

Full House

JULY 26, 2015



By the time this article is done, one of these three ladies will have been soundly spanked. But which one?

They are the three stars of *Full House*, a 1935 comedy by the Welsh actor, playwright and songwriter Ivor Novello (1893-1951).



Like many a gay man of the theatre, notably Sir Frederick Ashton, Novello was well attuned to the appeal of spanking. And to begin to prove it, here he is during a holiday on Long Island in 1919, in a snap from his own photo album:



The identity of Novello's girl is lost in the mists of time, but the older man on the left is the American actor Clifton Webb, also gay, and the girl getting stern treatment at his hands appears to be the 25-year-old dancer Ada Mae Weeks, with whom he was then starring on Broadway in the musical *Listen, Lester*. Exactly forty years later, Webb had another brush with spanking when he witnessed the fate of Carol Lynley in *Holiday for Lovers*:



I digress, but at least I'm on the right side of the Atlantic for what comes next. Ivor Novello spent the very early 1930s in Hollywood, where he not only acted in a few films but also wrote the dialog script for one. It's probably his most uncharacteristic, but also his best remembered piece of writing: the first talkie version of *Tarzan the Ape Man*. Since it's a pre-code picture, one early scene shows the original Jane, Maureen O'Sullivan, strip off her outer garments and start to clean up her face whilst wearing only a silky slip. Her *faux pas* is to do this in front of her father, who tries to make his excuses and leave. But as she starts to apply cleansing cream, Jane retorts:

JANE: Darling, don't be silly, you're not embarrassed by me. Why, you bathed me sometimes, and very nearly spanked me too. Several times.

PARKER: Very nearly.

JANE: You know, perhaps if you actually had I wouldn't be so obstinate. And I am. Very obstinate.



Maureen O'Sullivan contemplates the possibility of being spanked

By the time *Tarzan the Ape Man* was released in April 1932, its author had returned to the other side of the ocean and was appearing in London's West End in one of his own plays, *I Lived With You*. It opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre on March 23, and Novello played opposite 25-year-old Ursula Jeans as a pair of lovebirds, Felix and Glad:



In the third act, they look forward to their life together in marriage, and discuss the prospect that they will fight. Felix knows exactly what will happen:

FELIX: I will beat you to show how much I hate you – and then I will beat you to show how much I love you.

GLAD: And how'll I know which it is?

FELIX: You won't – but I shall know. Shall I beat you now just to show you?

He doesn't, and so the elegant Ursula Jeans...



... leaves our story regrettably unspanked – but her elder sister Isabel will enter it later, and she *will* be appearing in a spanking scene.

(Don't forget, either, that Ursula has just over seven years to go before she plays Kate in *[The Taming of the Shrew](#)*...)

What I'm trying to establish, of course, is that spanking references were firing off all over Ivor Novello's writing in the first half of the 1930s. And if you need more convincing, we could go via *Fresh Fields*, which opened at the Criterion Theatre on January 5, 1933, starring Lilian Braithwaite, another of the three ladies in the photograph up at the top of the article. But we'll leave that comedy for [another time](#) and, for now, go straight on to 1935 for one last preliminary, that will also give us a clear bearing on the way Novello's thoughts were developing. In *Glamorous Night*, which opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on May 2, he played the inventor of television – the imaginary and romantic Anthony Allen, not the real and lugubrious John Logie Baird – who travels to a Ruritanian country where he meets and falls in love with an opera singer, Militza Hajos, played by Mary Ellis. Here they are:



There's probably not much point adding that Novello's role was later taken over by Barry Sinclair, who went on to spank Patricia Dainton in the 1952 London premiere of *Friendly Relations*, because Anthony Allen plays no part in the moment that interests us. (He doesn't even get the girl in the end.) No, the one the tantrum-prone singer needs to watch out for is her maid Phoebe, played by Minnie Rayner:



After one particular tantrum early in the play, Phoebe comforts her mistress: 'There, there – come to Phoebe – Phoebe knows. Naughty little thing! If you weren't so strong I'd give you a good smack-bottom!' But naughty little Militza doesn't seem terribly worried by this...



In fact, it makes her laugh!

The story so far, then. Matinee idol Ivor Novello has regularly written plays that put his leading ladies into positions where there's a reasonable chance that they might be spanked, but has never quite managed to turn the situation into anything more than a piquant prospect. He's what you might call a 'nearly man' whose track record might be visually represented like this:



But that's about to change, when *Full House* opens at the Haymarket in August 1935...

