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Introduction

On 6 January 1931, Lilian Baylis, manager of the Old Vic Theatre in London, opened her new theatre, the recently restored Sadler's Wells. A few days later, after a banquet held to celebrate this event, Baylis was involved in a serious car accident. She lay stricken, and badly hurt, but as someone identified her – 'It's Miss Baylis. Miss Baylis of the Old Vic' – Baylis roused herself, despite her injuries, and corrected them, '*And Sadler's Wells.*'¹

This anecdote is one of the most frequently told stories about Lilian Baylis, a maverick and eccentric woman, who left her formidable and distinctive imprint not only on the theatres she actually managed, the Vic and the Wells, but also on her theatres' descendants: the British National Theatre, the Royal Ballet, and the English National Opera. She was an inspiringly successful, if unconventional, manager who ran two financially viable theatres housing a theatre company, a ballet and an opera company, all committed to bringing what was considered the very best of high culture – Shakespeare, Wagner, Mozart, *Giselle* – to working people, yet Baylis is often remembered nowadays primarily by means of comic anecdotes. These often portray her as a stingy caricature, and completely without tact. 'Quite a sweet little Goneril, don't you think?' was her crushing remark on an actress who had just performed that particularly unsweet role.² An unfortunate understudy emerging exhausted from playing a major role was greeted with 'Well, dear, you've had your chance. And you've missed it.'³ Staff asking for a pay rise were told that Baylis would have to ask God, and God's response was always the same: 'Sorry, dear, God says No.'⁴ And amongst underpaid Vic-Wells staff, Baylis's favourite prayer was reputed to be 'Dear

God, send me good actors but send them cheap.’⁵ These anecdotes attest to undoubted truths about Baylis’s management: last-minute, panic-stricken, under-rehearsed substitutions were common at her theatres; she did *not* flatter her performers; she underpaid actors of the calibre of Edith Evans and John Gielgud; and she was confrontationally public about her religious commitment. And yet the cumulative effect of the anecdotes very much suggests a tendency towards containment, as if the most effective way for many to deal with Baylis’s unladylike, unorthodox but completely phenomenal success was to render her a joke.

Baylis herself, however, actively participated in the generation of some anecdotes. Malcolm Baker-Smith, a Vic stage manager who subsequently went on to become a radio producer, relates how once, after he had worked right through the night at the Vic, he caught a taxi home at 5.45 a.m. Baylis’s response was not to thank him for going without sleep but to deplore the extravagance of taking a taxi, and to point out that working men’s trains started running at six o’clock. To his shocked response of ‘Oh really Miss Baylis,’ Baylis laughed and commented, ‘good story to tell’.⁶ And as the Baylis anecdotes circulated over and over again, related with impeccable comic timing by such star performers as Sybil Thorndike, John Gielgud or Laurence Olivier, Baylis’s two theatres acquired, as it were, a great deal of free advertising.

That Baylis may have deliberately encouraged the anecdote industry is suggested by the fact that she learnt the value of free publicity long before she became a theatre manager. Beginning in early childhood as a performer, a musician and dancer, first in London, and then later in South Africa, Baylis learnt the craft of marketing and playing to a very wide range of different and sometimes difficult audiences – London high society, inmates of lunatic asylums, gold and diamond miners in South Africa – and she learnt both to work audiences for all they were worth and to pitch her act very precisely. Evidence that Baylis’s performance of the gruff, badly dressed, gauche but basically warm-hearted manager was not simply spontaneous abounds, although this is the persona that dominates the anecdotes.

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The cultural work performed by the Baylis anecdotes is almost as important as their content, and theatre historian Jacky Bratton has recently argued for a more creative approach to the reading of theatrical anecdotes than is traditional. She suggests worrying less over whether an anecdote is 'true' in the sense that it can be documented, and instead being more attentive to what the anecdote is doing in terms of 'identity-formation' in relation both to individuals and to the groups and communities in which they seek to situate themselves.⁷ Given this, it is instructive that Bratton identifies a tendency for certain theatre managers to be 'constructed by a stream of anecdotes as pillars of the performance community, bearers of a comically old-fashioned but valuable and authenticating set of attitudes and knowledge of the trade'.⁸ Bratton is here discussing anecdotes about the theatre managers Thomas Dibdin and Sarah Baker, but many of the anecdotes surrounding Baylis operate in similar territory. And while historian Paula Backscheider maintains that

[t]here must be reasons that an anecdote survives, is repeated, and regardless of how its veracity is questioned continues to be a compelling portrait of a person[,]⁹

it is nevertheless important to note that some Baylis anecdotes, when read in terms of the theatrical hegemony of her time, can result in a construction of her success as *so* eccentric, *so* isolated and *so* unrepeatably that the implication is that no woman would ever achieve, or perhaps even want to achieve, similar success.

