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A Busy Day in the West End

IAN KELLY

'HUZZA HUZZA' Charles Burney writes to his sister Fanny in a letter of October 1799; Thomas Harris, manager of Covent Garden was delighted with her new comedy, *Love and Fashion*. 'Huzza huzza—Mr Harris admires it—and will bring it into use in the month of March!....Mr Harris is surprised that you never turned your thoughts to this kind of writing before as you appear to have a real genius for it—there now!'

Charles' excitement at the imminent production of a West End Burney opus I feel I know well—and his disappointment, and one presumes hers, when repeatedly events conspired to prevent her work reaching the stage in her lifetime—her comedies at any rate; 'I have' Fanny writes at about the same time 'I have all my life been urged to, and all my life intended, writing a Comedy'

It's lovely to be here, and quite strange, and quite ghosted in a number of ways. I have felt visiting The Society before to report on the long progress towards the West End of *A Busy Day*, that I was amongst friends. I remember, back in 1993, when I first saw a copy of *A Busy Day*, sent to where I was staying in Edinburgh, some wag looked over my shoulder and said 'Fanny who?—never heard of her—at least the author's name makes you laugh even if the title doesn't'; and we all I suppose have our different answers to 'who is Fanny—or indeed Frances—Burney?' and why is she important. Amongst friends, certainly, and yet, I know I am different; because I am that rare thing—perhaps there are a number of us now who have come to know Fanny Burney first as a dramatist and then later as a novelist and diarist. And

as any reader brings their own experience of the world to the novels, their characters and situations, and learns to know—or think they know, Fanny Burney, translated by our own experience of a very different world, I know her as a fellow theatre-practitioner if you will, or at least I like to think of her that way. And if I've come to know a little of how she thought for and wrote for the stage, she in turn—her *Busy Day* — has taken me on an unexpected journey which I am still trying to understand. So thank you also for the opportunity this is giving me to try to give some sort of overview.

Today, I thought I would try to answer some questions, for myself as well

- How I became involved in *A Busy Day*
- How it ended up in the West End last year
- What it's like to put together a West End show—a period' 14 hander; the costs, design decisions and so on
- Why Burney still seems to suffer ill-luck in the theatre—our particular tragi-comic obstacle race
- Why the play might be considered important—and what the critics—God bless their picky hearts—thought of it
- Why it closed in the West End, unnecessarily, when it did
- Its future life—and the further prospects post-*Busy Day* for Fanny Burney, dramatist
- I have some illustrations—sadly not many of the lavish designs—the set and costumes and the production photos are all in storage still pending future use. But on top of acting, co-producing and generally being meddlesome, I was asked to put together the programme, which was a little comic interlude in itself.

To start, an overview article the Sunday Times asked me to write about this time last year, which only made it into a few editions as the arts coverage was rightly overtaken by the death of John Gielgud. You will get a feel, from this, of my bad habit of eluding detail in the hope of making a good sales-point; and I hope you will forgive this here and this afternoon; it was all meant well. If I tell you that I found out the Lyric Theatre had sold a block booking to an American college group

convinced they were seeing a Restoration romp by a Cavalier called Frank Burney, you'll realise that strict accuracy is an early casualty at the box office.

The story starts over five years ago, in my sordid Edinburgh Festival digs: an unpromising backdrop for reading Fanny Burney's stylish and hilarious day-in-the-life-of-London comedy *A Busy Day*. Or rather, my part of the story starts then. Fanny has had to wait a lot longer for her West End debut; exactly 200 years. The woman now most famous for being chased around Kew gardens by the mad King George, or for her unanaesthetised mastectomy at the hands of Napoleon's surgeons (both jaw-dropping sequences in her extraordinary journals) and as the first female celebrity-novelist ('The Mother of English fiction' according to Virginia Woolf) all her life wanted to be a playwright. Sheridan commissioned her.....but it is a rocky road in to the West End. Her father got in her way, so did Napoleon and so did two centuries of theatrical obscurity....only now is she being allowed the voice she deserved.

In 1800, finally free of her father's anti-theatre prejudices and of Queen Charlotte, for whom she had reluctantly become lady-in-waiting, Fanny set about writing *A Busy Day*. Her 'comic masterpiece' was never performed in her lifetime. Set in the gaming houses, parks and ballrooms of Regency London, it gives a uniquely comic twist on themes familiar to anyone who has seen or read a Jane Austen, though it plays more like Oscar Wilde. Fanny's wit is fresh, modern, urbane, and undeniably 'London'; unlike Austen, she was brought up with a wide social circle that included the London theatrical-literary set. Garrick would lend the young Fanny his box at Drury Lane, Dr Johnson encouraged her stage writing, and when Sheridan came over to her in the lobby of Drury Lane to beg her to write him a comedy, she was practising her fan moves with Joshua Reynolds. Fanny was overwhelmed with excitement at the prospect; 'I actually shook from head to foot! I felt myself already in Drury Lane, amidst the hub bub of a First Night!'

Circumstances—and men—conspired cruelly against her theatre. She was compelled to rejoin her French husband, General D'Arblay in France at the start of the new century, taking with her the manuscript of *A Busy Day*. Napoleon rather scuppered her West End prospects at this stage by renewing hostilities with England, and Fanny

was 'exiled' for more than a decade. One academic believes the finely honed comic dialogue of *A Busy Day* stems from her practice of dictating the scenes over and over to her husband, allowing her a rare contact with the English language during her extended trip abroad. Yet by the time she returned, her contacts in the West End were gone, and her own fame was waning. She never saw her play put on. *A Busy Day* was in her papers when she died in 1840 and ended up in America, in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. It was here that Joyce Hemlow, her first biographer, found it in the 1950's, describing it as 'the play that long ago Dr Johnson and Sheridan had known Fanny Burney could write', and inspiring her most recent biographer Kate Chisholm to dub her 'The Female Sheridan'.

