ENGLISH HERITAGE

SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Episode 1: A 1930s Pioneer – The First Female Pageant Master

Josie: I'm Josie Long. Welcome to Speaking with Shadows. It's a new, original podcast series from English Heritage – the podcast that listens to the people that history forgot.

Have you ever wondered why you don't hear about inter-racial relationships in Jane Austen's time when in fact there were people from all over the world living and raising families in England? What actually happened to people who didn't agree with going to war in the early 20th century? What about the pioneering woman who hot-footed it to Sussex from London's radical theatre scene and directed thousands of local actors in a performance that lasted days?

In this series, I'm travelling the length of England, from castles on the south coast to Hadrian's Wall in the far north, to bring you stories from the shadowy corners of England's history. English Heritage are giving me full access to six of their sites. I'll bring you six stories from history that we should all be talking about. I can't wait to share these stories with you.

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We're in the charming Sussex village of Battle, or '1066 country' as they say. And just a hint at how charming it is – a little wren has just landed on a gatepost near us and it's looking around quizzically. I should also say it's absolutely chucking it down with rain!

We're actually at the bottom of the Battle Abbey looking out onto the battlefield. There's lambs and ewes grazing together and also somewhat incongruously I can see in the distance the figure of an archer. And that's been placed there as part of a reimagining of the landscape to sort of remind people that, at one time, this was the site of the most pivotal battle in England's history – the Battle of Hastings. Here William Duke of Normandy defeated King Harold of England to claim the country's throne. Every October enactments of this pivotal event in England's history take place here in the ruins of Battle Abbey. But it's not the story we're here to tell.

In 1932, one extraordinary woman brought her own unique kind of drama to these quiet streets. Her name is Gwen Lally, an absolute powerhouse and England's first female self-proclaimed pageant master, known for her extravagant, hundred-strong productions, which she would direct from on high through a loudspeaker. She most likely would have stepped off the train from London dressed in a handsome tailored suit, and I think the villagers around would have never seen anything like it.

I'm so excited to find out more and I'm going to start by meeting Kathryn Bedford, a collections curator for the south coast at English Heritage. Kathryn Bedford, hello! Where are we at the moment?

Kathryn: We're within the 14th-century gatehouse of Battle Abbey, up on the top floor. So this is one of the most spectacular gatehouses in Britain for an abbey building, and it has partly defensive

functions, but also it was very much a symbol of the status and power of the medieval abbey here – literally the interaction point between the abbey world and the world outside.

Josie: It's a hub. So you work across the whole of the south-east?

Kathryn: I do. I'm the English Heritage curator for collections and interiors for the south-east. So that's Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire.

Josie: Wow, how many places is that?

Kathryn: I have collections from 43 English Heritage sites over that area.

Josie: Let's be real. This one's the most important. Am I correct?

Kathryn: It's definitely one of the top ones – definitely one of my top sites. From our legal practice to our language to our interactions with the rest of Europe and the world and land, absolutely it's defined what it means to be British and English today, this site.

Josie: Wow! Okay, alongside all these country changing things, we've got the story of the 1932 pageant. And we're right by this cabinet which has I can see has the program, the show?

Kathryn: Absolutely. So this is the leaflet that audience members could purchase when they came to the pageant. So it gives a brief description of what was going to happen and some adverts from the times naturally.

Josie: So what is a pageant? What does that mean?

Kathryn: Pageants were popular particularly in the interwar period and shortly after the Second World War. They were massive theatrical events with thousands of performers and they typically told aspects of the history of Britain focusing around the area in which they were taking place. The Battle Abbey pageant took place in 1932, and as such was falling right in the middle of this period of popularity of mass pageants.

Josie: So what was this pageant supposed to be about?

Kathryn: This pageant starts with the story of the Norman Conquest. So there are a few different scenes early on that tell the story of William's right to rule, the battle itself, and the founding of the abbey. It then goes on to broader themes in British history such as smuggling in the local area and things like that. So it's a progression focusing on the founding of the abbey and the Battle of Hastings and then going on to tell the story of British history.

