

Wesley Bartlett presents

ALL ABOUT EVE

A new stage version

By Owen Brady

Based on the 20th Century Fox film

Cast in order of appearance:

Addison DeWitt	Rupert Blake
Eve Harrington	Abigail Dixon
Margo Channing	Judith Gold
Young actress	Kimberly Butler
Birdie	Janet Williams
Bill Sampson	Richard Gresham
Karen Richards	Beth Shipton
Lloyd Richards	Nick Connor
Miss Caswell	Kimberly Butler
Phoebe	Kimberly Butler

Director	Aubrey Henson
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Company Manager	Sarah Harrison
Deputy Stage Manager	Martin Johns
Assistant Stage Managers	Kelly Mortimer
	Evan Lester

Wardrobe Mistress	Libby Bennett
Miss Gold's dresser	Fred Walker
Dresser	Lexi Thompson

CHAPTER ONE

Judith Gold hadn't given more than a few seconds serious thought to her constant threat of retirement. What was that old saying? Actors never retired, they merely got fewer lines.

Fewer lines: that was what sensible, mature actors did. John Gielgud, for example, took a small role as the butler in the film *Arthur* and won an Oscar. Perfect. Even got a theatre named after him. Judith was still waiting for someone to propose a Gold Theatre. The buggers would doubtless wait for her to die first – what the hell was the point of that? She'd have to continue acting if only to ensure she wasn't forgotten and lose any chance of immortalization on a theatre façade. And if that meant taking cameo roles to avoid the responsibility of playing leads, so be it.

Then again, the downside to cameos might mean Judith wouldn't be in charge, and Judith liked to be in charge. Even though her role as Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* last year wasn't the largest in the play, it was the one everyone associated with it, and her involvement had ensured a six month sold out run. That said, the audience were as likely to recall the various disasters associated with that production as much as anyone's acting: bomb craters in the foyer; Nazi ushers; simulated air raids, and the destruction of the set on press night, all thanks to a director who hadn't the faintest

idea of what he was doing.

Judith gave a shudder of horror at the recollection. Actually, after press night when they'd rebuilt the set and banned the director from the theatre permanently, *Blithe Spirit* had proved a fairly enjoyable experience. Not that Judith would ever admit to enjoying anything, not even to herself. It wasn't her style. Acting was a serious business, and anyone who disagreed could jump out of the nearest dressing room window.

After the show closed, Judith had left for Prague to make an independent art house film for six weeks. It had been bitterly cold shooting the exterior shots, in addition to encountering several technical problems, and Judith was not happy. This meant no one around her could be either. The producer was found one night, hanging over the edge of his hotel balcony, threatening to jump if Judith made one more unreasonable demand. A few weeks after filming was completed Judith flew to New York where one of her earlier American films was having a retrospective at an East Village film festival.

By then Judith needed a break. The filming hadn't tired her, only everyone working with her, and in New York she was treated like royalty. But, even four months after its closure, Judith was still suffering from the pressure of not only performing but unofficially directing *Blithe Spirit*. She intended lying on a beach in the Caribbean for at least a month reading endless books and not even thinking about acting.

After two weeks and twelve books, she was bored and missing her two cats, Max X and

Max XI. Returning to England, she picked them up from the care of yet another of her housekeepers (Judith rarely managed to keep one for more than a few months) and rented a cottage in Cornwall from where she resolved to write her autobiography.

“Fuck, this is hard,” she announced to the two Maxes, after a week of scribbling with nothing much to show except piles of screwed up paper and a lot of unwashed coffee mugs. “I’m an interesting person so why do I either sound bloody boring on paper, or like a total megalomaniac? It’s ridiculous.”

Several sacks of used paper and two weeks later she decided the answer was to buy a computer. At least that way she’d be doing her bit for saving the rainforest. A sign in the window of the village shop offered the services of a computer expert, and he arrived two days later with a desktop machine. Judith allowed him to set it up, show her how to turn it on and get into word processing before firmly closing the door behind him.

