

ACTING UP ON QUEEN MARY 2

**A look at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts Program
by
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Cunard's ocean liners have a long history of hosting stars of stage and screen as they traveled between Broadway and the West End. However, passengers on Queen Mary 2 can do more than just travel like a star. They may also follow in the footsteps of Sir Anthony Hopkins, Sir John Gielgud, Kenneth Branagh, Diana Rigg and Glenda Jackson by participating in the program offered by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) onboard. This program includes not only acting lessons but theatrical performances and poetry recitals by a company of RADA graduates.

RADA has an unparalleled history of teaching acting and theater-related skills. Founded in 1904 in London an early member of the managing council and patron of the school was George Bernard Shaw who donated the royalties from his play *Pygmalion* to RADA. Over the next century, most of the major names in acting in Britain studied at the school. Many achieved international recognition.

The program on QM2 is run by RADA's commercial subsidiary RADA Enterprises Ltd. Its stated "mission is to generate income which supports RADA and its students by making available RADA's unique skills, expertise and assets to corporate, institutional and individual clients." Thus, it has considerable expe-

rience in teaching acting to non-actors.

RADA sends a company of six graduate actors to QM2 who are in residence onboard for nine weeks. "Cunard employs RADA trained actors so they are getting actors from what is considered the world authority on theater training. They are getting graduates to come onboard, it is not the students. It is people who were students and who now actually work in the profession," explained actor Will Norris, who was the leader of one of the RADA troupes that have conducted the QM2 program.

Actors are selected by RADA to come onboard based primarily on the plays that are to be performed on the ship during that period. In effect, the actors are cast for parts in those plays. As a result, if the plays have more female parts than male parts, the six-member company will include more women than men.

Although they work onboard, the RADA actors have passenger status. "We get to go to all of the bars and we get to eat in the restaurants so we mingle with the passengers quite a lot. We have met quite a lot of interesting people. The people really seem to respond to it."

The acting workshops on QM2 "give a very brief summarization of what we do in our three years at RADA." Accordingly, the entry requirements are considerably less rigorous than those for admission to the three year RADA acting course that leads to a bachelor's degree. Candidates for one of the 34 places in the first year class of the RADA degree program not only have to complete a written application but also have to sing and perform from Shakespeare in a series of auditions. Passengers who want to attend the workshops on QM2 merely have to come to the Queens Room ballroom at the time designated in the ship's Daily Programme.

Workshops attract from 30 to 50 people a session. Most passengers attend all three of the workshops offered during a transatlantic crossing but it is perfectly permissible to come to just one or two. Those who do attend all of the workshops are entitled to receive a certificate stating that they completed the program signed by the RADA team.

"On the whole, anyone coming to the workshops is coming for a fun time. At the same time, it is our responsibility to give them an insight into the types of things we do. At the end of these workshops, if someone has the confidence to actually stand up and do some form of acting in front of people, then we have done our job. I think you create that by creating an environment where they can have fun, which is a lot of what acting is about - - getting over that nerve of performance. Thus far, touch wood, we have been lucky and we have managed it."

The workshops begin with stretching and voice exercises that break the tension that generally surfaces when a group of strangers first come together. As the group relaxes, the members of the RADA troupe alternate in leading the group through acting exercises and improvisation techniques. Almost without realizing it, the passengers become relaxed and confident enough to act out short scenes from Shakespeare by the end of the final session. "There was one young girl about 12 or 13 who came to the workshops. She came in and she was very shy but by the end of it, I wouldn't say there was a complete transformation, but we gave her some confidence to go away with."

Along the way, there is a great deal of laughter



Above: The RADA troupe prepares for an acting workshop in The Queens Room on Queen Mary 2.

Below: Will Norris as Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet on QM2.



from both the students and teachers. "We all really enjoy the workshops, it is quite a bit of fun, sort of reminds us of being back in drama school. Some of the people have said it was one of their favorite parts of the whole trip. It is good that they enjoy it and we enjoy doing it."

The Plays

The RADA troupe typically performs two plays during a six-day crossing. One is a Shakespeare play and the other is a more modern play such as Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood" or Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest". They are usually done in the afternoon and are versions that have been condensed by the RADA faculty in London.

All of the parts in the plays are performed by the six members of the RADA troupe, which means that each actor must play multiple parts. "Once you get used to running around backstage and doing very, very quick costume changes, then it is great to play two parts and watch other people play two parts and in some cases three parts. It is a lot of fun. In 'Under Milk Wood,' we all play about 17 characters. It is a day in the life of a village in Wales and so we are all playing endless amounts of characters. It is great fun."

"If you are doing a show in the West End, you finish the show, sneak out the stage door and you walk out into the jungle that is London. Here, you finish a show, you come out and you are probably going to be having dinner with someone who saw it that afternoon. I think in that way it is possibly more gratifying because you are meeting your 'public' and you are actually finding out what people thought."

Poetry

The third part of the RADA program was not part of the program when it started but came about when one of the RADA companies asked if they could do a poetry reading. The performance was a hit and now there are usually two performances during a crossing held in the Winter Garden prior to dinner. One performance will have a musician such as a harpist who "underscores some of our poems." The second performance "which is just a fun poetry recital of our favorite poems."

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Above: Louise Collins reads at a RADA poetry recital.

Below: Michelle Luther as Juliet in the RADA production.