The anecdotes help keep Baylis's achievements in circulation, but it is not surprising that the Baylis who can be excavated from her own repeated attempts at autobiography and memoirs is quite different. Indeed, in her notes and unpublished autobiographical fragments she seems consciously to be trying to provide an alternative to the well-known public persona. Although Baylis never got round to completing her autobiography and telling her own version of her life story, she did want her biography written; indeed she expected that it would be written, because her chauffeuse and personal assistant Annette Prevost promised to write it.¹⁰ After

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Baylis's death, Cicely Hamilton, a much-published writer who had previously collaborated with Baylis on a book project, offered to write a biography of her, but the Vic governors informed her that Prevost was already at work.¹¹ Although Prevost did make occasional attempts to assemble material, to get letters transcribed and to make notes on the documentation she had access to, she never came anywhere near completing a biography.¹² What she did do was to cherish Baylis's personal archive, preserving personal notes, family letters and autobiographical sketches alongside more unexpected items such as shopping lists, veterinary bills, and Baylis's spectacles.¹³

The Baylis archive is very much the foundation of this biography, which I have tried to keep grounded in Baylis's own, and her family's, writings. I contend that Baylis has been rather ill served by her biographers so far, because none of them have taken serious account of her own writing. As a result, a very particular view of Baylis has been perpetuated: the Baylis who is familiar from the anecdotes, but not the Baylis she herself sought to present in her repeated attempts at autobiography. The only previous full-length biography of Baylis, written by Richard Findlater in 1975, is particularly problematic in this respect. Findlater records that Annette Prevost, who was then in possession of the Baylis archive, gave him invaluable assistance in his research, yet astonishingly laments the real 'dearth of autobiographical material' when in fact the archive is full of such writing.¹⁴ It has to be assumed either that Findlater did not have full access to the archive or that he chose not to explore it fully.

An additional problem with Findlater's view of Baylis is that, although he was able to interview many people who had known her well, none of his interviewees met Baylis until she was already in her forties. Annette Prevost, whom Findlater relies on very heavily, only met Baylis in August 1932, five years before her death, when she was in ill health and slowing down.¹⁵ Consequently it is not surprising that the older Baylis and the public persona dominate Findlater's biography, providing a stark contrast with Baylis's own autobiographical writings, in which she stresses her early life as if trying to

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suggest which experiences in her youth made her the woman she later became. Most critical of all, however, is the fact that none of the witnesses Findlater was able to interview had ever encountered the woman Baylis herself identified as the most inspirational and important influence in her life, Emma Cons, nor do they seem to have had much real understanding of the full extent of Cons's remarkable achievements (especially her role in the fight for women's suffrage).

This biography diverges in many places from Findlater's vision of Baylis. It takes Baylis seriously as a prolific (and published) writer, and also as a trained performer who knew how to work audiences and who used that knowledge very skilfully in the service of her theatres. It stresses Baylis the high-powered professional woman who enjoyed networking with other successful career women; Baylis the international traveller; Baylis the strategist who could (mostly) get what she wanted even when arguing about finances with economist John Maynard Keynes. This biography also challenges previous assumptions about Baylis's relationship with her mother, Liebe, who has hitherto been scandalously misrepresented; it highlights Baylis's and her family's commitment to the women's suffrage movement; it stresses the close and supportive relationships Baylis had with women friends such as Louie Davey and Cicely Hamilton; and it acknowledges Baylis's friendships with lesbian women.¹⁶

While I have attempted always to emphasise the influences that Baylis herself identified as important to her, and to acknowledge how significant Baylis thought her pre-Vic years were in making her the manager she eventually became, some caution is of course needed. Several of Baylis's autobiographical notes were made late in life, and she sometimes embroidered, elaborated, fantasised and forgot. When the significance of Baylis's early performance training, especially in improvisation, is taken fully into account, her attempts at autobiography offer a particularly rich negotiation of what theatre historian Thomas Postlewait identifies as the 'too neat' traditional dualisms that often operate around the autobiographies of professional performers: 'face and mask, presence and absence, private and public personality, life and

art.¹⁷ However, I have tried to respect Baylis's own views on what she thought was worth recording of her life and, bearing in mind the old tenet that the personal is political, to treat Baylis's records of her private life, her family life, her spiritual life and her adventurous globe-trotting holidays as important in enabling her to achieve the public and well-documented theatrical triumphs of her later years.

Nearly seventy years after Baylis's death, it is important not to forget the extent of those unequalled triumphs. Under Baylis the Vic-Wells became an institution where dancers such as Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, actors such as Edith Evans, Hollywood names such as Charles Laughton and singers such as Joan Cross would willingly work for dreadful wages. Stars in the making – Alec Guinness, Michael Redgrave, Alastair Sim, James Mason, Margot Fonteyn, Robert Helpmann – furthered their careers at Baylis's theatres. And under Baylis, the Vic-Wells also became a theatre which really inspired people; indeed it is difficult to find many significant British theatre practitioners in the mid to late twentieth century who were not influenced in some way by work done at Baylis's Vic. So, for example, in Britain during the 1950s, the Stratford Memorial Theatre – which later became home to the Royal Shakespeare Company – was dominated, and reformed, by the work of people like Anthony Quayle, Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, who had acted at the Vic-Wells earlier in their careers. Meanwhile at the other Stratford, in East London, Joan Littlewood ran her Theatre Workshop fuelled at least partly by memories of the excitement generated by productions she had seen at the Vic in her teens: after Gielgud's *Hamlet* in 1930, the sixteen-year-old Littlewood 'didn't miss a production down the Waterloo Road.'¹⁸ She wrote offering her services to the theatre (her mother intercepted the reply), and Littlewood could still describe enthusiastically, even sixty years after the event, the extravagant delights of Ernest Milton's performances in Shakespeare at the Vic.¹⁹ And while Littlewood's work was crucial in the development of fringe theatre in Britain, some have seen Baylis's Vic, with its reckless, alternative, non-commercial and desperately poverty-stricken work, as a precursor to the Fringe.²⁰