

# Elizabeth Montagu

## A Spy's Cover

Interview by Julia Varley

*Please, could you tell me about your first theatre experiences?*

In the old days in Britain to have repertory experience was looked upon as necessary for an actor. After you had been to drama school, you went into a repertory company, where you stayed a couple of years. Then, if you were lucky, you would get into the West End. You never went straight into the West End for this would be looked upon as if you hadn't done your job.

I was first engaged by the Newcastle Repertory Company to play juvenile leads. I had done nothing like that except at drama school and I was terribly flattered. I got an enormous salary: one pound a week! Even then it wasn't very much. I lived in typical second-rate theatrical digs where the lavatory was outside in the garden. I lived practically entirely on bread and sardines, which actually was a very clever choice, as I got oil, protein and starch. We did a new play every week, twice nightly: two performances a day for six days, twelve performances a week. And at the same time we were learning and rehearsing the new play. No wonder I never got rid of my text angst: one becomes obsessed by what one is going to say next. Then - usually - it comes! I have never recovered from that. I began to have a thing about memory, but I never lost it. I had a sort of terror that I would dry up, which I did do sometimes, because I was always chasing my lines. Quite a lot of famous people started in that repertory theatre. It was a very good theatre, always pretty full and I must say I was very glad to have done it.

Then I was talent spotted by an actor producer of the Garrick Theatre in London. He asked if I would come and play a part in his theatre in a West End production. I just couldn't believe my ears. I said: "Of course!" I found myself playing a juvenile lead in a production. I must have been twenty-three. I was in this play quite a long time. Then I was "resting" as you say - theatre resting - until I got a job from the well known actress who had been the lead in that

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play. She asked me to understudy for another leading part. I had no money and I was going to get paid. Of course I said yes! Then she suddenly disappeared to play in a film, *The Constant Nymph*. It is very rare that an understudy ever plays the lead, it is rare that you ever get to play the part at all, and I did. I played in the West End for three or four weeks and then we went on tour. I got another job in a play that opened at Croydon, in a repertory company that then was chosen to go to the West End, and after that I was asked to play a very good part in a prophetic play about the war, a very tragic play. It ran about a month or six weeks and there was a terrific controversy: this could never happen. There were bombs and we wore gas masks.

That came to an end and then I went into another play that ran for over a year called *Viceroy Sarah*, at the Whitehall Theatre and I got terribly bored doing that. You get so scared of forgetting your lines because you have said them so many times, you are rather inclined to think in the middle of a scene, "Oh! My God! Did I remember to get some butter!" It becomes a sort of routine. One must never let that happen. The thing that really helped me was the actress playing the leading part whose memory was poor. She broke down all the time, so much so that I and another actress got to know her lines so every time she got stuck we would say, "Oh mama, as you were going to say ..." I felt so sorry for her. She was fairly old. After a play about Mozart that opened in Glasgow with Peggy Ashcroft, I got a job writing articles and reviewing books in a magazine. I did that until the war and, when the war came, I joined up. I was the happiest I had ever been when I was working in the West End in London. I liked my colleagues. However hard the work I didn't mind it. I enjoyed it and so when I was in Switzerland during the war and I had the

chance of starting again, of course I did.

*Were the theatres you worked with text based? Was all the focus of your attention on the dramatic text, the play?*

A play in the West End was strictly text, the movements or the walks would come in rehearsal. You played exactly as in the dress rehearsal. Perhaps you tried things out a little bit, but very rarely in performance, unless you found something that really didn't work, so you slightly changed. But usually you did absolutely what had been agreed upon with the director.

*During the war you lived in Switzerland?*

I arrived in Switzerland from France as a refugee at the end of September 1940 and I left Switzerland finally in 1946. I was working for Intelligence. I needed to have what one called "cover", something obvious that I was doing, so that I couldn't possibly be involved in Intelligence. I thought of starting a theatre company. It was called the Anglo American Players. I put an advertisement in the paper for anybody who could speak English. That is how I started and so I was back in the theatre. We toured all around Switzerland and we played twice in some places like Basel and Zürich, in the north. Then we went to Geneva, Lausanne and all the towns in the south, and Bern of course. We had a wonderful reception everywhere we went: not only were the spectators enjoying their evening, but it was also a way for the Swiss - who were very pro-Allies - to be able to show their enthusiasm for the British and the Americans. They gave us a tremendous reception and their hands swelled with pain because they were clapping so much!

*Did the theatre take over the Intelligence work?*



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Oh, no! It didn't. I was terribly secretive, because the Americans ran Intelligence. I was paid a very small sum and I had to do quite a lot of work for them, which sometimes was rather dangerous. I worked part of the time with the British and the other part with the Americans. I spoke very fluent German and of course that was a tremendous asset especially for Intelligence work, but I was doing theatre in English.

