

December at the Theatre Royal

By Susan Baxter

Dundee was transformed. The snow blanketed the old resplendent buildings in the city centre along with the carbuncles erected more recently.

Joyce and Pat were sitting in the Deep Sea, devouring delicious fish and chips with bread and butter and a pot of strong tea. 'They definitely serve the best fish suppers in Dundee here,' announced Pat with her mouth full.

'Yeah, fab, especially when you're starving,' Joyce was watching the two waitresses strutting about their territory. 'I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of those wifies. I don't know who's scarier, the blonde one or the black-haired one. Where do you fancy for a drink? I like the Bread but we'll get soaked trailing away up there and our hair will be ruined.'

'Why don't we just go the Queens then?'

'Good idea, and it's just up the road,' Joyce answered, realising it was not a night for walking far.

The girls put on their coats and scarves. They were both attractive girls, tall and slim. Pat was a natural blonde while Joyce had chestnut coloured hair. Pat covered her newly styled beehive hair with a rainmate.

'Did you get that from your granny?' Joyce giggled.

'Cheeky, I know it's not the height of fashion but I don't want my hair ruined. Your hood will flatten yours.'

Both were glad they had on their knee-length boots as they crossed over arm in arm and trudged through the thick snow towards the Queens Hotel. Walking past St Andrews Cathedral, they could hear Christmas carols being sung through the open door, leaving the Nethergate resembling a Dickensian scene.

Pat removed her rainmate at the door, and the girls looked around for a seat. Being a Saturday night, it was busy. There was a large Christmas tree in the far corner and decorations draped around the walls. A buzz of conversation filled the lounge bar, and smoke hung in the air, the atmosphere was warm and inviting.

'There's one in the corner Pat, quick before someone else sits there, I'll get the first round. Do you want your usual?'

'Yeah, thanks.' While Joyce waited at the bar a tall, good looking young guy with dark, curly hair and long sideburns sidled up.

'I recognise you from the Timex, you're in the office, aren't you? Can I get you and your pal a drink?'

She had seen him at work and had also heard stories about the numerous girls he had gone out with. She looked over to where Pat was sitting and noticed she was chatting to his mate who also worked at Timex.

'Aye, okay but we're not stopping long, we're off to the panto at the Theatre Royal. Downfield Musical are doing Mother Goose.' She helped him carry the drinks over, and they introduced themselves. Barry was the one who bought the drinks and Ron was chatting up Pat.

'That's a shame you can't join us for longer.' Barry said, admiring Joyce, 'love the mini dress.'

Bet you do, she thought, unimpressed.

Ron seemed to be having more luck with Pat. 'Yeah, it's a pity, maybe another time,' she said, sounding disappointed.

'I wish we had tickets, sounds like it will be a laugh, get in the Christmas mood.' Ron was looking at Pat.

'Maybe there are still some left? Even if the seats are not beside ours, we could always meet up at the interval,' she replied.

'I'm off to the toilet, are you coming?' Joyce was scowling as the girls headed for the Ladies. Once inside, she exploded.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Joyce, I really fancy Ron. He's so good looking and he's dead sweet, reminds me of Paul McCartney with that hair. Barry's dead good looking too, I don't know what your problem is, lots of girls would love to go out with him.'

'Yeah and doesn't he know it.'

'Aw please let's give it a go and if you still don't like him by the end of the night you don't have to see him again.'

'There may not be any seats left but okay, I'll do it just for you, but that Barry had better not try any wandering hands during the show.'

Pat hugged her friend. 'My best pal.'

'I'm just going to touch up my mascara and put a bit more panstick on. Pat, can I have a shot of your perfume, it smells great?'

'Yeah, of course you can, it's a new one from Avon. The woman just delivered it last night.'

The girls huddled together during the short walk to the theatre, feeling warmed and tipsy from the rum and cokes they had drunk. The boys managed to buy two tickets but not near the girls' seats, and Ron suggested that the boys sit with the girls. Joyce was warming to Barry, helped by the alcohol consumed. The two couples split up and settled into their seats to watch the show.

'Joyce and I go to the panto every Christmas. It's a tradition, with tea at the Deep Sea.' Pat already felt at ease with Ron.

'Sounds great, I love the theatre and I'm trying to pluck up the courage to join Downfield Musical Society. I'd be quite happy to work backstage to get experience.'

'Go for it; you would love it, do it in the new year. I'd come and watch your shows.'

'That's sweet and thanks for the encouragement, my dad calls me a Big Jessie, so I don't talk about it any more at home.'

