

A Star of Life

Jonathan Croall, Sybil Thorndike's biographer, remembers a famous Chelsea resident

John Gielgud described Sybil Thorndike as 'the most loved and admired English actress since Ellen Terry'. She was also one of the most remarkable women of the twentieth century. Outside her acting career she was an ardent suffragist, socialist and pacifist, who fought throughout her life for a better and more peaceful world.



*Sybil Thorndike as Medea by Howard Ince
(matte bromide print c.1920. NPG Ax24998)
©National Portrait Gallery*

Richardson when he played what many considered his finest role, that of Ibsen's Peer Gynt. Her years in the theatre ran parallel to that of another great actress, Edith Evans, who was seen as her great rival, but was very different in style, temperament and personality.

Sybil was a talented pianist before turning to acting in her youth. She toured America and Canada for three years, playing over a hundred Shakespearean parts. Throughout the first world war she led the pioneering Old Vic company, playing numerous Shakespearean roles while bringing up four children. She electrified audiences with her powerful performances in *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*, and in 1924 became a household name with *Saint Joan*, which Bernard Shaw wrote especially for her.

A STAR OF LIFE

In the second world war she and Lewis took productions of Shakespeare and Euripides to the mining areas of south Wales. Afterwards she witnessed first-hand the devastation of postwar Europe while touring the continent with an Old Vic company headed by Olivier and Richardson. Later she and Lewis toured the world with their celebrated poetry and dramatic recitals, visiting Australia five times, and also performing them in America, Africa, Israel, India and the Far East, as well as all over the UK.

Sybil was on the stage for sixty-five years, during which time she played well over three hundred parts. She appeared in virtually every theatrical genre: Greek tragedy, drawing-room comedy, Grand Guignol, revue, Shakespeare, poetic drama, farce, gritty contemporary plays, and much else. It was an astonishing achievement, an indication of her remarkable versatility and her desire to play every kind of role. She appeared in some two dozen films, working with leading directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Herbert Wilcox, Michael Powell, Alberto Cavalcanti and Victor Saville. She also made a dozen television appearances, and worked extensively in radio.

When she played Saint Joan, Shaw gave her a copy of the play inscribed 'To Saint Sybil Thorndike from Saint Bernard Shaw'. She was much loved by both the public and the profession, for her warmth, her enthusiasm, and her generosity of spirit. But was the label 'saint' that was often applied to her an appropriate one? And was her sixty-year relationship on and off stage with Lewis the model theatrical partnership it seemed to be?

These were two of the many questions I tried to answer in the biography I wrote about her extraordinarily rich life. For seven years I interviewed nearly two hundred actors, directors and playwrights who had worked with her or knew her well. I also had many extremely fruitful conversations with members of her family, who collectively captured in absorbing detail Sybil's larger-than-life personality, her many virtues as well as her flaws. These interviews revealed the intense, sometimes furious arguments she had with Lewis about the state of the world, and her struggles to combine motherhood with a glittering stage career. Her letters showed the many facets of her personality: the fun-loving woman delighting in theatrical gossip; the doting but anxious mother and grandmother; the avid reader of the latest novel or book about religion or philosophy.

Unlike many actresses of the time, she had a rich life outside the theatre. Strong-willed, courageous and outspoken, she appeared on countless platforms with people such as Vera Brittain, holding forth passionately on the burning issues of

A STAR OF LIFE

the day, from Votes for Women as a suffragist in Manchester in her youth, to nuclear disarmament in her eighties. As a member and later sponsor of the Peace Pledge Union and a committed pacifist, she marched for peace; as a socialist she helped refugee children of Republican families made homeless during the Spanish Civil War. She spoke up for many groups struggling against their government, whether they were miners in the General Strike of 1926, native blacks in apartheid South Africa in the 1930s, or conscientious objectors during the second world war.

As a result of her political activities and popularity she was on Hitler's blacklist of individuals to be eliminated once Germany had invaded Britain. Yet her passionate desire for a better world was not confined to public speaking, nor to her support for many good causes, big and small. She was intensely brave, visiting leper colonies in England and Hong Kong, and holding the hands of children dying in the newly liberated concentration camp at Belsen. She was also, with Lewis, one of the founders of her profession's trade union, Actors' Equity. It was for all this, as much as for her great theatrical achievements, that the writer A.P. Herbert described her as 'a star of life', a description I used as the title of my biography.



Sybil Thorndike: A Star of Life by Jonathan Croall is published by Haus, in hardback and as an e-book. He is currently writing a one-woman show about Sybil, based on his biography.