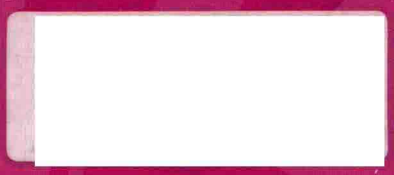
Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Twentieth-Century Actress

Helen Grime



Number 3

GWEN FFRANGCON-DAVIES, TWENTIETH-CENTURY ACTRESS

BY

Helen Grime

PICKERING & CHATTO
2013

Published by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
21 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2TH

2252 Ridge Road, Brookfield, Vermont 05036-9704, USA

www.pickeringchatto.com

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Grime, Helen, author.
Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, twentieth-century actress. – (Dramatic lives)
1. Ffrangcon-Davies, Gwen, 1891–1992 2. Actors – Great Britain – Biography.
3. Theater – History – 20th century.
I. Title II. Series
792'.028'092-dc23

ISBN-13: 9781848933194
e: 9781848933200

This publication is printed on acid-free paper that conforms to the American
National Standard for the Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Typeset by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Printgroup

GWEN FFRANGCON-DAVIES, TWENTIETH-CENTURY ACTRESS

DRAMATIC LIVES

Series Editor: Katharine Cockin

TITLES IN THIS SERIES

1 Ellen Terry, Spheres of Influence
Katharine Cockin (ed.)

2 The Public Lives of Charlotte and Marie Stopes
Stephanie Green

www.pickeringchatto.com/dramatic

For Jonathan, Peter and Anna

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the material in this volume has been reworked from the following articles: 'Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies: "Ethereal from the Waist Up and All Welsh Pony Down Below"', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 27:3 (July 2011), pp. 203–14; and 'Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies: Pioneering a "Pocket-Sized" Lady Macbeth', *Shakespeare*, 8:4 (December 2012), pp. 424–36.

Thanks are due to many who supported this project, especially to Margaret Westwood and Ann Baldaro for their generous loan of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies's personal archive and their permission to reproduce the figures included here, and to Martial Rose for his guidance through the archive material.

To the University of Winchester for funding the development of this volume, and to colleagues who have helped with the development of this work, especially Dr Stevie Simkin, Professor Roger Richardson, Dr Marianne Sharp, Charlotte Purkis, Professor Millie Taylor and Professor June Boyce-Tillman.

To Professor Gilli Bush-Bailey, Professor Katharine Cockin, Dr Kate Dorney and Susanna Jones for their interest and encouragement. To members of the Historiography Working Groups at the Theatre and Performance Research Association and the International Federation for Theatre Research, and to staff at the Royal Shakespeare Company Archives, the British Library Manuscripts Reading Room, and the Theatre Archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum for their help and assistance.

To all those who have shared their stories and memories of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies with me, in particular Margaret Westwood, Ann Baldaro, Clive Robbins, Claire Cochrane, Frances Hughes, John Tydeman, Nicholas Wright, Johnnie Beardmore, David Spenser, Victor Pemberton, Paul Scofield, Grace Stamper and Ian Brown. To archive users who shared their enthusiasms, especially Jane Dunn, Nicola Upson, Mandy Morton, Jennifer Thomson, Laurence Wright, Ralph Montagu and Jonathan Croall.

Special thanks to my parents Robert and Jo Grime, my partner Jonathan Gregory and my children Anna and Peter, who have all lived with Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies beside me for the last decade.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

1 STORIES AND MYTHS

Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies (1891–1992) made her acting debut in 1911 as a singing fairy in Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at His Majesty's Theatre, London. Her career spanned more than seven decades, and in the late 1980s with the approach of her centenary, she was the subject of several television and radio programmes. In these broadcasts her lifelong love of Shakespeare was evident, and references were made to her performances alongside many theatrical luminaries of the twentieth century, including John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, Edith Evans and Peter Hall. However, in the process of sifting through Ffrangcon-Davies's personal archive, which includes more than 2,000 letters plus numerous press cuttings and photographs, it became clear that her Shakespearian work, which had been so clearly highlighted in the 1980s broadcasts, was a surprisingly small, albeit important, part of her career when taken as a whole – totalling just thirteen of over one hundred different roles on stage (see Table 1.1 for a full list of her stage roles). In addition, those obituary writers who hailed her as one of the most important actresses of the twentieth century were compelled to source their information from a listing in *Who's Who in the Theatre* because many published histories failed to mention her. This actress, retrospectively mythologized as an influential Shakespearian, had apparently been omitted from written theatre history. This absence, echoed in her 'strange omission'[1] from the honours list until her hundred and first year, demands investigation.