It was a stimulating period. That is when I came in contact with all the theatre people in Zürich, which was a great privilege because there were some great actors and actresses at that time. I went to every production. I managed to see at least three or four first nights of Brecht. I saw the first performances of *Mother Courage*. It was extremely interesting and I was grateful.

Intelligence could also be confusing. For

example we British were told that we should have nothing to do with a person because he was supplying the Germans with arms and then we found out he was also supplying the British. What was one to do? I only met him once with other people at a party and saw many paintings at his house. It was uncanny and monstrous that he should have a large house filled with wonderful pictures, but no human beings at all.

*I was recently in Switzerland and people were speaking about the fact that the Swiss feel as if they have been cheated about their history because of all they are discovering concerning the Jews and their bank accounts...*

I was in Intelligence and I didn't know about this, the Americans didn't know nor the British. So the poor old Swiss obviously didn't know. They would have gone berserk if they had known. There is a little bit of William Tell in the Swiss. You imagine that to know about this suddenly must be awful. To those people to realise that they had been living a lie must be awful. Twice the Germans literally nearly walked into Switzerland and the Swiss were totally determined to resist them. They were geared up to do so, they built bunkers and they had made fortresses in the highest mountains where they could have lived for three years and in a lake they sank stored food and guns. I once asked what would happen with their wives and children, if they would take them along, and they said no. They would have left the towns, they were so anti-German and anti-Hitler. I never had any even remotely unpleasant experience in Switzerland. It was very obvious who they were backing.

A very important spy who was head of a terrifying department in Germany and connected to the German Consulate in Zürich, came over to our side. That was the man to whom I was attached, I was to make

him talk. One of us would write it down, the other would make him drink a lot of whiskey. He liked whiskey. We had two decanters and they looked exactly the same, but in one the content was tea. Maria or I would drink the tea and the other would talk and take notes. The only thing in this that was rather alarming was that, after these sessions, I had to go back to the town. The Germans had insisted that the Swiss had a black-out because they maintained that the Allied bombers could tell when they were in Germany by the lights in Switzerland at the frontier. I was going home after these sessions with this man, in the pitch dark and I got very nervous, because I knew - it was common knowledge - the Germans were in the habit of snatching people off the streets and putting them into their cars. We were only an hour away from the German border. So I thought they could do that to me. I would always try to keep either on the road or off it where I felt a car couldn't snatch me. If I stood absolutely in the centre I felt safest, but it was very unpleasant. This man went to America, he lived there until the end of the war and went back for a visit to Europe. I was working in advertising and I was in Düsseldorf one morning staying in a good hotel there. I came down for breakfast and there was only one other table occupied. He had his back to me and I looked at him: "My God that is Gisevius!" So I walked up to the table, looked at him full in the face and I said, "Wie geht es?" "Elizabeth!" he said and jumped to his feet. I thought he looked somehow reduced, pale, shallow, compared to what he had been.

*How did you do theatre if you had to have all the lights off?*

The street lights had to be off. We didn't have so many lights on in the theatre. You just didn't have lights in the streets or at the windows, or at the windows you put

curtains.

*And people used to go to theatre just as much?*

Oh yes! They did in London too, even during the bombing period. It was amazing. We never had any bombs in Zürich, only in Schaffhausen, but the feeling of a German presence was very much there. Where could you go? A woman from a pension in the Engadin where I once stayed, rang me up and said to me: "Things are pretty bad at the moment, I would like you to know that you are absolutely welcome here and I will hide you for as long as you wish." For her it would have been terribly dangerous. She probably could because the Engadin is remote.

*Thanks to your theatre activity during the war you met Therese Giehse, the famous German actress who worked with Brecht and first played the character of Mother Courage. How was your friendship with her?*

I met Therese in Switzerland during the war. I knew she was German-Jewish. She had lived in Munich and she was a refugee as I was. She was in a company in Zürich, which was practically one hundred percent made up of refugee actors from Germany and Austria. I just took my courage and asked if she would help us out. Therese herself directed the second show of the company I started, as I had to play the leading part. Therese was rather fierce, if I did the wrong thing. I shall never forget when I was doing a performance in Zürich in the Schauspielhaus and she had been performing with the Zürich Theatre in Wintertur and so she had not been present for the performance. She arrived just before the last act. As I came off, when the curtain had gone down and everybody was clapping, she absolutely tore me off a strip. She said, "Is it possible to go slower, is it possible to ruin a

whole performance with that speed?" And she lashed into me and into the other actors.

