

## Joie Macaulay as a teacher, remembered by Meg Harris Williams

(Margaret Harris, South Hampstead High School, 1962-1969)

Joie Macaulay, whom I first met aged eleven in 1962, was one of those rare and inspired teachers who make you feel that you are not ‘having a lesson’ but ‘experiencing life’ – and who become part of that internal pantheon who have ‘taught you everything you know’. Her love of literature was essential to her personality. She taught dramatically, using her RADA training (she originally wanted to be an actress), so we acted scenes in class. I remember moving the desks around to read the quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar* – a play which, with its school-life subtext, spoke vividly in many respects to the fourteen-year-olds that we were. As young adolescents we therefore felt on the pulses that literature was not just a ‘subject’, but was about the serious task of finding our identity. Even novels were always ‘dramatised’ and read aloud, with passages divided up for different voices. She was a brilliant reader of poetry, using the Richardsonian (Cambridge) method of ‘close reading’ to get to the deeper meanings; indeed she found it incomprehensible, and upsetting, if pupils couldn’t ‘scan’ the rhythms of poetry, as if they therefore lacked some essential life-skill. She produced the school magazine and encouraged us to write poetry and stories, above all helping to structure and condense our thinking.

Joie was passionate about linking art, music, and literature (she sang in choirs herself, and went on painting courses), and lots of thought went into scenepainting for the school plays, in collaboration with Jenny Weir (the Head of Art), and into their music (with Jean Middlemiss). At rehearsals for Daisy Ashford’s *The Young Visitors* Joie regaled us with plenty of chocolate biscuits and said she had never laughed so much in her life. Her choice of school plays was sometimes unusual, and she was amused when people told her that after some neglected or little-known play had been produced at SHHS, it appeared in the West End the next year. Amongst others she produced Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, Goldoni’s *Servant of Two Masters*, Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, and also of course *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Another interesting venture was a presentation of the mediaeval York, Chester and Wakefield medieval Mystery cycles for which we made puppets in different styles, corresponding to the styles of the plays (shadow, string and glove).

From the sixth form she sent us down to special theatre education days with the RSC at the Aldwych. In 1968 she asked a group of us to paint a mural of *The Canterbury Tales* across the back wall of her classroom (long since replaced by the new school building). Feeling like satellites of Miss Jean Brodie (being played by Maggie Smith at that time) we went to tea at her house in Abbey Road, and read *Paradise Lost* in the school’s little garden.

In the 1990s she helped me write *Five Tales from Shakespeare* for children, a project dear to her heart. In 2008 we produced *A Morning in Hell with John Milton* at St Marylebone with the aid of Chris Mackenna. The sequel to this, namely *The Fall of Man*, remained in its planning stages; it seemed to get stuck over the problem of ‘who on earth could play Eve?’ and she would review everyone she knew, as if back at school, but somehow it had the flavour of an internal question about herself and where she was going next. Probably this was the last piece of actual work she engaged in, unfinished.

She was fond of my father (Roland Harris) who was also an English teacher, and who died in my last year at school. She said at parents’ evenings they never talked about me, the pupil, but always about literature; one evening they were so involved in discussion they went in last to a talk that was being given, relieved to see two places had been saved, and Joie thought how nice it was to be sitting next to a friend rather than just a parent. She always remained vitally interested in education; hence after retiring from SHHS she tutored at the Open University for five years, then became a governor of St Marylebone School, very involved in their drama department. She also took an acutely observant interest in the development of the children of her ex-pupils, enjoying the talents and personality traits that comprised the growing individual.

One of the vivid memories she recounted from early childhood was of her own father, on leave from the First World War (or possibly just after it was over); he was asleep on the sofa and she said he seemed 'cold' so she took books from the shelves and covered him. She must have been no more than four at the time. It seemed symbolic of the role of books and their content. One's impression of her parents was of a sensitive man and a wife who found it hard to cope with his depression (a variant of the shell-shock suffered by so many). Joie said he was good with children; and perhaps working with them as a maths teacher eventually helped to pull him through, even though Joie herself acquired a stubborn blankness in relation to all things both mathematical and scientific. Reading Wilfred Owen's *Miners* in class has lodged in my memory as a life-changing moment, and resulted in the first serious literary essay I ever wrote.

Joie was argumentative and could be acerbic, but like all true teachers she would readily empathise with any person who required and appreciated her help, and would then be endlessly patient.

She loved both solitude and the company of friends; even at age 90 she recounted how one of her house tenants said they envied her packed social life. Certain practicalities were a mystery to her; after retiring from school she went on a Cordon Bleu course to learn to cook, then concluded this art was only revealed to those who had families to feed. But she was undeterred. She was a scatty if energetic driver and once knocked a corner off our house without noticing. She took pride in her garden, which was always well kept, and liked to swap plants. In her final years, clouded by dementia, she would worry about who would take care of her house and furniture, as if forgetting she was the transmitter of far more precious gifts.

Several of my contemporaries have already expressed what a formative influence she had on their own development, and have asked that a special Thank You be appended from SHHS.

Boswell said of Dr Johnson that if only all his friends had been as ardent and diligent as he was himself, the great man 'might have been entirely preserved'. A delightful and ingenuous fantasy that nonetheless has a grain of truth: in that memory, as autobiography rather than straight biography, has a vital potential for seeding itself in other minds, and thus the 'object' is preserved internally.

There is a website for Joie: [www.marjorie-blanche-macaulay.co.uk](http://www.marjorie-blanche-macaulay.co.uk). Contributions are invited from all who knew her.