



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival



Gaslight

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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About the Playwright: Patrick Hamilton

By Daniel Frezza

“Writing a money-making play is very simple, really” Patrick Hamilton told a visitor when he was nearing the end of his life. “Just give the actors something good to say. I used to be one myself, once, and I know that’s all they’re interested in” (Sean French, *Patrick Hamilton, A Life*. [London., Faber & Faber, 1993], 275). It wasn’t really that simple, of course. Nor was much else in Hamilton’s life.

Patrick Hamilton was born in Sussex, England March 17, 1904, the last of three children. His family life appeared reasonably happy, though his father was emotionally distant and often absent from home. In later life Hamilton said his childhood was full of “anxieties and neuroses of all sorts” (Nigel Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly: The Life of Patrick Hamilton*. [London, Scribners 1991] 21). Both parents were writers, and Patrick’s literary ambitions were encouraged at school, though not by his father. At sixteen he entered a commercial college. That proved a failure. Hopes of following his brother, Bruce, into university had no greater success. His sister, Helen, an actress, and her husband, actor/playwright Sutton Vane, got Patrick a job in the theatre as assistant stage manager and bit player. He soon realized that this wasn’t his career, but from the experience he learned the technique of melodrama and “realized how successful such plays might be if written and presented in a sophisticated way” (French, 48). He went on to an office job, another dead end. In 1923 Patrick’s mother, sister, and brother subsidized him so he could concentrate on writing (Bruce Hamilton, *The Light Went Out, the Life of Patrick Hamilton by his Brother*. [London, Constable 1972] 43). Their faith was soon justified: his first novel, *Monday Morning*, was published when he was just twenty-one. Its favorable reception prompted him to start his second novel almost immediately. Around this time Hamilton began the drinking habit he would alternately indulge and struggle against the rest of his life.

Hamilton wrote three more successful novels drawing on his personal experiences, including pub life, the theatre and—especially—loneliness, before writing his first play, *Rope*. Oddly, he didn’t mention the play in his correspondence with his brother, Bruce (who had moved to Barbados in 1927), until weeks after its successful opening in 1929. Bruce stated that the 1924 Leopold and Loeb murder case, in which two college students killed a young man to prove they could get away with it, was the inspiration for *Rope*. Hamilton claimed he hadn’t heard of the Leopold-Loeb case until after completing *Rope*. That seems unlikely. The trial, in which defense counsel Clarence Darrow obtained life sentences for the defendants instead of the expected death penalty, was widely reported in both the United States and England. *Rope* earned Hamilton a lot of money and made him a public figure. From now on he interspersed writing novels with stage plays and dramas for the new medium of radio.

Hamilton married Lois Martin in 1930. She took on the burden of managing his finances and the business of everyday life and tried to limit his drinking. During 1931 Hamilton completed his fifth novel and adapted *Rope* for radio. Just days after its broadcast in January 1932, while out for an evening walk, he was hit by a speeding car. Hamilton’s extensive injuries required months to heal, and his face was left permanently scarred.

Hamilton’s second play had died after a tryout, but his third was an even greater success than *Rope*. *Gaslight* opened in London in December 1938 and enjoyed a six-month run. It opened on Broadway in December 1941 (under the title *Angel Street*) and ran for a record 1,295 performances. Hamilton took great professional pride in *Gaslight* but repudiated the

idea that his fame rested on his plays rather than his novels. His fourth play, *The Duke in Darkness*, set in sixteenth century France was a departure from his customary material. He was pleased with the production, directed by and starring Michael Redgrave, but it ran for only two months in 1942. The continuing success of *Gaslight* prompted Hamilton to write *The Governess*, showing the character of Inspector Rough at an earlier period in his career. It opened in Glasgow and had a successful provincial run in 1944, but it wasn't a success when produced in London after the war.

Early in 1944 Hamilton accepted Twentieth Century Fox's offer of £5,000 for the film rights to *Hangover Square*, considered his best novel by many. The studio changed the story so drastically that critic James Agate called the film "a masterpiece turned into rubbish" (Jones, 286). Understandably wary when Alfred Hitchcock approached him in 1947 about filming *Rope*, Hamilton finally signed when offered a contract as screenwriter. He considered the four weeks spent on the screenplay harder than writing the original script and the strain led to a drinking binge. Behind Hamilton's back, Hitchcock replaced him with other screenwriters. When Hamilton finally saw the film, he was heartbroken (French, 199).