Josie: How did they find Gwen Lally?

Kathryn: Gwen Lally was very much a personality. She initially wanted 7,000 performers to take part in this pageant. Ultimately only half of that took part even at its busiest.

Josie: That's still 3,500.

Kathryn: So you've got this woman who's coming in with really big ambitions and she thought that the ghosts of the monks were supportive of her in going ahead. She claimed that she felt very positive psychic energy on the site. She thought that the monks were supportive and she'd even seen a ghost of a monk and that this was an omen that they needed to push ahead and go forward with this pageant.

Josie: You can't argue with that can you! You can't disprove it. What kind of a figure was Gwen Lally? Would they have known her – was she famous the time?

Kathryn: She had successfully completed large-scale pageants like this in the past. So she was someone coming in with experience – she had a very long theatre background before she started working with pageants. She had performed in pageants before she started directing them. But as a female pageant leader, she was slightly in the minority still.

Josie: Would that have meant something to people to have a woman in that role? Do you think people might have reacted in a different way?

Kathryn: It's a very interesting period within the history of women's rights and women's suffrage because obviously immediately after the First World War women get the right to vote – not on the same terms as men but for the first time women are enfranchised, they have the right to vote. They relatively recently gained the right to get a degree at university and there's sort of a sense of what happens next, because women don't yet have the same rights as men. This is very obvious, but they have achieved what had been the aim for so long. So this is a period where there's a transition happening in what women are trying to achieve and what they should be wanting to achieve. The WI [Women's Institute] was quite heavily involved in a lot of the early pageants. So they are pushing almost women's view of history. These are women that are telling the stories of the past and on a popular level probably for the first time really.

Josie: Wow, so it's subtly changing the narrative even if overtly it might not seem to be. So we've actually got a list here of the expenses from the pageant and it's really interesting to look at because obviously the total expenditure was around £10,000, but that's 80 years ago. So costumes and wigs £2,218, pageant master £434. I mean, that's a tidy sum! That would translate roughly to £30,000 for that work.

Kathryn: That's a tidy sum of money. And if you look the author is only paid £26.

Josie: Oh that's so harsh! I mean isn't that always the way. So she got paid £434. The entire performers' tea was £500.

Kathryn: For all 2,500 of them.

Josie: Oh gosh, I can also see how the fact that her being a woman people might have bristled with that in some way. I mean, this is all speculation, but you can imagine …

Kathryn: But it's then when you look at how much they're bringing in in terms of the admissions and car parks and all this kind of thing which is supposed to balance it out.

Josie: And did it do that? How did it work in the end? Was it successful?

Kathryn: No! There was some praise in the local press for the spiritual gain to East Sussex.

Josie: This is good, that's important!

Kathryn: That's important. Unfortunately it did make a loss of about £3,000.

Josie: Oh no!

Kathryn: Which bearing in mind it was supposed to be raising money …

Josie: In fact, we've got some quotes from the paper at the time. We've got a favourable review that says it was 'Awakening the county spirit and dramatic instincts of the people of East Sussex'. And I can believe that – I mean it's so lovely and wonderful to have a big cultural event that everyone is participating in! But then at the same time people are saying: 'I understand that there is a possibility that the guarantors will be called on. This is the result of the muddle on the business side. I shall remember the Battle pageant as something that just missed the mark.' But you know, there's always bad reviews, aren't there!

Kathryn: You can see both sides of that argument.

Josie: But also I suppose what's interesting is the absence of complaint or scandal around the fact that it was a woman, and quite an unusual woman, directing it. That could say something?

Kathryn: That certainly doesn't seem to have factored in. The only concern around her was whether she'd spent too much money.

Josie: Do we know much about what it meant to her? We know that she had to defend herself in the local paper.

