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Blanche Marvin: London's best-loved theater critic

By Mary Blume

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Blanche Marvin at home in London. Her online newsletter is read on both sides of the Atlantic and her influence has been a factor in bringing ignored productions to London.

LONDON: The state of play in the London theater depends obviously on its actors, writers, directors and producers and less obviously on a very small white-haired American named Blanche Marvin who is acknowledged within the theater community here as a major force, not in terms of an executive position since she has none, but as what one critic calls a great wise presence who touches a lot of people's lives. "I've done the things I've done with no money, ever, but I've always been able to do it," Marvin says. She stands 4 feet 11 (1.5 meters), is a feisty 82 years old, and goes to the theater just about every night except for matinees when she goes twice.

Her online newsletter (www.blanchemarvin.com) is followed by theater people on both sides of the Atlantic. In it she reviews every production that comes along, whether in the West End or in a converted chapel in Liverpool, and notes whether a show should be

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exported to the United States, as well as thoughtfully indicating whether it's good enough to fork out for a expensive seat or if the back rows will do.

If she is unknown to the public, she is, flowing and bead-bedecked, hardly invisible to first-nighters. "Her outfits are legendary," says Paul Taylor, The Independent's theater critic and Marvin's frequent escort. "Sometimes she goes to the theater in an ensemble that's themed to what she is seeing. I once went to Paris with her for the day to see 'Happy Days' and I thought I wouldn't put it past her to arrive in a mound of earth. She didn't, she was baroque, but not in a mound of earth."

She is a very amusing figure but not a figure of fun, Taylor adds. Her influence in the London theater is unquantifiable but major in that on her own she has helped to break down the frontier between fringe and mainstream with the result that ignored productions make it to London and theater is renewed. What grabs her is originality.

"It can happen in the worst theater in the world or at the National or in the West End; you can see good theater anywhere," she said in her London walk-up. "The only trouble is that people don't give money to the fringe and you want to develop them to get to the next stage."

A longtime London resident, she set up the new plays department for the government-run Arts Council, which didn't move fast enough. So she hit on a simple notion: an award to help new venues. Her journalist friends said fine and offered to write about it but she shrewdly saw that nothing would happen from a single article and so enlisted London's first-string critics to serve on the award committee, ensuring continued coverage and support.

She then dragooned Peter Brook, whom she hadn't met, into allowing her to name the prize the Empty Space Peter Brook Award after his statement that theater can happen in any space anywhere.

The first award was given in 1991 and the ceremony has become an essential annual event, bringing fringe companies to public attention and helping them find further funding. The prize is £2,000, or \$4,000, from Marvin's slender pocket.

"I cashed in my old age annuity, I thought what the hell, let the government take care of me," she says, laughing. "Listen, if you don't put your money where your heart is, forget it."

The award has become so prestigious that it has helped winners gain mainstream production space and has spawned further prizes, most recently a rent-subsidy award to help cash-strapped smaller venues. It is named after Marvin's late husband, the American producer Mark Marvin.

Born Blanche Zohar in New York, she was an actress and dancer confined mostly to Asian handmaiden roles because of her exotic looks. A photo among the theater posters in her apartment shows a sultry jet-haired beauty with cheekbones so sharp they could fillet a sole.

She played in such Hollywood clinkers as "Casbah" (1948) and "The Girl from Persia" and on Broadway in "Lute Song," (1946) she understudied the star, Mary Martin, became friendly with Yul Brynner (who was playing his first role) and had to dance around Mrs. Ronald Reagan, then Nancy Davis. "She was a stick, she couldn't move and she couldn't

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act so they kept her still."

She befriended a shy young Tennessee Williams, claims that Blanche Dubois was named after her, was courted by Marlon Brando, painted scarves made from World War II parachute silk with Zero Mostel, started a successful children's theater in New York and taught playwriting at the University of Iowa. In London she became a producer, acting teacher and agent, getting Joan Littlewood in 1973 to put on "Sweeney Todd," her client Christopher Bond's play, and then informing Stephen Sondheim that he should make a musical of it.

It's been a very full life. "One thing about my age," she says, "I can tell you every scene of every show I've seen." Brook says her ideals are fed by enormous experience: "I don't think anyone has seen as much as she has," he says. "Her criticism as such is the most reliable I know."

Marvin sometimes walks out and is often angry, for example at the current revival of "Equus" whose unique selling point is the Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe in the nude. "They're starting a trend, now it's Ian McKellen nude in 'King Lear.' There are articles saying see Ian McKellen with dropped pants."

She travels by subway and at Edinburgh festival time takes the overnight bus from London. "I don't care. I'm not going to spend the money for a room. I get there at 7 a.m., use the ladies room in the best hotel to clean myself up and then I'm ready for what I have to see of the European things that are not coming to London. I take the 10.30 p.m. bus back." She has survived three major operations for cancer.

Words like redoubtable and incessant are used about her: she is that rarest of things, a bully who is on the side of the angels. She is eccentric and impassioned, Brook says, but almost clinical in her judgment.

"She is very very knowing and highly discriminatory. I think she is in a sense totally attuned to the real sense of experimentation, the older she gets the more it fascinates her," he says. "What she brings to the theater is not recognized because she has no specific place, but following everything everywhere she brings the sense that theater must all the time be in movement and change."

"Listen," Marvin says, "people say how can you go to the theater for 50 years and still be enthusiastic. I don't know what it is but every time I go I think, 'Oh I'm going to see something, I'm going to be surprised' and then I'm not and I am so disappointed. But when you do get the surprise, then you walk out and say, 'That's theater!' "