

THE DESERT QUEEN

The extraordinary
life of Gertrude Bell
1868 – 1926

a play for the stage

by David Farn

Based on the book *Queen of the Desert* by Georgina Howell

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THE DESERT QUEEN

The Desert Queen was produced by Hands On NE and first performed at Washington Arts Centre, Tyne & Wear on July 26th 2018, followed by a short NE tour.

The original cast and creative team were:

Gertrude Bell	Phillippa Wilson
Everyone Else	Brian Lonsdale
Director	Neil Armstrong
Dramaturg	Dolores Porretta-Brown
Lighting & Sound	Neil Armstrong
Stage Manager	David Farn
Technical Crew	Neil Armstrong & Peter Dawson
Properties	David Farn & Company
Wardrobe	Peoples Theatre & Company
Publicity / Media	Peter Dawson
Set Design	The Company

Hands On NE also produced a longer tour of the play, in 2019, which took in much of North Yorkshire, including Rounton Village Hall, which was built by Gertrude's own grandfather; and the Newcastle Literary & Philosophical Society, where Gertrude lectured on the Middle-East.

The cast for the 2019 tour was:

Gertrude Bell	Kylie Ann Ford
Everyone Else	Lawrence Neale

Review

'A great success ... fine performances.'

David Whetstone, *Newcastle Lit & Phil Magazine*



Synopsis of the play

We first meet Gertrude on one of her Alpine adventures, fearlessly climbing a mountain in a storm. She pauses to address the audience and describe the course of her career: her privileged childhood in Yorkshire at the family estate at Rounton Grange; her grandfather, Sir Isaac, knighted for his industrial achievements; her beloved father and her French stepmother.

Gertrude charts her academic career at Oxford, and her frustration with Victorian society, which eventually drove her abroad and to develop a lifelong fascination with the landscape and the peoples of the Middle East. She goes on to describe her unhappy love life, and the solace she took in garden design and her work for the Red Cross in the Great War.

Time and again, Gertrude returns to her love of travel, languages and archaeology. She becomes a trusted friend to the Arabs; assists T E Lawrence (of Arabia) in inspiring a revolt against the Turks; and plays an important part as a diplomat in the formation of the new state of Iraq.

The Characters

Gertrude Bell

Gertrude was born in 1868 to one of the richest and most influential families in the country. Despite being intelligent, courageous, adventurous and fiercely independent, the conventions of the time excluded her from the family business. Worse still, she felt stifled by a Victorian society that seemed to offer her no role other than that of ornamental addition to a husband.

The Man

During the play, this versatile actor – with the help of token costume changes, and sometimes only with a change of voice – becomes whatever character Gertrude requires in the telling of her story. Seamlessly, he changes from being Alpine Guide Ulrich, to Maurice (Gertrude's little brother); then Grandfather Bell; her stepmother, Florence; her father Hugh; a pompous Oxford don; her first love Henry Cadogan; Tavish the gardener; Fattuh, her faithful companion abroad; her great love, Charles Doughty-Wylie; and, among assorted others, T E Lawrence and Winston Churchill.

Part of the charm of the play is that a single actor, sometimes under pressure from the pace of the action, performs all of these roles. But, of course, it is also possible to divide the roles between several actors.

The time is circa 1910, though time is fluid in the play.

The running time is approximately 60 minutes.

The simple, composite set, with changes of lighting, serves for all of the settings in the play.

THE DESERT QUEEN

The time is circa 1910, though time is fluid in the play and lighting changes convey changes of scene. A canvas tent. Before the tent, a travelling chest, a crate, a desk, a (prop) boulder, a stool and a plate camera on its stand. Also present are books, maps, a telescope, an ice axe and other items from Gertrude's travelling life. A hemp rope trails from the travelling chest down through the audience.

A MAN enters. During the play, he will become whatever GERTRUDE requires him to be. The MAN moves about the set, checking the props.

We hear a howling gale.

We are high up in the Alps and the weather is bad. The MAN puts on an Alpine hat and becomes ULRICH, a mountain guide. ULRICH grabs the rope and pulls it tight.

GERTRUDE BELL enters through the audience holding on to the other end of the rope. She is climbing skirtless, in bloomers. With great difficulty, she begins hauling herself 'up' through the audience towards an imaginary peak.

