

What the Discerning Theatre-goer Is Going to See These Days

by Our Man in the Stalls*

I was singin' in the bathtub some days ago and I was giving of my best in a performance of a melange of show hits by Lorenz Hart. I had just finished a haunting rendition of 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' when the phone rang. It was the Editor of *Wooster Sauce* asking whether I would write a review of a show on at the National Theatre in London called, coincidentally enough, as I understood the Editor to say, *Stories by Hart*.

I cheerfully answered in the affirmative to the request to write the requested item, or, as we writers call it, the piece. Accordingly, I strolled over to the National on the appointed evening, being one of the two October evenings that the show was being performed in the UK, having been performed with very considerable success in 2008 in New York.

I settled down into my seat and a tall bod, looking a bit like an exclamation mark expressed in human form, padded on stage and started nattering away amiably. Minutes passed and the fellow was still nattering amiably. Rummy, I thought. No singing. If there is one thing I expect of a show called *Stories by Hart*, it's songs, specifically Larry Hart songs, and of these there had been decidedly none.

I thought I should make enquiries on the matter. Sitting next to me was Lt. Col. Norman T P Murphy, the Wodehouse Society's impossibly brainy Remembrancer. So, I tugged on Norman's sleeve and asked him what was what. Where are the songs? Where are the Hart lyrics? We journalists ask these probing questions.

Norman explained all to me, quickly – Norman does not really do slow. Turns out the show is not *Stories by Hart* but *Stories by Heart*. It's a one-man show by the American actor John Lithgow of two stories, P G Wodehouse's 'Uncle Fred Flits By' from *Young Men in Spats* and Ring Lardner's 'Haircut'. No songs. No Hart connection whatsoever. Turns out I had picked up wrong

end of the stick altogether. Actually the wrong stick. Totally different stick. Stick of a different water.

Stories by Heart came about through the American actor John Lithgow learning favourite stories which his father had told him in childhood and were later told back by him to his father, whom he helped to comfort through his final illness. Mr Lithgow opened the show with recollections of his early family life and of his father's later illness. He then moved into a wonderful reading of 'Uncle Fred Flits By', seamlessly segueing into a barnstormingly effective word-perfect 'by heart' performance of the story. He played some 10 or so roles, including a nut-proffering parrot, delivered with some very good physical comedy. Mr Lithgow's delivery of Uncle Fred's observations in the matter of the world of jellied eels was a particular delight.

The second act was given over to the Ring Lardner story, a far darker tale, and one involving Lithgow playing this time just one role, the barber-narrator, but in various moods and modes. If less barnstorming, and subtler, this called for just as much skill, if not more, than his performance of the Wodehouse farce.

If the stories of the first act were songs, they were songs delivered with the bravura verve of an Ethel Merman performing for the benefit of the Upper Circle, whereas the songs of the second act were delivered with far more intimacy, as if in a small nightclub.

The show may have no songs, but it well deserves to be a super boffo hit for John Lithgow. So, if you ever get the chance to see *Stories by Heart* – and I hope he is successfully encouraged to reprise it regularly, as the number of performances of it by him are criminally rare – do toddle along to see it, even if there is no singing in it. Not a single song, but tremendously good.

* Also known as Graeme W I Davidson



John Lithgow prepares to tell the classic Wodehouse story 'Uncle Fred Flits By'.

"... I found to my horror that a young man of whom I knew nothing was arranging to marry my daughter. I sent for him immediately, and found him to be quite impossible. He jellies eels!"

"Does what?"

"He is an assistant at a jellied eel shop."

"But surely," said Lord Ickenham, "that speaks well for him. The capacity to jelly an eel seems to me to argue intelligence of a high order. It isn't everybody who can do it, by any means. I know if somebody came to me and said 'Jelly this eel!' I should be nonplussed. And so, or I am very much mistaken, would Ramsay MacDonald and Winston Churchill."

(From 'Uncle Fred Flits By', 1935)