IN THE FLESH

Brian McFarlane talks to Margaret Tyzack, co-star of Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads, and latest in the long line of distinguished British performers visiting our shores.

It used to be claimed that overseas theatre stars only visited Australia when their careers were in decline, that they took in the colonies to boost sagging incomes and reputations. When one considers the recent tour of Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads, originally designed for television and now beautifully adapted to the stage, with Maggie Smith and Margaret Tyzack each solo-starring in the two monologues that make up the bill, it is clearly not possible to maintain this point of view any longer. If it ever was.

Here, without any shadow of a doubt, we have two magnificent actresses at the height of their powers, and no-one who cares for the theatre would have wanted to miss the chance to see them strut their stuff. Granted that they had the advantage of Bennett’s superb scripts, subtly evoking in each character a world of disappointment without her being destroyed by this, and of Anthony Page’s direction which, according to Margaret Tyzack, helped them to accommodate this most intimate of dramatic forms to the vastness of Her Majesty’s Theatre. Granted, too, that there may be local actresses who could have played the roles of vicar’s tippling wife and middle-class widow facing severe shocks. However, can
anyone seriously not have wanted to see what Smith and Tyzack, each with a half-century of experience and réclame behind her (and, no doubt, more ahead), could make of such writing; what kinds of densely textured worlds they might create as, solo, they move about that large stage? Are we merely being starstruck to want to see in the flesh those whose skills and reputations we know only from filmed images?

It is perhaps understandable that actors, for whom presumably there are never enough roles to go around, may in the past have objected to overseas, mainly British, luminaries descending here and taking the leading roles while locals made up the supporting cast. It is also perhaps arguable that it was better to have the secondary parts than none at all, if the lure of the big name was what enabled the production to take place. And in these days of jet travel, when Britain or America is only, as someone has said, 'a bad night's sleep away', there seems to be plenty of evidence that Australians are making their way in the various media of the Northern Hemisphere. With three of the four leads in Van Helsing, currently showing in Melbourne cinemas, played by Australian actors (Hugh Jackman, David Wenham and Richard Roxburgh) and Nicole Kidman and Cate Blanchett divvying up most of the available female leads in international films, it is getting harder to sustain the idea of one-way traffic in which Australia is left to pay tribute to UK or US actors on or off the skids.

When one considers that as long ago as the 1940s and 1950s, celebrities such as Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh or Sybil Thorndike and Ralph Richardson or Katharine Hepburn were appearing on Melbourne stages, that on-the-skids argument doesn't seem ever to have been generally valid. It is true that, in the early 1950s, Jessie Matthews (Larger than Life) and Evelyn Laye, with husband Frank Lawton (September Tide), were past the days of their West End glory, though they were still certainly worth watching; it is true that Diana Barrymore was only worth watching for all the wrong reasons in Light Up the Sky; it is true that Michael Redgrave, two decades later and no longer in brilliant health or in full command of his lines, in Voyage Round my Father, was not the compelling figure he had once been. But in the balance, those earlier named, along with others such as Margaret Rutherford (The Happiest Days of Your Life), Anthony Quayle and Diana Wynyard in the touring Stratford productions of the early 1950s that John Rickard has discussed in an earlier Meanjin (vol. 61, no. 2, 2002) or Dulcie Gray in Tea and Sympathy (1956) or Roger Livesey and Ursula Jeans (The Reluctant Debutante, 1956) or Judi Dench and Donald Sinden with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1970, or Joyce Grenfell twice doing her virtuoso
monologist turns in the 1960s, far outweigh those whose glamour and reputations may have been seen as slightly tarnished. In very recent times, two major character actresses, Patricia Routledge and Miriam Margolyes, have played iconic British roles in two famous British comedies: as, respectively, imperious Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and batty Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*. There is no sense in which these or most of the other imports could be seen as having exceeded their shelf life.

When one turns to film, the argument is perhaps a little less persuasive. Very recently, I have found myself asking what on earth this or that British actor is doing in one of our locally produced films—for instance Eleanor Bron as an improbable Italian matchmaker in upcountry Victoria in *Love's Brother*, or Pete Postlethwaite as a tax inspector traversing the same territory in *Strange Bedfellows*. Both are very respected character players but the international chances for these two films are surely not greatly strengthened by their presence. The same might be said of several other overseas actors who have been involved in films here since the 1970s revival. But film is a different kettle of economic worries from the stage. Clearly, if it is to be profitable, a film will have to reach a very much larger audience, preferably an international one, and a famous name may help the production to get off the ground in the first place and then to attract punters here and overseas for the finished article.