As another century turns over the City of London 'this seat of Integrity!' Fanny Burney is having something of a revival. Her diaries and the novels, *Evelina*, *Cecilia*, *Camilla* and *The Wanderer* have in truth never been out of print, yet academically she is more studied in America than here, and certainly it is an unusual household where hers is a Name. Yet this summer sees the publication of Claire Harman's important new biography following hot on Kate Chisholm's excellent *Fanny Burney—Her Life*. BBC Radio 4, after the enormous success of the serialisation of Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, is dramatising Fanny's journals, to be broadcast through July and August. And the Burney Society has finally won the agreement of Westminster Abbey to erect a plaque in Poets' Corner, possibly to read 'Novelist-Diarist-Playwright'

Only this last—playwright—would have surprised her fellow residents on the walls of Poets Corner; Jane Austen, whose admiration led to her quoting Fanny Burney in her titles *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and Byron who rushed out to order her novels hot off the press. Only the theatrical community at the time had immediately recognised one of their own from those novels, whose stage types and even-handed comedy in turn inspired a whole style of classic British character-based situation comedy—think Elizabeth Bennett and her awful, yet sympathetically drawn, mother. For good reason was Fanny's comic style once described as 18th century Joyce Grenfell.

It took a while longer for the theatrical community to rediscover her potential. The play was finally published in the late 1980's, as a PhD project of American academic Tara Goshall-Wallace. It received its first fringe productions with Bristol's inspired Show of Strength theatre company, above a pub in Bedminster and then at the Kings Head pub theatre in Islington.

And that's where I come in. Or more specifically, that's where intrepid West End producer Julius Green comes in, who luckily saw and fell and love with it in Bristol and Islington, and asked me to reprise my performance as Frank for the West End. Of such things are actors' dreams—and night sweats—made.

The prospect of a commercial producer taking on a 14 hand period comedy from an 'unknown' writer might be considered brave. (And this at a time when the only West End truism seems to be that nudity and Hollywood sell; there is some Hollywood, but disappointingly little nudity in *A Busy Day*, of which more later) Yet Julius saw something in the play that we had barely recognised in Bristol or Islington, despite sell-outs and rave reviews; its accessibility, modernity and broad commercial appeal. Fanny wrote when the theatre was perhaps at its most democratic since Shakespeare's time, but when London was first experiencing what it is to be vast, modern, anonymous city. So her characters, though obsessed with class, money and sex, and with the hypocrisies and vanities of metropolitan life, are all equally ridiculed and equally loved. Though our first audiences in Bristol and Islington may have booked imagining an evening of theatrical archaeology, a 'museum piece', what they got often shocked them; City fat-cats, East End girls, class-war, snobs spouting Wildean epigrams; a comic take on the West End of London that is immediately recognisable whilst gloriously more stylish. Sex and The City but in 1800; great parts for witty actresses, and frankly, better frocks.

But would Fanny Burney approve?

She is missing the hubbub of our first night (June 19th, 2000- two centuries later than planned) but may yet grace the First Night Party she dreamed of, which takes place in the crypt of St. Martin's in the Fields where her father was organist and her sister married illadvisedly. Indeed her ghost may already have cast a critical eye over the costumes and lavish designs at the 1766 Bristol Old Vic where this production opened, a theatre Fanny seems likely to have known from her visits to

Hotwells spa with her father. And surely she must have been laughing, knowing better than most the tricky waters to be piloted to get into the West End even with Sheridan behind you, seeing Julius Green locked outside the Bristol Old Vic stage door trying to get in to a party to announce our West End deal before the midnight deadline on our contractual transfer options.

Fanny Burney knew the rival companies at Drury Lane and Covent Garden so well she had even pencilled in ideal casting for *A Busy Day* by her list of characters; the greatest comic actors of their day to play the roles now given suitable glamour and star-quality by the brilliant Stephanie Beacham, Sara Crowe, John McCallum and Ben Moor. They say the ghosts of Sarah Siddons and Mrs Macready haunt The Bristol Old Vic—actresses one can't help thinking would approve enormously of allowing a female playwright her voice and launching a play with seven important comic roles for women—unusual for any period. There were nights looking out, hearing laughter rock an ancient theatre for lines and situations penned with only a French secretary as audience, when I badly wanted to believe Fanny had joined the party in the Siddon's Box. More likely of course, West End girl that she was (the Central Reference Library now squats over her house south of Leicester Square) she will be there at the Lyric instead, discovering that, 200 years on, London hasn't changed that much and British humour has barely changed at all.

So that was the News Review sales pitch, diverging from the strictest historical accuracy in ways which will appal the historians amongst you.

In fact, *A Busy Day* came quite near to being produced at other theatres in the years between 1993/94 the Alan Coveney productions in Bristol and the Kings Head and the eventual West End opening in 2000-fiddled as a 200th anniversary, when in fact the play was probably written in 1801/02.

Firstly, Alan's production. I know he came to talk some years ago, so I shan't go over old territory I hope. Alan had managed to win a £16000 grant from London Weekend Television's Plays on Stage fund to put on *A Busy Day* in November 1993. It was his brainchild, I was merely an actor. But I was aware, as was the cast, that we had quite a find, were having a wonderful time, and wanted to bring it to London.

