

A Trip to Fermanagh

There's a saying – in summer, the water is in Fermanagh..and in the winter, Fermanagh is in the water. After several years of living in Northern Ireland, I am not altogether sure how the seasons can be easily differentiated in any event , and July 31st 2015 proves the point as I set off from Hillsborough to Enniskillen in atrocious rain.

Well, I never moved here for the weather, so I cannot complain. In addition, for the first time since my return to the THAS and my invitation to join the Executive, my presence here is proving a distinct advantage. Last week, I had to spend a lot of lób and take a day off work to get over to London to see The Missing Hancocks (TMH) being recorded at the BBC Radio Theatre(but, of course, it was well worth it). Today, however, I can be in Enniskillen in an hour.

I am off to see TMH again. Neil Pearson, the producer of the radio shows, has brought the cast and concept to the annual Beckett Festival held in the town. Neil is a strong believer that the Hancock character is highly consonant with key themes of Beckett's work – the small man shaking his first against the world; and all those bloody pauses. Aside from this, though, the festival is giving Neil and the cast a very valuable opportunity to road-test these shows because, critically, they are not the



five shows that have been recorded for the BBC's second series of TMH. Rather, these are four additional shows – Prime Minister Hancock, The Three Sons, The

Winter Holiday and The New Year Resolutions – that Neil will be taking to the Edinburgh Festival in early August. I have previously asked him whether these shows might be recorded, but Neil is insistent that they will not. For obvious reasons, he hopes these shows will get picked up by the BBC for a third series of TMH in the future. For this reason, I am determined to see all four shows, which will entail two trips to Enniskillen, since the shows are performed in groups of two (matinee and evening).

As I get closer to Enniskillen, I go through the villages of Augher, Clogher and Five Mile Town. Some of the faded shop signs - many of surviving shops, indeed - of villages like these are highly – and appropriately -redolent of past decades. As I drive past the Clogher Valley Credit Union I am briefly reminded of The Insurance Policy. A clothes shop with yellow cellophane in the window in Augher would surely not have looked out place on East Cheam's high street in the 1950s. When I get to the venue, this temporal illusion is nicely completed. I think the picture says it all. The shows are being performed in the old Regal Cinema. Founded in 1936, it eventually closed in 1967, but then found a new life in 1972 when it became the HQ of the Fermanagh Unionist Association. It occupies the theatre part of the complex. The foyer was taken over by Toytown – and don't be fooled by the

antiquated logo, because that happened in 2008. The theatre, as it is tonight, is accessed by a small door on the extreme right of the picture. As I walk in, I am greeted by Robin Sebastian, the immaculate impersonator of Kenneth Williams (amongst many other things). I assume this is a coincidence, but I later see that Robin does a meet and greet – and a hi and bye – for all the shows I attend. As we chat, Robin expresses some concern about his cold. Apparently last week, when he was recording the second set of BBC shows, he lost his voice. Snide was coming out like a Turkish Prime Minister on helium (if you do not get this reference, go and find it on YouTube, it is truly hilarious). Indeed, Robin explained that it was so rough that the whole show, not just specific parts, might be re-recorded when the fifth and final show of the second series is done in mid-September.

Wishing him well, I go into the theatre, which again sends me back decades. A small auditorium, wooden floors, wooden frontispieces on the walls, wooden stage, wooden chairs. Everything is brown. This is a far cry from the BBC Radio Theatre of last week, but funnily enough, much more atmospheric and effective.



The stage is prepared in a simple and Spartan way, as the picture demonstrates. I get a tingle seeing those old-style BBC microphones. I chat with Neil and he describes how these productions will be more theatrical than the shows recorded for broadcast the previous week. I wish him well and settle down the tonight's shows .

The lights dim and the cast make their way on stage as the traditional announcements are made. It is the same cast heard in the BBC shows with the exception of Adrian Lukis - star of shows such as The Bill, Peak Practice and many more -replacing Kevin Eldon, who is otherwise engaged. Simon Greenall, who plays Sid, is here by the skin of his teeth, having flown in from Los Angeles. Simon voices the meerkats in the Compare The Market adverts, and had been filming a new campaign with Nicole Kidman. Later, I ask with some confusion why he had to be in California to do voiceovers. It turns out that the campaign consists of lots more than the adverts, including one-to-ones with the stars where they and Simon improvise conversation. Who knew?



