

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Waxing Lyrical

Judith Paris  
New Diorama Theatre  
(2011)

Meet Anna Maria Tussaud (née Gorsholtz). Yes, the waxworks lady. You probably know that she came over to England and set up her waxworks exhibition following the French Revolution but what else? Very little I expect and even that is probably not likely to be correct. She is quite a character and hers is a tale worth telling.

Drawing on Tussaud's own, not strictly truthful memoirs, Kate Berridge's biography *Waxing Lyrical* and on a considerable amount of her own research, Judith Paris has unearthed a fascinating story. She tells it in character as Madame Tussaud talking to us as though to her memorialist Francois Hervé and occasionally re-enacting particular moments and conversations all skilfully woven together to make an entertainment which the writer/actress performs herself.

Born (probably) in Alsace, she taken as a child to Berne where her mother was housekeeper for Philippe Curtius, a doctor who began by making wax anatomical models and then went on to making portraits. From him she learned her skills of observation, drawing and modelling and when he moved to Paris and set up a waxworks exhibition, she and her mother followed. She worked with him and eventually inherited his business.

As a girl she overheard the conversations of Rousseau, Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin, and saw the handsome Lafayette. The Princess Elizabeth came to the exhibition and Anna Maria went to Versailles to teach the king's sister to draw but with the coming of the Revolution she found herself making death masks of its victims. She was herself arrested and found herself sharing a prison cell with Joséphine de Beauharnais (who later married Napoleon) but it was not as a fleeing refugee that she came to London.

In 1804 she agreed a deal to present her waxworks alongside Paul Philidor's Phantasmagoria and magic lantern show at the Lyceum theatre. Married by then to François Tussaud she left him in Paris with one of their sons to take care of the business there, taking four year old Joseph with her. The Napoleonic Wars kept her isolated in England and from her husband. He lacked her business sense, ruined the Paris business and sold it off, so she stayed.

Paris not only creates a captivating character study of a girl who wanted to work with "Uncle Philippe" rather than in the kitchen with her mother, who becomes a self-sufficient survivor, but also offers a graphic glimpse into her troubled times. She gives us Tussaud's delight in her own abilities, her grief as she searches for the bodies of her brothers among the bodies of the massacred Swiss Guards at Versailles, the trauma of shipwreck on the way to Ireland with Joseph, the joy of reunion with her other boy Francois. She conjures images of children parading the Paris streets with the chopped off heads of cats on sticks in imitation of their elders, of Louis XVI walking beside his carriage to take the air as he and his family try to flee the Revolution, of Robespierre guillotined facing upward watching the blade descend.

It is a beautiful performance, carefully thought out even to the accent which has a hint of German as well as French, the telling spilling out freshly as true memories of real events though, as Tussaud herself reminds us, she is a show-woman and there may be a little shaping and embellishment. It takes nothing from Paris' achievement that she is aided by design and atmospheric lighting that helps her to suggest other spaces (we even see the shadow of the guillotine as she speaks of it) and an evocative soundscape of music and effects that can be either subtle background or appropriately powerful. The contributions of Nina Morley (set and costumes), Steve Lowe (lighting), Peter McCarthy (music) and Clive Derbyshire (sound design) support but never detract and Gillian Lynne's production, always concentrated on the actress, makes it all come together to make a satisfying piece of theatre.

*"Waxing Lyrical" runs at the New Diorama Theatre until 10th December 2011*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)