Alan original Bristol production was staged in the round., with audience sitting on benches and chairs almost as if in an 18th century drawing room. It worked remarkably well, even for the 'asides' which require immediate contact with an audience, but usually work as a deliberate and brief breaking of the 'fourth wall' of a proscenium production. Some problems within the play began to surface; the meandering length of the third act, set in Hyde Park, which feels even longer to a modern audience waiting for their one interval (Fanny was presumably planning several) More importantly, the production highlighted problems in the final act; a problem Fanny shares with all comic writers; making the 'pay-off' (in this case Miss Percival's revenge at her Piccadilly ballroom) and thus keeping the energy going to the end of the play. Act 3 and Act 5 were revised by Alan Coveney and to some extent in rehearsal. In any event, these were quibbles; the play was a huge success; critically, and for Show of Strength, commercially.

There was also a special sense of pride and ownership amongst the actors, who were not paid, though took an eventual split of the profits, and I especially became obsessed with the potential of taking the play to London.

This prospect was only improved by some superb reviews, of the play as much as the production:

'A sure fire copper bottomed smash hit' said the Bristol Evening Chronicle,

'One of the funniest plays in the English language' wrote the FT stringer; and a recurrent and useful theme from several: *'Fanny's lost masterpiece'* is found. The Independent wrote:

'If ever £16000 was well spent it is on this sparkling production of a previously unperformed 18th century comic masterpiece that deserves to immediately decorate the repertoire of our Royal National Theatre, let alone be premiered in an upstairs room in front of 120 devotees at a pub in the Bristol suburb of Bedminster'

Well the National did not take much notice—that time, but various other producers did. I invited Julius Green down, who was the working for the West End producer Bill Kenwright. I also invited a

friend who was then working at London's Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, which is, in shape, a Georgian theatre. It was a very exciting time; feeling that Alan's 'discovery' could be so popular—and look so very commercial. We were all aware as actors that any further production might not use us, and badly wanted to hang on to the happy experience as a company. The Tricycle offered us an immediate transfer to the London fringe, but Show of Strength vetoed the idea

The first London production—with nearly all the original cast, took place instead the following summer—in a heatwave! For those of you who suffered the Kings Head theatre, which is uncomfortable at the best of times and ghastly in heat, I can only thank you for coming, for laughing, and tell you it was a whole lot worse in wigs and stockings. The point, from the plays perspective, was made. The Kings Head, as London's first and premiere pub theatre, does not suit all plays and certainly did not suit *A Busy Day* (the stage is a shelf about 20 feet by 6 feet deep, which resembled a Georgian Tube carriage with all 13 characters on stage).Yet the Kings Head gets national press attention and is the necessary next stage for many new or 'rediscovered' plays en route to proper recognition or reclamation.

To wit; every national newspaper, and even the International Herald Tribune sent critics, and again, on the whole, the reaction was very favourable indeed—about the play.

For the first time however some reviews were not so good—of the play as well as the production.

But the good included a Daily Mail, Jack Tinker headline 'Lost Comic Masterpiece'—which I think headed all correspondence after that! 'How such a splendid play could have escaped an audience until now is as much a mystery as it is a crime', he went on. It was likened to Jane Austen, to Vanbrugh and Sheridan—and by the jauntier press to Ray Cooney, Keeping Up Appearances, and so on. All of which helped box office, but also helped the play's future. Some adored it—

The problems of the play were more conspicuous at the Kings Head—or perhaps the London critics are more discerning

John Gross in the Sunday Telegraph: *The characters are mostly familiar types, and the intrigues and confusions that keep the plot turning are standard fare. But Fanny Burney manages to infuse her*

material with spontaneous humour (and good humour) and she brings to it her own freshness of spirit

Again the thought went round the reviews that the play deserved a fuller production: The FT: *it would be good to see a really polished production, by the RSC say, that imposed discipline on this panorama of late Georgian heiresses, fortune seekers, snobs, beaux and arrivistes.*

Irving Wardle, one of the most respected of the broadsheet critics at the time later wrote this:

When I saw the Kings Head production of A Busy Day three years ago, it seemed to me much more than an interesting curiosity. It didn't need special attention as a piece from a theatrically blank period or as an addition to the meagre repertory of plays by women. It was worth reviving, and worth more than a fringe revival, because it was a good play. I was expecting the work of a literary lady, and was quite unprepared for Fanny Burney's robust stage craft and comic sense that went far beyond witty dialogue.

What (among other things) Burney's got is the ability to turn a harsh form of comedy into something humane and reasonable without any loss of fun. She does this partly by creating brand new comic types which are manifestly drawn from life, and then fired by a kind of comic energy that's usually reserved for trusty stereotypes—jealous husbands, domineering parents etc. She can disdain these clichés, because she's in the business of creating a commedia from everyday life.

Eighteenth century comedy is often described in terms of dance; but the comparison really does hold good in this case. And not just a dance around a maypole (though I suppose the lovers do from the centre around which the others revolve). If it is a dance it's richer and more complicated than that; as it takes in different social groups, and presents a zone where the social boundaries are blurred, status gets reversed and people are no longer sure where they are in the world. Burney clearly knows this territory intimately, and seizes on it as a wonderful comic resource for her sharp eyes and sense of the absurd. It came over hilariously. I would love to see how much more would emerge from a production with the time and budget to explore the social background and the full fantasies and pretensions of these characters.

The piece is a discovery that ranks with London Assurance and The Rover, and anyone who backs it will be doing themselves a good turn.

And that, after we closed in the summer of 1994, became my mission. To put on the production the play deserved, and to conclude a journey begun over a pub in Bristol.

