

The Patchwork Players

Catharine Wells



Catharine Wells, Cairo, 1944

A short while ago, I was delighted to be given a copy of Miranda Seymour's absorbing new biography of Robert Graves. It is a hard book to put down, especially for me, as I was a great friend of his daughter Jenny, in the days when we were both students at the De Vos School of Dancing in London. I was fourteen when I enrolled there, Jenny a year younger. We both hoped to go on the stage.

Jenny, after the break-up of her parents'—Robert Graves' and Nancy Nicholson's—marriage, was in a highly-strung-up state, often in tears, and in difficulties with the people with whom she lodged in London.

When Jenny's father left his wife and their four children to go abroad with Laura Riding, the poet Geoffrey Taylor had stepped in and helped Nancy to build a house for them all in the village of Sutton Veny in Wiltshire. It was here that Jenny produced the "Patchwork

Players" in the summer holidays, inviting fellow students from the De Vos studio to come down and inviting me to share the choreography with her.

I did not realise at the time that our name originated in a book of poems by Graves called "The Patchwork Flag".

Our list of names in the programme read:

Kit (me), Jenny
Pat, Penny
Nony, Désirée, Sam

'Pat' became the film star Patricia Laffan. "Penny" was the daughter of the artist William Nicholson, by his second wife Edie. "Jenny" was his grand daughter, "Nony" my sister, "Sam" youngest of the Graves family. David and Catherine Graves did not take part.

Our programme consisted not so much of "ballets", but of short dance dramas, putting ideas and originality first and foremost. Music was a weakness as we had to use gramophone records. Nancy Nicholson made costumes for us which I had designed.

I remember so well arriving at the house in Sutton Veny—one long room at the end of which Nancy worked on her beautiful designs for fabrics at a large table; at the other end Geoffrey Taylor, tall, dark and craggy, standing behind a semi-circular "bar" with his oil cooking stove. Meals were served up straight on to plates and we all sat round on high stools at the bar.

Jenny had told me that they had very little money and lived on sausages, potatoes and oranges.

The performers were appreciated in the village and we enjoyed ourselves—sausages and all!

The following summer the "Patchwork Players" were invited by the writer Richard Hughes, a former friend of Graves, to come to his castle at Laugharne in Wales and give more performances. So we travelled down by train from London to Carmarthen and not realising that we had at last reached that station, we were all taken unaware and had to tumble out of the carriage in a heap.

We were thrilled by the castle which was situated on an estuary running out into the sea. "Diccon", as we called him, had erected in the castle grounds a huge Arabian tent where we were all to sleep. Diccon himself had a small room in the half-ruined castle, empty except for a lilo and a vase of flowers. His wife, Frances, and two young children

slept in the house in the grounds. As the week went by, one after another of our company crept indoors, until only Penny and myself were left outside. We'd slept out before and loved it. Penny would sing me to sleep.

Jenny, who was not very well herself, became very annoyed at the way Diccon would keep on inviting everyone to go bathing or sailing in his boat. "I brought them down here to *work*" she'd say to me with the usual tears, and she had my sympathy as I wanted to rehearse as much as she did. We were doing some new ballets. Jenny did the Aesop fable of *The Wind and the Sun* with herself as the "Wind", Désirée as the "Sun", and I as the "Traveller" whose cloak both Sun and Wind vied with one another to remove. I made my entrance on horseback, riding down through the archway of the castle.

After that I choreographed a fairytale ballet of the *Boy who made Music* (Sam) who comes into the village playing his flute and everyone he touches has to start dancing. Then Jenny did a little comedy ballet of *Old King Cole*, Queen Cole and Prince Cole trying to "Balance the Budget" with the "Fiddlers Three" solving the problem.

The two performances went down well in the village and the audience included the young poet Dylan Thomas, who came up from his home in a Laugharne boathouse.

An exciting week, but what I think I enjoyed most was sitting in a circle in the tent in the late evenings by the light of a hurricane lamp, while Diccon told us ghost stories.

The following year Winston Churchill's daughter Sarah came to train at the De Vos School. Although quite a bit older than the rest of us, she was delighted by the idea of the "Patchwork Players" and invited us all to go down to Chartwell, the Churchill's home, to give performances there in the summer.

We were to dance on the grass terrace outside the house and camp out for a week in the gardener's cottage. I'd worked out a new ballet, *Cherry Stones*: a little girl—Désirée—with a mobcap on top of her golden curls, sits eating cherries with the "Tinker", "Tailor" and the rest of them dancing before her, and with her, in turn. Each is dismissed as not being to her taste. Finally the Thief steals her away. Sarah invented a part for herself in this ballet—the Gentleman, who was unpresentably tipsy!

Mr Churchill had asked Sarah if three of us—Jenny, Sarah and myself—would pose for him on the lawn, where he was painting a picture—which we did, first getting into the ballet dresses. We never

saw the result as, Sarah said, her father did not like his sitters looking at what he had done until it was finished. So I don't know to this day where that picture is.

The morning after our last performance, Jenny told me that Mr Churchill had, the night before, been walking in the garden with a group of friends all in evening dress, and that Churchill had asked his guests to sponsor him jumping into the swimming pool, fully clad, with cigar in mouth, to raise money for our "Patchwork Players". I forget how much was raised, but the "Patchwork Players' " time was up. When we got back to London, we found that we had to concentrate on our training and future careers. Pat went to Drama School, Jenny, Sarah and Désirée got into the Cochrane West End revue *Follow the Sun* and I got into the Opera ballet at Covent Garden.

Our Salad Days were over.

-OXFORD

Virconium

Merryn Williams

*Eighty-five years is nothing, an imperceptible
blink on the face of the stone god of history.
I say it does not count. Greater stretches of time
have passed, since the Romans abandoned Wroxeter.*

*Eighty-five years ago saw a student cycle
the long, dusty, carless road from Shrewsbury;
blue September, the Wrekin as it is today,
dew glistening on the mounds, similar sheep grazing
between the bath-house walls of the ruined city.*

*This was better than Latin. He scoured the site
for iron keys, a fragment of dark-red pottery,
a coin, stamped with the image of the goddess Luna;
urged his brother, think what we may be missing,
the great find of the century!*

*Some of his finds got into the town museum,
can be seen there in dusty glass containers,
mixed up, not labelled with his name, Wilfred Owen.*

*The boy picked up his steel horse,
made his way through summer darkness back to Shrewsbury.
School was next day, and war was a barbarous game,
fit only for Romans.*