GERTRUDE Gaaah! The Klein Engelhorn - daaah! - is composed of smooth vertical rocks. The great difficulty being - naaah! - that it is so exposed, there is nothing but the face of the rock - caaah! - and up you have to go! Aaaah! I'm okay! I'm on this ledge!

The gale subsides.

Luckily, the wind is easing off. Oh, sorry, I'm not wearing my skirt! I shall put it on now. (*doing so*) You'll appreciate a skirt is not terribly convenient at these altitudes, so I generally climb in my underwear. There we are! Decent again. I have some provisions. (*producing them*) Jam and bread. And sardines. They're a trifle mushed together, I'm afraid. (*offering them*) Would you, er -? No? Please yourself. (*she takes a bite - it's not good*) Erm - (*putting them aside*) Maybe later.

Excuse the mess, but sometimes when one makes camp in a hurry, things get a little jumbled. I should tidy these things away before –

GERTRUDE picks up the ice axe.

I'm sorry, I should introduce myself! My name is Gertrude Bell and I am in training for Mont Blanc, the highest summit in the Alps. Ulrich is my guide on these trips. Say hello, Ulrich.

ULRICH Hello!

GERTRUDE Ulrich says I'm as good as any man, and, well, I think I am!

ULRICH (*in a German accent*) Is very strong lady! Sehr stark! Also very brave! Sehr mutig!

THE DESERT QUEEN

We hear thunder and rain.

GERTRUDE Thank you, Ulrich. I guess I can manage any mountain you like to mention. Which is doubly impressive when you realise that mountaineering is no more than a hobby, and much less important than my other interests such as travelling, learning languages, archaeology, photography, gardening –

ULRICH (*interrupting*) M'am. Ze veeather! Perhaps ve should get a vigggle on.

GERTRUDE A what?

ULRICH A vigggle!

GERTRUDE Oh, nonsense, man. This is nothing! One time, a furious thunderstorm was raging -

We hear a burst of thunder.

We were standing by a great upright when suddenly it gave a crack –

A second burst.

And a blue flame sat on it for a second. My ice axe jumped in my hand.

And then a third.

BOTH Aaarrhhh!

GERTRUDE hurriedly drops the axe.

GERTRUDE We tumbled down a rock chimney, and landed one on top of the other.

ULRICH and GERTRUDE roll together in a heap.

GERTRUDE It's not nice to carry a private lightning conductor in your hand in the thick of a thunderstorm.

ULRICH You are telling me!

GERTRUDE: We beat a hasty retreat.

The storm fades out ...

To be replaced by the twittering of birds. Now we are in an English country garden on a sunny day.

GERTRUDE Rounton. My home in North Yorkshire for many years. I've always

THE DESERT QUEEN

been adventurous. As a child, I used to lead my little brother Maurice –
Say hello, Maurice –

ULRICH now becomes little MAURICE, carrying a toy rifle.

MAURICE (shyly) Hello!

GERTRUDE On our most perilous adventures, such as commanding him to jump
from the garden wall nine feet to the ground -

MAURICE considers the drop from the travelling chest.

I used to land on my feet. Maurice (*MAURICE takes a tumble*) - seldom
did.

MAURICE Ow! My leg!

GERTRUDE Another time, I took him on a climbing expedition on the greenhouse
roof -

MAURICE is obliged to climb again. He teeters dangerously.

I got down safely. Maurice (*MAURICE takes another tumble*) - didn't.

MAURICE Ow! My other leg!

GERTRUDE helps the tearful MAURICE to his feet.

GERTRUDE You're fine.

GERTRUDE tickles MAURICE and he laughs and soon forgets his pain.

Look, here's your rifle.

MAURICE (*taking it*) I'm going to be a soldier when I grow up!

GERTRUDE And I'm sure you'll be a very brave one.

MAURICE What are *you* going to be, Gertie?

GERTRUDE I don't know, Maurice. I love this place. The house and this beautiful
garden. But sometimes I wonder - what's beyond them?

But MAURICE, now bored with the conversation, is blasting an imaginary enemy.

MAURICE Perchow! Perchow! Perchow!

GERTRUDE Home. I was born in Washington New Hall in 1868, but shortly after we
moved to a fine Arts and Crafts building called Red Barns –

We hear seagulls and waves.

a short walk from Redcar's long beach. If you look south, you can see the Saltburn cliffs. Fishing boats are beached on the sands at low tide, there are striped bathing huts in the summer, and donkey rides for the children.