Kathryn: Well, she's only doing these pageants irregularly. They're coming up every couple of years.

Josie: This is her big gig.

Kathryn: Absolutely. Whilst Battle was a failure, some of her others were real successes. So her reputation kind of fluctuated quite a lot as a result of that.

Josie: Well it's quite a big gamble, isn't it?

Kathryn: It is. Just getting that quantity of people together and then hoping that you've still got enough people left in the local community to come along and pay for tickets. It's just the two weeks. You've just got to hope that it doesn't rain. I mean, this entire thing is happening outside.

Josie: We've not have that luck today!

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Josie: This is so interesting. I meet a lot of actors and performers in my line of work and it is really really exciting to think that in 1932 there was this woman who was in herself so unusual and so good at her job. I mean, I know we talked about it making a loss but it's not a catastrophe! It's a massive thing to pull off and doing that in a public way, a high-profile public way, in the interwar period.

I'd love to know more about Gwen Lally – I'd love to know more about her career and her private life. So I'm going to meet Deborah Sugg Ryan, who's a professor at the University of Portsmouth. Hi, Deborah, it's so nice to meet you!

Deborah: And you!

Josie: So you've written a lot about pageants. What's your interest in this?

Deborah: Well, I started getting interested in pageants because I was interested in exhibitions, and there's this kind of tradition following the Great Exhibition, and sometimes pageants happened in the context of exhibitions. So that's what piqued my interest at first, and then it became an obsession.

Josie: So Gwen Lally – I hadn't really heard of her. What should everyone want to know about her?

Deborah: Well, I think one of the most interesting things about her is that she made a living as a pageant master. She didn't call herself a pageant mistress and there were very few women in charge of the large pageants. So the pageant tradition started in 1905 in Sherborne and it spread like a contagion across Edwardian England and carried on in the 20s and 30s. And her pageants, they're quite cinematic – she described them as looking a bit like silent film.

Josie: This is so interesting because I was thinking about how that job is a little bit akin to a film director in terms of the scope of the managerial things that you have to get on with.

Deborah: Well in fact, she was, she says, the first pageant master to use a megaphone. They were always held open in the open air, in a place of historic interest to give them this kind of authenticity.

Josie: Did she start out as a performer herself?

Deborah: Yes. She started as an actress. She was from quite a well-to-do family. Her father was a Reverend. She was educated at home and had some tuition as an actress. But what is very interesting about her early acting career is that she always played male parts.

Josie: Do you think the fact that she was educated at home, and the fact that she had a little bit of money behind her, would have given her more confidence to make an unusual choice of her life?

Deborah: I think what it did, as a kind of upper middle-class woman, is it gave her real freedoms. And I think she was very much part of a kind of artistic set. She also wrote her own plays. She wrote one about a famous ancestor who was a Jacobite refugee. The only time she ever played a female part, she played a female male impersonator like Vesta Tilly. So she said I am the only actress who has never appeared on the stage in a skirt. So it's something really distinctive about her career.

Josie: So what was the attitude to that kind of crossing over in the 1930s? Was Gwen Lally a pioneer in this – were there other precedents? How did she fit into the wider context?

Deborah: Well, there is a long history of women playing male parts on stage. We know that they did that in Shakespearean time – that they sometimes passed as men for male parts, although interestingly a lot of the female parts on the Shakespearean stage were played by men.

Josie: That's the thing I've heard of – it's definitely the other way around. I've not seen it this way.

Deborah: And there was a real trend in the 18th century as well for women to play male parts. When we get into the 19th century it becomes quite common for women to play male parts in Shakespeare. The very famous actress Sarah Bernhardt played some Shakespearean male roles and there are fantastic pictures of her doing that. And then, of course, there's pantomime as well, and the whole tradition of the principal boy, and there is this kind of interesting crossover between pageantry and Drury Lane pantomime. But the other thing that happens that is really fascinating is that in the First World War, when men are mobilised, the London theatres have no choice other than to use women to play male parts.

