

The Questors Theatre Archives

Questories

SHIRLEY BUTLER

QUICK CUES

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by Prudence Fay

Now It's Honey And Plenty of Money!

Shirley Butler got her first break because she knew a good thing when she saw it. An aspiring director, she tackled a play called *Next Time I'll Sing To You* by a little-known playwright, James Saunders, with a production budget of £1 and a cast of amateurs. Now, four years later, she has a hit comedy, *Say Who You Are*, running in the West End with Ian Carmichael; her new ex-Broadway comedy, *The Owl And The Pussycat*, opens at the Criterion on 2 March; and she's scheduled to direct *Grimaldi*, a musical by Waterhouse and Hall, in May.

Shirley Butler is the living proof of Edison's old saw about genius: one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine per cent perspiration. At thirty-seven she's an established director, and it's largely the sweat her brow that's got her there. "If you're a craftsman," she says, "you must know your business. A director's job isn't to have fine theories about the essence of a play, it's primarily to get the play onto the stage. I learnt that the hard, rep way. If you can't get a show going, what are your theories worth?"



of

She is American, tall, elegant, curly haired. She talks fast, entertainingly, disarmingly. She looks a stranger to work of any kind. But her past sixteen years have been tough and crowded; since she and her husband parted seven years ago, she's had two children to support as well.

"One shouldn't perhaps have pride, but I *am* proud that I've made it on my own," she says - an oddly touching admission from one so self-assured. "I'm a real outsider; I'm not part of the Oxford or the Cambridge or the West End commercial cliques. And I've never had to sleep with anyone to get anything."

Shirley Butler learnt about the hard work behind the bright lights in her first job, as a mannequin in Dior's Paris salon. She was nineteen, a student; it was 1948, Dior's heyday, the era of tight New Look waists and calf-length skirts. "Hard work and no money," she says. "Of course they expected you to be kept by someone, but I was an American high-school puritan, so I starved. I adored it really. The worst things were pulling on revolting soggy gloves that someone else had just taken off, and the unbelievable stench. No deodorants and clouds of stale *Miss Dior* ..."

In 1949 she got what she was really after - a place at the Old Vic studying stage production under Glen Byam Shaw, George Devine and Michel Saint-Denis. She met her husband at the Old Vic, and after a year there they joined Wilson Barrett's rep in Scotland. Her seasons there, she says, were the prosaic basis of her career, providing the hard core of technical know-how a director needs. "People malign rep, but it stretches everyone to the utmost, not in depth but in technique. It's like radar, pinging different areas, always lighting up new points."

There followed seasons of pantomime and revue in the North, where she worked as an electrician; and a tour of America with the Old Vic, as assistant to the business manager. On her return to England in 1955, Shirley Butler and commercial TV made simultaneous debuts: she was picked from a thousand applicants as one of a handful of announcers. Working as an actress in TV and rep, she learned how it felt to be on stage, not just in the wings. And in spare evenings, without pay, she directed an amateur group in Ealing called The Questors.

'I was a bad actress. I was always too aware of the whole, where a good actress is self-centred, narcissistic. And I wanted control.

In 1962 she got it. John Fernald, then principal of RADA, asked her to direct a student production of a one-act play by James Saunders, *Double Double*. And The Questors commissioned *Next Time I'll Sing To*

You for their New Plays Festival. They thought it the least promising of their festival, but Shirley Butler thought differently. So, when he saw her in-the-round production, did impresario Michael Codron. He snapped it up for the Arts Theatre. Shirley Butler cast it (Michael Bryant, Michael Caine, Barry Foster, Liz Fraser) and directed it: it transferred, with ecstatic notices, to the Criterion and ran for about five months.

After that came Anouilh's *Poor Bitos*, which also transferred from the Arts, to the Duke of York's and then New York. Before leaving to direct it there, she produced James Saunders' next play, *A Scent Of Flowers*. The critics liked it, but it didn't really draw the public.

Then there was a long pause - "like eight months long," she says - without work. Projects folded, unsuitable bait was offered. "The one thing I won't touch," she says fastidiously, "is crap."

Her patience and discernment paid dividends in the form of her present West End commitments. Shirley Butler has, as she says, made it, on her own terms, and in a male-dominated field.

The basis for her success in the past and her confidence in the future, she sums up in a phrase - "I know my job."

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