

## A BIOGRAPHY OF N.C. HUNTER

By Maya Cantu

A keenly observant writer of “charm, pathos, and humor” (*The Stage*), N.C. Hunter took his place among the leading British dramatists of the 1950s. Spanning diverse genres of farce, fable, satire—and, most distinctively, tragicomedy—Hunter’s body of work encompassed eighteen plays and six novels. He was a playwright of contradictions. A deeply private man who shunned the spotlight, Hunter’s plays drew dazzling casts of West End stars. Trained to serve in the military, Hunter earned acclaim for his delicate, gently ironic “plays with Chekhovian tints, yet with qualities of sensitivity and craftsmanship all their own.”<sup>1</sup>

Born September 18, 1908 in Derbyshire, Norman Charles Hunter came of age in a prestigious English family. The son of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles F. Hunter, D.S.O. and his wife Nancy Wingrave Cobbett, Hunter’s great-great-grandfather was the radical journalist and agriculturist Sir William Cobbett, who had famously campaigned for the rights of farm workers in his 1830 book *Rural Rides*. Following after his father, Hunter attended Repton School and the Royal Military School of Sandhurst, and served his commission in the Dragoon Guards from 1930 through 1933. Yet Hunter looked to a life of letters, and in 1932, the British radio show “Miscellany” featured the young man’s poem, “La Promenade à Cheval.”

In the mid-1930s, Hunter broke out as a playwright and novelist. After the debut of his first play, 1934’s *The Merciless Lady* (co-written with John Ferguson), Hunter made his name on the West End stage with a series of frothy, deftly crafted farces, including *All Rights Reserved* (1935), *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1937), and *Grouse in June* (1939). These “comedy soufflés” (*The Era*)



N.C. Hunter in the early 1950s.

found a moderate degree of success with audiences and critics. Hunter also settled into married life with the Belgian-born Germaine Dachsbech. In 1938, Hunter adapted Irish folklore (i.e. “The Cooneen Ghost”) for the Belfast BBC, and in 1939, co-wrote his only screenplay, the thriller *Poison Pen*. That same year, he re-enlisted as a soldier in the Royal Artillery, as Great Britain entered World War II.

Following his experiences in the war, Hunter’s early comedies gained in depth and subtlety. *Smith in Arcady* (1947) and *A Picture of Autumn* (1951) evoked the influence of Anton Chekhov, whose plays Hunter had turned to “through the discomforts and horrors” of his WWII service.<sup>2</sup> Shaded with “touches of nostalgic and rueful poetry,”<sup>3</sup> *Autumn* followed the fortunes of the Denham family, who debate whether or not to sell their decaying Wiltshire manor. Although lauded by critics, *A Picture of Autumn* (revived by Mint Theater in 2013) was not picked up for a West End run after its one-night debut on

February 12, 1951 at the Duke of York’s Theatre. A disheartened Hunter was on the brink of trading playwriting for life as a rural schoolmaster, when Dame Edith Evans fortuitously stepped in. Picking *Waters of the Moon* off a pile of rejected scripts in the office of Hugh “Binkie” Beaumont, the actress persuaded the West End impresario to produce it.<sup>4</sup>

With the lyrical *Waters of the Moon*, Hunter became one of the most popular and successful of 1950s British playwrights. Hunter’s plays captured the mood of a nation shaken by economic insecurity and post-imperial decline, with characters grasping for purpose. Like *A Picture of Autumn*, *Waters of the Moon* poignantly portrayed English gentility struggling for survival. Balancing nuanced ensemble drama with virtuoso star turns for Evans and Dame Sybil Thorndike, the play traced the relationships and aspirations of a group of middle-class residents at a rural Dartmoor hotel, where a blizzard snows in a charismatic London socialite (Evans) and her family. This time, however, Hunter’s work met an enthusiastic reception, as *Waters of the Moon* played 835 performances at the Theatre Royal Haymarket after opening on April 19, 1951, as part of the historic Festival of Britain exhibition of national culture.