After typing merrily away with two fingers for a day, Judith decided this was the answer to her problems. Who said computers were difficult to master? At midnight she switched it off at the wall and went to bed feeling satisfied. The following evening, after a long walk on the beach and a visit to the local shop for more cat food, she plugged the computer back in and found no sign of her previous day’s efforts. Swearing at it, thumping it and issuing threats had no effect. In desperation she picked up the phone and dialled a number.

“Hello?” the male voice answered.

“My fucking computer just ate my autobiography.”

There was a chuckle on the other end of the phone.

“It’s not funny, Rupert. I’ve been working on this for months and it’s all gone.”

“I’m sorry, Judith. It’s the thought of you using a computer, combined with a mental image of your life’s story being digested by the hard drive. If your writing is anything like your speech I’m surprised it didn’t spontaneously combust. How much had you written?”

“I’ll have you know I’d poured my heart out.”

“How much?”

“Two pages, but that’s not the point. It’d taken me all day, and then ‘poof’ it disappeared.”

“Did you save it?”

“I have to save it?”

“Yes. Didn’t the computer ask you that when you shut it down?”

“I don’t think so. I just pulled the plug out.”

“That would explain it.”

“If computers are supposed to be so fucking clever, why should I have to do anything?” There was another chuckle down the phone. “Sod off, Rupert; I can’t help it if I’m not a computer expert.”

“Why, Judith, I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you admit to not being an expert at something!”

“You bastard! I don’t know why I bothered to phone you. I’d have got more help from that Ben man.”

“Ben man?”

“Yes, you know, the one who invented macrosft.”

Rupert had a wonderful vision of Bill Gates trying to explain to Judith how Microsoft worked. “I think that’s Bill, Judith, not Ben.”

“Bill, Ben, what’s the difference?”

“Little Weed?” Rupert suggested, humming what he thought was the theme tune to *The Flowerpot Men*, though he wasn’t sure he hadn’t strayed into *Andy Pandy*. It had been a while since his *Watch with Mother* days. “OK, have you got your computer there?”

“Yes.”

“Your autobiography is probably still there. I’ll talk you through trying to find it.”

Ten minutes later Rupert heard a crash and a lot of swearing. “Judith, what’s going on?”

“I kicked the bloody thing over. This stupid paper clip with eyes kept flashing messages at me. I hate paper clips at the best of times; I certainly have no intention of being interrogated by one.”

“You can change it to a dog, cat or wizard if you’d rather,” Rupert said.

“As if having a wizard flashing at me would make all the difference. If you recall I’m one of the few renowned English actresses who hasn’t been offered a role in the *Harry Potter* movies. No, I’m not cut out for modern technology. I’m going back to writing the thing by hand.”

“How’s it going?”

“I’m not sure; I seem to come across as so domineering.”

“And this comes as a surprise?”

“Oh, sod off, Rupert!” Judith slammed the

phone down.

Rupert replaced the receiver, laughing. His wife, Miranda, came into the room dressed in a slinky dark yellow evening dress with a large slit up the side. The colour brought out the best in her auburn hair. "Who was that?" she asked.

"Judith, she just hung up on me. I think I insulted her once too often."

Miranda frowned. "Honestly Rupert, I don't know why Judith puts up with you; you're so thoughtless sometimes. And you might have told me she'd phoned. I would have liked to talk to her too. After all, I was also in *Blithe Spirit* with her."

"She wanted help with her computer," Rupert said. "I wasn't aware it was your area of expertise."

"Don't be facetious, Rupert. If you don't want me to talk to Judith there's no need to make up excuses. Judith using a computer, I don't think so."

Rupert shrugged. "Suit yourself. You look lovely, by the way. Where are you going?"

"We are going to the Theatrical Benevolent Charity's dinner."

"Oh God," said Rupert. "Do I have to?"

"Yes. I've put out a suit for you on the bed."

Rupert sighed and went to change, noting how the suit Miranda had laid out for him would, as usual, coordinate perfectly with her outfit.

Judith sat in her cottage thinking of Rupert. Slamming the phone down had been entirely good-natured, as Rupert would be fully aware, and she visualized him laughing as he'd got the

cut off signal. Rupert was one of the few actors, possibly the only one, who could get away with standing up to Judith. On *Blithe Spirit* he'd become her rock; without him she wasn't sure she'd have survived the experience. When she'd initially heard the role of Charles was to be played by an ex-tennis player turned actor, she'd been horrified. But Rupert, she soon discovered, was a natural born actor.