Tensions had developed between Hamilton and Lois. In 1950 he began living with Lady Ursula Stewart (known to friends as La), while still spending weekends with Lois. Both women were aware of the arrangement; Lois tolerated it better. In 1952 Hamilton and La began divorce proceedings from their respective spouses. They married in 1954. Hamilton's reasonably balanced life of the previous decades, and his greatest successes were now behind him, though critic John Betjeman wrote an appraisal of his work in 1956, calling him one of the best English novelists (French, 254). In the spring of 1955 Hamilton began his twelfth and last completed novel, *Unknown Assailant*. Not up to the physical effort of writing, he dictated it to La. La insisted he receive medical treatment for his alcoholism; he did but secretly continued drinking. In addition to alcoholism, Hamilton was now battling severe depression. In a fifty-page letter to Bruce, he confessed: "I contemplated suicide incessantly . . . but discovered how bloody difficult and doubtful a business the attempt is" (Jones, 348). In 1956 Hamilton received electroshock therapy; his suicidal urges stopped, and he regained his zest for reading. He even started another novel and a memoir but never finished them. In these later years a pattern developed. When in relatively good health and sobriety, Hamilton lived with La. When drinking more heavily, he headed for Lois's care to be cured. She had the skill and patience to do this and then send him back to La (Jones, 357). By 1961 Hamilton was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver; his only concession was to take more water with his whiskey. Bruce said his brother always had the ability to put distressing things out of his mind. Though deep down Hamilton must have known he was dying, he continued to insist that there was nothing much the matter with him (Hamilton, 186). During his last months, Lois was allowed to visit from time to time. She found him surprisingly cheerful. Patrick Hamilton died September 23, 1962.

Biographer Sean French eloquently summed up Hamilton's career: "Against the odds, in the most unpromising of circumstances, his was a life of resource, resilience, fortitude and humour. He suffered terrible troubles, some of his own making; he did some inferior work. But he had a steely sense of literary integrity and he never violated it. . . . When he died he left half a dozen first-rate novels and two of the most commercially successful plays of his time. That is the success that matters" (French, 5).

Synopsis

Bella Manningham, once a beauty but now pallid and withdrawn, suffers from what she believes are the early stages of insanity, a disease from which her mother died. Her husband, Jack Manningham, struggles to help her, and spends his evenings out on the town in order to cope. Or so he makes her believe.

Bella evidently misplaces items from time to time, some of which are gifts from her husband. Because she cannot remember moving or misplacing these items, she thinks she is going crazy. It becomes clear, however, that her husband is behind these petty inconsistencies in order to slowly drive her insane and torture her into believing they are her fault.

But what of the dimming lights and footsteps heard within the house while her husband is away? Are these simply a figment of her delusional mind?

Then late one evening, a stranger comes to the house while Jack is out and explains he is there to help Mrs. Manningham. Who is this man and what secrets does he know? Why is Jack tormenting his wife? Is Bella truly going mad? This Victorian thriller will keep you on the edge of your seat as you discover the mysteries of the Manningham home.

The Characters

Jack Manningham: A handsome, well-dressed man of forty-five, Jack's complete authority over and manipulation of his wife drives her down the road to insanity. There is mystery below the surface and feigned bitterness towards having to put up with his wife's "condition."

Bella Manningham: Younger than her husband, Bella is in her mid-thirties. They have been married five years and in that time she has denigrated into a pallid, frightened, and exhausted woman. Every night her husband goes out, leaving her alone in their large house, where sights and sounds fill her mind with fear and impending insanity.

Elizabeth: In her early fifties, Elizabeth is a kind and dutiful servant in the Manningham home.

Nancy: Attractive, impudent, and conniving, Nancy is a serving girl of eighteen in the Manningham home.

Inspector Rough: A friendly and impelling middle-aged man, Inspector Rough comes to the aid of Mrs. Manningham by revealing secrets and mysteries of years past. He, too, has an air of secrecy about him, as he puts the pieces together of the Manningham puzzle.

Policemen

A Narrative of the Human Mind

By Heidi N. Madsen

Naturalist playwright Emile Zola writes that true action lies not in the facts of the plot, but in the “inner struggles of the characters” (qtd. in Clark, Barrett Harper. “Preface to Therese Raquin.” *European Theories of the Drama*. [Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Company, 1918], p. 401). While arguable *en masse*, a truer statement may never have been made about the plotline of Patrick Hamilton’s so-called “Victorian thriller,” for more than just a story, *Gaslight* is a narrative of the human mind.