Ffrangcon-Davies was stage-struck from an early age, and she frequently told anecdotes which reflected her childhood fascination with theatre and Shakespeare in particular. In this one she describes how she had been overwhelmed as a young audience member:

> When I was very young 10 or eleven I think I saw Hamlet for the first time. The impact was shattering on my childish mind – I went about dazed for three days and wept when spoken to! What is more I was quite convinced that this glory was gone for good. It did not occur to me that I might go <u>again</u> to see it another night![2]

This reference to the impermanence of theatre is a pertinent reminder of its allure and the resulting challenges which face the theatre historian. In the post-modern world, where uncertainty has become a touchstone in the quest for understanding, theatre's ephemerality has made it a favoured subject. Nevertheless, the challenge of grasping the essence of a past performance, or the actress who gave that performance, remains. As Virginia Woolf foresaw when writing about Ffrangcon-Davies's idol, Ellen Terry:

> It is the fate of actors to leave only picture postcards behind them. Every night when the curtain goes down the beautiful coloured canvas is rubbed out. What remains is at best only a wavering, insubstantial phantom – a verbal life on the lips of the living.[3]

For the theatre historian, especially when working on the margins of living memory, interpreting fragments of evidence is a means of substantiating Woolf's phantom performers. Penny Summerfield writes of the fragmentary nature of life-stories which appear in oral histories and the tendency towards composed narratives in the telling of oral life stories.[4] The fragments of evidence about Ffrangcon-Davies include documentary material from her archive and oral material from herself and those who knew her. Unlike Ellen Terry, whose place in theatre history is secure, Ffrangcon-Davies's story is intriguing because she has, as many other actresses of her generation, fallen into relative obscurity. Although not unique, her marginalization in the dominant narratives of twentieth-century theatre histories is nevertheless surprising because she was so popular and well known in the inter-war years.

The writing of Ffrangcon-Davies's story shares pragmatic feminist intentions as expressed by Elaine Aston[5] and Sue-Ellen Case[6] in recovering an individual actress from historical obscurity and challenging the patriarchal assumptions which led to her omission: as Tracy C. Davis suggests, 'Recovery is probably an indispensable first step of feminist scholarship'.[7] However, anxiety has been expressed about the disadvantages of identifying women's history as a separate entity because this neutralizes any potential influence over the dominant narrative.[8] As these scholars suggest, there are disadvantages in identifying women's history as a separate entity because it perpetuates the tendency to marginalization. Gilli Bush-Bailey proposes that feminist historians should be 'suspicious of a history that works only in the margins',[9] and argues that the aim should be to reveal the limitations of the dominant narrative of theatre history and incrementally build a 'polyphonic'[10] alternative. Ffrangcon-Davies's story does not belong in the margins of theatre history; she had a long and varied career and enjoyed considerable popularity on the West End stage, particularly in the inter-war period. Although retrospectively excluded from its history, which may be due in part to her gender and sexuality, Ffrangcon-Davies was a prominent figure in the theatre for a good part of her career, working alongside influential figures

and as a member of a number of significant companies. These factors make it too simplistic to conclude that because she was a woman, actress and lesbian, her omission from theatre history was inevitable. Such an assumption is further weakened by evidence that Ffrangcon-Davies publicly presented as heterosexual and chose to highlight those areas of her career, such as her Shakespearian work, which promised prominence and recognition. Her story works both within and without dominant narratives in theatre history and serves as a means of illuminating their construction.

Ffrangcon-Davies's story *could* offer a powerful challenge to the dominant narrative *if* prominence were given to her gender, sexuality and the challenging work she undertook on the margins of the theatrical establishment. However, the version of her story in which she collaborated, in the 1980s broadcasts for example, privileges her image as a great Shakespearian and aligns her with powerful figures and companies which have a secure place in theatre history, although the extent of her agency in this process is ambiguous. Her career is one of shifts, changes and contradictions. She was a highly feminized lesbian actress who achieved significant commercial success as a (heterosexual) romantic lead while risking the occasional unconventional role in the Theatre Club scene. Ffrangcon-Davies's public profile belied her private identity, and thus she is well placed to serve as a representative example of the experience of the twentieth-century actress – all the more so because she consciously presented herself as conformist. Her story then can be read as a performance of studied normality, of deliberately conventional behaviour in which her self-mythologizing reveals much about the dominant ideologies of her time and the narratives of theatre history in the twentieth century.