Not only had he kept the show together with his amazing talent for ad-libbing on stage when things went wrong, but his cool under the most trying of experiences, and his sense of humour, had kept the entire company relaxed. She'd never forget him emerging from under the table on the press night, after the set had collapsed around him, and calmly finishing the play.

Normally, once she'd completed a job, whether on stage, film or TV, Judith would forget her fellow actors, move on, find others to torture, but Rupert was different and she had to admit, if only to herself, that she missed him. While most people quivered at the very sight of Judith nearing them, Rupert gave as good as he got – and Judith loved that. It wasn't a sexual association, though God knows he was handsome enough, but she was far too old for him. Besides, there were enough infatuated women throwing themselves at him; on *Blithe Spirit* alone there had been four that Judith knew of, in addition to his wife. No, Rupert was a friend, and that was something Judith didn't have many of.

She glared at the computer. "Fuck off," she told the contorting paper clip, "or I'll find the

wizard Rupert was telling me about and have it castrate you.”

Undoing a box in the corner of the room, which she'd brought with her from London, Judith produced a selection of scripts she'd been sent. Dividing them into film, TV and theatre scripts, she considered each genre. Film and TV were more lucrative, and the exposure more universal, but she was a stage animal at heart. Also, filming was slow and she didn't fancy another cold, miserable location shoot. She picked the top script off the theatre pile and began reading. The perfect play should have a superb role for a mature lady (Judith never owned up to being over 55), and for a younger man – if Rupert could be persuaded to return to the stage. He'd recently completed a major Hollywood film and was greatly in demand. Maybe she should get an assessment of the situation before getting too involved. Picking up the phone she pushed re-dial.

“Hello?”

“Miranda, it's Judith.”

“Judith! How lovely to hear from you.” Judith could hear the excitement in Miranda's voice. Bother, she'd rather have got straight through to Rupert. It wasn't that she disliked Miranda, she'd been excellent in *Blithe Spirit* which was what mattered in Judith's book, but, in total contrast to Rupert, she was a bit too sycophantic for Judith's taste. “How are you enjoying your break?” Miranda continued. “You certainly deserve it after all you went through.”

“It's wonderful thank you, Miranda. I'm in a little cottage in Cornwall having a rest and a

think.”

“Sounds like heaven. I keep telling Rupert we should do something like that. Where exactly are you?”

“Somewhere on the coast,” Judith said vaguely, not certain she wanted to find Miranda renting a place nearby and popping in for a bowl of sugar. “Could I have a quick word with Rupert?”

“Oh. All right.” Miranda was obviously disappointed. “He’s getting ready for a charity dinner. I’ll give him a shout. When you’re back in London, we must all go out for dinner. Or even better come round here. I could cook.”

“How lovely.”

Realizing she wasn’t getting any more from Judith, Miranda called Rupert. “It’s Judith for you – again. Don’t be long, we mustn’t be late.” Miranda stalked off to reapply her lipstick. There would be quantities of actresses there tonight, all checking out their competition.

Rupert picked up the phone. “Judith, please tell me there’s a disaster in Cornwall and I have to leave immediately to save you.”

“Sorry, you’ll have to go to your charity thing.”

“Damn.”

“Rupert, how do you feel about doing another play with me?”

There was silence for a second. “What play?”

“I don’t know. I’m working my way through scripts at the moment, but I wanted to know if you were interested first.”

“Will it be directed by Alexander?”

“After last time? What do you think?”

“Will I have to seduce anyone to improve their performance again?”

“Not unless you want to.” Judith smiled, thinking of their naïve ex-beauty queen who had been cast as the ghost in *Blithe Spirit*, and with whom Rupert had done stalwart work.

“OK. Count me in – presuming it’s a good script and I don’t doubt that if you’re choosing.”

“Really?” Judith hadn’t been prepared for such an easy acquiescence.

“Sure. I’m flying to LA next week to do a small part in a George Clooney movie, but after that I haven’t much lined up.”