Therese was originally German-Jewish and she was brought up in Munich. She had been on the stage all her life. She was a wonderful actress. She was an unlikely looking star, she was round and fat, not particularly pretty, and yet she came to be considered as one of the greatest German actresses. She was no diva, but was a wonderful talent and so convincing. She created most of the big parts in Brecht and Dürrenmatt. They were both great friends of hers. She created *Mother Courage*. It was a great privilege to work with her. Therese spoke English very well.

*What were your reactions seeing Mother Courage during the war?*

I thought it was absolutely marvellous. I think I saw it twenty times. I was absolutely entranced by it. I thought the music by Paul Burkhard was so suitable. Unfortunately when they eventually did it in London and on the radio they had new music by Paul Dessau, which was very modern and had no atmosphere. Burkhard's music, which was not very modern, had tremendous atmosphere. He had hit it. Therese was unforgettable in that part, absolutely marvellous, one of the greatest theatrical performances I have seen.

*Did you follow the rehearsals at all?*

No, only the performances.

*Were there changes in the performances, did you notice any changes in Therese?*

No, none at all. I saw it performed in Zürich and Basel, in those two places it was exactly the same. They didn't have any proper set. It was done with curtains and rags and things sticking out. It was very

primitive, which made the atmosphere so terribly strong. And I think it is a great play. *Mother Courage* has no real character, she just wants to keep herself alive and her sons alive. She doesn't really mind if the Catholics or the Protestants come. She is quite shameless. Brecht did that so well, I think it is his best play. When I met him I didn't like him very much. He was dressed in a German workman's suit, but the suit had obviously been made by the most expensive tailor, in the most expensive material and I found this offensive. He was terribly nice and polite to me, but I don't know what it was, I didn't take to him.

*Was Therese in Switzerland during the whole war?*

Yes, where could she go? You were in Switzerland and, even if you had a British passport, you were to count yourself lucky that you were alive. Even after the war when Therese moved back to Germany, she had no intention of giving up her British passport, which she got from marrying a British man.

*And when you worked with Therese how long did you work on the rehearsals?*

I think we worked about a month, in a sort of hall, just like one would in England and we opened in Basel. Her instructions were very helpful, except if you were stupid because then she would shout at you, not rudely, but she didn't take nonsense, she took one as a responsible person. She was a very creative director. Her creativity freshened things up a bit. She did work us like mad and we rehearsed very hard in the mornings. If she had to play in the evenings in the Schauspielhaus, she would rest in the afternoons. Accordingly we would rehearse

every morning or afternoon and it was harder work than I ever did in the West End. Therese as a director could get impatient because she knew how it should be done and she got irritated if we somehow hesitated.

*You kept up your contact with Therese?*

Oh yes. When she died, she left me a lovely thing. I kept on seeing her, she was working in Munich then, she went back. In *Mother Courage* I always found myself crying at certain moments. It was a great privilege to have known her. Politically she was very left wing, absolutely uncompromising. She was a magnificent character. She was quite ruthless, she didn't like bad acting, she didn't like anything amateur in the theatre, it had to be professional, although she wasn't didactic, she didn't lecture. She was serious. What you did you had to do properly. I know that towards the end of her life she was terribly haunted by text angst. In fact I saw her after she had more or less given up working for the theatre in Munich. She was giving recitals of poetry, mainly Brecht, where she would actually have a book and I know it was because she didn't have to have the nightmare of the text angst. I think it was very clever of her to have done that.

She died in such a stupid way. She went into one of the best hospitals in Munich for an operation to her eye, not a very serious one. She was going to stay Thursday and Friday and then would have come out. By that time she was very well known of course. The doctor came and said: "Frau Giehse, why don't you stay in the hospital over the week-end? I know you live alone. We will look after you over the week-end and then you can go home". She said: "Yes, that

sounds like rather a nice idea". She had diabetes and she had to have an injection of insulin, as one did in those days. And the nurse who took over forgot and she didn't get any insulin for forty-eight hours. She went into a coma and died. In a strange way I think it was a good thing, because she would have been alone, she was getting old, she had her text angst, a lot of things against her. I think in a way she was lucky to go without realising; she just went into a coma, and that was it. There are so many good friends from that time and now Maria Becker is the only one left.

ELIZABETH MONTAGU (Britain) was born in 1909. After going to drama school, she worked as an actress in Newcastle, London and Switzerland. Before enrolling in the army during the war she worked as a critic for *19th Century Magazine*. Elizabeth worked as a writer in films with Alexander Korda and then started her own production company for advertising. She married in 1962 and had to stop working four years after. Recently she has been writing her autobiography.