The story concerns Frynne Rodney, whose business affairs are in a mess and who might have to go to prison for fraud. How will she wipe out her £1000 debt? Why, turn her house into a gambling club! Her son John can be her legal advisor and her hypochondriac sister Lola Leadenhall can help her to run it – Lola, an ex-actress who used to play vamps, and who is married to but separated from the well-off young Archie Leadenhall... She now lounges around on a chaise longue pretending to be an invalid and living off Frynne. Archie, meanwhile, wants to marry again, and the object of his attention is Lady April Hannington, a horsy Olympic athlete whom the script describes as 'a fresh-looking girl with a hearty manner'. And those are our three principals pictured at the top of the article. In the first production Frynne was played by Lilian Braithwaite (though the role was originally intended for Zena Dare) and Lola by Isabel

Jeans (sister of Ursula, and another late recasting of a role written for Phyllis Dare, Zena's sister). Completing the line-up was Heather Thatcher as Lady April.



In the first act, April visits Frynne's house, en route to a horsy encounter and so wearing jodhpurs. She and Lola end up alone together, and their tense, brittle conversation slides towards the fact that Lola and Archie are going to have to make their separation formal and get a divorce... a course that will run smoother because April's father happens to be the president of the divorce court. Then an even more touchy subject comes up when April accuses Lola of hiding her 'raddled' skin under a thick layer of cosmetics. Lola dabs at her face with a handkerchief to demonstrate that there's nothing on there, but April keeps up the assault:

APRIL: Yes – it won't come off. It's enamel.

LOLA: It's not enamel. It's me – my skin's famous.

APRIL: Anything's famous if it's been there long enough.

LOLA: You little beast.

(She suddenly pushes April.)



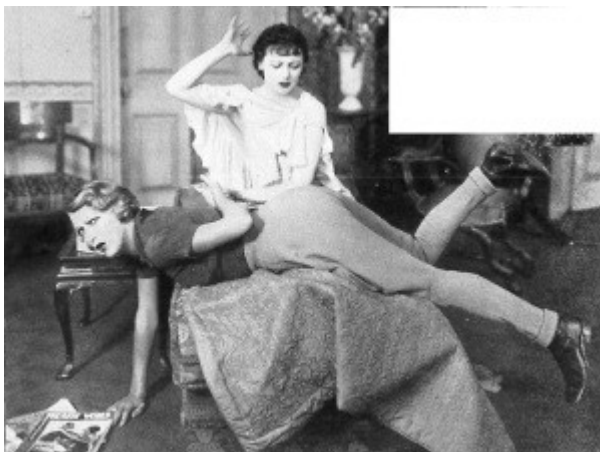
APRIL (pushing her back): Don't you push me.

LOLA: Don't you push me!

APRIL: Push you! I'll smash you. There's a Hannington temper and this is it.

LOLA: Don't you touch me – don't you touch me!

(April takes Lola by the shoulders and shakes her. Lola suddenly puts a half Nelson on her and bends her down, and puts her across her knee, and smacks her very hard indeed.)



APRIL: Ouch – ouch!

LOLA: Enamel, is it? Enamel! Been there for years, has it? I'll show you.

(Frynn, followed by Archie and John, enters from upstairs.)

ARCHIE: *Good God!*

FRYNN: *Lola! What are you doing? Are you mad?*

LOLA: *Yes, mad. And like it. Had enough, you little prig?*

(She throws April away, who sits on the floor amazed.)



APRIL (amazed): *My God – you’re strong.*

LOLA: *Strong! That wasn’t strength, it was epilepsy!*

And with that, Frynn and Archie escort the hysterical Lola from the room, while John, fascinated by April on the floor, asks her if she feels alright. ‘It all depends where you mean,’ replies April, the first of a series of oblique references to her smarting bottom. She then explains:

APRIL: *We were having an argument.*

JOHN: *About Archie?*

APRIL: *No – about skin. I said she was raddled and she hit me.*

JOHN: *Well, it’s not a bad way of getting hit. Why did she hit you?*

APRIL: *She pushed me – then I pushed her – and suddenly she’d twisted me round over her knee and started thumping my –*

And John cuts in quickly to forestall an indelicate allusion. A bit further on into the conversation, she gets a little haughty about the brand of cigarette she has been offered, and John tells her firmly, ‘Look here, my girl, don’t you vent your tantrums on me. I didn’t put you over my knee.’ (‘I’d like to see you try,’ is her retort.) And when she exits

the scene, John tells his mother, 'Lady April Hannington has departed, nursing her – grievances.'