Alan and I were and remain on good terms, and I never intended to run off with his baby; but his interests were not metropolitan, and the play would need to be picked up by a 'name' director to happen, unless a star actor fell in love with the idea of playing one of the parts. And so over the years I would badger directors I was working with about it, or remind those who had seen it of its virtues, all the time aware that it might well get taken up in such a way that I could no longer be involved. I had to be realistic about this; but it always seemed to me the play deserved a full production irrespective of whether I got to play Frank again or not. The problems that producers and directors returned to were commercial in scope. There are eight 'leads', no real 'star role', no character who alone drives the plot. Such plays are usually the province of subsidised companies, the RSC or RNT, and are difficult to get off the ground without 'names' attached even then.

The harridan Lady Wilhemina, a sort of Ur-Lady-Bracknell seemed possible bait for star actresses of a certain age; but the role is not large. Miss Percival is an unusual blend of female foppery and vindictiveness; she also doesn't come on until Act 2. More to the point, producers were keen to point out, *A Busy Day* requires a cast of 14 or so, even with some 'doubling' of roles—and in expensive period costume...

In its favour however, Julius Green amongst others had fallen in love with it. He showed to Bill Kenwright, who in turn showed it to Sir Peter Hall—all men interested in a 'find' and in a 'new' writer demanding zero royalties! I kept sending out the press cuttings and badgering the RSC. Then in 1995 I had a call from Derek Jacobi who was then artistic director at Chichester and wanted to read it having heard about it from a mutual friend. I rushed to my agent to photocopy the script and cuttings and sent it off. Sir Derek rightly pointed out there wasn't really a role for him. Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire

Playhouse was said to be seeking plays by women but apparently decided Fanny Burney was too little known

In 1996 I heard the RSC was considering a sort of Regency Theatre season for The Swan theatre. It's a marvellous idea but is yet to see the light of footlights.

1997: Chichester again considered the play, but plumped instead for an adaptation of Mansfield Park

Then in 1998 Julius left Kenwright's to set upon his own. Kenwright—a name that recurs in our story, reluctantly let him take *Busy Day* with him, only the Old Vic and Sir Peter Hall had seemed a possibility and the Kenwright/Hall season there hadn't worked, ironically, it was said, through lack of comedy. Julius set up on his own. Or rather he set up in partnership with theatre angel Ian Lenagan, a businessman with concerns in computers and hotels groups, who also had happily invested in theatre all his adult life. With some success. Julius had suggested a raft of West End projects as diverse as the lesbian rock show *Saucy Jack and Space Vixens*, which ran at the Queens and is now the resident show in the London nightclub...and *A Busy Day*—amongst others.

Julius called me on April 17th 1998—I remember the date because I got married the next day, and he said, more or less, 'we're on'. It only took a co-producing, building theatre, and *A Busy Day* might have it's day; in principle Green and Lenagan were determined to produce it. It was the best wedding present I had. I think I came and spread the news with you, a little prematurely, that year. Just as in Fanny's day, things did not go smoothly.

One way into London is to tour first. For most of the last 15 years, it has been easier to make money on tour than in the West End; the provincial theatres tend to co-produce or buy-in rather than rent their space, and actors along with everyone else are on much smaller wages. Many a West End hit has only recouped financially on tour after its West End run—or has only come in to Town with the momentum and cash generated by a provincial tour.

In this scenario, Green and Lenagan hoped to tour for 10 weeks or more from a producing theatre such as, ideally, Bath Theatre Royal, and then bring the show into town.

Bath agreed, we applied for the touring grant from Barclays Stage Awards (a funding body for ambitious and unusual provincial touring) and Salisbury Playhouse came on board to actually build the sets and costumes—which Bath has not done in a generation.

All this was predicated on star casting as you can't book a tour without name. But names don't like to book themselves too early in case a better offer comes in; a straight West End or National Theatre job; better still, for the bank manager, a telly or a film.

Nevertheless, Miriam Margolyes, who had seen the original production, offered to sign up to play Mrs Watts, and Donald Sinden to play Sir Marmaduke. Neither one could be completely committed, and rightly so,—it was a favour, a big favour at that—'use of name'; Fanny had written for a company, not for stars, and commercially this has remained a problem.

Later on a casting director, Sam Jones began to work on the project and put it succinctly; when she said 'you could cast this in a few hours for the National or the RSC—where people want to be in a company; for the commercial West End, stars want lead parts in poor plays above good parts in good plays that aren't leads' We had no leads!

The 1998/99 tour fell through. The names wouldn't commit in time, Barclays and Bath got cold feet. Yet meanwhile, the artistic director of Salisbury Playhouse, Jonathan Church had read the play, decided Salisbury would only co-produce if he directed it, and when it fell through, took it independently to the Bristol Old Vic.

Jonathan's greatest triumph at Salisbury had been a production of Aphra Behn's *The Rover*. This play was greatly reworked by John Barton at the RSC for a 1989 production; the sort of thing that proves and disproves the worth of rediscovered plays in that it works, but largely by not trusting the original (Barton interpolates an earlier Behn play and even updates dialogue). This is the sort of liberty Alan had never taken with *A Busy Day*...but increasingly there was pressure to change the script; perhaps not enough early enough. Jonathan saw similar potential in *A Busy Day*, and his *Rover* success helped support his desire to direct it.

Then the call came in November 1999 that *A Busy Day* would fit a slot at the Bristol Old Vic for the following April, with Jonathan

Church directing, and with an eye on transferring direct to the West End. I could barely believe it after all the struggle!