The days of Australian obeisance to our overseas betters are now passed (cultural obeisance, that is; certainly not political). This doesn't mean we are indifferent to seeing the world's best up close and personal, whether it's a pop idol at the Tennis Centre whom you could just as easily—more easily—listen to on CD, or Margaret Tyzack and Maggie Smith breaking our hearts in *Talking Heads*.

BMcF: You've been a star of British films, television and theatre for forty-odd years ...
MT: Oh, over fifty—fifty-three to be exact!
BMcF: Was there anything in your family background that prompted you to the stage?
MT: No. None whatever. The acting career came about by chance really. Someone came to school to teach what used to be called elocution. I did a few poetry things with her, admired her enormously and thought I'd like to teach the same subjects; so I sat for the entrance exam to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and was accepted. She went on to be Elizabeth Pursey, the voice coach at RADA, and was a great influence in my life. I went into RADA without the appropriate academic
qualifications for the teaching course, so found myself on the acting course instead. I went directly from school. I never had the other jobs you sometimes hear of people having to do to fill gaps.

BMcF: You made your stage debut in 1951 with the Chesterfield Civic Theatre, I think ...

MT: Yes, I was one of the bystanders in the opening scene of *Pygmalion*, and from then on went on to play leads every week. Rep began to peter out when television blossomed. People began to stay at home, and the repertory system that I knew, and the way I knew it, was dead. Apart from the Chesterfield Civic Theatre, I did seasons with Worthing Rep and the Sheffield Playhouse, which was fortnightly.

BMcF: It must have been hideously hard work but I suppose enjoyable.

MT: You might suppose the 'enjoyable' bit but the 'hideously hard work' was right! You did a play a week for fifty weeks a year; that was my first job and it went on for two years. You rehearsed each play for a fortnight of half days; you had three plays on the go at once: rehearsing one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and you were playing in one at night. And after the Saturday when the one at night finished, on the next Monday, the one you'd been rehearsing in the afternoon moved up and you played it before an audience. The one you'd been rehearsing in the morning moved to the afternoon, and a new play was introduced for the morning rehearsal, so that all the time you were rehearsing two plays and performing one.

BMcF: There must have been less arduous factory piece-work by the sound of it.

MT: Well, it was very different! You earned—I mean, I earned in 1952–53 as a leading player in repertory theatre £4 10s 0d, out of which you paid for your digs, all your food, and—this is what people can't believe, but it's true—you supplied all your own clothes. Mostly we did plays that had just been on in the West End, and mostly we were playing very smart people. It was pre-*Look Back in Anger*, pre-T-shirts, pre-sweatshirts, and you borrowed what you could. There was a milliner in town, who would lend us hats and she had a note in the program, of course. You dyed your shoes different colours; you got some white gloves and you dyed them. I'm not saying it was like down the mines, but it was physically very hard work.

BMcF: Morning, afternoon and evening!

MT: But that was usual. A few of the prettier people went into plays in London, which wasn't necessarily good for the rest of their career because sometimes they were never heard of again. And one or two went off and had short or longer
careers in the movies, but most people started in the English repertory system. When I went to Sheffield I joined the fortnightly rep with the late, great Geoffrey Ost. Patrick McGooohan had been there; so had Peter Barkworth, Paul Eddington. The Harry Hanson was also in town, a famous weekly rep with companies all over the country. Kenneth Fortescue was doing twice-nightly shows, and there was a touring company; and the City of Sheffield filled those four theatres week after week before the onslaught of television. There was a bit of BBC but not a great deal and not many had television sets in the early 1950s, though after the Coronation it began to catch on.

BMcF: As I understand it you were in London first in 1959 with the Royal Court.

MT: I can’t remember dates, but it certainly was at the Court. I did a Sunday night performance of a play called Progress in the Park with Lindsay Anderson as director. You did these Sunday night productions for £2, and if you got a ‘money job’ you could leave. I did that play with Tom Bell, and then I later went back to do The Ginger Man with Nicol Williamson. Then in 1984 I did the first production of Tom & Viv, with Tom Wilkinson, there.

BMcF: I also saw you when you and Judy Parfitt took over the leads in Vivat! Vivat Regina! in 1971 ...

MT: I didn’t enjoy that play at all. I hated the whole experience because it was far too under-rehearsed and the company was too used to being with other people, and most of them weren’t happy having to change what they did because they heard a different voice. No, completely blank as far as I’m concerned.

BMcF: What are some of the other stage roles you particularly cherish? Is Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf one of them?