Josie: If we go back to Lally and her identity, how much do we know about her off stage away from work? The fact that she was always photographed in male clothing – was that something she did as part of her life the rest of the time? What else do we know about her and her identity away from the pageant?

Deborah: I think in the Edwardian period it's very connected to her stage career – her playing male parts. In the 1920s masculine dress was highly fashionable for well-to-do women and it was a signifier that you were a new woman engaged in artistic circles, engaged in suffrage circles. We know Lally knew lots of suffragettes and had acted in suffragette pageants.

Josie: Well, it sort of makes sense as well, because if you're opening up new spaces, the first entry point is actually the male world, as you would say. So if you're saying 'I'm here to inhabit some of this public sphere', the first way to do it is to say, 'Well here I am emulating what's already here?'

Deborah: Yes, but what happens is that things start to shift after the big case around Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*, and so then you get a shift, and you start getting a public perception of masculine dress associated with lesbianism.

Josie: We're looking now at a photograph of Gwen Lally when she was younger as Henry V, and she's got a really cool air, hasn't she?

Deborah: Yes, she always has this rather noble, detached kind of look on her face, I guess – aristocratic, I guess in her kind of bearing. To me, she's absolutely passing as a man in her stage performance, and that is something that was said about her by critics.

Josie: We're looking at the moment at her in a dress suit – top hat and tails.

Deborah: This is from when she was younger, and I think these were probably taken to promote the one-woman show she did, for her stage career, so I don't think this is necessarily how she dressed in everyday life. We have to remember these are posed in the studio. But there are some later ones as well in the National Portrait Gallery. And in fact when you look at the footage of her, there's some film of her when she's wearing a skirt actually. She didn't wear trousers as far as I know in everyday life, but she always has a kind of masculine tailored jacket and shingled hair, which of course was very fashionable as well in the 20s. This is one of the photos where she does really look like a portrait of George Washington or a sort of French count. She looks fantastic.

Josie: She was also a writer as well.

Deborah: Yes, throughout Lally's early working life she published poetry in magazines – really well-known magazines like the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Country Life*, and she published a couple of volumes of her collected poetry. What's interesting is there are quite a lot of poems about romantic love written to a female subject. So that's another kind of clue to Lally's personal life and identity.

Joise: You've actually done some really, really recent research, and you think you have uncovered something about her personal life.

Deborah: Well, what's interesting is that I looked quite hard for a life partner, which is really difficult, because I had made the assumption that she was probably gay. I knew she was unmarried. The only clue I had was probate – that she left her estate to a Mrs Mabel Gibson. Recently we've now got access to more digital records and I've discovered that this is also Amabel Gibson, so went by different names, an actress, who Lally refers to as her partner, and she means her business partner. And when I started looking at street directories, they shared a home from 1924. So I have got records of them

living at the same address in the same premises from 1924 to 1939. And then she leaves her estate to her when she dies in 1963. So I kind of think that's pretty good evidence.

Josie: That's really exciting. So we can say that this is a queer performer, who is in a massive position of power, who was unconventional in the way that they presented themselves to the world.

Deborah: Yes. But also mixed in these kind of really interesting artistic circles as well, and knew people like Vera Jack Hulme, who was trying to pass as a man and worked as a chauffeur and very interestingly a working-class gay activist. And she knew lots of the suffragettes, she knew writers. So Lally moved in those circles. But it's hard to reconstruct these lives without letters and diaries.

Josie: It must be so frustrating when all you want is just to hear from them personally in their own words!

Deborah: There is another clue to this relationship, which is absolutely fantastic. Lally and Mabel Gibson took part in a re-enactment at Wroxton Abbey in 1928, and Lally is dressed as Henry V, and Mabel is dressed as Princess Katharine as the bride, to re-enact the royal love scene. I love this picture because it's as if they are hiding in plain sight.

Josie: What a romantic place to leave this. How cool! And thank you so much for talking to us – thank you for sharing your research with us. It's been a pleasure.