The Bristol Old Vic was a theatre known to Fanny Burney, the oldest theatre in continuous use in Britain. It employs some of the most prestigious theatre technicians in the country, including a brilliant scenic artist (who later painted a vast blow up of Canalettos' view of the Thames) and the last theatre tailor-costume-cutter employed outside London. There was now a budget—many tens of thousands of pounds, to mount the production for Bristol and Julius offered £10,000 irredeemable 'top-up' to the Bristol Old Vic for the show such that it could be cast and built to a 'West End' standard irrespective of whether it came in.

With a show definitely happening, agents and actors began to be contacted with definite offers. 100 scripts went out for the 10 main parts. Some turned us down for good reason and clearly with regret; Pat Routledge, Penelope Keith, Prunella Scales, all expressed enthusiasm to play Lady Wil but were busy. Screen names flirted with the idea of trying period comedy as Miss Percival, but maybe luckily got films instead; Helena Bonham Carter, Emily Watson, Jennifer Ehle...and at one stage it looked as though the piece might be strangely weighted with Dawn French suggested as the flighty but deadly aspiring-femme fatale Miss Percival.

In the end, as you may know, that part—the nearest to a lead went to the name on the top of the wish list as an actress and comedienne, and luckily a star in her own right Sara Crowe, Olivier Award winner for stealing *Private Lives* from Joan Collins.

About January of last year, (2000) the Theatre Royal Haymarket in the West End put a stake in the show, expressing a strong interest and offering money. The Haymarket is the perfect West End theatre for period comedy; its stage is large, but the pit not big enough for musicals, it commands an affection if slightly conservative audience. It is the oldest West End house. It seemed perfect.

However, it is the only remaining West End house with a built-in stage rake. Ruari Murchison's designs were immediately changed to accommodate this, and a temporary rake improvised for the Bristol run. The Haymarket is a big theatre, and is happiest with a number of 'names' above the title. They said they wanted five.

The word went out around the West End that *A Busy Day* could be the next *Ideal Husband*; a long running commercial hit with a period comedy, heavy with star names and beautiful clothes. But the weeks passed by and it seemed the company could not be put together that would satisfy the Haymarket. For quite a while it felt as though the whole project was about satisfying the Haymarket and would flounder out of town for want of (in many cases inappropriate) 'names'...

About this time I entered into something of a minor conflict with the director—and the first inkling of what might be about to come. In retrospect, I see that I was too close to the project, had thought about it for too long without the luxury of being able to plan to make it happen. The whole juggernaut had slipped into gear without anyone addressing the problems I felt we had discovered in the past. I knew the critics would be far more critical this time round—and rightly—the play needed work.

Based on the comic scenes in *Evelina* (I had subsequently become a fan of the novels) and having recently seen *The Critic*, I argued that Act 5 should be relocated to The Opera. Miss Percival's ballroom, Fanny's intended location, had proved problematic at the climax of the play and characters tended to drift in and out for no discernible reason, or stay in fixed relation when their dramatic imperative would be to move. The idea took flight for a few weeks, and then had to be dropped; the designs were already in, the set being built; we would have to solve the problems of the play in rehearsal.

The designs themselves were spectacular, even by the standards of the West End; an amalgam of 18th century perspective tricks and flats and more modern devices with trucks and lighting. Ruari's designs moved outwards from a restricted gaming house, through a grand Mayfair apartment, to a giant vista over Hyde Park, where the topiary later moved in to line to form a sweeping vista of gold doors disappearing into infinity.

The week before rehearsals were due to begin one 'name' suddenly pulled out, which news quickly led to the disappearance of another. The final line up, however, satisfied the Haymarket: Sara Crowe, Googie Withers and her husband John McCallum, both legends in the West End, and stand-up comedian Ben Moor. At the last hour the casting director came up trumps with Carol Macready as Mrs

watts, Simon Robson, a Cambridge contemporary of mine as my brother, and Richard Kane as Mr Watts. If we had been at the National, they would have been the first choices.

And so to rehearsals.

Long dreamed of days have a strange quality to them. None more so than the first day of *A Busy Day*. I sat a the back as my agent had said I should, trying to be just another actor. Googie and John were fresh in from Australia and very jet lagged. The Haymarket people were there looking stern. Ruari brought the model of the set. Julius struck a very honest note with the team about the continuing search for investors, the sort of honesty that alarmed the older members of the cast who are used to producers keeping the financial realities far from the rehearsal room. No such luxury would be open to me in the ensuing weeks. But at least now Julius had his star line-up and a 'product' in rehearsal so could set about putting the money together.

It immediately became clear that there was no going to be time to do much 'work' on the script. It was frustrating as I knew from the two previous outings of *Busy Day* that things needed attention, but a new cast and director needed to make their own decisions and learn their own lessons. The play ran nearly three hours long at the read-through. In the end, only Act 4 survived uncut into the West End, and Act 5 was shaved down to about half its original length.

Rehearsals went well in London and then Bristol. At the Old Vic one is in the exciting but sadly unusual situation of rehearsing in the theatre with the workshops next door, so costumes and sets take shape almost before your eyes. There were over 100 different materials in Ruari's costumes; silks and damasks and embroidered muslin, much inspired by the Indian themes of the play and fashions of the time

Cleveland and Eliza, the romantic centre of the play, had a strength and clarity in Simon Robson and Sara Markland's performances that I had not seen before; it changed the play for the better of course and made me realise how strong Burney's writing is even outside the more comic milieu that my character, Frank, inhabits..

