

Friendly Relations

MAY 4, 2015HARRY

The 1952 stage comedy *Friendly Relations* was written by James Liggat (1920-81), an actor who also appeared in the first production. He later became a very highly respected casting director in the British film industry, notably on *Dr No* – so he was partly responsible for Sean Connery becoming James Bond! His daughter, Susie Liggat, works in television and was for a time the producer of *Doctor Who* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*.

The play concerns the complications that arise while an Australian, Michael Barry, is staying for Christmas with the Watson family in Britain. Anne Watson, the elder daughter of the family, plans a romantic conquest, but he is more interested in the family's ward, Margaret Lee. Margaret in turn loves the inarticulate son of the family (the part Liggat wrote for himself), and Michael does the decent thing and enables them to get married. Anne draws the wrong conclusions about what has happened, and domestic mayhem ensues before they ultimately get engaged.

At the end of the second act, Michael tells Anne that she needs 'metaphorically spanking'. At the end of the third act, it becomes more than a metaphor: before they are married, he says, there is something he has to do to her. Here's the script:

MICHAEL: You really are the most spoiled brat it's ever been my misfortune to meet. I hate having to do this, darling, but for the sake of our future happiness I see quite clearly that it's the only way. You're horribly spoiled and you've got to be cured once and for all.

ANNE: No! Don't dare to lay a finger on me. Do you hear? Michael – don't you dare.

MICHAEL: I hate having to do this darling.

He chases and catches her.

ANNE: Don't you dare!

MICHAEL: Sorry, but ...

He carries her, kicking and shouting, to the sofa, and puts her across his knee.

At this point the family comes in to congratulate them on their engagement, but...

Their words die on their lips and they stand aghast at the spectacle of Anne struggling furiously against the spanking which Michael is about to administer as

THE CURTAIN FALLS

James Liggat wrote the play in 1952. The Lord Chamberlain licensed it on August 23, and it opened in Wimbledon in September, then toured before coming to London in December: it opened at St Martin's

Theatre on Boxing Day and ran for about seven months, followed by a brief post-London tour in August 1953. During this period the production and casting changed in several significant ways.

First off, the role of Michael passed between three successive actors, and there were also two Annes. In the initial tour, Michael was played by Derek Bond, who was a film star best known for playing the title role in the 1947 Cavalcanti version of *Nicholas Nickleby*. The girl he was spanking was also a film star (or starlet), Patricia Dainton, who had recently played Steve (the hero's journalist wife) in one of the *Paul Temple* movies. Here she is:



By the London opening in December, Bond had left the show, and his replacement was Barry Sinclair – not such a name to conjure with, and notable mainly because he was Patricia Dainton's husband at the time. By the time the show went back on the road in August, Michael was Roy Purcell and Anne was Joan Forest – neither of them household names, though Purcell did go on to become the President of the Time Lords in *Doctor Who* in 1973.

A play can change in many small ways as it goes through rehearsal and previews and a preliminary tour, and one thing that we know changed about *Friendly Relations* was the spanking scene. As you can see from the script extract above, James Liggat originally envisaged it as a 'curtain scene' requiring split-second timing on the part of the stage manager, so that the curtain comes down before the spanking begins. But this proved impossible to stage: the final scene as written has just too much business packed into those closing seconds. Think about it: after Michael puts Anne across his knee, the family comes bustling onstage and gets a shock as they realize what is happening. Is Michael supposed to wait for them, suspended between the intention and the deed, until the curtain eventually comes down? By the time it got to London (and I would guess a whole lot earlier, probably during rehearsals), the ending had been fixed so that the spanking has already started when the family arrive and gather round to watch. A 'quick curtain' then ensures that the actress can still sit down for the next performance!

Well, **usually**. This scene was the subject of an urban legend that used to circulate in the British theatrical profession. Apparently in one performance the curtain got stuck, and in consequence, just for once, Patricia Dainton got the spanking **in full**! I don't know if it's true, but it's an amusing story.