“George Clooney, get you.”

“I know, it’s a hard life, but someone has to do it. I’m hoping we get on so well I’m taken home and introduced to his pot-bellied pig.”

Judith laughed. “I’m glad to know you have such high ambitions. Will Miranda be OK if there’s nothing for her in the play?”

“You mean you’d like to find something in which there is nothing for her?”

“I didn’t say that.”

It was Rupert’s turn to laugh. “Actually, Miranda has been offered a regular part in a new TV hospital drama *NHS: The National Hope Service*. She’ll be the caring face of Nurse Cathy, giving out pills, enemas and sympathy – on the condition she doesn’t have to wear unflattering flat shoes. She could be the first NHS nurse to be wearing Manolo Blahniks. She’ll be contracted for at least a year, so you’re off the hook.”

“It’s not that I don’t like her, Rupert.”

“It’s fine, Judith. We aren’t inseparable.”

“She says you and she should hire a cottage in Cornwall.” This disclosure was greeted by total silence. “Hello, Rupert, are you still there?”

“Yes. I was temporarily stunned at the picture of Miranda in a cottage in the country, teetering down lanes in the latest fashions, complaining that the cows woke her up, and horrified there wasn’t a beauty therapist within a hundred foot radius.”

“It’s not the cows that wake you,” Judith grumbled, “it’s the silence in the country; it’s unnatural. And the fact that the bloody kitten you gave me is now fully grown and keeps leaping on me as dawn rises. You’d think as a theatre gift he could keep theatrical hours like the rest of us and sleep until noon.” Max XI chose that moment to illustrate Judith’s point by jumping from the back of the sofa onto her neck. “Ow! Sorry Rupert, I’ve got to go and feed these bloody creatures before they turn cannibal and eat me. Enjoy your charity event!”

“What did Judith want?” Miranda demanded, as Rupert drove them to the evening’s venue in his 1950s classic Jaguar.

“For some reason she wants to do another play with us.”

“Really?” Miranda said, thrilled.

“Yes, and she was most disappointed when she heard your hospital series would rule you out from taking part.” After eleven years of marriage Rupert had perfected the way he dealt with Miranda’s ego.

Miranda’s face fell. “Damn.” Then she smiled again. “Never mind, if you’re doing it I’ll be involved by proxy. I’ve asked her round for supper

when she gets back.”

“You’re not going to cook, are you?” Rupert asked in amazement.

“Don’t be silly, Rupert. That’s why caterers exist.”

In Cornwall, Judith was working her way through piles of scripts. By 6am she’d found one she considered perfect.

CHAPTER TWO

Wesley Bartlett was fast asleep when his phone went at 6.30am.

“Hello?” he muttered, taking the phone under the duvet. Beside him his wife, Henrietta, moaned, turned over and put a pillow over her head.

“Good morning, Wesley, it’s Judith.”

“Judith?” Wesley felt a sudden drop in the pit of his stomach as briefly, in his sleepy state, he was transported back to last year, when every phone call from Judith meant yet another catastrophe on *Blythe Spirit*. That was the trouble with being a caring theatre producer; ultimately every problem ended up on your doorstep, and it took some time to recover from that. Especially when your leading actress was Judith Gold and your director was a cretin.

“You sound tired, Wesley. Did I wake you? I thought you were sure to be up early with a baby. Don’t they always wake at unearthly hours?”

“Yes, but sometimes those unearthly hours are at 3am until 6am. I’ve only just got her back down.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry.” Judith didn’t sound in the least bit sorry. “How is my god-daughter?”

“Blythe is fine, thank you, though I wasn’t aware you were her godmother.”

“An oversight on your part, Wesley. After all, I inspired you with her name.”

“You bullied us with the name,” Wesley pointed out. “Eventually you thrust it down our throats so much nothing else seemed to suit her.”

“A charming memento of the play though, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I want a memento; it wasn’t my easiest experience to date.”