MT: Yes, very much so. I enjoyed playing it because I felt that I understood Martha. I had seen Uta Hagen, the first and greatest Martha, and when people used to talk to me about other actresses who played her I used to think: what are they talking about?—I saw Uta Hagen! I saw her in it with Arthur Hill and, yes, she was absolutely wonderful. That was early in 1964 and it has stayed in my mind as one of the utterly superb things I’ve ever seen in the theatre.

BMcF: To turn to television, you’re very fondly remembered as Winifred in the first adaptation of The Forsyte Saga [1967]. Did that seem like a turning point for you?

MT: Yes, I suppose, but I’d already done many televisions before it. Before I did Vivat Vivat, I hadn’t been on stage for nine years, because I’d been doing television back-to-back. What was a bit irksome at the time was that people only
remembered the old Winifred at the end of the series, and I got endless parts for characters that were thirty years older than I was. However, it made me better known at the time, and yes, it was a sort of turning point.

**BMcF:** There's a great moment of you comforting Eric Porter as Soames, with just a gesture; I've never forgotten it.

**MT:** She was a wonderful character to play and she understood Soames too. It's what Galsworthy wrote, it came from his experience of life and his powers of observation. As far as I'm concerned, it was a lovely part to which I was suited.

**BMcF:** Was the filming of *The Forsyte Saga* a big prestige thing?

**MT:** No, you didn't have any of that bullshit then. All this ghastly celebrity-chasing! No, we had, I think, Kenneth More and Nyree [Dawn Porter] on the front cover of the *Radio Times* when the covers of the *Radio Times* were the kind of thing that you would even have in your house. There was no booklet, no banging of drums. It wasn't a particularly 'big thing'. There had been massive classic serials before it: many of the Dickens novels had been done; there had been big classic serials like *Kenilworth*. *The Forsyte Saga* just happened to be a bit longer.

**BMcF:** Twenty-six weeks.

**MT:** Yes, I did twenty-three of the episodes. I was only meant to do about twelve. Eric did the longest stint, and I did the next longest.

**BMcF:** And the BBC didn't have a big publicity department selling it?

**MT:** Not that I was aware of. I don't know what happened behind the scenes but on the surface of it, no, there wasn't the fanfare there would be now.

**BMcF:** Did it seem like a luxuriously appointed serial from the point of view of production design, costume?

**MT:** No, no, quite the reverse. Most of our costumes weren't new. They didn't need to be, either. So much money is wasted now, thrown away. A lot of our things were just makeovers. You know, a new skirt attached to an existing costume, and not all our hats were new. Our wigs of course were new. It was in black and white, it was good, first-rate in fact. The producer was a very good man called Donald Wilson, who died a couple of years ago, well into his nineties. He loved *The Forsyte Saga* all his life, named his daughter Holly, and gathered around him a cast that he wanted. This was before the days when the BBC had to employ someone who might have been known in *EastEnders* or some other soap. Those were the days when a director could cast precisely whom he wanted, for their suitability for the role. On my very first television, which I did with John Neville, I went to see the director, who courteously asked me if I'd mind reading a little bit. So I did, and he said 'Thank you very much, Margaret.' It was called
Another Man's Life, and the job was mine. He didn't have to double-check whether some Boston company who had put the money into it knew me or not, or whether I'd appeared in a soap. When I started, to be in a soap was the kiss of death to serious work, whereas now it is the open sesame. I think people have far more contempt for television than they used to, when we were doing those wonderful classics.

BMcF: Some stage and film people I've interviewed said they were worried about going into television.

MT: Not now. Maybe a few decades back they were worried about television because of possible overexposure, but that was rare. But different things drive television now. I'm not saying it's right or wrong; I'm just saying that's how it was and it's not how it is now. And there is still some wonderful stuff coming out of television.

BMcF: You were lucky, you had things like The First Churchills, for which you got a BAFTA Award, Cousin Bette and I, Claudius. This was pretty prestigious stuff, wasn't it?

MT: Yes, I know, I was very, very fortunate to get the best of all that.

BMcF: To turn to the present and the theatre. How does Talking Heads rate in difficulty, as compared, say, with a part in a more usual play?

MT: Well, you have no-one else to bounce off. You are alone, you and the audience, and it's daunting. You have nobody else's energy on stage with you. You have no-one to throw your line in a slightly different way. There's Alan's wonderful character of course, and his superb writing, but it is daunting for a lot of reasons.

BMcF: What about the sheer memory thing?

MT: Don't let's go into that. That's a technical thing, it's nothing to do with the work. You've still got to remember it whether you are on stage with fifty people or doing a Shakespeare. That's just like telling the carpenter to bring his hammer with him.

