

Jessie Matthews: The Diva of Debauchery

By MICHAEL THORNTON

Last updated at 18:14 27 June 2007

The atmosphere at the London divorce hearing was electric. The public benches were packed with people who had queued for hours to get in. The Press box was jammed with reporters armed with pencils and notebooks.

Outside the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand, crowds stood ten deep, together with an army of photographers, all waiting for the conclusion of what promised to be Britain's first great showbusiness scandal of the 20th century, an astonishing saga of intense sexual passion, illicit love and steamy, pornographic letters.



The names on the door of the courtroom - *Monro, E.E. versus Monro, J.R.H., Lytton J.M. intervening* - gave no clue to the fame of the three protagonists, or to the sensational nature of the *cause célèbre* about to unfold.

For Elsie Evelyn Monro was better known as Evelyn 'Boo' Laye, the reigning blonde beauty of the London and Broadway stage. Her husband, John Robert Hale Monro, was the popular actor and comedian, Sonnie Hale. And Jessie Margaret Lytton, the other woman, was the West End's saucer-eyed, long-legged, highkicking musical comedy sex symbol, Jessie Matthews.

'Boo' Laye was not in court. She was in Hollywood, making a film called *One Heavenly Night*. In her absence, the court was told about the heavenly nights enjoyed by her husband and his devastatingly attractive mistress, and listening to the sexually explicit love letters which Jessie Matthews had written to her married lover, which his wife had discovered.

'My Darling,' she wrote in one that was read aloud, 'I want you and need you badly, all of you, and for a very long time. I am lying here, waiting for you to possess me. The dear little boobs, which you love so much, are waiting for you also.'

Representing Matthews in court was the most celebrated advocate of his day, Norman Birkett, who was soon afterwards to appear for Wallis Simpson in the divorce case that precipitated the Abdication Crisis. Birkett had already acted for Matthews in her own divorce.

Presiding over the court on this afternoon in July 1930, was the most censorious and inflexible divorce judge of his generation, Sir Maurice Hill, a 68-year-old widower, three months away from retirement, with a deeply ingrained distaste for divorce proceedings, which he once described as like having 'one foot on sea and one in a sewer'.

Matthews' presence in court, young, beautiful, a self-confessed 'fallen woman', visibly angered Hill. She sensed his hostility to her and became increasingly tense.

Halfway through the evidence, she slumped forward, falling in a dead faint on the floor beneath the seat in front. Very tenderly, Hale lifted her up and some women helped to carry her outside, where she was given a glass of water.

This painful incident did nothing to lessen the stinging severity of Sir Maurice Hill's final comments. 'It is quite clear,' he said, 'that the husband admits himself to be a cad, and nobody will quarrel with that, and the woman Matthews writes letters which show her to be a person of an odious mind.'

Those words, emblazoned in giant headlines across the front pages of newspapers all over the world, scarred Matthews for life. 'That day in court marked me,' she admitted later.

Not even the massive fame she was to achieve as Britain's first and greatest international movie star would erase the memory of it.

And ironically, when, at the age of 56, she emerged from more than a decade in the showbusiness wilderness to seize the headlines again, it was in the role of radio's Mrs Dale, the paragon of middle-class respectability.

This month, the centenary of Matthews's birth has been celebrated by the National Film Theatre with a season of ten of her films and four of her television performances. A new double CD, also released in tribute to her, contains love songs such as May I Have The Next Romance With You?, One More Kiss and Head Over Heels In Love.

Yet at the beginning, Jessie Margaret Matthews, born on March 11, 1907 in a cramped Soho flat above a butcher's shop, sixth of the 11 children of a Berwick Street Market costermonger, was a figure of total innocence.

In 1923, when she made her first visit to New York as a 16-year-old chorus girl, she had never had sex with anyone, and was completely ignorant of the facts of life.

But with her huge and brilliant eyes, gamine looks, and unconscious, nymph-like sexuality, she acted as an overpowering magnet to men.

The first was a fellow passenger on the Aquitania, taking her to New York, a devastatingly handsome young Argentine, Jorge Ferrara, with whose rich family the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, had stayed with during visits to Argentina.

The Cockney innocence of Matthews, acted as a challenge to the louche and sophisticated 28-year-old. He set out to take her virginity. He continued his siege for months after their arrival in New York, and when the star of her show, Gertrude Lawrence, fell ill, and Matthews stepped into the lead, he finally lost patience and raped her.

She became pregnant as a result, and after her return to London, was forced to undergo a secret abortion. Both the rape and the abortion triggered a recurring psychiatric illness that was to plague Matthews's career for years. She always believed the abortion had damaged her chances of childbearing. She suffered a series of miscarriages and her only child lived for just an hour. Later, she adopted a daughter.

However, after her spell in New York, and despite Ferrara's attack, at just 19 she became a West End star, acclaimed by the critics.

The leading man in her first major hit was Henry Lytton Jr., the spoiled and pampered son of Sir Henry Lytton, the legendary idol of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas at the Savoy.

The couple married in 1926, a partnership which seemed to offer Matthews all the social advantages her own upbringing had lacked, but which proved to be a short-lived disaster. Lytton was an indolent womaniser who bedded chorus girls behind her back, then charged bottles of perfume for them to her account.