“It wasn’t your easiest experience? How do you think I felt? I had to go on stage with egg on my face half the time.” Wesley couldn’t recall Judith with egg or anything else on her face. She’d never been anything but wonderful on stage. But he wasn’t going to argue with her, especially at 6.30 in the morning. “And,” Judith continued, “may I point out, it was you who employed the director – without even checking out his previous work.”

Wesley banged his head against the pillow. Judith was never going to let him forget that. Not that he could blame her. “So, Judith, is this call intended to revisit old miseries, or is there a purpose to it?”

“I want you to produce another play for me.”

Wesley sat bold upright, almost hitting Henrietta with his elbow. “Are you serious?”

“You are a producer; I am an actress. It seems a perfectly logical request. You’ve produced most of my more recent ventures, after all.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to do any more plays for several years. Something about a break, diversity and not putting yourself through all the strain again.”

“I also told our renowned director, several

times, to go fuck himself, but believe me it was the last thing I wanted. The thought is utterly repellent. So here I am, in need of a producer.”

This wasn't something Wesley had thought he would be worrying about at present. He was enjoying an easy life for a while, currently producing Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, which involved three very easy going actors and an excellent director. It might be less profitable than producing a play with Judith, but it was far better for his stress levels. And it meant he had more time to spend with Henrietta and Blythe.

As if on cue, Blythe started to wail. Henrietta staggered out of bed and headed towards the noise.

“Blythe has a good pair of lungs on her,” Judith commented. “She'll doubtless end up as an actress. She certainly knows how to upstage. There are very few people who can distract me when I'm putting forward a project to a producer.”

“So what is this great new project?”

“That's a very good question. I'll let you know when I've made the final decision. And you did assure the *Blithe Spirit* cast that you'd give us another job as an apology for lumbering us with Alexander.”

“You want the whole cast back?” Wesley couldn't keep the amazement out of his voice. He was fully aware Judith had been less than fond of specific members of the company.

“Don't be ridiculous, Wesley. If I was reunited with certain cast members one of us would not survive the experience.”

“So who do you want?”

“Rupert. I’ve spoken to him, and he’s agreed in principle.”

Wesley was hardly surprised. He’d never seen Judith so at ease with another actor. And if he was going to produce this project, he’d be glad to have Rupert on board. But neither Judith nor Rupert came cheap, so Wesley hoped this mysterious project had a small cast and simple sets and costumes or he’d be unlikely to make any money for the six month run that Judith would only sign for.

“Are you going to enlighten me as to this project before I make my decision?” Wesley asked.

“What decision?” Judith replied. “You’re hardly going to say no. I’ll phone you back when I’m ready. Goodbye.”

Wesley picked up his pillow and threw it across the room in a half-hearted gesture of annoyance. Henrietta came back into the bedroom carrying a now happily smiling Blythe. “What did Judith want?” she asked.

“Me to be her producer on a new theatre project.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“Apparently I don’t have a choice.”

“You could say no.”

“To Judith? Would you like to try?”

“No, but then I’m not a successful producer, who can choose what he wishes to produce.”

“When I talk to Judith I feel like I’m about 10 years old and need to be told what to do.”

Henrietta laughed. “So, what is it?”

Wesley sighed. “Would you believe I have no idea?” Henrietta stared at him open mouthed.

Wesley put his hands up in mock surrender. “I know, I know, I’m a pushover. All the information I was allowed was that Judith and Rupert are lined up for it.”

“Rupert?” Henrietta replied, her face lighting up. “That’s great.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t look quite so happy about that.”

Henrietta smiled, and, leaning over Blythe’s head, she kissed Wesley. “You know I only have eyes for you. I was merely thinking how his presence in the cast would not only boost ticket sales, but keep Judith calm.”

Wesley nodded, thinking how lucky he was to have found a wife who understood his business so perfectly. “And of course,” Henrietta added, “it does help that he’s irresistibly gorgeous.”

“Yes,” Wesley said. “Let’s hope the rest of the casting for this mysterious project will be as easy.”

“You’re producing a play with Judith Gold in it; you’re hardly going for the easy option.”

“No. I must be totally and utterly crazy.”

“Cwazy,” Blythe gurgled.

Wesley and Henrietta burst into laughter. “You see,” Wesley said. “Even our 1 year old knows better!”