It was a strange position from the start, as silent co-producer, but also as unofficial dramaturge, trying to be useful but not invasive about Burney, and the period. After a short while, as had happened before, the cast become fans of Burney and could be spotted on the

tube on the way to works behind copies of Camilla or Kate's biography. But it was the beginning of a lonely time; without any of the original cast who knew the whole background of the journey and in the company, it soon became clear, of a disparate and potentially explosive combination of personalities.

There was much discussion over the nature of comedy, this one in particular, and Burney's style on stage and page. Some brought references from previous experience in Restoration drama. Some thought there should be much more darkness and melancholy at the heart of this dizzying day. We had of course no author to elucidate things. At one stage the full original text was distributed, which only fuelled contentious debates and set everyone trying to reintroduce their own characters' extra lines! Meanwhile, Googie, aged 85, was full of bonhomie and fabulous stories encompassing Hitchcock And Edith Evans, but was never well or happy. As the weeks went by, a violent personality clash elsewhere in the cast made it clearer still that this was not to be the happy recreation of a previously happy experience.

My life was taken over by *A Busy Day* —the rehearsals, the need to keep Julius positive about things although they weren't, the worry about money and publicity. My wife complained I was having an affair with a dead playwright. It was nothing so bizarre or macabre or even altruistic; I was willing a thing to happen that increasingly looked fated to fail.

As the Bristol opening drew near, the pressure only increased. Julius insisted on a new opening with the argument that West End audiences expect and deserve instant value for money and might not appreciate waiting an hour to see the vastness of Ruari's designs revealed. New music was composed, a cloth panorama of London painted, and a pre-show sequence choreographed depicting Cleveland's arrival in London. This made absolute sense to me but was bitterly resented by the cast as it cost time during our precious last week. And time was at a premium too when, in brief, a great career seemed to be ending before our eyes. Googie was not going to go on. The strain of travel, a new role, and the changes in the script proved too much for her and she bowed out in favour of her understudy for the Bristol opening. As well as making a tense cast tenser, the absence of the major star in the piece put huge strain on Julius and his abilities to raise money.

But Fanny's luck is not always bad. In the audience on our opening night, in Bristol, for the birth of her first grandchild, was an old friend of John and Googie, the Dynasty star Stephanie Beacham. We would not realise till later how fortuitous this was. The happier moment that night, apart from getting the show on its legs again, this time looking a million dollars, was hearing it work again. Not all of it. But certainly Act 4; the old theatre shook with laughter as I had known it could.

The first week was the best and worst of times, as the reviews came out, more than fine enough to take us in to town, but Googie pulled out of the show entirely. The company knew it wasn't really good enough yet to survive a London opening, and tried to be positive about the prospects of re-rehearsal that bringing on a new Lady Wil would provide. But who?

The audience, in the insufferably uncomfortable BOV seats continued to be very kind, and loved much of it, but it dragged in parts, and seemed somehow overblown, as if we weren't living up to the sets or the play. Jonathan reblocked and cut every day. Every day we re-rehearsed, and helped the stalwart Stephanie Fayerman, Googie's understudy. With one star down, Julius had to move fast to secure another, and the play had proved a long winded read in the past. He decided to offer it straight to someone who and seen and loved it—Stephanie Beacham. Somewhat surprised, having expected to be playing grandmother in the West Country rather than heading in to the West End, Stephanie accepted, and more rehearsals ensued.

Maybe for 48 hours things were on track, I can't remember; it never felt as though there was time to enjoy things. The next disaster; The Haymarket pulled out. They had got cold feet between the news of Googie's departure and Stephanie's arrival and their current show, Miss Julie, was doing very poor business. They needed a show in quicker than we could manage. This left us with a steeply raked set, and no rake to put it on. Which would require significant extra investment to build the support for it to go in to another house.

We ran for four of five weeks in Bristol, and the show improved, despite the tiredness of an over-rehearsed cast. During our last week, the Duke of York's Theatre in the West End invited us in. As the deal was being done, the Lyric on Shaftesbury Avenue, then one of the StollMoss theatres, bids more to take us. A bit like being gazumped

in the house market, this is an ugly part of the theatre business, but Julius needed the extra money and the Lyric was a better fit for the show; large, with a tradition of star comedy, and much passing tourist trade just off Piccadilly Circus. But we need to open June 17th 2000,giving very little time for publicity.

Actors contracts have options for renewal, which means a producer who cannot guarantee a transfer into town (few can) must decide by the end of the previous contracted run. Julius needed to confirm the deal for London before we closed in Bristol for fear of the cost of extra rehearsals if our options fail and some cast members went to other work. By this stage the cast was weary and dispirited, and try as I might, I could not engender the spirit that had reigned over the cast of the same play going from Bristol to London fringe. Julius had until midnight on the final Friday, May 3rd 2000 to confirm the whole deal

Andy Hay the artistic director of the Bristol Old Vic informs him that if he doesn't meet the deadline, up to half his cast will walk, so unhappy are they with the play and direction. I try to take soundings and wonder if the towel ought to be thrown in if no one, as it were, wants to play..

Julius calls me on the final Friday; they are short about £50,000 against a capitalisation of nearly quarter of a million. Without this he cannot complete the deal by midnight. G&L are convinced they could raise it given more time, but what if the cast walks? How much will it cost to re-rehearse? And what if it is again impossible to cast? I persuade one City Investor to up his investment from £15,000 to £30,000. Luckily he agrees—he is due to bid for the Dome and fancies another Millennial project he can take clients to; a dearer friend promises money if necessary, to be recapitalised from fundraising before we open. Sara Crowe approaches an investor friend, in love with the play despite her reservations about the production, Ian Lenagan personally invests a substantial sum. I'm on my mobile constantly in the corridor between scenes...The cast is informed that Julius is on the train from London—either to close the show or announce its West End transfer. Everyone assumes I know what is going on, though in truth I don't. Julius is still at work on it. We all repair to a reception room after the show, ironically for a party hosted by Googie Withers to thank us all for our support. A reporter from Time Magazine, an old friend, happens to be there.

