

Sheila Graham (1927–2009) – A Woman for all Seasons

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ALWAYS THE CHAMPION of the work of her father, Kenneth Leslie Graham, who was a designer for Wood Brothers Glass in Barnsley and then creative director of Coty Perfumes, Sheila was modest about her own achievements.

The only child of Kenneth and Leonore, Sheila was born in 1927. The family lived at 'Bartlea', Stairfoot, Barnsley. She attended Beech Grove School, near Locke Park, Barnsley until Kenneth took up his post at Coty in 1938.

Her childhood and teenage passion was the ballet and aged 16 she was awarded a Gold Star for her drawing of the ballet *Le Spectre de la Rose*. She had won a silver star in 1943 for her ballet drawing of *Les Sylphides*.

She was a pupil at the Maris Convent, West Byfleet, and then a student at Saint Martins School of Art. A drawing of Robert Helpmann, ballet dancer, featured in her Saint Martins show of 1945 and in a Students' Union exhibition of 1946 she offered for sale at four guineas a costume design for *Hamlet*.

Ballet was never far from Sheila's thoughts and in 1945 she embarked on a project entitled *The English Ballet Folios*. These described various ballets and Sheila was responsible for the drawings. The text was written by P.W. (Phyllis Winifred) Manchester, a noted dance critic and editor. The folios were four-page booklets issued monthly.

Immediately after Saint Martins Sheila went as a workroom hand to the Old Vic Liverpool and then went to design the costumes for a production of *As You Like It* at the Cambridge Arts Theatre. The production was a joint Arts Council and Robert Banks' Bankside Players initiative. Robert Banks was an actor and director at the Old Vic. He set up what is now known as the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre.

Sheila had a strong association with the open air theatre. She designed the set for a production of *Troilus and Cressida* and fairy dresses for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in June and July 1946. During the following two years she was involved in the designs for *Winterset*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *The Tempest*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Lady Precious Stream*. In 1950 her design work featured in *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

At the same time as her theatre work Sheila took up a position with a company called Two Cities Films, a film production company started in 1937. Their most famous film was probably *In Which We Serve* (1942). She was engaged as an assistant in their art department on a salary of £4 10s 0d per week. She worked

Sheila in her late 20s. Courtesy of the family





Photo of Sheila and Ruth Lodge, Regents Park Open Air Theatre

on the 1947 film *The Mark of Cain*, starring Eric Portman, filmed at Denham Studios. Denham Studios in Buckinghamshire was opened by Alexander Korda in 1936 and operated as a studio until 1952. Sheila also worked on the murder mystery *The October Man*, starring John Mills. Whilst working at Denham she became a member of the Denham Studios Art Group. Sheila contributed to their first exhibition an informal sketch of a ballet dancer.

Sheila's schoolgirl love of ballet brought her a special invitation to sketch the dancers of Sadler's Wells in their rehearsal rooms in West Street, London and at Covent Garden. Whilst at the Maris Convent she had started to sketch the ballets she went to see. By 1946 she was sketching Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann in rehearsal for the Sadler's Wells production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. She was to informally sketch Margot Fonteyn for the next three years. Sheila sketched dancers Moira Shearer and Pamela May amongst many others. Her work also includes watercolours of the dancers in their costumes. She also sketched dancers of the Ballet Jooss.

Kenneth had bought for Sheila an oil painting of Anna Pavlova as 'The Swan' by Sir John Lavery and this work was donated by Leonore to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In 1948 Sheila started her career in film costume design. She was appointed costume co-ordinator for a film entitled *Fools Rush In*, filmed at Pinewood Studios, Buckinghamshire and directed by John Paddy Carstairs. Pinewood was developed in the mid-1930s by J. Arthur Rank and has been the set for many great films, most recently the *Harry Potter* and *Hobbit* series. The film starred Sally Ann Howes and Thora Hird and was a comedy centred around the forthcoming

marriage of Howes' character Pamela. It was based on a play by Kenneth Horne, perhaps best remembered for his radio series 'Round the Horne'. The wedding dress designed by Sheila for the film was described as being made from ten yards of cream moire with a low-cut shoulder line and two large bows on each hip. Sally Ann Howes' most famous role is that of Truly Scrumptious in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Sheila did not abandon the theatre and was the designer for *A Harlequinade*, a play by Terence Rattigan which appeared as a double bill with *The Browning Version* at the Phoenix Theatre, London, and starred Eric Portman.

The youthful Sheila was next engaged by Walt Disney Productions as the costume designer for *Treasure Island*, starring Robert Newton and filmed at Denham Studios. This was released in July 1950 and was the first Walt Disney live action film.