Deborah: Great. Thank you!

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Josie: Gwen Lally clearly used her stage career to explore and express gender in different ways. And I want to hear more about how gender roles have been challenged through performance and how they continue to be challenged today. I'm joined by E-J Scott, a historian and the Curator of the Museum of Transology, and Francesca Reid, who performs as a drag artist, her main persona being the drag king Brent Would. E-J, hi, it's really nice to meet you! You're a dress historian, you're a curator, you're an academic, you're a queer cultural producer. What does that mean in the day-to-day? What's your life like?

E-J: It means I have the best job in the world. Essentially, I use archives to find objects that reveal stories that have been traditionally excluded from museums. And then I take those stories and reveal them and use them to both put on exhibitions, but also to work with performers so that they can draw on that history to inspire new performances of that today, and bring forward modern ideas about the past to better inform us creatively about ways we can move towards a brighter future.

Josie: I absolutely love it.

E-J: Yeah me too!

Josie: Francesca, I would love to hear about how your journey into drag performing started and how you started performing as Brent Would.

Francesca: So for me, I've been a performer since I was three. I started out tap dancing. I was a mouse called Doris in the tap recital, and I really wanted to be Morris because he had a better outfit but unfortunately, I wasn't allowed because I was a girl. And so all throughout my life it's been a question of, am I performing girl or woman enough? Does it look right? Does it sound right? And I don't think for me that my identity is that simple or that binary and I don't think anybody's are really, and that's what Brent Would is essentially – another aspect of me – but is ultimately like a persona and a character. And for me it does come from within, but the makeup is for me when I look in the mirror, so the two things aren't a disconnect, and also for the people who are watching me, that's for them a lot of the time –the makeup and the exteriors are often for the others.

Josie: Please tell me more about Brent Would. What's his back story? Who is he?

Francesca: Well Brent Would, as you can imagine, is an Essex boy, but he's not from Brentwood. He's from Bas Vegas – Basildon to you and I – and he works on a market stall, but he has pretensions of grandeur. He wants to have his own YouTube channel and make pop songs to educate the world so they can be a little bit friendly to each other but he's also extremely sexy and very much a lover man and has a pan identity. So he's very much into loving everyone anyone all of the time and he would anyone literally anyone!

Josie: I'd like to ask me which I think is possibly groundwork, but what are the crucial differences between performing drag and identifying as transgender, and how do you feel they relate to one another?

E-J: I think we can come back to a very interesting point that you've already made and that's about the gender performativity of clothes themselves. We know throughout history that what symbolises masculine on the one hand and feminine on the other hand through clothing actually shifts and changes.

Josie: Are our modern understandings of trans identities useful when we're thinking and talking about the story of Gwen Lally? What do you think?

Francesca: I think that definitely the way that we talk about it now does have application, because all of it does, but the terminology and the lexicon that we utilise may well have been different, and things that we speak about now and the words we use have become different. You know queer used to be extremely offensive, but the community have reclaimed that word so there will be words now that we use that perhaps would have been derogatory then, that actually probably are quite useful in the conversation.

Josie: How do you think Gwen Lally would have seen herself if we were thinking in terminology that we might use today?

E-J: Well, I don't think it's necessarily right to assert our modern conceptions on to her retrospectively. We can look at, for example, what pronouns they might use, or how they dressed off the stage. But actually I think that's also too simplistic – to say that your personal identity doesn't inform your stage persona is often too compartmentalised as well. What we can say confidently is that they engaged with gender nonconformity and that that would have been informed by their personal experience, but that their stage experiences – for example, being able to get away with more on stage – actually would have informed how they understood life as a woman off stage.

Josie: The way you've spoken about it I think is a really good way to not try to put too many contemporary terms onto the past.