Anecdotes and Myths

Auditioning for Ellen Terry

> As a schoolgirl Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies was engulfed with a precocious love of Shakespeare, and in particular the character of Juliet. Having expressed a desire to go on the stage as a young girl, in 1909 at the age of eighteen her mother arranged for her to see Miss Terry, whose housekeeper was Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies's godmother and with whom the family had a slight acquaintance. The aspiring young actress prepared Juliet's potion speech, unaware of the risk of presenting such a famously demanding speech to a renowned actress. She performed the speech with great enthusiasm in Miss Terry's sitting room, after which the great actress responded: 'Yes ... [long pause] ... yes ... [second long pause] ... you'll do.'[11]

This anecdote about auditioning for Ellen Terry is a frequent component of interviews given throughout her life. Terry had written to Ffrangcon-Davies's mother, Annie, in response to a request for advice: 'It would please me to see

your daughter (and her mother!) and to be of a little help in some way'.[12] The association with this significant theatrical family is an element of her career which Ffrangcon-Davies naturally emphasized. In interviews given in the 1980s, Ffrangcon-Davies tells a consistent story of her professional life, highlighting those areas she wished to talk about and ignoring those aspects she preferred not to discuss, reflecting the use of 'fictive devices'[13] which Liz Stanley identifies as a necessary element of autobiography. Ffrangcon-Davies retells her story using little myths of anecdote and reminiscence, emphasizing this important connection to her idol Ellen Terry. As a young girl Ffrangcon-Davies had seen Terry perform, and her album of theatrical postcards includes a number featuring the actress. Ffrangcon-Davies's career had spanned most of the twentieth century, and yet links with the previous century persist. Queen Victoria died when Ffrangcon-Davies was ten years old and a decade before she made her stage debut. Nevertheless, her early work for actor-managers in pictorial Shakespeare productions associate her with what are commonly understood as Victorian theatre practices, and this is reinforced in her presentation as a last link to this bygone era as she reached the end of her career. Her friends and colleagues also associated her with old-fashioned traditions, especially in her celebration of Christmas.

Christmas at Tagley Cottage

> Gwen was inordinately fond of Christmas. Every year she decorated her cottage for the occasion and had a Christmas party for friends. Tagley Cottage, which had been her home since the 1930s, was a wonderful place in winter, with the open fire blazing. Her Christmas tree was adorned with real candles which when lit would have an anxious friend standing guard with a bucket of water. Gwen preferred to hand-make her decorations as she did her Christmas cards. Each year she would spend hours making cards out of old pictures which she would decorate with sequins. Her friends remember Gwen in her nineties, when her eyesight was failing badly, sewing the sequins on by hand, often working in poor light, with the needle passing perilously close to her eyes as she worked.[14]

This anecdote about Ffrangcon-Davies dates back to the 1980s, when she was living in virtual retirement in her cottage in Essex. During the investigation into the life and career of this actress, I made contact with a number of her friends and colleagues, several of whom have told me a version of this story. When I met Grace Stamper (7 March 2004), who had been Ffrangcon-Davies's correspondent and friend for thirty years, I was intrigued by her offer to show me a selection of the handmade Christmas cards featured in the anecdote. On close examination I discovered, to my astonishment, that every sequin on every card had been stuck on with glue. This mythologizing of Ffrangcon-Davies, emphasizing her connection with Victorian traditions, neatly illustrates the complex and contradictory nature of her story. Anecdotes, stories and theatrical ephemera, and

their contexts, reveal much about the shifting phases of representation and self-representation of this actress. The *Christmas at Tagley Cottage* anecdote reflects the prevalence of mythologizing in theatre histories. In this reassessment of the life of the actress Ffrangcon-Davies, these myths and their associated omissions and suppressions provide a means of understanding the construction of, and interface between, the micro and macro narratives of twentieth-century theatre histories.

