

# EXEUNT

THE STAGE DOOR PROJECT

LLOYD MCDONAGH



SALVATORE SCARPA



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Kemp House  
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info@renardpress.com  
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*This book is dedicated to the theatre industry.*

*Proceeds from this book will go to charities that support theatres and the professionals who work to keep them alive.*

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# EXEUNT – THE STAGE DOOR PROJECT



# INTRODUCTION

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances...  
and their stage doors.*

In 2020, for the first time in centuries, there were no theatres open in London.

As two actors who felt that they had lost their homes away from home, we turned to another form of art that could survive the pandemic – photography. *Exeunt – The Stage Door Project* is a collection of memories – images by us and words by theatre luminaries you know and love – brought together to document the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on London's West End.

Who in this industry doesn't dream of walking through the theatrical pearly gates, of feeling the chaos of London's streets being replaced by the ethereal calm of backstage preparations, of gently being reminded to sign in (and out) by the angels at the door?

This book is a tribute to the magical experience that occurs at the stage door. But most of all, it's a celebration of the legendary places, the industry professionals and the countless audience members who weathered the storm together.

Ours is a book to celebrate what we endured together.

All of us.

Lloyd McDonagh & Salvatore Scarpa



# THE STAGE DOOR PROJECT

Ernie Davis was stage doorman at The Old Vic when I was there in 1960 when we did *She Stoops to Conquer* with Tommy Steele. Tommy received a letter from a fan asking him to sing 'Little White Bull' during the show that night as he was attending with an elderly relation!! Ernie loved the letter so much he asked Tommy if he could keep it... and he did. Stage doormen are rare and marvellous people.

**Dame Judi Dench**

As a Director, it is not often that I enter through a stage door. There is usually a lonely route to the auditorium through front of house which delivers me straight to my makeshift desk. Directors tend to slip into a theatre alone as actors throng and giggle their way to dressing rooms filled with cards and keepsakes, charms and sweet smells. So, when I think of stage doors, I think of times when I am off duty, anonymous and relaxingly not in charge; a stage door Johnnie if you like! My partner works in the theatre and it is a great joy for me to go and meet him from work; usually at The Old Vic in London. I love to loiter opposite the stage door in the knowledge that he will soon appear. It is at these times, stood in the road, basking in the warmth of the neon that I remember the fairy dust that theatre sprinkles onto our lives. The excitement of not knowing who will pop out of that magic door is intoxicating; it could be a wardrobe assistant, a star or the love of my life. The stage door is a gateway to such electric endeavour, a world of colour, surprise, possibility and potential. This door is the gateway to all I love and all I believe in – and I tingle with a humble sense of gratitude that I am lucky enough to be part of it. Then Simon appears in a chaos of bags and banter with the stage door keeper – and all my dreams come true at once. I get to whisk him to a warm bar for a debrief, decompress and a slow digestion of the day's events. The memory of these nights, this peek into the ephemeral wonder of the telling of stories, has a sweet neon glow and a melancholic sense of loss. When we come back, will the magnificent, messy, mysterious chaos of humanity return? I hope with my whole tired heart that it will.

**Emma Rice**

In the late 80s, the old stage door outside light was nicked. I rounded the corner of Webber Street and noticed the globe had gone, and when the LX department arrived to work I asked if they were working on it. No they were not, in fact they hadn't seen it was gone. Whoever made away with it had sawn through the swan-neck bracket and wiring. We never discovered who or why.

One morning in 1988 I arrived for work to find the whole of the stage door interior and staircases awash. At that time the stairs were carpeted and the aroma of damp, old, and not necessarily pristine carpet is certainly not to be sniffed at. It stank! Somebody, again we never found out who, had broken the above dressing room window and delivered an incendiary device. The sprinkler system had done its work and damage. Structurally this was insignificant, but we've never had carpeted stairways since.

In 2001, a show called *Over the Moon* was rehearsing with us before doing a short tour and then returning to our stage. On one particular afternoon there was no rehearsing done. Around the old radio I then had (before we hit the 20th century at the Vic with a stage door computer) were gathered Joan Collins, Ray Cooney (director), Moira Lister and Frank Langella, all listening to news from New York. The date was September 11th.

There are some very peculiar parallels between me and Lilian Baylis, who was at The Old Vic between 1898–1937 (running it solely from 1912), besides my having been here for only five years shy of her record. It's odd that Lilian was born a week after me in our respective years, both of us in the month of May. Lilian died in November 1937, the date a week after I began here in November 1986. I've always found that spooky. I do conclude that after all the things that have happened over the years, such as management changes, an ownership change, Artistic Directors coming and going, and latterly virus mutations, I'm still here and that (as Mr Sondheim wrote) it's the bricks and mortar of the place that keep me happily imprisoned. It seems almost as if fate drew me here those years ago, if you believe that old rubbish, and anyway, one must not be complacent because, as for tomorrow, well, who knows? (as Mr Fierstein wrote). I'm very proud of the old girl (if we're allowed to differentiate these days) at 203 years old and still going. I'll not make it to that age but will slide off my perch still doing what I have a passion for. A little discombobulating for the next occupant of the seat, but hey, that's the way of the world.

As for being one of longest serving stage door keepers, well, I never think about it, one never likes to be reminded of one's age. Although I suppose it's kind of neat really!

**Ned Seago**





The Old Vic Theatre

Almost without exception, stage doors are poky little places, presided over by a sedentary figure with whom one exchanges a few cheery words and then moves on into the theatre itself. They are transitional spaces of no great inherent interest. As an actor one signs oneself in and then swiftly proceeds on to the dressing room, where one will spend a great deal of time, unless it's a one-man show, and even then, in that private space, time before, during and after the show is of crucial psychological importance.

The stage door hardly figures at all. And yet it is there, in that mundane, functional little space, that the crucial transition occurs in which you receive a sort of odd invisible coating that enables you to undertake the crucial transition from the you that exists in the real world to the you that will give yourself over to a whole other identity, in which your mind, your heart and your body will be infused with other thoughts, other sensations, other needs.

The stage door is like the hole down which Alice falls into Wonderland, the portal of the space ship which one enters into the fourth dimension, the circle of fire through which Siegfried passes to claim Brünnhilde, Dr Who's phone box. Pass through the stage door and you have begun the journey from which there can be no turning back until you have completed what you came to do. And when you reverse the process at the end of the show, and sign yourself out, you re-emerge as a regular member of the human race, John Citizen again, cleansed of that spooky stuff, that transforming ectoplasm that adhered to you on your way in.

It is at the stage door that you shed it.

**Simon Callow**

I'm fascinated by the transiency of theatres. Stories, like nomads, settle for a short while then pick up sticks, leaving space for the next. And to me, an audience does the same thing. Each night a new body, a different voice, a whole other perspective goes on a journey with those of us on stage. A silent bystander but the last and most important piece of the puzzle. And the stage door is where the two finally get to meet. After going through so much together. Living, breathing, laughing, crying, loving together. It's the portal that bleeds fantasy and reality. For now, they are vacant. Calm. But the winds have hopefully changed direction. See you soon, old friend.

**John McCrea**



The Apollo Theatre

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