BMcF: Did you ever see Ruth Draper or Joyce Grenfell doing monologues?

MT: No, I never did. I saw Joyce Grenfell's work on television. But this is very different really; this is not personal, this is Alan's work. Ruth Draper and Joyce did their own stuff. I think they wrote their own material.

BMcF: What you had in common with Joyce Grenfell was, I thought, a kind of critique of English middle-class life.

MT: Yes, I suppose so. There's nothing vicious about it, not in my monologue anyway, though there is probably some in Maggie's [Maggie Smith's 'Love Among the Lentils']. It's certainly more caustic.
BMcF: Your character Muriel ends by saying 'Don’t think of me as a tragic sort of person'; perhaps not, but she is heroic. Did it strike you that there is something heroic about Muriel?

MT: No, I would never think lofty things about a character I’m playing. It would be like standing in the wings and saying I’m going on to be great. You don’t say that. I wouldn’t think about Muriel like that—as heroic; it would be very dangerous. I could look at Maggie or Patricia Routledge or Julie Walters and think such things but I wouldn’t think it about my own performance. I think that my performance would be appalling if I thought I was heroic, it would be ghastly. She’s just ‘soldiering on’.

BMcF: Do you feel you, as a performer in a very English play, have to make any kinds of adjustments when you’re touring in, say, Australia or America?

MT: No, an odd word maybe, that you think people really don’t know, you might change but not otherwise. But I was worried about doing this very intimate play in such a vast theatre. However, the director, Anthony Page, was very helpful about this. People haven’t actually given him the credit for what he has done, for me at least, in bringing the play up to size to ‘fill’ a large theatre. He’s a fine director and I don’t think anyone has mentioned his name in the context of this play. He recalled that Alan Bennett had said of Muriel that she’s being ‘overheard’, and Anthony’s way with her was for her to deal with the audience as a confidant, or as if she’s talking in a lecture hall to the Women’s Institute. This sort of advice gave me something technical to work with. This is a woman who speaks the language of the home counties, the stockbroker belt, and who is in most ways quite ordinary. But what happens to her wouldn’t be out of place in Greek tragedy.

BMcF: How hard is it now to maintain anything like a film career in England?

MT: I never had a film career. I just pop in and do bits and bobs whenever they come up. I didn’t particularly want to do more films.

BMcF: How did you first get into films?

MT: Well, I suppose somebody rang up the agents, saw your picture in the Spotlight and you went off and saw them. I don’t really remember.

BMcF: Your first was called Passport to Shame [1959]. You are Eddie Constantine’s secretary. People are smuggling girls into London for illicit purposes and so on.

MT: Yes, something like that. When I did 2001, Stanley Kubrick had watched a film called Ring of Spies [1963] in order to look at Bill Sylvester, because he wanted to see some American and Canadian actors without having to fly back to their countries of origin. He saw me in it, liked what I did in it, and invited me for an
interview and wrote that part in 2001. That was Elena. I didn't know at the time she had a Russian accent. That's how that started.

BMcF: I was going to ask you about Ring of Spies, because I'm interested in Robert Tronson who directed it and a lot of other films around the 1960s. An espionage piece, wasn't it?

MT: It was a true story about the Portland spy case, yes. It had been in the news a bit before that time. When I was making the film the woman I played [Elizabeth Gee] was in prison.

BMcF: You had the leading female role.

MT: Yes, opposite the late Bernard Lee.

BMcF: You did several films around the early 1960s, including Highway to Battle, directed by Ernest Morris, who I think has been underrated.

MT: I remember Highway to Battle with Vincent Ball ... Sweet chap. He was in my year at drama school. He'd been in the Australian Air Force, then came to RADA. A lot of people at drama school with me came straight from school, but some of the blokes had been in the army or the air force.

BMcF: And you were in a comedy called Let's Get Married for Peter Graham Scott, with Anthony Newley and Anne Aubrey.

MT: Do you know, I can't remember it. I do remember the director, though, just saying he wanted me to 'make like Hattie Jacques', which wasn't very helpful to me. I do remember at the time thinking how immensely inventive and clever Anthony Newley was and I always felt there was more to him than his later career might have led you to believe. He was a wonderful Artful Dodger in Oliver Twist.

BMcF: What do you remember of your illustrious leading lady in The Whispers—Edith Evans?

