

EVANS, CLIFFORD GEORGE (1912 - 1985), actor

Name: Clifford George Evans
Date of birth: 1912
Date of death: 1985
Spouse: Hermione Hannen
Parent: David Hugh Evans
Parent: Dinah Evans
Gender: Male
Occupation: actor
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Stephen Lyons

Clifford Evans was born in Senghennydd, Glamorgan, on 17 February 1912, the youngest of three children of David Evans, an outfitter, and his wife Dinah, a milliner. He had a brother, Kenneth, and a sister, Pearl. When his father joined up for the Great War Cliff went to live with his maternal grandparents in Bronwydd, Carmarthenshire. Welsh was his first language.

At eleven years old he attended Llanelli Intermediate School. His first acting experience was in numerous school plays. He passed his School Certificate examination in 1928 and, with the support of his parents, in 1929 he moved to London where he auditioned at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, RADA, and managed to persuade the principal to give him a special one term scholarship with a view to winning a full scholarship at the end of that term. He began classes that very day. Bernard Shaw, Charles Laughton and Robert Donat were amongst the lecturers at RADA at that time. Another former Llanelli Intermediate School pupil, Professor Lloyd James who tutored BBC announcers, helped him with his King's English. Evans subsequently won the Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson Prize for spoken English among other prizes and the RADA scholarship.

In 1931 Evans made his first professional appearance, aged 19, at the Embassy Theatre in Swiss Cottage, London, playing Don Juan in a revival of *The Romantic Young Lady*. His next move was a tour in Canada and repertory at Folkestone and Croydon. In 1933 he made his West End debut when the Croydon production of *Gallows Glorious* transferred to the Shaftesbury Theatre. Although the play's run was a short one it brought Clifford Evans into the limelight. In summer 1933, he played the role of Everyman in Welsh, 'Pobun', at the Wrexham Eisteddfod. This was made possible by the work of Lord Howard de Walden, long a supporter of a Welsh National Theatre.

Following his West End debut, he was cast in John van Druten's *The Distaff Side* with Sybil Thorndike, completing a three-month run in London and then touring to New York. Evans taught his friend Sybil Welsh. On his return from America he played Ferdinand in *The Tempest* with Charles Laughton at Sadler's Wells and Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. He played Laertes in Leslie Howard's *Hamlet* in America and Oswald in Ibsen's *Ghosts* at the Vaudeville Theatre, London.

Evans appeared in nine films between 1933 and 1938 and another twelve between 1940 and 1943. He appeared in the Welsh coal mining picture *Proud Valley* with Paul Robeson in 1940 and starred with Tommy Trinder as the Foreman in *The Foreman Went to France* in 1942, an early Ealing Comedy. In 1943 he married the actress Hermione Hannen (1913-1983).

His career was put on hold in 1943 when, as a conscientious objector, he joined the Non-Combatant Corps. He directed and starred in productions at the Garrison Theatre, Salisbury for the Entertainments National Service Association, starring alongside Hermione Hannen. He was also involved with the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which aimed to educate and raise morale among the troops. In the late 1940s he made two films, worked in radio, appeared in an All Star Matinee to benefit RADA, produced an opera, played Faust in Welsh and served on the Films Committee of the British Council (North Wales Office).

Clifford Evans always believed that a person's background was precious, 'something to be proud of, whatever it is, something that is a part of you.' In 1950, in line with that belief, he accepted the Arts Council appointment to become Director at The Grand Theatre, Swansea for six months, hoping to make it a nucleus of a Welsh National Theatre. Richard Burton came to play Konstantin in the first run of Chekhov's *The Seagull* in Wales. Although the season went well, the Grand was a large theatre to fill and Swansea Council discontinued the project.

In 1951, as part of the Festival of Britain, Evans directed the Pageant of Wales, *Land of My Fathers*, in Sophia Gardens, Cardiff. Glyn Houston was the narrator, and Evans had devised and contributed to the script. This reinforced his belief that the capital city was the only place a National Theatre should operate. He also felt that there was little future for Welsh playwrights until they had a theatre of their own.

For the next five years Evans returned to films, appearing in eleven productions. By 1957 he was publicly outlining the need for a National Theatre and, in 1959, formed the St David's Theatre Trust to fulfil this dream. His main collaborators were playwright Saunders Lewis and Lord Aberdare. Among the names of those who pledged support were Sir Donald Wolfit, Sir Lewis Casson, Tyrone Guthrie, Sir Malcolm Sargent and Sir Carol Reed; Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, Stanley Baker, Harry Secombe, Meredith Edwards, Hugh Griffith, Kenneth Williams and Donald Houston; Siân Phillips, Dame Sybil Thorndike and Dame Flora Robson; Emyl Williams, Alun Owen and Christopher Fry.

Meetings with Cardiff City Council progressed and locations were discussed. The plan was for a nine hundred seat theatre, art gallery and restaurant, rehearsal rooms, a two hundred seat student theatre and a large outdoor auditorium in Sophia Gardens, adjacent to Cardiff Castle. This centre was to encourage Welsh talent and develop a 'vigorous, native style in production and performance', creating opportunities in both Welsh and English. The Welsh Committee of the Arts Council, however, was following a different agenda.

In 1962 the Arts Council created the Welsh Theatre Company but very few Welsh actors were used in its English productions. The following year the Welsh Theatre Company renamed itself the Welsh National Theatre Company and the Board or Court of Governors of Clifford Evans's proposed National Theatre found themselves powerless to object. By the end of the sixties, his dream of a National Theatre for Wales was in tatters.

He continued to work in television until 1978. Between 1965 and 1969 he became a household name as Caswell Bligh in *The Power Game*. He appeared in *Armchair Theatre*, *Dr Finlay's Casebook*, *The Prisoner*, *The Avengers*, *The Saint* and *Jason King* among other well-known programmes. Clifford Evans never became a 'star' as did many of his contemporaries. He did, however, make an immensely important contribution to the worlds of theatre, film and television.

Clifford Evans died in hospital in Shrewsbury on 9 June 1985.

Author

Stephen Lyons

Sources

NLW Archives: [Clifford Evans Papers](#)

Further reading

Stephen Lyons, [Clifford Evans - Man of the Theatre](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Clifford Evans \(actor\)](#)

Images

Geoff Charles, [Eisteddfod Genedlaethol 1961, Rhosllannerchrugog](#)

Geoff Charles, [Eisteddfod Genedlaethol 1962, Llanelli](#)

Geoff Charles, [National Conference on Television for Wales, Cardiff](#)

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