

PROSCENIUM

The Thrill of Love

By Amanda Whittington

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Wednesday 26th to Saturday 29th June 2019
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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The Cast

Ruth Ellis (*a night club hostess*)Clare Wooster
Jack Gale (*a detective inspector*)Steve Bold
Sylvia Shaw (*a night club manageress*).....Hannah Lester
Vickie Martin (*a model and actress*)Zena Wigram
Doris Judd (*a charwoman*)Nicola Bielicki

Directed byAnne Gerrard
Stage ManagerCrystal Anthony
Assistant Stage Manager.....Meera Sarin
Arnold Glickman
Shirley Wootten
Caroline Bronne-Shanbury

CostumesAngela Evans
Sound TrackCharles Anthony
Sound OperationPaul Davies
Lighting Operation.....Paul Davies

The action takes place in and around London, in the 1950s.

There will be a interval of 15 minutes
between Acts 1 and 2

Our thanks to East Lane Theatre and Compass Theatre

Director's Note

In today's climate, the attitudes relating to Ruth Ellis' crime are disturbing - even allowing for the social thinking of the times. Class differences and the justice and police systems affect the outcome of the case; Ruth herself is affected by these, as well as her own mental state.

Amanda Whittington adds to our understanding of the situation with her research and use of created characters to illustrate the complexity and confusion of the facts.

This is not a feminist polemic but a humane view of a troubled person, which is what attracted me to direct this challenging play.

Anne Gerrard

Amanda Whittington

Amanda Whittington (born 1968 in Nottingham) is an English dramatist who has written over 30 plays for theatre and radio. Her work is widely performed by companies across the UK, with recent productions at Hull Truck, Oldham Coliseum, New Vic Theatre and Nottingham Playhouse.

She currently has two titles in Nick Hern Books' Top Ten Most Performed Plays, one of which is *The Thrill of Love*. In 2017 she was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy by Publication at the University of Huddersfield.

Original stage plays include *Be My Baby*, *The Thrill of Love*, *Ladies Day*, *Ladies Down Under*, *Mighty Atoms*, *Kiss Me Quickstep*, *Amateur Girl*, *Bollywood Jane*, *Satin 'n Steel*, *The Dug Out* and *Player's Angels* (adapted for Bristol as *The Wills's Girls*). Stage adaptations include *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* by Alan Sillitoe, *My Judy Garland Life* by Susie Boyt and *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters.

Original radio plays include *D for Dexter* (returning series), *The All-Clear*, *Louisa's*, *The Dock*, *Nuremberg*, *Once Upon a Time*, *Paradise Place* and *The Nine Days Queen*. Book adaptations for radio include *Man At The Helm* by Nina Stibbe.

Amanda began her writing career as a freelance journalist for titles including Nottingham Evening Post, New Statesman and Society and The Face. In 2016, her radio drama *D for Dexter* won Best Series/Serial in the BBC Audio Drama Awards, and the fourth series was broadcast in November 2017. In 2001, she jointly won the Dennis Potter Screenwriting Award for *Bollywood Jane*, a work she later adapted for stage.

She is currently Associate Artist at Nottingham Playhouse.

Amanda's plays are published by Nick Hern Books and Samuel French.

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amanda_Whittington)

Amanda Whittington on Play Writing

...How has your work evolved over your career?

Well, hopefully I've got better at it! It's hard to analyse your own work but what I'm striving for now is an originality in form as well as subject. I think I started out with an ear for dialogue but I've worked hard over the years to learn all the mechanics of play writing. One of the most significant things to have happened over the years is that I've found people to work with who really understand my work and bring out the best in it. Theatre is a collaborative process and those creative relationships are vital to me.

Can you tell us a bit about the process you go through when writing a new play?

