

BY THE WAY



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Seymour Hicks and Ellaline Terriss

We continue the review of the major stars who appeared in theatre to which Wodehouse contributed by considering the careers of a remarkable couple. The article has been written by **Eddie Grabham**.

The son of an English major in the Gordon Highlanders, Seymour Hicks was destined to master every corner of the theatrical profession. He trod the boards of various West End theatres before scoring his first major success in *Walker, London* at Toole's Theatre in the Strand in 1892. The following year, Hicks co-produced *Under The Clock*, often regarded as the first English revue. He had already met actress Ellaline Terriss and, after they married, they were one of theatreland's most popular couples.

Ellaline Terriss was born in 1871 in the Falkland Islands, where her father, actor William Terriss, had taken time out from his career. They returned to England and, at the age of fifteen, Ellaline danced in the Vesta Tilley pantomime *Sinbad the Sailor*. Her acting career really started when Beerbohm Tree cast her in *Cupid's Messenger* in 1888. She got the part because the original actress was taken ill. Although she only played the part for one week, she had made her West End debut and won a three year contract with Charles Wyndham.

She scored a hit playing *Cinderella* at the Lyceum in 1893, while Seymour Hicks played one of the Ugly Sisters. On October 3 that year, Ellaline became Mrs Seymour Hicks at Brentford Register Office. It was a simple wedding and the happy couple made for the Cafe Monico in Piccadilly Circus where they celebrated by having their wedding breakfast – with no guests. They remained devoted to each other until death took Sir Seymour Hicks in 1949 and, whenever possible, the couple liked to work together as a team.



Ellaline Terriss in *The Beauty of Bath*

In 1894, George Edwardes, known to one and all as 'The Guv'nor', invited the couple to join his stock company at the Gaiety, where they soon became stars. Their first production for Edwardes was *The Shop Girl* which confirmed the popularity of the musical comedy. Seymour Hicks scored with his song, *Her Golden Hair Was Hanging Down Her Back*, considered risqué at the time. Invited to perform the song at a Cadogan House party attended by the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra, he was invited to sing the piece privately to Princess Alexandra to see if she would approve. She smiled sweetly, indicating that she found the number charming. It was only some years later that the star learned that she was

deaf! Interestingly, Hicks actually made a brief recording of this number in 1932.

With the success of *The Shop Girl*, which ran for 546 performances at the Gaiety, Edwardes produced a series of musical comedies, often with melodies by Ivan Caryll and Lionel Monckton. The next was *The Circus Girl*, which opened at the Gaiety for a run of 497 performances in December 1896. Seymour Hicks and Ellaline Terriss headed the cast and Ellaline sang her most famous song (later, the title of her autobiography), *Just A Little Bit Of String*.

It was during the run of *The Circus Girl* that the couple suffered an 'annus horribilis'. Ellaline lost their first baby and had to leave the cast for some time. In the middle of December 1897, her father was murdered at the stage door of the Adelphi Theatre by deranged actor Richard Arthur Prince. To cap it all, her mother died suddenly at the end of the year.

By then, Ellaline was held in high esteem and affection by her audiences. Following her recovery from these terrible events, she returned to the cast of *The Circus Girl* and broke down in tears when she received a rapturous standing ovation.

Apart from his undoubted and varied skills on stage, Seymour Hicks was now a playwright and, in collaboration with Harry Nichols, wrote the next Gaiety musical comedy, *The Runaway Girl*. He also produced it, with his wife in the title role and, with music by Ivan Caryll and Lionel Monckton, it proved to be another success. Ellaline had a delightful number called *The Boy Guessed Right*, but the show's most successful and enduring number was *Soldiers in the Park*, better known today by its opening line '(Oh) Listen to the Band'.

Seymour was determined to conquer all aspects of his profession; he left the Gaiety for theatre management at the Vaudeville, and subsequently built the Aldwych which opened in December 1905.

P G Wodehouse, who was employed by Hicks as a staff lyricist at the Aldwych, contributed to *The Beauty of Bath*, which opened there in March 1906. Seymour Hicks produced, co-wrote the book with Cosmo Hamilton and played the lead, Lt Richard Alington, RN. He was the first to appear on stage, while co-star Ellaline Terriss as the Beauty came on last. The audience always looked forward to the actress's first appearance and it became common practice for Hicks to build up the expectation by making the audience wait.

At the end of 1906, he opened the new Hicks Theatre in Shaftsbury Avenue, which he built in collaboration with Charles Frohman. It opened with the transferred *The Beauty of Bath* with himself and Ellaline still in the leading roles. (When it closed in 1907 after 287 performances, *Brewster's Millions* with Gerald Du Maurier started its 321-performance run.) In 1909, Hicks Theatre changed its name to the Globe; the theatre still stands and is now known as the Gielgud.



Lawrence Caird, Ellaline Terriss and Seymour Hicks in *The Gay Gordons*
 "He looks like a performing seal."

Meanwhile, Hicks wrote and produced a new show, *The Gay Gordons*, which opened at the Aldwych in September 1907. Once again, Plum was among the lyricists and the show starred Seymour who, with Ellaline Terriss, played the leading roles, Angus Graeme and Peggy Quainton. Two of Plum's lyrics from the show were published: *Now That My Ship's Come Home* and *You, You, You*.

Seymour Hicks left the Aldwych Theatre in 1910, but remained busy. In 1915, he took a party of West End players including Ellaline, Ivy St Helier and Gladys Cooper to entertain Allied troops in France. He was the first to do so and, during World War II, he led the way once again. In 1931, in recognition of his services during the Great War, and to French drama in London, the French Government awarded him the *Legion d'Honneur*. By then, Ellaline Terriss had left the stage, though she did return briefly to play Mrs Thornton in *The Miracle Man* in 1935, the year Seymour was knighted.

Seymour Hicks also played in films from the twenties and continued appearing on the silver screen until he died in 1949. Ellaline Terriss, now Lady Hicks, outlived Sir Seymour by many years, and even had time to invite P G Wodehouse to her 100th birthday party before she died in 1971.

Details of the Relevant Shows

<i>The Beauty of Bath</i>	with Seymour Hicks, Ellaline Terriss	Aldwych and Hicks Theatres, 1906
<i>The Gay Gordons</i>	with Seymour Hicks, Ellaline Terriss, Zena Dare & Fred Emney	Aldwych Theatre, 1907