E-J: It's very difficult to map trans experiences retrospectively through time. It's a modern word that we might use for trans, but we know that trans people have existed throughout history, of course. You know, we've got examples local to Battle Abbey in Sussex. We've got a Colonel Barker who was arrested and sent to Brixton Prison, and then found out apparently to be a woman and sent over to Holloway Prison. We've got Vesta Tilly who performed on the pier at Brighton, and during the Victorian period she started performing in men's clothes from the age of six. So we have these incredible performers, but also incredible characters that are performing their gender identity on and off the stage – it goes throughout history. So we need to think not did trans exist and try and locate that – we need to look at gender performativity throughout history.

Josie: How early do we have references for gender nonconforming performances?

E-J: Obviously it varies within different cultures around the world. You look at the Edo period from the early 1600s in Japan and the Kabuki theatre. You have Shakespearean theatre where you see men on stage playing incredibly serious, some of the most complex women's roles in the history of the stage. You've got them doing that and that's in Britain, but this moves out. And I think really where you see the drag culture that we relate to today in the mainstream – we probably are quite right in saying that that was drawn from Vaudeville theatre and from pantomime. It was the introduction of comedy in those roles where men weren't pretending to be women really – they were mimicking and mocking women.

Josie: Why do you think it's important to make sure that people know about our history of gender nonconformity?

Francesca: It's important for us to have some sort of understanding that we have a history. But you know, you have young people of colour or trans people or whatever, and if they do not see people that look like themselves, speak like themselves, inhabit a similar space to them, succeeding ahead of them or having succeeded or existed behind them, they have no frame of reference in regards to existence and they're not able to achieve their best, because they feel like an anomaly or they feel like they're on the outside. But this speaks of a much bigger desire to homogenise societies but yet keep us

individualistically away from each other – no community – but also homogenised because then you can group people and make them hate each other and fight each other.

Josie: And also you can pretend that your version of events is the truth so you can say well look there aren't any of these stories.

E-J: There's a very famous phrase that history is written by the victorious, right? It's about time we wrote history and filled in some of the gaps that we're used to seeing.

Francesca: And also to remind us that the fight isn't over yet. We might have some queer families in a soup ad, but unfortunately there are people dying or being attacked at unprecedented rates and there's lots of freedoms being taken away internationally. It's important that we galvanise and learn about it so we can move forward together and not forget that it might look good on the surface, but actually there's a lot going on and we need to keep fighting together.

Josie: With performance especially. What it gives is a chance for, alongside activism, alongside fighting against, a chance for joy and celebration, and that's why I think art and museums are also important. Thank you so much for talking to me about this. It's been so interesting and so exciting. I feel like it's a great way to give a bit of remembrance and celebration of Gwen Lally as a person and as a figure as part of kind of a long, interesting history. So thanks so much!

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Josie: I hope you've enjoyed the programme today. It's been so interesting just to see how all of the different layers of history still interact with each other now. It really does make you think about the social history of these places, not just the buildings – like the fact that the 1932 pageant itself gives us so many hints about the culture of the time, the politics of the time, what was going on socially at the time – just in this one grand event the fact that you get these little insights into gender relationships and the roles of women within society. I just find it so exciting that you take that one thing and it blossoms out.

What's so good is that people like Gwen Lally who were unconventional and thriving with it are just dotted around all these different locations, just waiting to be uncovered and talked about. It also just reassures you that a hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, people were still as interesting as they are today.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Speaking with Shadows from English Heritage. If you've got a question or just want to give us your thoughts, you can tweet us using the hashtag #speaking with shadows, plus you can find out more about this story at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows.

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every time a new episode becomes available and you can download it for free, of course, to your device.

In our next episode, I'll be hearing more about the black prisoners of war who were captured in the Caribbean and imprisoned in a freezing English castle:

> [clip] We often think of certainly black people in the 18th century as just purely defined by the experience of slavery. They're either slaves or servants in grand country houses. Well, this research shows that they are active players in world events and that they are mobile.

I'm Josie Long. See you next time!