The first thing I want to identify is the 'world' of the play and what it's concerned with. I'll do a lot of research into the subject and look for a fresh way into it, for the story that hasn't been told before. When that story becomes clearer, I'll create characters and look at their relationships. The plot will develop from that. I usually have a clear plan for the first draft before I start writing it but then of course, the plan goes to the wall! As I write, I discover what I'm really trying to do and say. Essentially, the process is rewriting. Draft after draft after draft! A play's never finished, you just run out of time.

A big question! There is much discussion around the impact of funding cuts on opportunities for writers in theatre. What are your thoughts on this?

One of the worrying things about the cuts is that they could destroy the bridge into professional theatre for new writers. It's hard to sustain a career as a playwright but it's even harder to begin one. I'm very concerned that today's new writers won't have the opportunities that I've had and new voices won't be heard. Ten years ago, theatres were reaching out into the community to find people who might never have thought of writing for theatre. Can they afford to do that now? Great writers don't arrive at the Stage Door fully-formed, they develop with professional support. Where will that support come from if the funding goes?

What is your most memorable theatre moment ever?

There are many but it would probably have to be seeing *The Threepenny Opera* performed by the Berliner Ensemble in Berlin. Seeing this amazing piece in Brecht's own theatre had an extraordinarily powerful resonance. It was pure Brechtian theatre as it was intended to be, with the history, politics and style embedded in a way it could never quite be in an English production. The combination of the play, the theatre, the performances and the city was unforgettable – it was the real deal!

What advice would you give to a playwright starting out?

Aim to be truthful not original. There's a difference. If you try to be original, you may not be authentic. Write what you see, feel, know and understand. Explore the questions that are most urgent to you. See as much theatre as you can but find your own truth in your work. Be influenced by other writers but write in your own voice. If you write as your true and authentic self, then you can't help but be original, too...

Source: *Excerpts of Interview by Angharad Jones: Fifth Word, February 4th 2014*
(<http://www.fifthword.co.uk/blog/an-interview-with-amanda-whittington>)

Amanda Whittington on The Thrill of Love

...Ruth Ellis has been covered in documentary and drama before. What do you have to bear in mind when dealing with real life and how did you make the Thrill of Love fresh for audiences?

Ruth's statement on the night of the murder begins: 'I am guilty. I am rather confused'. For me, these seven words are loaded with meaning and subtext.

I think in a well-known case like this you need to read between the lines and search for new truths within. The fact is that Ruth Ellis was executed in 1955 for shooting her lover David Blakely in a Hampstead street. Drama and documentary have largely portrayed it as a crime of passion. There's always been sympathy for Ruth, who was beaten by Blakely but refused to present herself as a victim. I wanted to go beyond historical record, and look at Ruth's life in the light of what we now know of her – and of the consequences of sexual abuse, exploitation and domestic violence on women. Given her experiences, it's unlikely a psychiatrist would now say (as they did in 1955) her crime was 'a sign of emotional immaturity'. The sense of detachment showed after her arrest was more likely to be post-traumatic stress than the 'equanimity' her doctor recorded.

I was interested not so much in what Ruth did but why she did it. This led me away from the 'doomed love affair' scenario and into her life as a hostess in the West End gentlemen's clubs. Here, Ruth was one of a countless number of young working-class women who sought more from life than a factory job, marriage and motherhood. I was intrigued by the private world of those women. Who were they when the clubs closed; what were their dreams and desires, and what had they actually found? Their voices were all but silent in the official record of Ruth's story but I felt it was time we heard them. I began to reimagine the facts of the case through their eyes and experiences, and in doing so, a new story came to life...

Source: *Excerpts from BBC Writers Room blog, November 3rd 2016*
(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/writersroom>)

The Aftermath

Public Reaction to the Execution

The case caused widespread controversy at the time, evoking exceptionally intense press and public interest to the point that it was discussed by the Cabinet.

On the day of her execution, the *Daily Mirror* columnist Cassandra wrote a column attacking the sentence, writing: "The one thing that brings stature and dignity to mankind and raises us above the beasts will have been denied her — pity and the hope of ultimate redemption. A petition to the Home Office asking for clemency was signed by 50,000 people, but the Conservative Home Secretary Major Gwilym Lloyd George rejected it. The British Pathé newsreel reporting Ellis's execution openly questioned whether capital punishment—of a female or of anyone—had a place in the 20th century."