What is significant about these anecdotes in relation to Ffrangcon-Davies is what they say about her rather than simply what they say. Her connection with the Victorian era is hard to resist, and this association with a historical period which predates her career frames her as a relic. However, her determination to accentuate her connection with the Terry theatrical line is evidence of canny self-positioning. Elizabeth Schafer's analysis of anecdotes about Lilian Baylis suggests a similar tension: the subject's complicity is acknowledged, but the unfortunate emphasis on her exceptionality negates her potential as a role model and ultimately results in 'a tendency towards containment'.[15] The subject is reductively defined by the anecdote and yet can utilize it to promote a favourable association which suggests agency and resistance. Whether it disempowers or inflates, the theatrical anecdote has become a publishable format in its own right: Jerome K. Jerome, Ned Sherrin and Sheridan Morley have all published volumes. It must be acknowledged that theatrical anecdotes *are* often overacted: a piece of scenery falling over becomes the whole set collapsing; an unfortunate death or illness becomes a curse on the whole cast and crew. But for Jonathan Bate, 'The point of the anecdote is not its factual but its representative truth',[16] and therefore it merits the attention, albeit guarded, of the theatre historian.

As Liz Stanley identifies in her theoretical work on auto/biography, the past is 'a mythology created out of scraps and traces and partial interpretations',[17] and anecdotes are one form of this mythologizing process in many histories, not just theatrical ones. However, the prevalence of anecdote and mythologizing in theatre history is marked and can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the subjects of theatre history are concerned with story-making as a profession. Theatre professionals know how to construct an engaging narrative, and therefore the myth or story which distorts is familiar territory. Secondly, the very nature of the transient theatrical event is most effectively evoked through exaggerated emphasis: so much so that the theatrical anecdote is a form of entertainment in its own right. Thirdly, the social group of theatrical professionals, who work and compete intensely in temporary groups which are regularly fractured and re-formed with every casting decision, requires a common mythology to create a sense of community. The theatrical anecdote is an example of the 'ritual and repetition'[18] which Judith Butler identifies as a significant element of performativity, a process whereby individuals construct their identities through social interaction. Although the mythologizing

process can be seen in many historical narratives, it is the pervasive presence of the anecdote, in both dominant narratives and individual stories in theatre history, which attracts the attention of the historiographer.

Conversely, the suspicion of theatrical anecdotes and myths, particularly when told from within the acting profession, is a manifestation of Jonas Barish's 'antitheatrical prejudice',[19] a deep-seated cultural suspicion of all things theatrical. Put bluntly, this prejudice implies that you cannot trust an actor or actress to tell the truth when they lie so convincingly for a profession. The potency of the anecdote in the expert hands of an actor or actress intent on capturing the essence of an ephemeral performance event suggests deception. The anecdote is not truth per se, however, and as Bratton suggests, there can be 'a world of historical meaning in what they say about themselves'.[20] Ffrangcon-Davies's story about herself auditioning for Ellen Terry suggests an alignment with and potential for inclusion in the lineage of great actresses.

However, retrospectively, Ffrangcon-Davies has not been included in this lineage. Her colleagues Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft had a greater claim to this position. The story of Ffrangcon-Davies is the evaluation of the life and work of an actress whose experience was more representative and more repeatable than the extraordinary or forgotten figures hitherto favoured by feminist historians. Her experiences are perhaps an example of a more typical experience: an actress who enjoyed some considerable success at moments in her career and whose long working life allows for the investigation of a fascinating period of theatre history. By looking at her story, the dominant narrative of twentieth-century theatre histories is challenged and encouraged to elasticize and broaden. Ffrangcon-Davies's marginalized story, which sometimes seeks alignment with the dominant narrative, is an illustration of the complexity of the power relationships at work in the production of knowledge within theatre history. In this story, the female is favoured over the male, the supporting actress given centre stage instead of the luminary, the forgotten remembered in place of the fêted, and as a result, assumptions are confronted and reassessments encouraged. Reanalysing this individual story against the dominant narrative enables a refocused reading of the histories of twentieth-century theatre which reveals absences and seeks to broaden understanding in a spirit of inclusivity.

Sifting through the Fragments

The fragments of Ffrangcon-Davies's life which remain through anecdote, ephemera, reviews, articles and in the personal papers of her archive tantalizingly invite the researcher to piece them together to create a coherent narrative. Stanley warns that this auto/biographical imperative is predicated on 'the myth of a single, coherent, stable and gradually unfolding inner and indubitably real

essential self'[21] and suggests that, when writing about a life, the complexities of identity and contradictory truths should be revealed 'rather than try to eradicate them through searching for a seamless "truth"'.[22] Furthermore, the layering of an actress's identity complicates the task of building a picture of her life and work. Di Trevis's oft-quoted assessment of the actress's predicament, that 'being an actress was like being a woman twice',[23] cuts to the heart of the identity issues faced by the actress. The layering and shifting of identities – on-stage roles, off-stage public presentations and private and personal relations – complicate an already complex arena. Both the embodied nature of the acting profession and the explicit demonstration of the fragmentary nature of identity it entails draw attention to post-structuralist notions of the instability of the unified self.