The last of the monies come in at about 11.45 pm. Julius calls Stephanie Beacham's agent in LA to hold her to her contract—and then tries to rejoin the cast at the party. I get a call at about five to midnight on my mobile; Julius is locked outside as the Stage Door keeper is doing his rounds. I rush down, he tells me we're on and we go up together to announce the transfer. I didn't realise till my reporter friend pointed it out, that the announcement was not followed by whoops or applause, as this scene might be played in one of those Garland-Rooney show films. The news was greeted by absolute silence at first. Shock? Tiredness? Respect for Googie, who of course was not coming to town? Strange how dreamed of days are not as they have been dreamt.

The triumph, such as it was, was short lived. Eliza was pregnant. And about to start showing. This is a tricky problem for a producer and in employment law in which actresses have all the rights, quite rightly, of the rest of the workforce. Everyone naturally wanted Sara Markland to open the show in London...it only meant the show needed even more last minute capitalisation to cover yet more rehearsals for a new Eliza. Yet I remained excited about the whole prospect, and obdurately positive. I wanted to make a curtain speech the next night as we closed in Bristol, but the management refused. Some dreamed of days are maybe left unmarked.

In my attempt to do everything in my power to make things work out well for the show, I have stuck my oar in about the programme. I felt the chance to align Fanny with the satirical cartoon of the age, and help explain the background to play, was all too good an opportunity to miss. The few weeks between the closing in Bristol and the start of rehearsals in London were spent picture researching in The Guildhall Library and elsewhere. I found maps of London and panorama, imagined from a hot air balloon, that I felt helped make the play and its world clearer. In the final weekend, with a commission from The Observer to write about where the play was written (in France) I headed over the channel to Joigny.

There is no record of the D'Arblays in Joigny, though the barracks are clear enough (they are now the Hotel de Ville) Eventually I found an old soldier—Joigny is still a military town—who offered to drive me out to The Manoir D'Arblay, in rolling countryside nearby. I can't know if this is where Madame D'Arblay spent her time writing *A Busy Day*. If it is, the play takes on a lightly different hue: a

metropolitan comedy, Fanny's recreation of London life from a distant rural backwater

Back in London, booking was remarkably good. We had a healthy 'advance' considering there was so little build up time, and small publicity budget. We opened after brief rehearsals and ten days or so of previews. The Lyric is one of the largest West End houses, and that night was the only night when the theatre was full all the way to The 'Gods'. Another heatwave—which is tough on actors and audience. Nerves were very strained after all the changes; there were cuts up until the day we opened.

I don't remember much of that night, or the party afterwards. Alan Coveney was there, and Juliet Grassby who had played Miss Percival with me on the fringe, which was typically generous of her. There were flashbulbs and celebrities at the party, and a lot of tired, hot actors. In the West End, the play never had the response it had had at the Bristol Old Vic, or on the fringe. Maybe the cuts and revisions were poor. Maybe the production was never as it should have been. The director said subsequently he felt he never found a way to handle what he called a mixture of 'ensemble actors' and 'star turns'. I think West End audience are different. They are paying a lot of money—up to £38 for a ticket. I think the play has still not quite been given the airing Fanny deserves; but of course, she would have reworked it herself. Sheridan took *The Rivals* off and rewrote it—it was the expected practice with comedy.

And yet...some of the critics loved it. Some of them even loved me—though in fairness it was Stephanie Beacham and Sara Crowes night as far as the press and audiences were concerned.

For a brief week we stopped rehearsing, and I had a second to reflect, none too happily, on it all. You should be careful, as we know, what you dream for. The next week we were back at rehearsals for the new Eliza; fresh from drama school and beautiful as the day. And so the summer went by. We were, we kept reading, a 'hit'. Certainly the West End establishment, the critics and producers, were impressed at Julius' achievement; an unknown period 14 hander in the Lyric making money. And there was Fanny Burney's names in lights on Shaftesbury Avenue, just slightly smaller than Kathleen Turner's in The Graduate next door. That gave me a thrill every day coming in to work. Tens of

thousands of people—tourists and Londoners, purists and passing trade alike, have now seen a Fanny Burney comedy. Matinees, I remember, though often small, were often the most responsive.

It was tough summer in the West End for everyone; hot weather, and a poor year for tourists. But we were making it. Everyone knew, if we made it through to the autumn, we could run indefinitely. We had some of the best 'advance' in town.

And then the politics started.

West End theatres have been described as runways—with planes stacked up waiting to come in. Producers, just occasionally, will try to crash someone else's product. Perhaps croquet is a better metaphor. The Haymarket was suddenly in need of a show again, and asked to take *A Busy Day* . Green and Lenagan turned them down with a better deal at The Lyric...or so they thought. Bill Kenwright had his eye on the Lyric for Jessica Lange's *Long Day's Journey Into Night.* He told the management they could have it if they took Jenny Seagrovein *Brief Encounter* first, for a limited, loss-leading run. And to get us out. The Lyric management accepted, despite G&L's offer of better rent that Kenwright could pay. Julius called The Haymarket, but in the 24 hours since declining their offer, they had been forced to take another product. Fanny's luck was out again. We were offered the only other West End theatre large enough for the designs, The Whitehall, but had to face the reality that nothing like *Busy Day* had ever sold there. They took Puppetry of the Penis instead!

