

The Christmas Plays

It was my first Christmas. My first Christmas in England, in English. The year was 1939, the Second World War was just three months old, and everybody was still afraid that England might be invaded. My parents and I had been lucky enough to escape shortly after the Nazi invasion of Prague and had arrived in West Byfleet, Surrey in March as refugees.

The British were extraordinarily good to us and to many others like ourselves who landed on their shores. They settled us in hostels, most of which had previously been huge mansions.

Our English neighbours were also concerned and open to help in all kinds of ways. In my case it was to get me enrolled in a good school. They persuaded the headmistress of The Gables School to take me in as a charity case in September. I was placed in Kindergarten in the mornings to learn English and in my own form in the afternoons for math, music, art, etc.

Xmas came around soon and with it the annual Nativity play. I quickly became enchanted with the baby in the manger idea, especially since I was given a part as a silent angel with a long dress, a halo and wings! The only thing I couldn't figure out was the use of the halo! Why a round hat with a hole in the top? My parents came to watch and clapped and I felt very proud.

Xmas 1940 found me in my regular form all day, speaking fluent English. I was given the speaking part of a shepherd in the play. Oh, was I keen. So keen that I actually learned all the parts in the play.

As it happened, the girl who was supposed to be a king was sick on the big day. Up shot my hand. "I know it, I know it" and I proceeded to reel off the necessary lines. The teachers looked at each other, doubtful about this double part for a little girl who was not even a Christian. But they had no other choice.

So as soon as I came off the stage the first time in my ragged shepherd's costume, I was changed into a king with a crown and beautiful long robe and rushed back onto the stage to reel off my kingly lines.

I remember some giggles in the audience. Obviously many recognized the quick costume change of the child whose speech was still lightly accented.

When it was all over, I could see my mother talking to all who would listen and proudly telling them that I was her daughter and wasn't I wonderful. I tried to hide then and often, often thereafter from my mother's excessive effusion.



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