

Suburb News *in conversation with...*

... Leonie Stephen

Peter Falk chats to the much-loved Suburb thespian Leonie Stephen

Long term Suburb resident Leonie Stephen has just celebrated her 90th birthday. Friends and relatives gathered around her in the party room at Finchley Memorial Hospital where she was staying at the time. Happily Leonie is now back at her Willifield Way home.

Leonie and her twin brother George were born in Bavaria and looked after by their mother's parents until they arrived in this country in 1931 when they were six. By then their mother, Lilian, who was just 17 when they were born, had remarried over here after the breakdown of her first marriage.

She and Robert Metcalfe, her barrister husband, settled in Ealing and had a daughter and two sons together. Leonie did not meet her real father, Fritz, until the late 70s when she was over 50 herself.

In 1939 after interrogation at Bow St, as German passport holders, they were allowed to stay at home with a 6pm curfew. Leonie left school at 16 and joined the Old Vic Drama School before enrolling and then graduating from RADA. By then naturalised she was spotted by impresario Robert Atkins working at Stratford, and she spent a year playing small Shakespearean parts there until he moved to the Regents Park Theatre in

1946, leaving Leonie jobless.

Back in London she lived in the Suburb for a while and became involved with the Speedwell Players (a precursor of the Garden Suburb Theatre). Her eldest brother, Peter, became a close friend of Richard Wakefield, whose father can be seen seated in the photo of the Players.

In 1947 she started working in rep, first in the Petersfield and Alton area and then, in 1948, in Wolverhampton. She played a huge range of parts in plays by Priestley, Shaw, Coward and Wilde including Miss Prism in the Importance of Being Earnest, Hypatia in Misalliance and Portia (see picture) in the Merchant of Venice. In 1947 at Christmas she played one of the Ugly Sisters!

By 1950 she decided to leave rep as her family considered that at the age of 25 she should have a 'proper job'. She went to St Godric's Secretarial College in Arkwright Road, Hampstead but she admits she was awful at shorthand. So she got a job as a receptionist in a hotel in the Cromwell Road, and after two years moved to the Cumberland Hotel where she later became manager of its Peppermill restaurant.

Soon serendipity, in the form of her flatmate's mother who was editor of 'Theatre World', led to work as her assistant and



Leonie celebrates her 90th with her son Christopher, eldest step-brother Peter and a glass of champagne

a regular reviewer. They met on a visit to the theatre when Leonie was standing in for her flatmate, who wanted an evening with her boyfriend; the flatmate's, that is.

Leonie's mother and step-father, Robert and Lilian Metcalfe, had moved to Heath Close in the Suburb before the end of the war and Leonie lived there as well, when not living in a bed-sit in central London. They lived opposite the Flanders family and Leonie got to know Michael well. On one occasion she accompanied him up to Oxford to go to the theatre together.

During this time and especially when she was living in her Lupus St flat, Leonie had a succession of boyfriends and she almost got engaged to, in her words, "a ghastly Frenchman", who had confided in her parents that she was "completely impossible". The break up was mutual!

In 1956 her brother Peter came home for dinner with an office friend James, an architect. Leonie decided almost immediately that this was the man she was going to marry, but James was a cautious man and the courtship lasted two years until they were married at St Jude's Church. The reception was held at her parents' house, 10 Heath Close.

After their marriage James and Leonie first lived together in Leonie's flat in Lupus St; always known as Coldwater flat because there was no hot water. After six months they moved to the Suburb to a house in Woodside, and then moved in 1969 to her home in Willifield Way.

Leonie stopped working at Theatre World after the marriage, and she and James soon had a family. First their son Christopher was born in 1962, and then daughter Vanessa arrived two years later in 1964. He is now a war correspondent, currently working out of Tunisia. She

studied in Edinburgh and for a year in Italy, and is now running her own landscape gardening company in Scotland.

Leonie soon set up a baby-sitting group with Helen Chick from Erskine Hill so that she could go back to work; this time as a reviewer for the London Weekly Diary. After Helen moved from the Suburb, Leonie took over sole charge and ran the group for 25 years.

After 1975, when contact had been made with her birth father, she became friends with Holger and Renate, the children from his second marriage and so she acquired a second family. She met them in Germany and the extended family have also come over to England. There were lots of cards from Germany at her birthday party.

Leonie had 27 years of marriage to James, who was, she said, a kind and gentle man and they had a marvellous marriage. He died tragically in 1986 whilst they were on holiday together in Sri Lanka, and after his death she was persuaded by Eileen Whelan to get involved in local affairs.

She joined the Residents Association's Council, eventually taking over as chairman, with Richard Wakefield as vice chairman, for three difficult years when there were tremendous differences of opinion on whether the School or the Institute should remain in Central Square. Later she became a champion for green spaces and was chair of the Trees and Open Spaces committee.

She also got involved in local politics becoming chairman of the local branch of the Liberal party. She had already joined the Citizens Advice Bureau, and for ten years was the manager of first the Bell Lane office and then the one at Church End.

Leonie only acted once for the Speedwell Players shortly before they merged with the Play and Pageant Union, and

were renamed the Garden Suburb Theatre. She played opposite David McCallum, who later starred in the Man from Uncle series and now features in the TV series NCIS.

She was also, for many years, our incisive play reviewer at the Suburb News.

Leonie has made a tremendous contribution to the local community over so many years and we owe her thanks for all she has done. Her mind is as sharp as ever; as anyone who visits her at Willifield Way can attest. We wish her well as she enters her nineties **S**



Leonie plays Portia in the Merchant of Venice The Speedwell Players



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