The novelist Raymond Chandler, then living in Britain, wrote a scathing letter to the *Evening Standard*, referring to what he described as "the medieval savagery of the law".

Family Aftermath

Ellis's husband, George Ellis, descended into alcoholism and died by suicide by hanging, at a Jersey hotel on 2 August 1958. In 1969 Ellis's mother, Berta Neilson, was found unconscious in a gas-filled room in her flat in Hemel Hempstead. She never fully recovered and did not speak coherently again.

Ellis's son, Andy, who was ten at the time of his mother's hanging, took his own life in a bedsit in 1982, shortly after desecrating his mother's grave. The trial judge, Sir Cecil Havers, had sent money every year for Andy's upkeep, and Christmas Humphreys, the prosecution counsel at Ellis's trial, paid for his funeral. Ellis's daughter, Georgina, who was three when her mother was executed, was fostered when her father killed himself three years later. She died of cancer aged 50.

Pardon Campaign

The case continues to have a strong grip on the British imagination and in 2003 was referred back to the Court of Appeal by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. The Court firmly rejected the appeal, although it made clear that it could rule only on the conviction based on the law as it stood in 1955, and not on whether she should have been executed. The court was critical of the fact that it had been obliged to consider the appeal:

We would wish to make one further observation. We have to question whether this exercise of considering an appeal so long after the event

when Mrs Ellis herself had consciously and deliberately chosen not to appeal at the time is a sensible use of the limited resources of the Court of Appeal. On any view, Mrs Ellis had committed a serious criminal offence. This case is, therefore, quite different from a case like Hanratty [2002] 2 Cr App R 30 where the issue was whether a wholly innocent person had been convicted of murder. A wrong on that scale, if it had occurred, might even today be a matter for general public concern, but in this case there was no question that Mrs Ellis was other than the killer and the only issue was the precise crime of which she was guilty. If we had not been obliged to consider her case we would perhaps in the time available have dealt with 8 to 12 other cases, the majority of which would have involved people who were said to be wrongly in custody.

In July 2007 a petition was published on the 10 Downing Street website asking Prime Minister Gordon Brown to reconsider the Ruth Ellis case and grant her a pardon in the light of new evidence that the Old Bailey jury in 1955 was not asked to consider. It expired on 4 July 2008.

Burials

Ellis was buried in an unmarked grave within the walls of Holloway Prison, as was customary for executed prisoners. In the early 1970s the prison was extensively rebuilt, during which the bodies of all the executed women were exhumed for reburial elsewhere. Ellis's body was reburied in the churchyard extension of St Mary's Church in Amersham, Buckinghamshire. The headstone in the churchyard was inscribed "Ruth Hornby 1926–1955". Her son, Andy, destroyed the headstone shortly before he killed himself in 1982.

Coincidentally, Styliou Christofi, who was hanged in December 1954 for murdering her daughter-in-law (the second-to-last woman to be executed in Britain), lived at 11 South Hill Park in Hampstead, with her son and daughter-in-law, a few yards from the Magdala public house at number 2a, where David Blakely was shot four months later.

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Ellis)

Our Next Production

Woman In Mind

By Alan Ayckbourn

Susan comes round from a bump on the head to find her world populated, rather confusingly, by two families – one tedious and irritating, the other charming and supportive. She knows which she prefers, but which is real?

Woman in Mind - a funny and unsettling vision of mental ill health - is recognised as a defining play in Ayckbourn's career, the start of a period when he incorporated increasingly darker elements into his plots.

Directed by Shirley Wootten

Thursday, October 31st 7:45 pm

Friday, November 1st 7:45 pm

Saturday, November 2nd, 2:45 pm and 7:45 pm

Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 250 615

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 in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Ben Morris

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk