

Pauline Chase - Marlow's Peter Pan Connection

In modern times, leading actors and actresses in starring roles, both in the theatre and cinema, are paid fabulous amounts of money. However it is not widely known that this has actually been the case in the world of London and New York theatre for over a century. Their looks and talent enabled actresses to live luxurious and privileged lives, which brought them wealth and most importantly, independence. It was a time of immense poverty amongst the working class, before women had the vote and who were very much an 'under class', at all levels of society. One such actress was Pauline Chase, an American who first appeared on stage in England in 1901 at the age of 16, and who died 60 years ago this month. She quickly rose to fame and success in the British theatre.



There is no published biography of Pauline and all our facts and the background of her life come from a variety of references in articles and biographies by others, including her daughter Jane. One such article, "Marlow's Pocket Venus" by John Fontannaz, was published by the Marlow Society in November 1990. Dozens of photographs of her exist and can be found online, with some prints held in the National Portrait

Gallery, London. She must have been one of the most photographed actresses of her day, and one can see how she has been described as "staggeringly pretty". Pauline mixed with many famous people and had a friendship with Robert Falcon Scott, the Antarctic explorer. In 1910 she was in a relationship with a prominent British aviator of the day, Claude Grahame-White.

Pauline was very talented in her sphere of light entertainment, which led to her being "adopted" by two of the most influential men in British theatre at that time. The one who discovered her was the American theatre producer Charles Frohman, about whom we have written previously. He became a good friend both to Marlow and to Pauline. The second was J M Barrie, the writer of Peter Pan and other plays in which Pauline appeared. Both were hugely influential in her career and in her life.



Although she performed a number of different roles on stage, Pauline is best known now for playing for 8 years in the part of Peter Pan, a total of more than 1400 performances. This was both in London, on tour, and twice in Paris. She was in the first production in 1904 in a minor part, but by 1906 she was understudying the lead. According to Frohman's biography, it seems she was given the role of Peter permanently via a humorous game rather than the traditional audition. On tour in Liverpool, the actress playing Peter had to give up the part through ill health and Pauline stepped in as her understudy. Clearly Frohman and Barrie had her in mind

to be next in the starring role, as they travelled from London by train specifically to see her.

Robert Louis Stevenson's book "Treasure Island" was a big influence on Barrie, resulting in his introduction of pirates into Peter Pan. The men's game centred around the idea of the "Black Spot" which is an important part of Stevenson's story. Anyone who receives this black mark on a piece of paper knows that he has fallen out of favour with Long John Silver, the evil pirate captain, and is therefore "doomed". The two men used this idea in reverse and said they would send Pauline a piece of paper with a cross on it if they were happy for her to keep the role. They returned to London before the end of the play but left backstage for her the paper with the all-important cross.

There are a number of items of memorabilia relating to Pauline's career as Peter, held in the V & A Theatre Museum. The most significant is an embossed metal plate dating from 1912, which was produced to commemorate her 1000th performance in the part. The items were passed to the Marlow Society in 2009 by John Fontannaz, and subsequently donated to the V & A.

Most London-based theatrical people with money wanted to escape at every opportunity the grime, winter fog and discomfort of living in London. Accordingly places all along the Thames, easily accessible by train, became very popular with those who could afford to either rent or purchase property.

Pauline's association with Marlow may be seen as rather nebulous, but for one or two significant events. She came to live in the area around 1907 and, as an indication of her financial independence by this time, Pauline was able to buy a large house called "Treetops" in Farnham Common. She first owned a large four seater open top car, which she drove herself, and her second car was a 1910 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost convertible. When in England, Frohman made his trips to Marlow on summer weekends. He travelled by train from London and Pauline would "taxi" him from Slough Station to stay at the Compleat Angler and to make visits to her house.

She clearly knew the Reverend Light, who was rector at All Saints from 1902 to 1917. Fontannaz suggests that in 1906 she was baptised by Light into the Church of England, in one of London's most prestigious churches, St Martin in the Fields. Her Godparents were Barrie and another famous actress of the time, Ellen Terry.

Pauline's divorced mother came to live with her in Farnham Common. On a visit to America with Pauline in 1910, her mother was taken into hospital. Soon afterwards her mother died and through the generosity of Frohman, her body was rapidly transported by ship back to England. Pauline clearly had an affinity with our town as she arranged for the funeral to be held in Marlow, and her mother became the first person to be buried in the new cemetery on Friday 11th November 1910.



Pauline retired from the stage early in 1914 when the regular winter season of *Peter Pan* in London ended. In October of that year, she married into the exclusive Drummond banking family. A further privilege, available only to a select few, was that her wedding also took place in St Martin in the Fields.

After her marriage, she moved to East Sussex but, during the next 10 years, she did maintain some connections with the town. Following Frohman's untimely death on the *Lusitania* in May 1915, a Memorial Committee was formed by a group of his friends, including Pauline, Barrie, Haddon Chambers and Frederick Harrison (manager of the Theatre Royal in The Haymarket). Their task was to raise funds and to choose a

suitable memorial for their beloved friend. Today, it is an insoluble mystery as to how and why they chose the statue they did with its Sappho fragment of poetry beneath to commemorate such a giant of the Edwardian theatre. There has always been much speculation about the statue and its origins. It stands, of course, on the Causeway and is a replica in Portland stone of a marble sculpture by Leonard Merrifield. He was a leading sculptor of his day, responsible for a number of prominent WWI Memorials. The original is entitled "The Nymph" and stands on the staircase in the Chelsea Library, London.

It seems that by July 14th 1915, Marlow UDC had agreed on the site. But again, inexplicably, it took nine years before the statue was finally erected on Easter Saturday 20th April 1924. The event was reported in the BFP of May 16th that due to the illness of both Barrie and Harrison, there was no formal unveiling and "the wrappings were removed without ceremony".



Pauline had three children, the first born in 1919, when she was aged 32. Her last child was born when she was 42. Having children at this mature age was really unusual in the period when people tended to marry and have their families very much younger. Her daughter Jane wrote that her mother was not particularly maternal. It is a sad irony that Pauline, who spent so much of her professional career providing entertainment for children, appeared somewhat remote to her own children.