With his next set of plays, Hunter raised questions about the complexities of political engagement in an Age of Anxiety, and the relationship of money, work, and success to personal fulfillment. As England drew the world’s gaze with Elizabeth II’s 1953 coronation, Hunter’s plays also were a magnet for stage royalty. Opening to largely glowing reviews in November 1953 at the Haymarket, where it ran for 386 performances, *A Day by the Sea* starred Sir John Gielgud (who also directed the production) as diplomat Julian Anson, alongside Thorndike, Irene Worth, and Sir

Ralph Richardson. The play also came to Broadway’s ANTA Theatre in 1955, directed by Sir Cedric Hardwicke, and starring Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. Although critic Brooks Atkinson praised Hunter’s work as “humorous, touching, wistful, gentle and wise,”<sup>5</sup> *A Day by the Sea* blossomed for only 24 performances in brash and booming 1950s America. Hunter’s next play, *A Touch of the Sun* (1958), featured Michael Redgrave as an idealistic schoolmaster pressed to defend his ascetic way of life after he, his wife, and daughter (Vanessa Redgrave) travel with wealthy relatives to the French Riviera. Contrasting with the air of celebrity surrounding his plays, Hunter himself lived close to the soil, “in part of an old farmhouse in north Wales,” as *Theatre World* profiled “The Elusive Playwright.”<sup>6</sup>

With the changing of the theatrical guard in the mid-1950s, Hunter’s career fell into sudden decline. The incendiary 1956 premiere of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre ushered in a revolutionary new wave of young playwrights. Championed by critic Kenneth Tynan, the so-called “Angry Young Men” revitalized and permanently transformed the British theater. At the same time, the new movement also toppled a substantive interwar generation of dramatists, including Hunter, Noël Coward, Terence Rattigan, and J.B. Priestley, now charged with an escapist “celebration of country house, cocktail glass, (and) cigarette holder.”<sup>7</sup> While Tynan’s criticism dealt serious blows to all of these writers, Hunter’s reputation additionally suffered from critics’ endless comparisons to Chekhov, and “a tendency in England to underestimate Mr. Hunter and give almost all of the credit to his actors,” as *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted in 1954. As critic W.A. Darlington later recalled:

(Hunter’s) best work was often treated disparagingly by critics who allowed themselves to pretend that he was a

mere imitator of the Russian genius. However, I think they were demonstrably wrong. Hunter's sense of character was acute and full of original observation. The trouble really was that their character belonged to the class he knew best and to which he himself belonged—and it happened to be a class that the new wave and its followers were treating with deliberate disdain.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the turbulence of the sixties, Hunter continued to craft a range of thoughtful dramas, including *The Tulip Tree* (1962) and *The Excursion* (1964), as well as a picaresque farce, *The Adventures of Tom Random* (1967). In 1969, Hunter also reflected on “Modern Trends in the Theatre” at Wales’ University College of Swansea. In this lecture, Hunter shared his admiration



Jill Tanner and George Morfogen in *A Picture of Autumn*, Mint 2013. Photo: Richard Termine

for such language-driven younger writers as Tom Stoppard and Joe Orton, while surveying British theater's last decade of transformation with characteristic generosity: “In a live and healthy theatre, there should be room for everything: the open stage and the proscenium, the play of commitment and the frivolous farce, Ibsen and Feydeau, and the ‘tragical-comical-historical-pastoral.’ It should be as varied, surely, as the tastes of the society it reflects are varied.”<sup>9</sup> Hunter died on April 19, 1971, at the age of sixty-two.

As Hunter's West End peers, including Coward and Rattigan, draw renewed rounds of applause in the varied theatre worlds of the twenty-first century, Hunter likewise beckons new audiences with plays rich in ambiguity and paradox. As a clear-eyed and compassionate observer of the changing seasons of English society, Hunter insightfully chronicled a country in the throes of historical transition, looking toward an uncertain future. At the same time, Hunter—a perennial lover of gardens—explored timeless themes of aging and memory; nature and the natural cycle. With his “dramas of sensitivity, perception, and adult understanding,”<sup>10</sup> N.C. Hunter eloquently speaks on.

- i. Obituary, “*The Stage and Television Today*, April 22, 1971, pg. 17.
- ii. Charles Duff, *The Lost Summer: The Heyday of the West End Theatre* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), pg. 109
- iii. A.V. Cookman, *The London Times*, February 12, 1951.
- iv. *The Lost Summer*, pg. 109.
- v. Brooks Atkinson, “Theatre: A Leisurely Day by the Sea,” *The New York Times*, September 27, 1955, pg. 42.
- vi. George Bullock, “N.C. Hunter: The Elusive Playwright,” *Theatre World*, February 1954, pgs. 11-12.
- vii. Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge: 1999), pg. 8.
- viii. W.A. Darlington, “Obituary,” *The London Times*, April 20, 1971, Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Archives, “N.C. Hunter Biographical File.”
- ix. N.C. Hunter, “Modern Trends in the Theatre: The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture, Delivered at the University College of Swansea on March 18, 1969,” Swansea: University College, 1969.
- x. Louis Sheaffer, “Theatres: Two London Hits,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 12, 1954.