'That's ridiculous, not all actors and singers are like that.' Pat was unimpressed by his dad's attitude and felt protective towards Ron.

She suddenly felt a shiver down her spine and goose pimples prickling her arms, 'Ooh,' she let out a cry.

'You feeling cold?'

'Yeah,' she lied, 'I'll keep my coat on just now.' But the theatre was warm.

'I wonder how the two love birds are getting on, Barry; I think they really fancy each other,'

'It's very sweet, Ron's normally quite shy with girls. You're not so bad yourself Joyce, love your hair and you smell gorgeous, maybe we could meet up sometime before Christmas? That is if you don't have a boyfriend.'

'We'll see. I take it you're unattached, you were seeing Donna Clark.'

'You miss nothing eh? No, that didn't work out, she was too clingy.'

'Well don't worry. If I see you again there will be no ties,' Joyce was determined she would call the shots.

As she settled back into her seat, her eyes became blurred, and she felt her skin crawl. She closed her eyes and felt her heart pounding. She opened them and looked at Barry, who seemed distracted, but neither spoke.

'Mother Goose' started amid cheers and applause, and the first half seemed to fly by. They met up for drinks at the interval, Pat and Ron already hand in hand chattering excitedly about the show.

'It's such fun, I just love pantos, and the costumes are gorgeous,' Pat was beaming.

'I liked the dame, so funny but that make-up must have taken hours to put on,' Ron laughed.

'Aye pal that could be you next year, you're ugly enough but you do have great legs' Barry teased.

'Well you never know, I wouldn't mind giving it a try, just don't tell my old man!'

The second half was in full swing when Pat started to feel peculiar. There were shadows of lions rearing up and pawing. The images seemed to fade in and out of her vision, and there was a strange, unpleasant smell. She clasped Ron's hand more tightly, and he looked at her. 'What's the matter darlin'? You look pale, are you not feeling well?'

'It's strange Ron. I keep seeing shadows of lions appearing and disappearing at the back of the stage and there's a weird fusty smell.'

'It's probably just the lighting and someone's smelly feet,' Ron smiled but didn't like to admit he had noticed elephant shadows moving in and out of his vision. He didn't want to worry her.

She felt more reassured, 'Yeah you're probably right, maybe too many rum and cokes.'

They sat hand in hand as Mother Goose drew to a happy ending followed by Christmas carols which the audience could sing along to.

The friends met up in the foyer. 'That was great, Joyce, I just love happy endings.'

'Och, you're such a softie but it was good and I loved the carols at the end.' Joyce had her arm linked through Barry's.

'Did either of you notice anything odd at the back of the stage?' Barry looked strained in the bright light.

'Yeah, I saw the shadows of lions and there was a strange smell.' Pat sounded anxious. 'Ron said it could be the lighting and someone's smelly feet but it made me feel weird.'

'I thought I'd had a pint too many when I saw horses dancing about but Joyce saw animals too,' replied Barry uneasily. 'Only she saw elephants.'

Ron tried to avoid looking at his pals as uneasiness crept over him.

'Anyway I need to go to the toilet before we head out, boys.' Joyce headed upstairs to the Ladies followed by the others.

'See you in the corridor here,' said Ron as the boys headed to the Gents.

'I don't want this night to end Joyce, Ron is just a pet. He's so caring. I'd love to go steady with him.'

'God, you have got it bad, you've only just met him! Mind you Barry's okay, maybe I've been a bit harsh on him. He's cute with his long curls.'

'You'd better watch Joyce, you're getting soft!'

The girls headed out of the Ladies, arm in arm. They looked around for the boys and spotted them further along the corridor standing outside a closed door.

'What on earth are you doing?' shouted Joyce as they approached the door.

'Sssh,' Ron answered quietly, 'we heard strange noises while we were waiting for you and they seem to be coming from behind this door. They're not happy noises, sounds like something may be trapped in the room.'

'Only one way to find out,' Joyce pushed open the door hard half expecting it to be locked and the others followed her in. She put the light on and looked around. The noises had stopped, and there was no sign of anything untoward. The room had several shelves piled high with film reels and a couple of old, cumbersome projectors. Everything was covered in a fine layer of dust, and the room smelled musty.

'They used to show films here years ago; I remember my old man speaking about going as a kid. It's like standing in the past,' Ron had always been interested in history.

They stood quietly, fascinated by their surroundings.

