

War Winning Women: June Ballinger and “Remembrance Day”

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by Natasha Dawsen, Editor

We're honored to get a few minutes of June Ballinger's time.

The British-American actress has worked on Broadway, off-Broadway, regional theatre and television. She is a member of the Ensemble Studio Theatre for over two



decades and a member of The Actors Center. She helms The Passage Theatre Company in Trenton, NJ workshopping quality works since 1997. She also teaches the

craft in her community. Her latest project, which came from Passage Theatre is Remembrance Day. A daring one-person piece about someone who helped change the course of history and basically save the world during WWII. Incidentally, that person was her mother. She will present this at New York's legendary 13th Street Repertory Theater this September.

We hear a lot about inspiration – or Muse – that drives an artist. What inspires you?

My inspiration comes from trust in my intuition... someone once referred to it as 'magical thinking'. I get an intuitive notion about something and follow it.

I missed the event of my mother's death almost 4 years ago after being by her the bedside for two months. I had snuck into NYC for a writing workshop fully expecting to see her once home in the afternoon. I told myself immediately that she died whilst I was away writing about her so I am to write her story...of which I had only fragments. This play is what came from acting upon that intuition. Intuition is a theme in Remembrance Day. My mother was born in North Shields, a seaport town in the North of England. She was born with a caul – a thin membrane – covering her face. Her Scottish Father was furious when the midwife tossed it in the fire. There is a lot of superstition surrounding those born with a caul such as they'll never drown (handy being born near the sea). And a caul bearer has the gift of second sight. Well, my mother always told my brother and I to trust our intuition so I assume her caul legend inspired that from.

This is a true story inspired by the life of my mother and discovered through letters, clippings photos a personal diary and a deep investigation on my part into personal memories, dreams, a lot of research and a trust that if I am inspired to write something I could not support it might be true. It was quite eerie to then discover in later research that what I had "created" for the sake of the drama actually was the truth. I feel I have given my mother the voice she could not use during her lifetime.

Tell us about your play ... and why you wrote it?

I think I explained the "why" so here is the "what."

It's about secrets, memory, regrets, romance, loss, principles, fate, heroes, war and ghosts. It's about failing to achieve what one wants but being ennobled in the ef-



fort.

But to elaborate, Remembrance Day centers on a British woman, Nancy Annan, who had been a Wren in the Royal Navy during her youth in WWII England. She was smart and of a certain character and was selected to work on Ultra Secret at Bletchley Park in a privileged circle. She signed the Official Secrets Act thereby swearing to erase her identity and all mention of the contribution she made in ending the war in Britain...a lifetime vow. She would never be able to share her stories and achievements with children and friends.

The play begins in 2005 when 80 yr old Nancy returns to England for a Remembrance Day ceremony with her daughter, June. Remembrance Day is a national holiday in which one remembers and honors soldiers of past wars during a 2-minute silence (like our Veterans Day

only the entire nation comes to a full stop). It is June's hope that after this visit her mother will be inspired to finally tell her all the secrets of her life before memory fails. Nancy wonders how she will be remembered, when so much essential to herself she felt required to keep to herself.

The "memories" Nancy recalls are silently realized during the "two - minute" silence utilizing the audience as her witness. Nancy's story gives an intimate look inside Bletchley and the code-breaking machines, an insight into Nancy's pride in her work with the team that created the world's first electronic computer, her romances, tragedies and unfailing resilience throughout. Her post-war migration to America as a war bride brings implosion and silence for Nancy. Like many women of the 50s and 60s she is discouraged- forbidden- to work and had to content herself with motherhood. Keep the peace became her motto. Don't make a fuss. And keep the secret. But looking back at her life from old age she sees where she was complicit in what became a life of compromise. She has a discovery at the end, however, that helps her make a decision.

What do you want most in your chosen profession? It's OK to say "fame" or "wealth."

To regularly work in the theatre! I have been blessed to always have a career in live theatre as I am artistic director of a small Equity theatre in Trenton, NJ. But I stepped away from acting for 15 years to produce and build this theatre. I returned to acting 7 years ago so it's now a somewhat double life for me that swings more heavily towards the performing these days. Now I am in my 60s, I find myself busier as an actor..."I crossed the Crone Barrier" I tell people.

Sally Field and Paul Newman both said of their profession... "it's all I can do." Is this all you can do?

It's not all I can do but it's all I want to do right now. I continue produce and I enjoy that but my true joy is in performing. What keeps my interest, as an Artistic Director is the socially responsible mission of my theatre and its ability to make changes in community. But as a friend pointed out the other day, I can take that value with me in all I do.

Along those lines, if you couldn't do this, what would you do?

If God forbid I could not act I would go deeper with exploring my voice as a writer. My experience of myself as a writer is newer to me.

Last words?

Men as well as women like this play due to its subject... WWII enthusiasts, cypher experts and historians and particularly women. It has been described (by a man) as “the finest feminist play written without the anger...a woman who loses her destiny but never her character” I think this play can serve a a reminder of what many women endured during the “mad men” era and how we must own our voices if we are going to move forward.

Some historical bits- Nancy had worked on Ultra Secret directly under Max Newman, mentor to Alan Turing, at Bletchley Park's Newmanry. Because she signed the Official Secrets Act with an oath to keep all her work secret for the rest of her life. She, like all British people, took this to heart. So none of our family knew about Bletchley Park until it was revealed through a shocking book titled Ultra Secret published in the 1970s. That book rocked the world as no one had any idea that the British had won the war thanks to their astonishing code breaking abilities and the creation of what was actually the world's first electronic computer. So not until my 20s did I finally know WHERE she had worked during the war...but very little else. She told me she was “taking the secret to her grave” and that books such as Enigma and more said “a lot but NOT everything”. I dare not make up what is still under wraps but I just returned from Bletchley this July and a conversation with the Bletchley Park historian. He verified that some of the work around Colossus is still classified but could not tell me what... he is in the dark as well.

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