

Silvia

I've lived in Brighton since I was married over 41 years ago. I'm 67 and my name's Silvia Ockendon.

(What's your earliest experience of theatre going in the Brighton area?)

Well I was born in Worthing which is only about 10 miles away, but yes it was generally pantomime. The circus came to town complete with the elephants coming from the station holding onto each other's tails so, yes. It was great, it was after the war. Theatre was not that brilliant in Worthing or Brighton but coming to Brighton was mainly for Ice shows and pantomimes and things like that. Obviously with my parents.

(Is that how your interest in theatre started?)

Yeah, we also had drama lessons in school which weren't that exciting but yes, it told us what drama was and there were films especially. we used to go to the cinema with my father and yeah, all of that sort of thing.

(What was your favourite production while growing up?)

'Peter and the Wolf' yes, it was specially organised for children so yes, there was music and that sort of thing.

(do you think theatre has changed much in Brighton?)

No not really. It's always been good, especially the Theatre Royal. It's catered for all tastes. In the 80's, my husband, for his work, we came on the sports and social club. We used to get tickets for first night. So we came for three or four years, every week. And we got super critical but we saw all genres, from D'Oyly Carte to ballet, opera.

(Any ones that stuck out? favourites?)

We saw Peter O'Toole in 'Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell'. It was the first stage production of that play. It was hilarious because Jeffry Bernard was in the audience and he was drunk. And he was sitting there, shouting abuse, at Peter O'Toole and it collapsed into hysterics. It was just lovely. But again, this theatre is very easy for that. People like Dora Brian and Lawrence Olivier, we used to come in and get a drink and there were all sort of actors in the audience 'cause they enjoyed it as well. They wanted to see it.

(So was it more common for the actors to join you at the bars those days?)

Because we always came there were people, not the actors who were in the plays, but other actors, because they lived in Brighton came to see the play. So yes, it was all inclusive. Everyone was enjoying each other's company and the whole thing was about theatre which was excellent.

(You must've met some very interesting people in your theatre days?)

Just people that lived locally as much as anything. But yeas, television stars, we recognised them and that sort of thing. But we would give them their space, they don't want to have people chasing after them and spoiling their evenings.

(So ever since you moved to Brighton have you always been involved in Brighton theatre?)

Yeah now we've retired it's a lot easier as well. So we come, Mainly to matinees 'cause it's a lot easier and a bit cheaper, but we belong to a theatre club, we go to London to see musicals and things like that.

(What sort of things do you do with your theatre club?)

The next one we're going to see is 'Miss Saigon' and I've booked tickets today for 'Gypsy' It's quite an eclectic mix. Whatever is decided by the general consensus. Then they book enough tickets. Yeah, they book tickets, pay in advance, but we get a coach up, have a day in London, something to eat, make a day of it. Yeah very nice.

(have you ever had an unusual experience in the Theatre?)

Dora Brian and Sue Pollard getting drunk and talking all the way through the second half! No, not really. Always enjoyable, but people are quite well behaved. I mean, I had a lady throw up in front of me! It happens. She'd obviously had too much to drink at lunch time. And her husband was very embarrassed.

(have you ever seen anything risque at the theatre?)

Well 'Hair' there's sort of full frontal nudity and things like that but you know you've got to be open minded and you just accept it's there, it's for people to see. I mean, the language in 'History Boys' was quite risque wasn't it but I think it's educational for all sorts of people, and there were a lot of children, teenagers in the audience so it's a good way for them to see that it's alright in some instances to use bad language like that. Not necessarily in everyday life.

(So who do you go to the theatre with normally inside your theatre group?)

Well The retired staff group there's about a hundred people but it's down to a core of about 50. Tends to be the same group of people so we know each other, we go for meals together, we also go away on holidays and that sort of thing. But in Brighton itself on a weekly basis I probably just come with my husband, spur of the moment. At the beginning of the year we get the programme for the year. Maybe book two or three events over the year, but one off chance that we've got some spare time then if we can get tickets we'll come and see something else.

(What performance do you think has had the biggest impact on you?)

I loved 'Evita' that was good, that was, the music was good, the singing was good. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And that was quite a long time and it was the same time as it was brought out in the west end so we were very lucky that we got it the same time as that.

(Why do you think it had the biggest impact?)

There's a story to tell. And singing and acting was excellent, it was one of those things. Yes, from that I went on to see some of the best shows in London, 'Les Miserables' and things like that. Love anything like that. I mean we've seen light-hearted ones and sometimes that's all you need, you just want to be entertained, go and see 'Shrek the Musical' or something like that. It's there for everybody which is excellent. I mean there used to be more theatres in Brighton. We used to have the Hippodrome and the sort of ballroom at the end of the west pier - used to do summer shows, variety and that sort of thing. So any night of the week there was something to see in Brighton. In the summer you'd come for a walk in Brighton, see if there were tickets and go and see the summer show. It was good. The Hippodrome was great in the 60's, you had the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, big pop concerts and things like that. And Brighton in the 60's was fantastic. Had the Mods and Rockers and 'Quadrophenia', that sort of thing. I thoroughly enjoyed growing up in Brighton.

(Do you think theatre had a big impact on your childhood?)

I didn't see a lot when I was younger. But yes it was a treat, my parents thought it was important that we were introduced to theatre. Not until I was a teenager, maybe my early 20's. Again, pop culture probably took over. Yes, it wasn't 'til later, maybe when i was married, that we started taking life a bit more seriously.

(What was one of the earliest you really took seriously?)

There were things like 'Pigmalion' which were done at schools, 'My Fair Lady' and things, but I think I liked musicals. We used to go to amateur dramatics in Worthing. Local amateur dramatics which were all great, so they introduced us to a much wider selection of stuff. And 'Fiddler on the Roof' things like that I liked.

(Were there any particular sets or costumes that you liked and really stood out?)

Mainly at the Ice Show, it was after the war and there wasn't much colour. And the all of a sudden you went to somewhere that was bright and had bright coloured costumes, spot lights, glitter all those things that little girls love. That's what I really enjoyed.

(Wheres the best place in the theatre to get the best view?)

Definitely the stalls. There's one thing called 'Slava's Snow Show' which was three or four years ago, and it was a mime company. That was different. During the interval, clown type characters came walking across the seats and started interacting with the audience. Huge blow up balloons - they weren't as light as balloons they were more, just great big balls and people started playing and hitting them all over the place and at the end there was this massive snow storm. and these great big lights came on. And from the ceiling dropped all of this snow, pieces of paper and things. and in the end we were covered and the whole floor was covered in about three inches of this snow. and that was incredible and so unexpected but that's one of the nice things about theatre. You just want to be entertained and a bit taken aback really. I must admit I like that.

(Do you think the attitude towards going to the theatre has changed?)

Yes. People eating all the time, and drinking. It's very off putting for everybody else. And at one time there was theatre culture, you didn't make a noise, you were polite to people and now people don't take that much notice. Some of them do arrive late and things like that so that spoils it a bit. But yes, noisy sweets and eating!