Suddenly they felt an icy draught, and the door slammed shut, followed by the light going off. The girls screamed while Barry grabbed the old door handle turning and pushing it.

'Don't worry it must have jammed, Ron give me a hand to force it.' The boys rammed the door several times but to no avail.

'It looks like nobody has been in this room for a long time, the lock's maybe rusted,' Ron didn't sound convinced.

'Why has the light gone out?' Pat sounded scared.

Ron tried to reassure her, 'Maybe there's been a power cut to do with the snow. Don't worry, it will come back on again.'

Joyce put her arm around her friend, 'It'll be okay the boys will fix it,' but she couldn't stop shivering.

Barry walked over to the window and drew up a dark blind. It overlooked the back of the theatre, and an eerie light shone through the worsening snowstorm.

'I thought maybe we could attract someone's attention over the back but I can't see a thing through the blizzard.'

'If we bang on the door and shout someone's bound to hear us,' Joyce was struggling to hide her fear.

'Yeah, the toilets are just along the corridor, surely there will still be people about,' Ron's voice was breaking as he tried to reassure the girls.

They all started shouting and hammering on the door when there was a sudden flash at the window followed by terrified animal noises, the trumpeting of elephants, the blood-curdling screams and roars of large cats and the high-pitched whinnying of horses.

They ran to the window to find the snow had stopped and figures could be seen running towards an outbuilding, one dressed like a Victorian circus master. They appeared from the back of the theatre which was now engulfed in flames.

'Oh my God,' screamed Pat, 'the theatre's on fire and we're stuck.' They all started pounding on the door, yelling and screaming.

Suddenly the door flew open, and there stood Mother Goose without his wig but still in costume and make-up. 'I was at the lavvy when I heard screams and shouting. What the hell are you doing here?'

'Thank God, we thought there was an animal stuck in here and then the door slammed shut and the light went off,' Pat was hysterical, 'then we saw the fire.'

Mother Goose looked shocked, 'It's all right lass you're out now, don't cry, there's no fire, you just panicked that's all. You're all safe. We're having a wee after-show party backstage, come and join us, a drink will settle you down. Christ, you all look like you've seen a ghost!'

They numbly followed Mother Goose and despite being subdued Barry whispered to Ron, 'Your old man would approve of that dame, nothin' airy-fairy about him.'

'You can say that again,' he stifled a laugh.

Joyce took a practical stance and explained to Mother Goose that they couldn't stay long as their parents would be worried about them.

'Do either of you girls have a phone at home? If you do then you can phone from the theatre office', he looked concerned.

'My mum and dad have one,' replied Joyce, 'I'm sure my dad will go round to your house Pat to let your parents know we'll be a bit later.'

'Where do you stay girls?' asked Mother Goose kindly.

Pat replied, 'We both stay on Blackness Avenue in neighbouring closies.'

'We'll walk you home, eh Barry?'

'Of course we will if you don't mind Joyce?' Barry put his arm around Joyce protectively.

'Yeah, thanks that will be great,' Pat smiled weakly.

Mother Goose disappeared to remove his make-up and dame's outfit and explained to them where the party was. 'See you in a bit folks, oh and by the way dinnae go into any other rooms you shouldn't be in.'

'We need to talk about what happened,' Joyce whispered, 'Just the four of us. He obviously doesn't believe us; thought we were ready for the loony bin.'

'Well you can't blame him for that, and I don't think we should mention this to anyone else as they'll think we're crazy,' Barry was struggling to sound calm, then he added 'But that was an odd thing for him to say before he went.'

Nobody responded.

They trooped downstairs towards the office where Joyce phoned her folks, explaining that a friend in the cast had asked them to the after-show party and that they wouldn't be late.

'It's alright for you guys, you get more freedom, like my brother,' she complained, looking at Barry. 'My mum and dad wait up for me and if I'm five minutes late there's hell to pay.'

'I suppose,' he shrugged.

Ron was studying the framed photos on the wall. 'Look at all these old photos; they go way back. There are photos of the Palace Theatre and before that the People's Palace.

There's one of the Jollity Theatre which was originally built on this site. Look that's a press cutting below.'

As Ron read the article, he felt shaky and took deep breaths, willing himself not to faint.

'What's the matter pal? You don't look too good.' Barry went over to his friend.

'Read the last couple of lines out,' Ron asked him.

Barry's voice trembled as he spoke. *'The Jollity Theatre was a circus property which had an adjacent building containing stables. It burned down and was replaced in 1893 by the new People's Palace Theatre.'*
