

PROSCENIUM

2010 – 2011
SEASON

Three Plays

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By Wolf Mankowitz

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Wednesday March 16th to Saturday March 19th, 2011
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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By Wolf Mankowitz

The Hebrew Lesson

Jew	Alan Bobroff
Man	Alan Glover
1 st Black and Tan	David Pearson
2 nd Black and Tan	Michael Gerrard

It Should Happen to a Dog

Jonah	Alan Glover
Man/Sailor/King/Angel	David Pearson

The Bespoke Overcoat

Morry, a tailor	David Pearson
Fender, a warehouse clerk	Michael Gerrard
Ranting, his employer	Alan Bobroff
Clerk	Alan Glover

Directed by Anne Gerrard

Stage Manager Susi Thornton

Assisted by Crystal Anthony
Evelyn Moutrie

Irish Dialect advisor Margaret Matchett

Lighting and Sound Arnold Glickman

Wardrobe Evelyn Moutrie

The Author

Wolf Mankowitz was born in 1924 in Whitechapel, East London, to immigrant parents of Russian-Jewish ancestry. He was the first boy from East Ham Grammar School to win an Exhibition to Cambridge, where he studied English at Downing College under Dr F.R. Leavis. His university career was interrupted by the Second World War in which he served in the mines and in the Royal Army Corps, and he was finally awarded his degree in 1946. During this time he married Ann Seligmann, a student at Newnham College, and co-edited the university literary journal, *Sheaf*.

In the immediate post-war period he lectured extensively for the Workers' Educational Association, co-edited with Raymond Williams and Clifford Collins the influential left-literary magazines *The Critic* and *Politics and Letters*, and began his journalism career with *Time and Tide* and the *Sunday Pictorial*. He also made a name for himself as a dealer and authority on antique porcelain, especially Wedgwood. His experience came from working in street markets, then in his own lock-up shop, a practical schooling which he put to good account, becoming both a scholar and co-editor of *The Concise Encyclopaedia of English Pottery and Porin*. In 1953 he published the definite book, *The Portland Vase and the Wedgwood Copies*. Mankowitz's special talent was to make an abstruse and specialised subject read like a detective story. The book sold well and he cashed in by opening a glittering new shop in the Piccadilly Arcade.

At the same time he was using his experience as a street trader and as a bright young boy with an observant eye to write short stories and novellas. *Make Me and Offer*, about an antique dealer in search of the Portland vase, appeared in 1952 and *A Kid For Two Farthings* the following year. Mankowitz also began to write for the theatre and scored a considerable success with *The Bespoke Overcoat*, 1953, in which David Kossof played Morry at the Arts Theatre. In 1958 he wrote a musical, *Expresso Bongo*, based on the career of Tommy Steele.

He became an important and imposing figure in the literary and cultural life of 50s and 60s London, contributing novels, short stories, journalism, plays and, in particular film scripts. He wrote the screen play for his own *The Bespoke Overcoat* (which won six awards including Best Short Story Film at the Venice Film Festival in 1955 and an Oscar for Best Two-Reel Short Subject in 1957) and *Expresso Bongo* in 1959, as well as *The Millionairess* (1960), *The Day The Earth Caught Fire* (1961) and *Casino Royal* (1967). In addition he co-owned a restaurant, the Pickwick club, in Gt Newport St, which became a fashionable venue for a new generation of actors and producers.

In the 70s he retired to a comfortable house and small property in the south-west coast of Ireland to continue writing and to take advantage of the government's generosity to writers, who paid no tax. Visits to Central America inspired his work and in 1971 he became Honorary Consul to the Republic of Panama in Dublin, a post which gave him some amusement but little revenue. In 1982 he took a post teaching theatre at the University of New Mexico as well as being Adjunct Professor of English there. He stayed until the late 80s before returning to Ireland.

During this time he continued to write – novels, books on Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe, a volume of poetry - and he made a documentary on Yiddish cinema in the 1930s: the influence of Yiddish life and work is evident in much of his work.

He died in County Cork in 1998. John Calder wrote in his obituary in *The Independent*: "Wolf Mankowitz was a man of many parts with a voracious appetite for knowledge, an outgoing personality, attracted to women, a good talker, with an underlying interest in philosophy, which developed particularly during his illness from cancer in his last years. Much of his work shows an ironic sense of humour, an understanding of human motivation and weakness, and a compassion for those unable to rise from the underside of society".