The shows start and I see now what Neil means by theatricality. In *The Winter Holiday*, the tunnel scene on the way to Brighton is done very effectively as the lights on the stage go out and the cast huddle round a

mike with the script illuminated by torchlight. The antics on the beach as the tide washes Tony, Bill and Andree around like rag dolls are mirrored in those on the stage. Amidst all this I am struck by the sheer physicality of Kevin McNally's performance. It is one thing to get Tony's voice and mannerisms right - and this is no mean feat. Like Terry Wogan, Tony has, famously, always been one of those stars where impersonation is very difficult. But watching Kevin is like watching a man possessed. Later, I ask him if he had any qualms about taking on the role. He jokes that he was too stupid to entertain these doubts - but then pauses reflectively and recalls the terrifying few minutes before he first went on stage as Tony back in 2014.

Kevin describes himself as having 'marinated' in Tony for decades. After the show, I am struck not only by his knowledge of the show but that of other players. Robin moans about the audio quality of the surviving recording of *The Diet* (which, by the way, is on the hit list for TMH in the future). Susy Kane, playing Andree, talks passionately about Ericsson the Viking - and as the daughter of John Kane, the veteran comedy scriptwriter, she knows funny.

Back to the show, and the small audience of about 60 people is in gales of laughter. In *The New Year Resolutions*, there is a scene when Tony has been convinced by Sid that he is to be in charge of a scout jamboree event for parents when in fact it is a seedy night club. When Kevin then surveys the imagined scene and innocently says 'They've got old fathers and young mothers, haven't they?' the house comes down. As fans, this is perhaps not surprising - we know how durable and relevant this comedy is. However, thinking about this more deeply, an interesting observation occurs to me. When diehard fans or regular folk are asked about their favourite radio shows, very few will mention any from the first three series. And any student of the radio shows will recognise that there was a dramatic shift in the tone, style and content of the writing and acting to a more 'naturalistic' approach. Clearly there is a common thread throughout all the shows, but I think to assume that these early shows will automatically be winners with modern audiences is, I think, to underestimate the skills of the actors and the incredible precision and talent that Neil has brought this in his capacity of producer.

Once more, the theatricality of these shows is a key factor in the renditions. In *The Three Sons*, there is a point where Kevin, as the ancient Ebediah Hancock, and Robin, his faithful and equally aged retainer, are competing to see who can depict the most decrepit (imagine Shakin' Stevens on a train in an earthquake). And the cast aren't afraid to liven things up with topical references - Simon Greenall bursts into an outrageous but excellent Northern Irish accent for one of the parts; Adrian, as Bill, is not afraid to describe the dismal Brighton weather in November from *The Winter Holiday* as being like 'Enniskillen in July'. The more I see these shows, the more I feel that if the Edinburgh run is a success, there is a much wider opportunity for TMH than a third series on Radio 4. The performances I am enjoying here could easily play in small London theatres and key venues around the UK, such as Cambridge, Oxford, Birmingham, Manchester and, indeed, Brighton. And why stop at missing episodes - why not take *The Poetry Society* or *Sunday Afternoon and Home* and, yes, share them with new audiences, but also imbue them with new meaning and ideas to create original performances and interpretations. Talking with a rather exhausted Neil in early September, I am pleased to hear that Edinburgh has been a critical and commercial success. I do hope this leads to greater opportunities to stage new versions of the shows than just radio remakes - wonderful as they are.

Driving back from the shows, the fact that the scripts and the performances are so funny gets me thinking about that age-old debate about Tony's ability as a performer with and without Ray and Alan. If we can watch these shows now and still laugh long and hard, does this diminish the value of Tony's contribution? I think not. I remember Kevin's remarks about being marinated in Hancock. Tony gave Ray and Alan a unique inspiration to create characters and situations which endure today. Tony created a comic persona - later icon - that he communicated and defined in an equally unique way. Having watched again Paul Merton's versions of the television show, I feel more strongly my view is correct - the scripts are hilarious but because Paul essentially performs as Paul, the shows do not work as effectively as the originals. However, in the case of TMH, because Kevin is channelling the spirit of Tony so effectively - if not spookily - in his voice, mannerisms and face, the chemistry is perfect and the humour is maximised to the full. Similar plaudits should go to the cast - again, it is never enough to simply have good scripts. Using that argument, we should be expecting Wayne Rooney's Hamlet any time soon. . You will find no greater admirer of the work of Tony, Ray and Alan, but let us always remember this was an ensemble piece, and these new shows work because of the great talent of the cast and their love - and deep knowledge - of the material. Lastly, let us never forget the producer. I am constantly reminded that I could only enjoy these shows, and the TMH CD in my car, because of Neil's drive to revive them. Doing this was incredibly difficult in any event, but it also constituted an immense professional and financial risk for him. In reviving HHH as a new radio series and well as, potentially, a new theatrical production, he has breathed new life into the legacy of the programme, and renewed interest in Tony, Ray, Alan and, indeed, the THAS. Heartfelt thanks go to him - and everyone else involved - for the two great escapist days I spent in 1950s Britain, courtesy of a wet Enniskillen.