**CURZON DOBELL** (*William Gregson*) Curzon Dobell appeared at the Mint in *Love Goes to Press*. He has worked in NYC at Lincoln Center, the Irish Rep, the Culture Center, Soho Rep, the Director's Company, St Clement's, and five times for Theatre for a New Audience. Regionally, he played the title role in the premiere of *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Carson Kreitzer at Cincinnati Playhouse. He has also performed at the Guthrie Theatre, Baltimore CenterStage, Pittsburgh Public, Hartford TheatreWorks, Syracuse Stage, GeVa, the Westport Country Playhouse and Living Room Theatre in Vermont. In Canada, he has been a company member of the Stratford Festival and the Grand Theatre Company. Film and TV: includes “House of Cards”, “The Knick”, “John Adams”, “Law and Order”, “Mr Robot”, *Return to Paradise*, *Greg Orr's Alone* and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. Training: Bristol Old Vic Theatre School.

**JULIAN ELFER** (*Julian Anson*) Julian Elfer's recent stage credits include John Patrick Shanley's new two-person play *Our Fantasia* (Nylon Fusion), the role of Charles Condamine in *Blithe Spirit* (Cape May Stage), Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (Directed by Cat Parker) for which he won the New York Innovative Theatre Award for Best Actor in a Lead Role, Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Gloria Maddox Theatre), Asher in *A Perfect Crime* (Snapple Theatre), the role of Moon in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (*Gloria Maddox Theatre*), *Poor Ophelia* (New York Directors' Guild) and *Coriolanus* (Shakespeare NYC) to name a few. Julian's recent film credits include the role of Albert Fuh in the award winning *The World of Albert Fuh*, a short film written and directed by Cady McClain. He also starred in *Sonnet 64* (the NYC Shakespeare Sonnet Film Project, Shakspeare Exchange). [www.JulianElfer.com](http://www.JulianElfer.com)

**KATIE FIRTH** (*Frances Farrar*) Previously at the Mint: N.C. Hunter's *A Picture of Autumn*; *Susan and God and Far and Wide*. Other New York credits include: *The Hiding Place*, Atlantic; *Humble Boy*, Manhattan Theater Club; *Only the End of the World*, *The Quiet Room* and Stephen Belber's solo play, *Finally*, Company Charnière; *Museum*, Keen; *Golden Prospects*; *The Winters Tale*; *The Wild Duck*; *Three Sisters*; *Stonewall*; and *A Woman Alone*. Regional: Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress*, Peterborough Players; *Placement*, The Black Dahlia, (LA Weekly Outstanding Performance nomination); *King Lear: Storm at Home*, Virginia Stage; *Day of the Kings*, Alliance Theater; *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, New Jersey Shakespeare Festival; *Picnic*, Actors Theatre of Louisville; *Persephone*, Mettawee Theatre Co; and the Williamstown Theatre Festival. Film & TV includes: “Ugly Betty”, “Law & Order”, *Honey*, “Guiding Light”, and BBC's “Grange Hill”. Ms. Firth is a narrator for Recorded Books, and a company member of The Actors Center.

**PHILIP GOODWIN** (*Doctor Farley*) Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, DC: Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Timon in *Timon of Athens*, Mayor Stockbridge in *An Enemy of the People* (Helen Hayes Awards); *King John*, *Henry VI*, *The Tempest*, *Volpone*, and others. Broadway: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The School for Scandal*, *Tartuffe*. Off-Broadway: *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *Macbeth* and as the Fool in *King Lear* with Kevin Kline, Public Theatre; *The Broken Heart*, *Troilus and Cressida* and as Henry VI in *Henry VI* (Drama Desk nomination), TFANA; *Grace*, MCC; *Drowning*, Signature Theatre; *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, NYTW; *Richard III*, *Double Falsehood*, CSC; *Celebration*, Atlantic Theatre Company. Regional: Kenneth Tynan in Tynan, *The Lisbon Traviata*, *The Puppetmaster of Lodz*, *The Seafarer*, Studio Theatre, DC; Dr. Tambourri in *Passion*, *Golden Child*, The Kennedy Center; other regional appearances include Hartford Stage, Cleveland Playhouse, Great Lakes Theatre Company, Guthrie The-