Julius came in to give us our 'notice'...two weeks that would take us into September. It was horribly sad—and galling. Its bad enough when things go awry in the theatre for external reasons; its almost embarrassing when it is the competitive mismanagement within the industry that shoots itself in the foot. It was certainly embarrassing and painful for me, in respect of the investment I had brought on board. Not everyone lost their shirt as it were, but it certainly was not the money maker Fanny, and later Julius, had hoped. But through no fault of hers—or his.

Brief Encounter never had an audience larger than our average. We handed back and advance that would have put us well on the way to making our money back- indeed about £80000, the sun of Eliza's dowry from India.

The final weeks were quite sad. As ever, I felt some need, not unlike today, to mark the event, and try and make sense of it all. Its common for the author to thank producers at such an occasion. Here is what I said:

> On behalf of the author, I wanted to say a few words—no actually I wanted to say a few words on my own behalf as well, to express due thanks to Julius and to Ian who may never forgive me for introducing them to Fanny Burney and to *A Busy Day* .
>
> You mainly know the story here, but six years ago, when Julius and I were I suppose both a bit jaded about certain aspects of the theatre, I begged him to trek to Bristol on a wet Saturday to see a play which had restored my faith in actors and acting, above a pub in Bedminster—and that play, *A Busy Day* in turn inspired him and then Ian to acts of courage and determination as producers quite beyond the usual bounds of producing.
>
> I'd never seen it from both sides before, and am aware, tonight even more than usual, that we owe them a huge debt of thanks.
>
> I've learned enough about producing in this last year to feel nothing but admiration for what Julius and Ian do, and to fear for their sanity....such that one of the most frustrating aspects of this, for me, rather sad week, is knowing that they were on the point of proving—beyond what our success has proved already—something really inspiring about theatre; that you could take that mad enthusiasm from a pub in Bedminster and the thwarted passion of a long dead writer, and turn it to commercial success. We've proved great things nonetheless— but we all get the nightly thanks of laughter and applause—some nights more than others—but I think we are all aware you have done something very brave and inspiring here too.
>
> All of us who were there when Julius came to explain about how and why *Busy Day* was closing could see that this has meant more to him than most producers invest, emotionally, in a project...I've known Julius as a friend and would expect nothing less of him.

You all know I am too close to this project; I brought it to Julius in the first place, and have willed it against the sometimes unfavourable tides. Its been a demanding and dangerous mistress, and I use the word advisedly, and the affair leaves me a bit wrecked—how Fanny would hate being talked about like this. I only ever wanted this to happen because of some small faith I had had in it as text, but rather more than that, as I said, because it restored my faith in actors. I think of it as an actors piece—and largely an actresses' piece come to that—and that's what excited me about making it happen, and still does.

So despite its many disappointments, the struggle and the unhappinesses, it makes me proudest to have been part of this company, to have had your company and to see what you do, despite back pains and birth pains and sleepless nights and broken hearts and the messy humanity of a group of actors (which is, indeed, as Fanny might tell you, so attractive to the solitary playwright.)

Carolyn and Sara, amongst others, give me a hard time about being a Burney bore, quite rightly, though it has sometimes proved useful in moving the project forward, and it has served me this last time, as I came across this in her letters this weekend in Bath where I also now face exile or rest cure and the beg like Fanny that you, all my Cit friends, will come and visit, and it seemed apposite.

From Madame D'Arblay

Walcott Street,

Bath

Dear Messrs Green and Lenagan,

Alarmed almost to the point of agitation as I am by the intelligence I have received of your producing my humble opus theatrici A BUSY DAY, I regret that pressing business keeps

me, all but literally, buried in the provincial West. Beyond my supplications as to casting of my play, details of which you will have received from Mr Sheridan, who I understand has forgone his tenure at Drury Lane, and suffered the unnecessary closure of *School for Scandal* to be replaced by Miss Seagrove in *The Clandestine Producer* (Miss Seagrove is quite unknown to me) I plant only these precepts for your consideration.

Miss Percival; Must be costumed in pink & gold, cannot wear too *much* paste jewellery. Mrs Jordan is so over the hill as to be quite in Hampstead, as Mrs Thrale would say; I venture to suggest Miss Crowe.

I beg to suggest the disavowal of the current fashion for the hiring of dwarves, children, low-born Irish redheads, colonials in low-cut gowns and antipodeans; they please the footmen in the galleries only.

Lord John must be short and fat, Jemima and the valet unerringly plain, Eliza fair, Cleveland dark and Joel Tibbs a man of sterling moral rectitude as befits a follower of Cobbett.

I share with all true admirers of Thespis a distaste for garish Indy brocades, and the interpolation of prologues merely to demonstrate stage machinery.

Aside these precepts, I leave you to exercise your own discernment.

Please know I meant nothing but diversion and joy from my little comedie-a-la-francaise, and trust it will bring your names, if not your bankers', blessed good fortune and some small happiness.

A thank you awaits you in Bath, where I remain, quite eternally, your grateful author

FB

Madame D'Arblay.

It may yet live on. One Australian producer remains interested, and one off-Broadway. As we failed to be nominated in any category for the Oliver Awards (although they did agree that Fanny should be considered as a new comedy writer, as the play was not a revival) it seems unlikely.

I moved to Bath, to contemplate.

Company Television, makers of Tom Jones or more recently Nicholas Nickelby and the BBC are both considering the possibility of adaptations of Evelina or Cecelia; this too will be a long, long journey.