Alternately entitled *Angel Street*, this play is set in Victorian London, an ironic society infamous for its scrupulous exterior, as well as its coarse and uncaring interior (think *Oliver Twist*). In this antique setting, the upper and middle classes summon their servants with bells; the muffin-man jingles his chimes in the street around tea-time; homes are heated with coals and illuminated with gas lamps. The personality and ideals of this period, particularly the customs of female suppression and gender stereotyping, generate the vital atmosphere for this play actually written after World War I. Here, in the late 1930s, “the language of psychology [is] the idiom of the people,” and there is a general fascination with the “private theater” playing out in the human psyche (Fagin, N. Bryllion. “Freud on the American Stage.” *Educational Theatre Journal*. Vol. 2, No. 4. Dec., 1950).

The action takes place inside a four-storied house on Angel Street, “a gloomy and unfashionable quarter of London (*Angel Street* [New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1966], p. 3). There are no eye-like windows, and yet, as the scene of a brutal crime committed a decade and a half ago, there is a whisper of malevolence about the place. For her famous rubies, an old lady’s throat was cut—her killer never found. As the play opens, evening shadows are gathering; it is the “zero-hour . . . before the feeble dawn of gas light and tea” (p. 3). Bells sound from the street; Big Ben strikes five. The Mannings pass the time quietly in the drawing room. While Jack Manningham naps on the sofa, his wife Bella enjoys a few moments of rare autonomy; although, she tiptoes and sounds as a mouse fearful of waking the cat. Her once lovely face is worn from friendless days, fearsome nights, and months of despotic husband-guardianship. She rarely leaves the house and no one visits—the harsh prescription for a woman “going off her head.”

Hysteria, a term used to describe a variety of emotional troubles, was not an uncommon (though commonly misdiagnosed) “women’s disease” of this period. Vivienne, wife of famed author T.S. Eliot, was consigned to an English madhouse; Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a chilling semi-autobiography about this grossly misconceived “disease” and the idiotic notions of rehabilitation (“The Yellow Wallpaper”); and most significantly to this particular play, Bella Manningham’s own mother died insane. It is possible, then, that Bella is just another hysterical Victorian housewife, doomed to follow her mother down the same strange path. In such a setting and under such circumstances, it might be relatively easy for a husband to prove his wife belongs in a sanitarium.

“What are you doing, Bella?” from the first uttered syllable, Jack Manningham introduces himself as tyrannical husband (4). He hardly allows her an action or a thought without special direction or consent, but this obsessive awareness is not to be mistaken for lover’s envy, or zealous concern; instead, it is part of a ruthless experiment to bully and confound his wife out of her mind. His scheme involves taking pictures off the walls and stashing them; stealing rings, keys, grocery bills and hiding them—only to blame and disgrace Bella later in front of Elizabeth, the cook, and Nancy, the “cheeky” maid of nineteen. Playwright Hamilton, the author of other psychological thrillers including *Rope*

(one of Hitchcock's experimental films), has a way of plotting his villains in very close—even intimate proximity—to their would-be victims. Danger lurks not outside in a dead-end alley, or down a dark lane; it cannot be outrun or locked out because it already inhabits the same room with its prey.

More distressing to Bella than the daily brow-beatings and mind games, is the house itself. In the evening when Jack is out, as he is in the habit of doing almost nightly, strange things happen within. In her own words: "Every night . . . I find myself waiting for something. Then all at once I look around the room and see that the light is slowly going down" (36). An extra lamp has been lit somewhere in the house, but where? Footsteps and tapping sounds begin overhead; they seem to come from the third floor above her bedroom, but these upstairs quarters are sealed. No one goes up there, not even the maid with her feather duster. She listens in terror by the muted glow of the gaslight until, suddenly, the light goes back up again. Ten minutes later, Jack comes home. Bella knows it is too coincidental that the gaslight's ebbings and risings are in near synchronization with Jack's own comings and goings; but her husband's forceful voice inside her head has made her doubt her own reason.

Lucky for Bella, Nancy (the young maid under her employ) is disloyal and inclined to gossip. Though such an employee might seem an unlikely savior, Nancy's free talk about the Manningham's private affairs has inadvertently reached the ears of one Detective Rough, a retired police sergeant familiar with the details of the crime that took place there fifteen years prior. Convinced of foul play, he shows up on the Manningham doorstep to have a chat with the lady of the house. The gloomy tension of the play is refreshingly moderated at the appearance of this sort of wise joker/therapist who makes witticisms and philosophizes even while breaking into Jack's desk and convincing a troubled woman that she is not mad.

For a three-act, one-night play, *Gaslight* is deceptively layered. "On one level," as actress Rosamund Pike points out, "it is a fairy tale, with Rough as Rescuer" (Curtis, Nick. "The Passion That Stirs the Cool Miss Pike." *Evening Standard, London*. June 1, 2007). On another level, it is an effective domestic-peril thriller, with husband planning to dispose of wife; and finally, at "id" level, it is an eerie psychoanalysis of the dark and dramatic life of the mind.