The sounds fade.

MAURICE *(announcing)* The train now approaching platform one is the 9.30 to York!

MAURICE now becomes a train and begins chuffing around the garden.

GERTRUDE Oh yes, and in the garden we have our own personal railway platform where the train from Redcar stops. You can do that kind of thing when your father is a Director in the railway company.

MAURICE ignores this command and carries on chuffing.

I said, Where the train from Redcar stops!

MAURICE reluctantly stops.

I know, it seems rather an extravagance. I should explain. My grandfather was Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, Mayor of Newcastle, MP for Hartlepool and High Sheriff of County Durham. He owned collieries and quarries, but most of all he was a steelmaker. Here he is now, look!

MAURICE looks bewildered.

Getting off the train.

MAURICE now becomes GRANDFATHER BELL.

The family boast was that Bell brothers could make anything from -

G/FATHER A needle to a ship! And pretty much anything inbetween.

GERTRUDE Besides steelworks on the Tyne and the Tees, he set up a factory in Washington for the country's first manufacture of aluminium. At that time, aluminium was as expensive as gold, and Grandfather – who could be a bit of a showman, when the mood took him - had an aluminium top hat made, and celebrated the moment by being driven in his carriage through the streets of Newcastle –

THE DESERT QUEEN

G/FATHER puts on the famous hat and waves to the crowd.

G/FATHER Ladies and gentlemen!

G/FATHER takes off the top hat and from it magics a stuffed rabbit.

Behold the future!

We hear a crowd cheer.

Thank you – I'm here all week.

G/FATHER goes into the tent.

GERTRUDE His son was my father, Hugh Bell, who inherited the family business. My mother Mary – father's delicate wife - died when I was just three, so I hardly knew her. But my father, being still young, remarried. My stepmother was a young Parisian lady called Florence. Say hello Florence.

FLORENCE emerges from the tent. She carries a parasol.

FLORENCE 'Ello!

GERTRUDE In fairy tales, children always resent their evil stepmothers. But Florence was gentle and loving. She only scolded me once. I'd run the garden hose down the laundry chimney and put the fire out.

FLORENCE Gertrude! Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire?

GERTRUDE I responded by gathering up all of the hats in the hallway (*doing so*) and throwing them at her, one by one.

GERTRUDE throws hats. FLORENCE defends herself with the parasol.

Ha-ha-ha! (*pause*) No. I'm not proud of that. Coming from Paris, she was used to strolling in the Jardin de Tuileries and was appalled by the industrial north east of England.

We hear factory noises and steam engines.

FLORENCE Middlesbrough! Mon-Dieu! - was caked with grime. For twenty miles the air smelt of chemicals, ash and soot, and the crowded houses smelt of cabbage, cheese and cat. The smog of industry almost excluded daylight from the district.

The sounds fade out.

THE DESERT QUEEN

GERTRUDE She was so moved she wrote a book, called *At The Works*, about the condition of working families on Teesside.

FLORENCE Teenage girls went into marriage full of hope and excitement, but the arrival of one baby after another left them broken in health, depressed and unable to make the effort demanded by cleaning and cooking.

GERTRUDE The weary husband often resorted to the pub to escape the crying babies.

FLORENCE Compare the working class mother with the middle class woman, who can rely on someone *else* to do the cleaning. We shall understand better if we recognize that there is one code of conduct for the rich, and another for the poor.

FLORENCE enters the tent.

GERTRUDE Not that my father's employees fell into that category. No, his men were well paid and treated well. Like grandfather, he built schools and libraries, believing that it was a lack of education which led to much of their hardship. He was sympathetic to the movement towards a welfare state: benefits for the sick, the unemployed and the retired.

Father was a good man. I loved him above all others. All my life, wherever I was on my many travels, I kept up a regular correspondence with him and my stepmother, sharing my thoughts and feelings.

HUGH BELL emerges from the tent, reading one of Gertrude's letters. At first, he gives a wry chuckle.

HUGH (*calling*) Florence! Come here. You should hear what our Gertrude is up to now.

GERTRUDE Perhaps sparing them the details of some of my more - hazardous exploits.

HUGH Goodness me! She's done what!?! Erm – (*hiding the letter*) I'll read it to you later, dear!