But that's not the end of it, because the scene was altered again before the end of the run. Even the revised version they were playing at the start of the London run seems to have been too cumbersome, and there is a second revision in the version of the script that was published in 1953 by Samuel French (the veteran British playscript publishing firm). This time Michael 'begins to spank her as the curtain falls', and then the curtain comes up again with the spanking still going on. The family enter to

congratulate the happy couple and are surprised at what they see, and Anne's father interrupts the spanking to shake Michael by the hand – curtain again. This means that the audience sees the beginning and end of the spanking (which must still be fairly extended to allow for the business associated with the family's entrance), but not the middle: there's the implication that Anne spends quite a long time wriggling painfully over her fiancé's knee, without forcing the actress to undergo the same. This version also introduces an overt sign of paternal approval, whereas previously the whole family was just astonished.

When the show opened in London, the press got some publicity mileage out of the spanking scene:



These are backstage posed photos, not a record of the scene as it appeared in the play itself. It's interesting that they posed it two different ways, which would have entailed her getting up from his lap and then back again. She looks a lot more distressed in the 'left-handed' pose (below), which might be because there are children watching her being spanked, but might also be because his hand appears to be in motion!

The two pictures were taken by the *Daily Mirror* on December 22, 1952, four days before the show opened, so they would have appeared in the newspaper the next morning, December 23. Were other newspapers represented? Might there be other spanking snaps out there waiting to be found?

Now we turn to the 'afterlife' of the play, when it was released for repertory productions. The earliest was at Penzance in August 1953 while the post-London tour was still going on. The best known was later that year at the Prince's Theatre, Bradford, in 1953, in which the actress playing Anne was called Patricia Pilkington. She later changed her stage name to Pat Phoenix and found fame in the long-running British soap *Coronation Street*. She included a rather attractive photograph of herself being spanked in her autobiography (*All My Burning Bridges*, published in 1974), and this is now widely reproduced on the web, though often without information about its origins and context. Here it is:

In the autobiography she captioned the photo with the information that she got her own back – by biting his leg!

Photos of repertory productions are always hard to come by, but there are two spanking stills from amateur stagings of *Friendly Relations*. Here is the end of the play as performed in February 1961 by The Mercators, an amateur group in Edinburgh:



It's obviously a staged publicity shot, since the actress playing Anne is out of character and smiling. Whereas the panic of the moment comes across well in this especially nice one from exactly ten years later, by the Guild Players of Deal in Kent, in February 1971:



The Guild Players website includes a review of the production which contains the comment:

‘Tess Ashton played the precocious elder daughter with considerable ability: such ability in fact no one was sorry when she got a well-deserved spanking at the curtain fall.’

Yes, it's Tessa Ashton again — the girl who also got spanked when the Deal Players produced *Fools Rush In* later the same year!

(Actually that may not have been the only time something like this happened. I know of several cases of professional and amateur companies that produced more than one spanking play in the same season ... so maybe in each case there was a young actress who specialized in being spanked!)

Just as a little bonus, here's another shot of Tessa Ashton in maid's uniform in the company's previous production, *Dinner with the Family* ... whose script, unfortunately, **doesn't** call for her to be spanked!

Also unfortunately, *Friendly Relations* was not done especially often in repertory or by amateur drama groups. Between 1953 and 1964, there were 41 productions in professional repertory and touring theater throughout Britain. That's a lot of spankings! But it's not phenomenal compared with other plays of the period. Most towns had a repertory theater at this time and they put on productions weekly, so they really needed a big turnover of plays. There were 49 professional productions of *It's Never Too Late* between 1955 and 1958 alone, and 91 of *The Little Hut* between 1954 and 1975.

Likewise, I have notes of only 14 amateur productions of *Friendly Relations* between 1954 and 1971, compared with 37 of *It's Never Too Late* between 1956 and 1973. Apart from *Kiss Me Kate*, the most popular spanking play with amateurs seems to have been *Till Further Orders*: 128 productions over 29 years from 1937 to 1966 ... and those are only the ones I know about!

So *Friendly Relations* was never an outstandingly popular spanking play in the way that *Kiss Me Kate* or *The Little Hut* were. But what's nice about is that, unlike many other plays, we can be pretty confident that the spanking was a prominent feature of **every single** performance. Often enough, a stage spanking is relatively marginal, a piece of business whose removal wouldn't affect the overall story and structure of the play and wouldn't require the kind of patching that would need a new licence from the Lord Chamberlain. But in *Friendly Relations*, the spanking scene is structurally central: it simply can't be cut or even skimmed on, because then the play just wouldn't have an ending!