Mankowitz and MI5

The security service file released at the National Archive in 2010 showed that for more than a decade after the Second World War, Mankowitz was in MI5's sights as a possible communist agent. They first took an interest in him in 1944 after he married his wife Ann. She was a communist party member and when the two moved to Newcastle upon Tyne they were said to be "avoiding national service and doing themselves well by lecturing for the Workers' Educational Association at about £6 a week. Wolf appears to be at least a pure Marxist."

The security service warned the BBC that Mankowitz was a convinced Marxist, married to a CP member and "a security risk would exist should Mankowitz have access to classified information." In 1957 the corporation phoned MI5 before engaging him on a three week contract to translate and dub a film of Chekhov's *The Bear* for television. MI5 felt they had to tell the BBC that he had visited Moscow the year before and been in touch with Soviet officials over a film project. Both officials, however, agreed that translating Chekhov was unlikely to give Mankowitz access to any classified information. But even MI5 was bound to note that he was critical of the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 and called for the right of free expression for Russian writers.

In a 1958 Friday night interview programme on ITV he told Ludovic Kennedy: "No, I am not a communist, I am an anarchist."

The Plays

The Hebrew Lesson

In a large attic room in a decaying eighteenth century house in Cork an elderly Jew is studying with great concentration. He might be praying but actually is learning Irish, translating numbers from his native Yiddish into the English of the text books before him and then into Irish.

From the streets outside comes firing, occasional shouts and boots running on cobbles. It is very late on a Friday night and the year is 1921. A year when the newly constituted bodies, known as Black and Tans, and made up of British World War One veterans, were employed by the Irish constabulary as temporary constables; when Palestine was under British mandate Mankowitz reflects wisely on politics and language.

It Should Happen to a Dog

The author notes that it "is a serio-comic strip which, those who know the story of Jonah will see, is faithful to the original. If the characters speak as people we know personally, it is because there is no other way for us to know characters. If Jonah is somewhat familiar in his manner of address to the Almighty – it is because one may assume that a greater intimacy exists between prophets and their source of instruction than does for the rest of us.

As to the message of the story – 'Why should I not spare Ninevah?' This is, one hopes, how God feels about Man – unlike Man who is less tolerant of himself."

The Bespoke Overcoat

"Love is a luxury which very poor people can afford, and *The Bespoke Overcoat* is a story of this love." (Wolf Mankowitz). He also pays tribute to Alec Clunes, director of the first production, who understood that the play 'was a sustained, typically over-long Jewish joke – than which there is no sadder and no funnier story.'

Mankowitz took his plot from Gogol's 1842 short story *The Overcoat*. In Gogol's story Akaky, a poor, lowly clerk, finds his old threadbare overcoat irreparable, saves and saves from his meagre wages and manages to buy a new one; but his overcoat is stolen on his way home. The police do not take him seriously, so he appeals to a Very Important Person. However, his lack of status is obvious (after all he has no overcoat), he is treated with disdain, falls ill and dies. Gogol's story works on several different levels and is very influential and admired in Russia. Dostoevsky declared: 'We all come out of Gogol's overcoat.' Nabokov said: 'In the immortal *The Overcoat* he really let himself go and pattered on the brink of his private abyss to become the greatest artist Russia has yet produced.

Mankowitz makes the story more domestic and more touching, dispenses with the Very Important Person and the satire on bureaucracy and power and concentrates on personal feelings and morality.

The possession of an overcoat has often been seen as a source of pride and self-esteem for the poor and downtrodden. In Puccini's *La Boheme*, Colline, the philosopher among the poor students, bids a tender farewell to his most prized possession as he pawns it to buy medicine for the dying Mimi:

Garment antique and rusty
A last goodbye farewell.
A faded friend so tried and trusty
We must part you and I.
For never yet your back did bend
To rich man or mighty.
How oft
Safe in your pocket spacious
Have you concealed philosophy and poetry.
Now that our pleasant friendship is o'er
I would bid thee once more,
O companion tried and trusty
Farewell, farewell.

Our Next Production

Blithe Spirit

By Noel Coward

Take one happily married novelist, two wives, one alive and one long dead, an eccentric medium, a séance and a dotty maid and you have all the necessary ingredients for a charming and witty evening in the theatre. Coward, known as the Master, sub-titled the play "An Improbable Farce." He was probably right!

At the Compass Theatre, June 8th to June 11th 2011

For further details contact

Proscenium Box Office 020.8866.7075

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season.

Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

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Become a friend of Proscenium for £10 a year - for more information, contact Anne Gerrard, on 0208 954 4110

Artistic Director: Michael Gerrard

Secretary: Izzie Cartwright

Chair: Crystal Anthony

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk