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Arts and Culture

Why I want to be feminist icon and theatre lighting head Bethia Cassie

Inspirational woman showed no sign of the imposter syndrome that blights so many working mothers today



Unmute



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When I grow up, I want to be Bethia Cassie. A mother of three who graduated from cleaner to head of lighting at an Edinburgh theatre practically overnight more than a century ago, she is my new feminist icon.

While women of my generation still battle with imposter syndrome and the guilt of being working mothers, Bethia apparently had no such worries, despite doing what she admits was an "unusual job for a woman" back then at the King's Theatre.

Known to her numerous friends and acquaintances in the theatre world as Bertha, her name, as she was not afraid to admit herself, became "something of a by-word in the theatrical profession", where she hobnobbed with stage stars of the time.

In an article she wrote in the People's Journal, she was not afraid to explain her status.

THE PEOPLE'S JOURNAL, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1937. 23

HERE ARE OUR STORIES

SCOTS WHO TELL SOMETHING UNUSUAL

Mrs Bertha Cassie's job is an unusual one to be held by a woman. She is switch-board operator at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh, and is responsible for those marvellous stage lighting effects which nowadays can be obtained. The nature of her job has brought her in touch with many famous stage personalities, while she has also had some memorable experiences. Here is Bertha, as she is always known, to tell all about it.



Bertha at her switchboard.

Bertha
—THE LADY WHO LIGHTS THE STAGE

WITH due modesty I think I can say that my name is somewhat of a by-word in the theatrical profession. As switchboard operator at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh, for close on 20 years I can claim to occupy a position which is unique for a woman. Hence the reason why the name Bertha, as everyone calls me, is known to all artistes who have ever visited the King's, and who, when they return to the city after an absence of years, invariably voice the query, "Is Bertha still here?"

My job at the King's Theatre has not only been well known, indeed, that it is so is nearly any London actress, mention my name, and be sure to be an old friend.

I remember being in London some years ago, and was standing outside this's when I noticed a familiar figure in the crowd. It was the famous actress, and she was looking at me with a smile. I went up to her and she said, "Hello, Bertha, I've heard so much about you. How are you?"

My first job at the King's Theatre was as a switchboard operator, and I was engaged in this position for some years. I was the only woman in the theatre who held this position, and I was the only woman who was responsible for the lighting of the stage.

I was a switchboard operator, and I was responsible for the lighting of the stage. I was the only woman in the theatre who held this position, and I was the only woman who was responsible for the lighting of the stage.

I Make My Debut.

My debut as switchboard operator was made one of these weeks, later when Mr. James had given everyone his holiday. The first at the King's that week was "The Boy David", and on the opening night I was very much nervous, knowing that so much depended on me, and that I could not fail by my handling of matters that night.

The attention by the audience, indeed, the entire staff, and then the lights, which I had to handle, were all in my hands. Everything seemed to be all right.

But everything was not so quiet, as I was standing with a shock when Mr. W. H. H. (I think he was called) called out to me, and I was told to turn on the lights. I was told to turn on the lights, and I was told to turn on the lights.

Bertha As Cleaner.

When I was a cleaner, I was the only woman in the theatre who held this position, and I was the only woman who was responsible for the cleaning of the stage.

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Surprise For the Audience.

One of the most surprising incidents which took place during the run of "The Boy David" was the surprise for the audience. The surprise was that the lights were turned on, and the audience was surprised.

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The People's Journal article from 1937 by Bethia Cassie. | Festival Theatres

"Hence the reason why the name Bertha, as everyone calls me, is known to all artistes who have ever visited the King's and who, when they return to the city after an absence of years, invariably voice the query, 'Is Bertha still here?'" she wrote.

Go Bethia. Her full story, as uncovered by researchers at the King's, which is due to open next year after an extensive refurbishment, is told here.

Vintage news

Sometimes at Scotsman Towers, we receive a special delivery. A few times a year, one or other of my colleagues will be researching a piece which requires them to consult a vintage edition of the paper. A huge, fabric-backed tome, containing a certain few weeks or months' worth of copies of The Scotsman, will be delivered from our storage archive and will be kicking about the office for a few weeks.

I can't stop reading them. I love finding the differences and the similarities in how we put together the paper now compared with 100 or 200 years ago. One of my main takeaways is just how focused readers used to have to be: the text is dense and tightly packed; there are few pictures to break up the page, and that white space much-lauded today by page designers is non-existent.

I'm looking forward to **an exhibition at Wigtown Book Festival** which displays original newspapers from across the decades, showing how different titles covered key stories and offering a fascinating insight into how news was covered in the past.

A copy of The Scotsman is included – natch – from the day Louis Bleriot flew across the Channel. Our report is verbose compared to modern day equivalents and offers opinion in a way that a news piece now would not. Even the phrase a "plucky aviator" would be unlikely to make it into a modern broadsheet news piece these days. Who am I, as an independent news reporter, to say he's plucky? What evidence do I have to back that up? He might have been terrified for all we know. My colleagues of the past had no such fears.

Wigtown is in full flow – and I'm excited that I'm lucky enough to be able to spend a few days there, taking my festivals diary on tour.

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