



BY THE WAY

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Plum's Last West End Play

In the final article in this series, Eddie Grabham looks at five cast members in Plum's hit post-war play *Don't Listen Ladies*, which opened its 219 performance run at London's St James's Theatre on 2 September 1948 and was based on Sacha Guitry's 1942 play *N'écoutez pas, Mesdames*. Wodehouse, who wrote the play with his old friend Guy Bolton, took the pseudonym Stephen Powys, a name previously used by Guy Bolton himself for his play *Wise Tomorrow*.

Jack Buchanan (1890–1957)

The debonair Jack Buchanan was nearing the end of his career when he appeared in his only play by P G Wodehouse. Born in Helensburgh, Scotland, in 1890, Buchanan made his professional stage debut in a Glasgow variety show in 1911, the year in which he also appeared in a straight play for the first time. The following year found him in London, and in 1914 he under-



Jack Buchanan with Moira Lister

studied Jack Hulbert in *The Cinema Star*. In 1917 he not only took over from Hulbert in the Charlot revue *Bubbly*, but also made his screen debut. A Charlot favourite by 1918, he became the darling of the Twenties London revue. Throughout that roaring decade, Buchanan found equal success in revue, musical comedy, straight plays, and films.

Mainly occupied by the film studios in both London and Hollywood during the Thirties, he devoted more of his time to the stage in the Forties and Fifties, often making film versions of his stage successes. In 1948 he was offered the part of Daniel Bachelet in the New York production of *Don't Listen Ladies*. The play had opened in London with Francis Lister in the lead and was still playing to capacity houses when Buchanan, his leading lady, Moira Lister, and his

company arrived to a rapturous reception in New York. Sadly, the play proved to be a frost on Broadway when it opened in December 1948, mainly because a leading New York critic wrote a damning article recalling that the play's originator, Sacha Guitry, had the reputation of being anti-Semitic during the Nazi occupation of Paris. The play ran for just 15 performances.

With the play shunned by Broadway audiences, that may have been the end of a very short association between Plum and the legendary Buchanan, but fate played its hand. Francis Lister, still playing to full houses in London, fell ill and couldn't continue. Jack Buchanan was asked to return to London as quickly as possible and take over the role opposite Constance Cummings. He was on the stage of the St James's Theatre in January 1949 and stayed with the cast for the remainder of its run.

Jack Buchanan's final public appearance was in the first transmission of Independent Scottish Television in August 1957. Following a heart attack, he died peacefully on 21 October that year.

Constance Cummings (1910–2005)

Constance Cummings's acting career spanned nearly 70 years. Having made her professional debut in a San Diego stock (rep) company in 1926, she made her New York debut some two years later playing a small part in the Gershwin musical *Treasure Girl*. Her Broadway appearances attracted the notice of Hollywood, and she gained a part in Howard Hawks's *The Criminal Code* (1931). The following year found her opposite Harold Lloyd in *Movie Crazy*.

Constance Cummings came to London after meeting and marrying English playwright Benn W. Levy; the couple remained happily married until his death in 1973. She appeared in his comedies in both London and New York, making occasional forays into the film studios. Constance is still remembered for her portrayal as Rex Harrison's second wife in the splendid film version of Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, and also as a distinguished West End actress, proving herself to be an exceptional serious as well as



Denholm Elliott and Constance Cummings

comedic actress. She played Daniel Bachelet's second wife, Madeleine, in *Don't Listen Ladies*. Constance Cummings starred in Benn Levy's *The Rape of the Belt* in both London (1957) and New York (1960). Her range was formidable, and in the Sixties she joined the ranks of the National Theatre, where she worked with Laurence Olivier. She continued working into her 90s, performing in an adaptation of Henry James's *Daisy Miller* for the radio as late as 1999.

Denholm Elliott (1922–1992)

Following a brief period at RADA, Denholm Elliott was called upon to serve his country during World War II. He found himself in a German POW camp, where he was able to act in camp shows. After the war, he joined the distinguished cast of *Don't Listen Ladies* as Daniel Bachelet's assistant, Blandinet. He then began a successful career in films; following *Dear Mr Prohack* (1949), he was in *The Sound Barrier* (1952) and *The Cruel Sea* (1953). As his roles became more substantial, Denholm Elliott scored a hit in the cynically dark comedy *Nothing But the Best* (1964). He made several films in Hollywood, including his role as the acerbic valet in *Trading Places* (1983), with Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd. He was also in two of the *Indiana Jones* adventures with Harrison Ford and the 1988 television version of

The Bourne Identity. He was nominated for an Oscar for *A Room with a View* in 1985.

Francis Lister (1899–1951)

Francis Lister came from a theatrical family, making his stage debut at the Haymarket in 1914 when he was only 15 years old. He was kept busy on stage until 1917, when he began two years' service in the forces. After demobilisation, he went straight back into the theatre, where he appeared in *You Never Can Tell* (1920) and *The Tempest* (1921) before embarking on a variety of roles in the West End. Early in 1930, he went to New York, where he played The Marquis Of Farnborough in *Dishonoured Lady*. He was back in London by August that year to continue his run of successful West End performances. His 1924 marriage to Nora Swinburne only lasted until 1932, and a later marriage to Margot Grahame was also dissolved. He crossed the Atlantic again to appear with Hollywood's British contingent in *Clive of India* (1934) before returning to Broadway. In 1939 he rejoined the Royal Artillery, but he was invalided out in April 1942. In July that year, he played Macduff in *Macbeth* (Piccadilly), followed by a series of Shakespearean roles with John Gielgud's repertory company. He created the role of Daniel Bachelet in *Don't Listen Ladies* in the London production, but fell ill and had to drop out of the cast, his part being taken by Jack Buchanan (see above). During his long career, he also appeared in a number of films, his last being *Home to Danger* (1951), released in the year of his untimely death.

Betty Marsden (1919–1998)



Francis Lister and Betty Marsden

Best remembered for her comical characters Fanny Haddock and Lady Beatrice Counterblast, and for her Fiona to Hugh Paddick's Charles in the popular Kenneth Horne radio shows *Beyond Our Ken* (1958–1964) and *Round The Horne* (1965–1968), Betty Marsden was also an accomplished stage actress. She was a member of the London company of *Don't Listen Ladies* from September 1948, playing Daniel Bachelet's first wife, Valentine.