And nursing her bottom too, of course. There's a fair amount of dialog to be got through while April is being spanked, not to mention the entrance of the other three characters down the onstage staircase, so it is necessarily quite an extended spanking! And it was considered one of the play's real highlights: 'You must go to see Heather Thatcher get her spanking in the good old-fashioned way from Isabel Jeans,' exhorted the critic in *The Stage*, while *The Times* summed up the play as being about 'how Lady April came, was smacked, but conquered'. (She ends up, as you may have guessed, with John; Archie and Lola don't need that divorce after all.) The society journal *The Tatler* really went to town on the spanking, illustrating its review with a caricature of the scene captioned 'When Girl Spanks Girl':



'For me,' wrote the reviewer, 'none of Mr Novello's desperately bright dialogue had the comic vitality of the moment when Lola wrestled with the Olympic runner and heartily spanked her across the divan.' The following week, it gave up a whole page to photographs of the scene, part of a set specially posed on September 11, three weeks into the London run.



And according to Ivor Novello's biographer, Paul Webb:

‘The sight of Miss Thatcher’s bottom being spanked may have led to more gentlemen of a certain sort sliding into the dress circle, for there was an electric sense of sex in the air during that scene.’

But we’re getting ahead of the story. The play was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain on July 26, eighty years to the day before this article was published. (The play was, opined his lordship, ‘an unworthy piece of coarse work from this author’.) Leslie Henson’s production opened on August 12 for a week’s try-out at the King’s Theatre, Southsea, then transferred to the West End from August 21. The casting wasn’t the only thing to have changed in those last weeks before opening night. Novello originally wrote the play under the title *House of Cards*, referring to Frynne’s gambling establishment. It was then retitled *Full House* – a bold decision, because the phrase ‘full house’, displayed outside a theater, usually meant there was no point trying to get tickets. It didn’t do the play any harm, though: it ran for 185 performances at the Haymarket, then toured in the early spring of 1936 after its London closure on February 1. It toured again in 1940, and this time Novello got his ideal casting, with the Dare sisters playing Frynne and Lola, while Heather Thatcher refilled Lady April’s jodhpurs before the part was taken over in mid-tour by Diana Beaumont:



The play’s subsequent life has several distinct dimensions, beginning on Boxing Day 1936 when the first overseas production opened at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne; it played till March and then had a short run in Adelaide. Betty Tait was Lola and Judy Thomas was April, who respectively gave and got what the reviewer in *The Age* called ‘an electrifying smacking’, which was again the moment chosen by another journal’s caricaturist to represent the play visually:



1941 saw further productions in Sydney and Montreal (the later with Mildred Mitchell and Kathleen Spotswood), while in Britain, *Full House* went into repertory, and was performed intermittently until at least 1962. There have also been amateur productions in Britain and across the world, ranging from Michigan (1941) to South Africa (1958). Here's one from Hobart, Tasmania, in 1941, with Mollee Dandison spanking Doreen Corcoran:



In 1944, the play was produced by the Jersey Amateur Dramatics Club during the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands. And back in Hobart after the war was well and truly over, Diana Flower, in a skirt rather than riding breeches, found herself across Claire Mitchell's knee:



The very last amateur production that I have been able to trace was in 1967 by the Bunbury Repertory Club in Australia, in which Janet Storey was spanked by Jean Pope.

The play didn't always impress: 'What can one say about a silly bubble of midsummer madness that is designed solely to send wave after wave of titters over the somnolent surface of the audience?' grouched the *Glasgow Herald* about a 1938 production with Joan Carol as Lola and Elizabeth Kentish as April. A 1952 production, with Pauline Williams and Tilsa Page in the roles, drew a choice remark from the *Birmingham Post*: 'Lola Leadenhall seemed only out of character when she spanked Lady April Hannington. Lola seems the one eminently eligible for spanking.'

Over the years, a few actresses of note played in the spanking scene, though it seems that Lola was the role more likely to lead to minor stardom. At least, over the years Lola has been: at Birmingham in 1941, **Betty Bowden**, who five years later was cast as the mother of the title character in the film version of *Just William*; at Bedford in 1950, the future classical actress **Rosemary Harris**, also known as the mother of Jennifer Ehle; at Perth in 1953, **Valerie Lush**, later the aunt in the sitcom *And Mother Makes Three*; and at Bognor Regis in 1954, **Jennifer Wilson**, who went on to star in the 1970s road haulage drama *The Brothers*. Lady Aprils over the years simply haven't gone on to get the same kind of exposure – with one exception...

The BBC produced a television version in 1953, which had two live performances on October 11 and 15. There were some minor amendments to the dialog, one of which suggests that the spanking may have been shortened: when in the stage play Lady April says that Lola 'started thumping my –', the equivalent line on television was: 'She gave me half a dozen on the bags!' Only half a dozen...? Lola was Diana Graves, but this time it was April who was the more noteworthy actress, 35-year-old Avis Scott. Here she is:



She was also an in-vision television continuity announcer, but her claim to fame is that she was eventually sacked by the BBC in 1955 – for being too sexy!