When considering the embodied professional work of the actress, it is unhelpful to artificially disassociate her on- and off-stage existences, as these lines are inevitably blurred. Furthermore, Lesley Ferris suggests the boundary between on/off-stage identities of the actress is complicated because women perform the social construct of femininity in their daily lives.[24] This analysis echoes the sexologist Havelock Ellis's early twentieth-century estimation that women are 'both by nature and by social compulsion, more often than men in the position of actors'.[25] The connections between the on-stage performances in dramatic roles and the off-stage performance of gender and sexuality performed by the actress reflect the multiple layering of her identity. However, the actress often finds herself compelled to differentiate between her on- and off-stage identities to avoid unflattering associations which may come with playing a violent, promiscuous or merely unlikeable character. Edith Evans's performance as Lady Bracknell was a character with whom the actress became closely associated, but her own assessment of the character subtly but firmly distanced her from the role. When she declared, 'I know that kind of women',[26] the implication is that she was not one of them.

The theatre performance constructs a frame through which audience members are encouraged to conflate the performer with the role. However, this conflation is potentially dangerous because it is at the core of prejudice against the acting profession, as Barish suggests: 'the habit of imitating others must necessarily bring out the worst in the actor himself'.[27] The skill of the performer in representing what they are not in itself can be problematic, as Harriet Walter suggests: 'Actors, bigamists and conmen are some of those who keep grabbing for a fresh sheet of paper on which to reinvent their lives'.[28] This detrimental potential is especially damaging for the actress whose sexuality and gender are subject to acute moral anxiety. Elizabeth Howe argues that Restoration actresses willingly played on their 'scandalous, glamorous personal reputation[s]'[29] in their on-stage performances in order to sustain their public profiles. Subsequent actresses have often felt the need to contest these negative associations: in her memoirs the actress Lillah McCarthy rejected suggestions of moral dubiousness

attached to her profession: 'The power to represent life does not depend on having lived all sorts of lives'.[30] Historically, actresses have played with notions of their on/off-stage identities in their autobiographical practices. Actresses' autobiographies often acknowledge their complex identities: Sarah Bernhardt wrote of *My Double Life* (1907) and Elizabeth Robins put herself *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940). The inevitable layering and complexity is explained by Thomas Postlewait, who argues for an inclusive approach to the use of auto/biographical evidence in historical analysis because:

> no clear separation can be established between face and mask, presence and absence, private and public personality, life and art, but also ... these dualisms are too neat because they split identity, documents, and historical conditions in ways that are reductive.[31]

Actresses' autobiographical practices, in both written and oral form, can reveal much about the negotiations between these layers. Although Ffrangcon-Davies did not comply with efforts to encourage her to cooperate with a biographer,[32] she did present her life story at different stages of her career in both written and broadcast interviews, and these presentations can be read as a kind of autobiography. Sidonie Smith argues for the acceptance of 'alternative technologies of autobiography',[33] which include the recognition of letters, journals and diaries as autobiographical material.

For the feminist historian, this auto/biographical material can be the means of recovering marginalized experience which provides both a connection to the past and role models for the future. As an actress, particularly in the early twentieth century at the height of her career, Ffrangcon-Davies found herself flouting normative gender behaviour and confounding expectations. In the inter-war period, her transgressive career choice alone might have raised awkward questions, as Maggie B. Gale notes:

> For many social theorists and sexologists during the inter-war period, the fact that a woman was intentionally single and desired economic and personal independence indicated that there was indeed something 'wrong' with her, that in fact she wasn't a 'natural' woman ...[34]

However, Ffrangcon-Davies was careful to exercise the discretion necessary to protect her professional reputation with particular regard to her sexuality throughout her career, presenting a highly feminized public persona which avoided association with the readily identifiable mannish lesbian stereotype. Her discretion, the requirement for it and the importance of sexuality as integral to her identity are extremely significant in rereading her story. The close relationship between changing notions of femininity and the position of the actress as a site for the debate of normative gender behaviours is important, especially when investigating the occlusion of Ffrangcon-Davies's lesbian sexuality.