful and private celebration of her 100th birthday in the theatre’s lobby. Age has not withered her grace, her innate kindness, tenderness or inner beauty, even if it has done damage to her knees. She remains an undisputed lady and a star as she glides into her second century.

Her good friend, director John Bowab, joined by Pantages general manager Martin Wiviott, were the hosts that evening, and the crowd of about 140 of the star’s best friends formed a happy group of celebrants — including another centenarian, the spry and indefatigable, tennis-playing, actor/director/producer Norman Lloyd, now in his own 101st year. Pat, herself lovely and smiling, was visibly overwhelmed by all the loving attention.

A week later, at Pasadena’s University Club, Pat was the focus of a special fund-raiser for the Pasadena Playhouse. It was a magical afternoon, heightened by a terrific selection of rare video clips from shows and films that Pat has starred in, and by her friend John Bowab leading a Q&A in which he gently coaxed a few funny stories out of her.



Patricia Morison and Yul Brynner in *The King and I*

One of them touched on her professional relationship with the womanizing Yul Brynner when she joined the company of *The King and I*. “He invited me to have dinner with him and I said no, because I’d been instructed to say no,” she said. That didn’t stop Mr. Brynner who then asked her to stop 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 queried, “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.”

The afternoon in Pasadena 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. Did she ever. The rapt audience was treated to *Kiss Me Kate*’s “So In Love” and “Brush Up Your Shakespeare.” The body may have reached its 100th year, but the glorious, full-throated, unwavering voice heard last Sunday is surely 25 years young.



Patricia Morison

The interview that had brought us together in the early 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 plum 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 like heady brew. I chose Broadway because all I knew then was that Broadway was where theatre lived in America. I discovered later that it was more complicated than that. But Broadway certainly was where you needed to be if you wanted to be recognized for whatever you had to contribute to the theatre. And there she was, a golden-voiced, fuming, vigorous, striking beauty as that virago Kate in *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 with Alfred Drake in *Kiss Me Kate*



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| <p>Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison in a hair-pulling moment from <i>Kiss Me Kate</i></p> | <p>So meeting her in person, one on one, 20 years later was a thrill. We had a pleasant enough interview about <i>Sound of Music</i>, 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 this visit turned out to be the start of a close and deeply valued 45-year friendship (and counting).</p> |
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Over the years, we enjoyed many intimate dinners together at her table. They included my sweet husband and Pat’s close friend, Isabelle Borchert, a tiny Lebanese spitfire who was the widow of Pat’s vocal coach. The no-nonsense Isabelle appointed herself the protector of Pat’s privacy and

celebrity — and guarded both more fiercely and with greater affection than any helicopter mother.

These dinners frequently included at least one or two other guests who were as devoted to Pat as we were. Isabelle and Pat lived on two different floors of the same building at Park La Brea Towers, where Pat still lives, and Isabelle 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 Isabelle 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 as a string of pearls etched on my memory. 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 is — 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 with director John Bowab at Pasadena's University Club. Photo by Carol Summers.

Now both Isabelle and Panevino are gone and the world keeps churning and changing, but Eileen Patricia Augusta Fraser Morison retains her magic and her equanimity. 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, has not uttered an angry word or been anything but gentle, elegant and classy for the 45 years that I've known her. There is no reason to think that she wasn't exactly the same for the first 55 before we ever met.

Is there anyone alive who can lay claim to such a perfect score?

Uncredited vintage photos courtesy of Patricia Morison and John Bowab

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