Sheila with Sally Ann Howes discussing the wedding dress from *Fools Rush In*
Courtesy of the family

In April 1950 Sheila's work was exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum for an exhibition named *Exhibition of British Stage Design*. In 1946 a group of designers had set up The Association of Theatrical Designers to try to gain recognition for their craft. The exhibition notes state: "A painter who is a genius in the studio is not thereby a genius on the stage. Indeed, an easel-picture and a design for a stage-setting are not products of the same creative process... It is evident that different kinds of aesthetic insight and technical skill are required in each case."

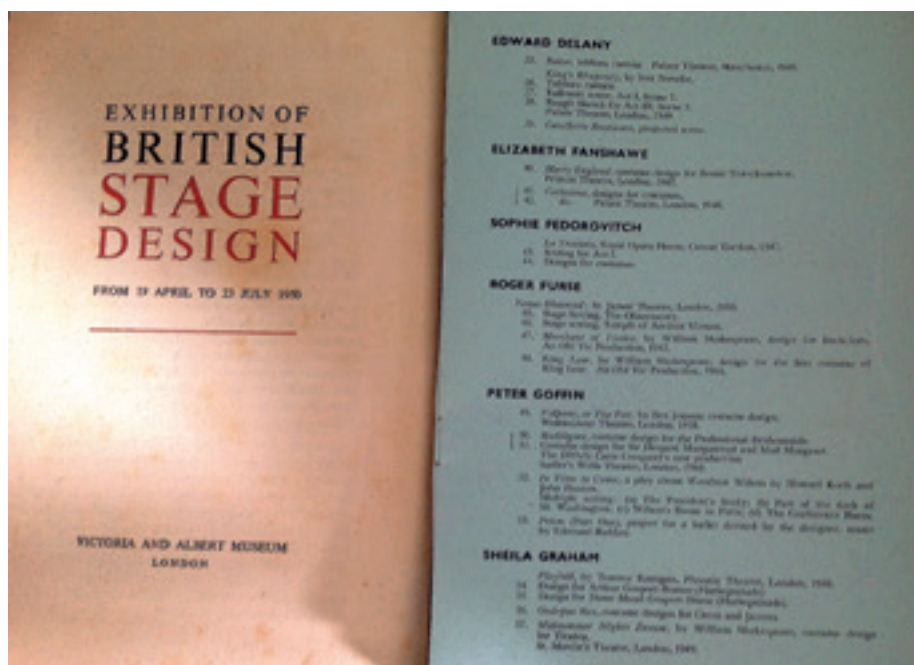
This was the first ever exhibition of contemporary British stage design in England. Forty-two designers were represented, 13 of whom were women.

The magazine *Debutante* in July 1950 wrote about Sheila who was designing costumes for the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre's production of *The Merchant of Venice*: "Sheila Graham's ambition is to design costumes for all Shakespeare's plays. At 23 she is well on the way to achieving it... to get where she has she worked two solid years by herself, studying history of costume at a London museum."

Sheila's next commission was by Warner Brothers when she was engaged to design the costumes for the film *Captain Horatio Hornblower R.N.* This film, released in April 1951 and filmed at Teddington Studios, starred Gregory Peck and Virginia Mayo and was a popular success.

It Started in Paradise, a film about the couture industry released in October 1952, was Sheila's next film. Extensive designs for this film were needed and Sheila produced numerous coloured sketches and line drawings for the film.

Appointment in London, filmed at Shepperton Studios and starring Dirk Bogarde, Dinah Sheridan and Bryan Forbes was to be Sheila's last film. In 1953 she married in Kensington, London, Hector John McLusky, a freelance artist born in Glasgow in 1923 and trained at the Slade School of Art, London.



Catalogue for *Exhibition of British Stage Design*, 1950. Courtesy of the family

Sheila with Jane Hylton at the Leicester Square Theatre 1952. Jane's dress designed by Sheila. Note Sheila's Elizabethan style collar. Courtesy of the family



McLusky is best known as the first person to create an image of James Bond. He drew James Bond for the *Daily Express*, starting with *Casino Royale* in 1958. He adapted 13 Bond novels between 1958 and 1966. The author Ian Fleming was said to have reservations about portraying his novels in this way but the series was popular and increased the sales of the *Daily Express*.

Sheila had two children and in 1959 the family moved from London to Datchworth, Hertfordshire. For many years she and Hector ran a theatre company called The Elizabethans. This troupe of actors, musicians and dancers travelled around to country houses and cathedrals performing Elizabethan dramas. Sheila also worked as a furniture and picture restorer, the latter skills no doubt learnt from Kenneth, her father, who ran the Da Vinci gallery in London.

Leonore donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum two works of Sir Edward C. Burne-Jones and a portrait by Dutch artist B. van der Helst. It is fitting, therefore, that the museum holds four of Sheila's costume designs for *Oedipus Rex* and *The Winter's Tale* which Sheila donated.

Sheila died in 2009. She was at the forefront of her profession and paved the way for female theatre and film designers. She was creative, confident, set her goals and achieved them.

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