

# A little Forsyte

by Josephine Wise 2002

I have just spent two days on a shoot for Granada TV. They were filming the Forsyte Saga part 2, which includes a scene in a Bedouin tent on the edge of Lords cricket ground. The tent was put up, in the year 1920, to be a space in which the rich could have elegant refreshment during or after the cricket match.

Unfortunately it was filmed at Liverpool cricket ground, Lords having been modernised and rendered unsuitable, so I had to stay overnight. I didn't get to the ground until 11:30am on the first day, having left the house at 6:30, and I got home at midnight the following day.

The first day was a good introduction to the waiting game that is the world of film.

Arriving at the cricket ground car park, Beatrice, one of the actresses, and I had to find our way through the vans and lorries that had brought in the film equipment and sets, plus caravans of all shapes and sizes, some for makeup and costume, some for directors and some for actors. After half an hour spent waiting for the assistant director in his caravan, I was shown to mine. I actually had a third of a caravan, the other two thirds of which contained two of the actresses. I had a little room with sofa, table and cupboard and, most importantly, a blow-heater. The cricket field had a cold North-Easterly wind whistling across it, which guaranteed our discomfort for the duration.

I sat in my little room and waited. The assistant director popped his head in to tell me where to queue for lunch: at a lorry nearby, and where to eat it: in one of two double-decker buses with re-designed interiors full of seats and tables. This I duly did and I marvelled over my cottage pie and roast beetroot how the extras in their white cotton gloves and 1920's muslin summer frocks didn't get the juice on their costumes.

After lunch I sat and waited for an hour and a half. Then the costume woman arrived and together we pieced together my costume from some of my bits and some of theirs: my Assuit dress, their headdress; one hip scarf of mine and two of theirs; my jewellery. It was a gorgeous costume by the time we had finished. I went to makeup feeling quite excited but the makeup artist assigned to me proceeded to paint my face in a disappointingly ordinary way. The makeup artist made me look ordinary. Oh, well.

Then I sat in my room and waited for another hour and a half. The assistant director then came and told me they wouldn't be needing me that day after all. It was 6pm.

I was taken to the Holiday Inn Hotel - a dismal place nearby. I ate early and alone in a restaurant peopled by four or five male reps also eating early and alone, all of us reading our books or newspapers. I then escaped to my room, phoned husband and girlfriend for company, bathed and slept. Of course, when I say I slept, that would be an exaggeration. I dozed and fretted and listened to 2:30am drunken party-goers coming back and bellowing good-naturedly at each other outside my bedroom door.

The second day started badly with a 6:10 alarm call and a 6:30 ride to the set. By 7:15 I was in full costume, by 8am I had had breakfast and found and finished queuing for a different makeup artist. By 9am I looked extraordinary. This artist had really enjoyed herself. She transformed me into a Theda Bara, a Rudolf Valentino heroine, all bruised eyes and dark red lips. My cheeks were rouged, my lips were full and my eyes were dark, dark, dark, great rings around them. I looked scary, and divine darling, and so authentic I thought I would faint with delight. The artist was thrilled. She took a Polaroid to keep. She took another for me to keep. We loved each other.

Now, for the first time, I heard the music to which I was to spend the rest of the day dancing. A jazz band had arrived and I was to dance to 1920's jazz, most with an 'Arabian' feel and influence, but some without. They played me a tape so that I could get a feel for the style and the beat. I really wasn't sure my dancing style would go with this bouncy sound, but I would go at it with full energy and do my best.

I sat with tea and musicians on the top deck of a bus until our call, at around 10:30am. Finally I walked onto the set, into the tent, and experienced several hours of the film world.

The tent was draped and painted on the inside to look Arabian, with the floor covered in oriental rugs. Around the edges were big brass pots and potted palms, and the rest of the area was filled at one end with camera and sound equipment, in the middle with dining tables set with crystal and silver, and the far end had a stage for the musicians, a buffet loaded with luscious food, and a dancing area in front of the musicians for me.

The equipment end was full of technicians, costume and makeup people, the director and all his sub, under and assistant directors, people who said "scene 67, take 1" and clapped the clapper, and anyone else in jeans and a big padded jacket. The diners in the middle consisted of about forty or so extras in gorgeous 20's dresses and hats, suits and waistcoats, gloves, cravats, tiny beaded evening bags, satin shoes. They looked immaculate.

The front table was empty but for two actors, who played major characters.

My first sequence involved 45 seconds of dancing. I had to start stage left and dance to the right with the camera following me. As I did this, a waiter would cross my path and two male extras would come on after me and ogle me as they passed me while I was dancing on the spot. After a few seconds on the spot I was to approach the two men at the table and dance at them. My cue to approach them was a line of dialogue from one about "selling the family silver".

The first time we tried it I couldn't hear him say his line over the music. One surprising thing about TV and film is that the actors speak rather quietly and normally. Often when you are on set you can hardly hear them, but of course everything is picked up by the powerful boom microphones on long poles held above their heads.

