

## **A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Theatre**

**Darren Finn-Hurst**

Star-studded anecdotes showcasing a 25-year career in the glamorous milieu of West End theatre and cinema took centre stage in this colourful, absorbing and above all entertaining memoir of a rarefied world dominated by celebrity and royalty.

From humble beginnings embalming corpses in Clacton-on-Sea to working in management at some of London's most prestigious showbiz venues, Darren took fellow Buxton U3A members on a beautifully recounted, breakneck tour of the highlights of his compelling, often demanding professional role.

Just listening to the roll call of famous people he has met over the years – ranging from the late Diana, Princess of Wales and Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother to legendary actors such as Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise – felt like leafing through a well-thumbed copy of Who's Who.

Darren began his theatrical career as a box office assistant at the former Empire Theatre, now a cinema and casino and ended it as assistant manager of the ticket bureau in Harrods – working at a host of well-known venues such as the London Palladium, Theatre Royal and Criterion Theatre along the way.

As an 'unofficial ringmaster' of numerous Royal premieres, he met many prominent members of Britain's most famous family – including the then Prince Charles, The Princess Royal, Princess Margaret, Princess Alexandra and the Duke and Duchess of York. During this time he worked closely with former Royal press spokesman Dickie Arbiter to make sure such occasions ran smoothly and without incident.

Diana, Princess of Wales – whom Darren described as 'delightful' - clearly retains a special place in his heart. He fondly recalled one evening when Diana arrived at the Empire for a film premiere of *Stepping Out* starring, and attended by, US megastar Liza Minnelli, and the usual crowds had gathered to spot her and admire what she was wearing: "As she stepped out of the car and flashbulbs popped, she joked 'I don't know who they are waiting for!' and I replied 'No idea Ma'am'. She giggled, and it was an unforgettable moment. She had a real gift for making people feel at ease."

Earlier that day, Darren's jaw had metaphorically hit the 'tasteful carpet' when he was summoned to the Royal Promenade Suite at the Empire for an audience with Minnelli herself. She asked him how he planned to pronounce her name when introducing her at the premiere, and, having heard her song 'Liza with a Zee', chose the correct option. His perfect rendition earned him a kiss on the cheek just before she launched into her speech, and he joked that his face was still dirty, as he had never washed it since that day.

Another favourite Diana anecdote focused on the time she turned up at the Plaza Cinema with four friends and police protection and asked Darren if he had five spare tickets for the film *Shirley Valentine*: "We were absolutely sold out, with an audience of 500, but fortunately we had an alternative – the preview box next to the projector. We only had four chairs, but Diana said they'd make do. She let her friends use the

chairs and she knelt down and put her elbows on the sill to watch. A truly graceful lady.”

Princess Margaret was another regular at Royal premieres, and had a penchant for Famous Grouse whisky served with still Malvern water and ice cubes made from the same bottled water. However the crowning moment of Darren’s entire career came when he was asked to escort Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother at a performance of the musical Miss Saigon to celebrate her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday: “She didn’t want a fanfare or any pomp; she was a delightful woman who radiated warmth. I offered her champagne, but she confessed she would prefer gin. She was so gracious and remarkably sprightly for her age and when I offered her my arm to negotiate some steps she took it, remarking that ‘high heels and long dresses can be treacherous!’ “

One of Darren’s brushes with theatre ‘royalty’ came when Dame Maggie Smith was starring in Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads at the Comedy (now Harold Pinter) Theatre: “Dame Maggie arrived at rehearsals with a lady who I assumed to be her PA, and I asked all kinds of questions, checking if Dame Maggie was alright and if she needed anything to drink etc. Two weeks later she came back for the first performance and I found out her ‘PA’ was actually another acting legend, Dame Margaret Tyzack. She gave a me a sly wink and it was another jaw-dropping moment. So I learned never to underestimate a national treasure in sensible shoes!”

Other memorable moments included escorting Tom Cruise and meeting Dustin Hoffman at the British premiere of the film Rain Man, a brief encounter with Joan Collins in sunglasses and hat when she joked ‘I’m not her!’ and being accidentally soaked by a pint of Guinness that belonged to Richard Harris at the theatrical club The Green Room, off The Strand. “After all, it’s not everyday you are baptised with the black stuff by King Arthur!” quipped Darren.

Another of his favourite encounters came when he met Stephen Sondheim at a production of Company that began at the Donmar Warehouse then transferred to the comedy Theatre: “He was very unassuming and wanted no fuss. A very sweet man.” And on another occasion he was told that President George W. Bush and Mrs Barbara Bush would be coming to Drury Lane, just ten minutes before a performance: “They arrived in a motorcade with six CIA officers running alongside it, and Mrs. Bush waved from the Royal box to the audience, which was 80 per cent American.”

Gifts were not uncommon and ranged from bottles of champagne to a silk pocket handkerchief from King Hussein of Jordan, a silk Hermes tie from the late former UK Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath and a digital radio from Queen guitarist Brian May to celebrate the release of Radio Ga Ga.

Unsurprisingly, after such a long professional association with theatre and cinema, Darren was tempted to tread the boards himself, and embraced many roles in amateur productions, ranging from a topless soldier in South Pacific and an innkeeper in Fiddler on the Roof to both Professor Marvel and the Wizard in The Wizard of Oz. A truly fascinating insight into the secret world of theatre and cinema

that most people never encounter. As Darren jokingly put it himself: “Not too bad for someone who started work embalming corpses in Clacton-on-Sea!”