MT: I didn't have scenes with Edith in that but I did in the television version of Waters of the Moon, with Dame Sibyl Thorndike, Lewis Casson, Edith Evans and wonderful Cyril Raymond who played the husband in Brief Encounter, and the late, great Kathleen Harrison. I remember Dame Edith as wonderful from that, but in the film my scenes were all with Eric Portman, a fine, versatile actor.

BMcF: When working on 2001 and A Clockwork Orange, did you find Kubrick as exacting to work for as people say?

MT: He was far, far more exacting with the technicians than he was with the actors. I always had a secret feeling that he didn't quite comprehend the actors' processes, as he did the technicians'. He was certainly no more exacting than many other directors. I found him direct, honest, straightforward, powerful, yes, but certainly not cruel, a fine director, a fine leader, which directors have to be.
BMcF: Did these films seem like exciting experiences at the time?
MT: Yes, you knew it was important if it was a Kubrick film, and I have very fond memories of him. He had a nice 'chortly' sense of humour.

BMcF: Both of these films look remarkable apart from their themes, and I'm always interested to know how aware actors were of matters of production design.
MT: Well, it was always around you and you thought wow, look at that, how tremendous, how's that going to work?

BMcF: Do you remember a gentle underrated film you were in called A Touch of Love?
MT: Yes, I do. That used to be shown as an example of how nurses shouldn't behave. I was a nurse of some kind but I don't know that I ever saw the film. It was directed by Waris Hussein, who did a lot of very good television. He went out to America, came back to England for a little while, went back again, a very fine director.

BMcF: It's based on the Margaret Drabble novel The Millstone. If you are doing a film based on a novel, do you make a point of reading the novel?
MT: I didn't on that but I certainly did with The Forsyte Saga and I, Claudius. It supports you, the actor; it makes you feel as if you've got a stronger basis.

BMcF: In Mrs Dalloway (1997), you have that wonderful scene with two of my favorite actors, John Standing and Oliver Ford Davies, where you are putting some preposterous scheme to them over lunch ...
MT: I played a barking-mad lady, who thought everyone who came back from the First World War should immediately be sent to Canada. That was her mad, strongly held theory and the look on John Standing and Oliver Ford Davies' faces where they are trying to be frightfully polite! Oliver keeps eating and this is a worry to me as Lady Bruton, because I don't think he is concentrating. That was enormous fun to do, and those are wonderful actors. I'd worked with John a couple of times before, once in a horror movie called The Legacy. To do that scene in Mrs Dalloway, I had to hold on to the firm belief—never for one second could I think it was funny. It's like not thinking Muriel seemed heroic: I couldn't be thinking Lady Bruton was funny. That's for other people to think, not me.

BMcF: How about playing the Queen in Charles and Diana?
MT: I forget that. I shouldn't think if she's got any sense the Queen ever looked at it. We were like cardboard cutouts, it was totally uncontroversial. It was totally and utterly innocuous. I thought the directors were mad to have cast me.
BMcF: Though you thought they were mad, you did it. Did you ever turn anything down?

MT: Oh, I've turned down things constantly. People say to me 'Oh, why did you do that?' and I say 'You should see the ones that got away!' It depends upon your circumstances at the time, and the advice you are given, or the belief or the confidence that you have, or whether the roof is leaking. I don't think there's anything romantic about acting and I often tell people who say they'd love to meet so-and-so 'Why on earth would you think their offstage persona is anything like their onstage one?'

BMcF: I do think actors are more interesting than the national average. Is there part of yourself, apart from your physical self, that goes into every performance?

MT: I suppose so. I think possibly that thought has grown on me over the years. I used to think that being very versatile was a good thing; now it's an extremely bad thing. Now there's the proliferation of casting directors, which was never so when I was young, and some of them with far too much power. Some of the second-rate ones only want you to do what you've done before.

BMcF: You have so often been a memorably sympathetic presence in films and TV that I wondered if you'd had much experience of playing harsher types.

MT: Oh yes. I was the tough-talking Mrs Baldwin in His Girl Friday for the great director Jack O'Brien, and the mother in Tartuffe, both on the Royal National stage, and I was pretty nasty in an episode of Midsomer Murders and an Agatha Christie [Nemesis] on TV. And Martha, in Virginia Woolf, isn't what you'd call an obviously sympathetic character, is she?

BMcF: Do you have preferences among television, stage and film?

MT: I think I prefer television. You don't have to repeat yourself over and over again, which I can't stand and which happens with a long run. When I say television, I'm talking about the ideal television, not something you might get involved in against your better judgement. And remember, I was in television's heyday and I played a lot of very subtle, emotional and delicate parts that were perfect for the talking heads of television.