I voiced my concern about not hearing my cue. The director, a tall, substantial Londoner in his forties with a small pony tail and a comforting arm around everyone's shoulders as he took them through their scenes, said "Don't worry about that, we're going to fade the music out for the dialogue and in again at the end. You just go on dancing in between as though the music's there. The musicians will only be miming to their own tape". He obviously didn't envisage any problems for the musicians and myself as we tried to remember the music well enough for them to mime correctly, me to improvise something that would go, all in silence and in the hope that when the music faded back in we would still be on the beat. We were all slightly horrified at first but we had a go and miraculously succeeded despite my having heard the music only twice before.

Scene two involved the next section of music, the entrance of several famous actors and actresses, and me dancing again to imaginary music, between the tables, criss-crossing once in front and once behind the actors, narrowly avoiding the boom mike and two extras crossing in the other direction, not tripping over the edges of any rugs or any of the electrical wires attached to mikes, cameras etc, and all this while smiling, undulating, hips pumping, performing and taking cues from various lines as to where I should be in the room.

The first scene had been done in six or seven takes, this one took about twenty-five, only a third of which had me in them. This was not because it was not working, but because it was repeated with the camera at different angles. By the time we had finished I knew my imaginary music by heart. Luckily it was time for lunch. The two scenes represented about one and a half minutes of Forsyte Saga and had taken two and a half hours to shoot, not counting set up of equipment.

TV filming is renowned for being slow, and expensive costume drama is probably the slowest, with the fabulous sets and excellent production values. Film can be, no, always is, even slower. It is agonising, a kind of well-behaved torture, especially for the extras. They have to wait and wait, sit and sit, walk the same route with another glass, another cigarette, mime the same conversation and “cheers” over and over and over again, each time looking attentive and fresh and waiting for the main actors to get their bloody line right, stand further to the left etc. etc.

Every time something goes slightly wrong, i.e. a plane goes over, car horn beeps, actor drops glass, chinks cutlery in the wrong place, mispronounces a word or leans out of the light, the director goes for another take. Meanwhile everyone sits or stands still and slowly freezes. I wanted to point out to the director that although when frozen you can still act, you can't still dance. Your muscles stiffen up and simply don't respond. Dancing isn't really a stop-start affair. It's more a warm-up, do it, relax and go home kind of activity. I didn't say that, of course, I felt too sorry for him as he carefully negotiated the minefield that was the delicate ego of his leading lady. Yuk! She couldn't get it quite right, needed reassurance etc. In any other profession she would have been told to grow up and get on with it.

Anyway, I digress. After lunch we went straight back to work. For me this involved watching the main actors enact another scene thirty times or so while freezing my bum off in various corners of the hall, this activity sandwiched between a single take with me dancing in the background to a piece that started with an “oriental” feel but then changed to the full '20s trombone oompah-ing, clarinet soaring, banjo twang, twang, twanging, and a final close-up of me doing the same again, just me, no actors, the camera with me full length and panning up and down me, me, me. So, I was interested that I was expected, or succeeded, in getting these things in one take only. Either the director was so enamoured of my dancing that he saw nothing to improve or my dancing wasn't important enough to bother. I have to say that the man was something of a perfectionist with everything else, and obviously hugely enjoyed my dancing, so I'm going with the first version.

By the time we did my final take my legs had stiffened up badly, but I rustled up enough adrenalin and enthusiasm to go at it full tilt. Oh, and they let the band play rather than mime for that one too, and that really helped. And yes, I did allow the odd '20's flapper girl move to sneak into my dancing as the jazz took over. Why not?

So how did it go overall? I certainly enjoyed myself, mainly because it was a novelty for me. I'm not sure I'd enjoy it if I had to do it all the time. The company was good, and the director and I formed an instant mutual appreciation society the minute we met. I thought he was great and he obviously thought the same about me. The extras were friendly and sweet. The costume people were fine, the makeup - one had bad vibes and did a boring face, the second was great and made me look like a dream.

The technicians were helpful and friendly, the musicians were instantly delightful and easy to work with. And what about the actors, the stars? Well, for the most part they were too concentrated on their work to socialise. They kept to their own group and looked warily at the rest of us. I was in a strange nether world, neither extra nor star, so they didn't know what to make of me, but they were guardedly friendly, smiled at me from time to time and asked me occasional questions or made comments rather than actually conversing. I can say that the pseudo Frenchman was a natural comic off screen, that Soames can play tunes on his teeth to make you laugh, that one actress can't pronounce long words in her mother tongue, and that the experience of being 'famous' seemed to have made them all tragically self-conscious. However, the rest of us had a ball!

The coda to this is that eventually I saw the episode we were filming, and most of what we did had fallen onto the cutting room floor. If you blink you'll miss the tiny glimpse of my dancing that's left. Never mind - it's normal in the TV and film world. I think I'll stick to the theatre...

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