



BY THE WAY

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Four Damsels in Plum's 'Repertory Company'

When the actor Basil Foster turned to theatre management, he gathered together a cast of seasoned performers and relative newcomers to put on *A Damsel in Distress*, adapted by Wodehouse and Ian Hay from the PGW novel, at London's New Theatre. **Eddie Grabham** introduces four actresses who remained with the company for one or two further Wodehouse adaptations.

Jane Baxter (1909–1996)

Jane Baxter was the daughter of an English engineer and a half-German mother, formerly a lady-in-waiting to Princess Charlotte of Saxe-Meiningen. After her father's death, the family moved to Wimbledon, where Jane studied at the Italia Conti School. In 1925, she made her London debut at the age of 15 as an urchin in *Love's Prisoner*, a musical comedy at the Adelphi. After taking minor roles in productions of *Peter Pan*, Sir James Barrie took her under his wing and she understudied Jean Forbes-Robertson in its title role at the Gaiety, playing the part for a week in January 1928. This led Wodehouse to offer her the role of Lady Maud Marsh in *A Damsel in Distress*, a successful production which ran for 242 performances from August 1928.



Ann Todd (left), John Clements, and Jane Baxter in a publicity shot for *Ships With Wings* (1941)

Jane stayed with the team for *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep* (which Hay and PGW adapted from a Hay short story) for its 115 performances from April 1929, starred in Hay and King-Hall's *The Middle Watch* (Shaftesbury Theatre, 387 performances) and

returned to play Eve Halliday in the Wodehouse and Hay adaptation of *Leave It to Psmith*, also at the Shaftesbury, for 156 performances in September 1930. Two more appearances in Ian Hay plays at the Shaftesbury followed, including the very successful *The Midshipmaid*. She made her screen debut in *Bed and Breakfast* in 1930 and then married racing driver Clive Dunfee, who was tragically killed in a race at Brooklands in 1932. While still in mourning she returned to the stage in *Once a Husband*, with Fay Compton and Owen Nares, at the Haymarket.

Jane's career continued on both stage and screen, with the film *Blossom Time* a notable success, playing opposite Richard Tauber. She joined Michael Redgrave in rep at the Liverpool Playhouse; their friendship resulted in Jane becoming Vanessa Redgrave's godmother. Returning to London, she had a huge success in *George and Margaret*, which ran for two years at Wyndham's Theatre from February 1937, and after the war made her Broadway debut, playing Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest* with John Gielgud and Margaret Rutherford. In 1948 Alec Guinness directed her as Viola in *Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic, and she continued to act until 1972.

Ann Todd (1909–1993)

Ann Todd trained at the Central School of Speech Training and Drama, and after a London debut as a 'Fairy Child', she played Lady Prudence Willowby in *A Damsel in Distress*, staying on to take the role of Oenone in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*. Like Jane Baxter, she stayed with Ian Hay for *The Middle Watch* at the Shaftesbury, but after parts in a few less successful productions – and apparently because she was embarrassed by applause – she turned to film work for British studios from 1931.

Three of her earliest films – including the second version of Arnold Ridley's comedy-thriller *The Ghost Train* with Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge –

were released in 1931. Her screen career blossomed, and the success of *The Seventh Veil*, in which she played a gifted pianist cruelly treated by her monstrous guardian (James Mason) established her as a huge star. After going to Hollywood to star in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Paradine Case* (1947), she returned to England, appeared in David Lean's *The Passionate Friends*, and then took him as her third husband. After making two more films for him – *Madeleine* (1950) and *The Sound Barrier* (1952) – the marriage, like her earlier two, failed.

She had not completely given up her stage career, and in later years she played in rep at the Old Vic, as Lady Macbeth, and in *Henry IV Parts I and II*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. At the end of her career she was writing, directing, and producing documentaries, along with her autobiography and two novels.

Joan Hickson, OBE (1906–1998)

When Agatha Christie saw Joan Hickson play Miss Pryce in *Appointment with Death* in 1946, she is reputed to have told the actress that she hoped she would play Miss Marple one day. This proved prophetic, even if it was nearly half a century before Joan became a star, playing that very role for BBC Television.



Joan Hickson as Miss Marple in the role for which she will always be remembered

By then, she had had a very successful career as a character actress, both on the West End stage and in more than a hundred films. Having trained at RADA, she made her debut in the provinces in 1927, and her London debut, in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* at the Arts Theatre, followed in 1928. She played in each of the three Hay-Wodehouse

collaborations and, like Jane Baxter and Ann Todd, also appeared in Hay's very successful *The Middle Watch*. She then had three seasons for Oxford Playhouse before making her film debut in *Widow's Might* in 1934.

Joan created many memorable character roles in British film, including Richard Attenborough's mother in the film version of *The Guinea Pig* (1948), a role she had created at the Criterion in 1946, and the landlady in *Seven Days to Noon*. She had a minor role in *Murder She Said* (1961), in which Margaret Rutherford played Miss Marple, and she was in her late seventies when, in 1984, she first played the part for television which made her a household name, and helped to earn her the OBE in 1987.

Clarice Hardwicke (1900–not known)

The Australian actress Clarice Harwicke became a stalwart of the West End stage during the 1920s and '30s. She appeared in musicals, including the Drury Lane productions of *Rose Marie* (1925) and *The Desert Song* (1927), before joining the casts of *A Damsel in Distress* as Albertina Keggs and *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep* as Chickie Buff. She returned to Drury Lane to play Dandini in *Cinderella* in 1934, one of



Clarice Hardwicke with Henry Kendall in *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep*

the last pantomimes to be staged at the theatre, which had been associated with that peculiar British tradition since the 18th century. After transferring to the Strand for the 1935 production of *1066 and All That*, she returned to the Drury Lane Theatre for the short-lived revue *Rise and Shine* in 1936, and then worked in the provinces and on tour.

No information about her post-war activities – or further details of her life – have been found.