Nevertheless, at the age of 20, Matthews took London by storm, starring in Charles B. Cochran's lavish revue, *One Dam Thing After Another*.

Prince of Wales was 'captivated'

The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, attended the opening night, and was so captivated by her that he leapt to his feet in the stage box, shouting 'Bravo! Bravo!'

He reported her 'devastating' physical attractions to his brother, Prince George, later the Duke of Kent. George went to see for himself and agreed.

The princes ordered the 12th Earl of Airlie, father of the late Sir Angus Ogilvy, and his brother, the Hon. Bruce Ogilvy, to invite Matthews and another member of the cast, Sheilah Graham - later F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'beloved infidel' and a formidable Hollywood gossip columnist known to some stars as 'Miss Poison Pen' - to supper at the Berkeley.

The object was to inquire discreetly if Matthews was willing to dine *a deux* first with the Prince of Wales, and then with his brother.

'Jessie,' Miss Graham told me years later, 'coming from a Cockney family in Soho, was under the impression that a royal command could not be refused. So she said "yes", without having any idea what she was agreeing to.'

The first dinner, alone with the Prince of Wales, took place at York House, St James's Palace, with the servants banished and HRH serving the star himself. She was surprised by this, then astonished to find herself shortly afterwards in bed with the heir to the throne, an episode that was over almost before it began, as the Prince, in his pre-Wallis Simpson days, was a disastrously incompetent lover.

With extreme apprehension, Matthews returned to York House for dinner with Prince George, who ate nothing, appeared to be very much the worse for drink and possibly drugs, showed a bizarre fascination with the texture of her evening dress, and finally slumped unconscious over the coffee and liqueurs.

Ringling the bell, she informed the footman: 'His Royal Highness appears to be unwell. Would you bring my wrap and arrange for a car to take me home?'

Matthews was so ashamed of these episodes that her strait-laced Cockney family was kept in ignorance of them, and in 1974, when I wrote my biography of her, to coincide with her own ghostwritten memoirs, leading lawyer Lord Goodman, on her behalf, forbade any reference to these royal interludes.

Royal admirers aside, Matthews's leading man in the Cochran revue was Sonnie Hale, who had been married for just over a year to the London theatre's greatest beauty, Evelyn 'Boo' Laye, whom he was later to describe as 'sexually frigid'.

Matthews's hit song in the show was Rodgers's and Hart's My Heart Stood Still. The song went: 'I took one look at you, that's all I meant to do, but then my heart stood still.' The two stars, both unhappily married, took more than one look.

The following year, in Noel Coward's This Year Of Grace, Matthews and Hale starred together again, sitting at a lighted window, holding hands, to sing Coward's tender love duet, A Room With A View.

Evelyn Laye, visiting her husband during rehearsals, found him holding Matthews's hand off-stage as well. She searched their flat and found the bundle of explicit love letters, written by Matthews, that were to feature so sensationally in the divorce case.

Moving out of the marital home, Laye, 'shaken with hatred for Jessie', stalked the streets outside her husband's flat and saw

On the first night of her greatest hit, Ever Green, she forgot to put on the leotard she was supposed to wear under a pair of chiffon pyjamas. The lights cut straight through the chiffon, revealing her pubic hair to the shocked audience.

And even after her marriage to Hale, the scandals did not cease. In their next show, Hold My Hand, Matthews's love interest was played by a tall, dark-haired and extremely handsome 31-year-old actor, Harry Milton, who had been married for only 18 months to the film actress, Chili Bouchier.

In the show, Milton had to fall in love with Matthews, kiss her passionately, and then marry her.

'One night,' Bouchier was later to allege, 'Jessie opened her mouth to Harry during a stage kiss and that was it. He was lost.' Milton pursued Matthews relentlessly, imbibing huge quantities of brandy, and destroying his marriage. But Matthews was a major box-office draw and could not afford another scandal with a married man. Milton was bought off by her studio.

In desperation, he hired a Gypsy Moth and flew it low over The Old House, the Hale mansion at Hampton, dropping a cluster of matchboxes on the lawn, each containing a single raspberry. Later, divorced by Bouchier and unable to get work, he was reduced to working as a porter in a block of flats. He never got over his obsession with Matthews and finally gassed himself.

But little affected Matthews. In 1933 she became an international star in the role of Susie Dean, the diamond-bright concert party trouser in the film of J.B. Priestley's novel, *The Good Companions*.

Her co-star, John Gielgud, was homosexual, but Matthews still pursued him. 'She was an enchanting creature,' he recalled years later, 'but no man was safe in her presence.'

When the film was released, King George V and Queen Mary attended the premiere, but Matthews, as the central figure in a scandalous divorce, was not allowed to shake hands with them.

Breakdown

In 1934 she had a son by Hale - although many believed the child to be Milton's - but the baby lived for only one hour. It was then that Matthews succumbed to one of her many major breakdowns. Showbiz cynics dubbed her 'Jess the Mess'.

Her private life was equally complicated, her affair with Milton being far from her last.

On a visit to CadaquÈs in Spain, Matthews made love to the surrealist painter, Salvador Dali, in front of a canvas depicting an extremely large cow reclining on top of a grand piano, while Hale went fishing.

In the 1937 film, *Head Over Heels*, the first in which her husband directed her, Matthews's leading man, Robert Flemyng, the 6ft 1in, 24-year-old ex-Haileybury public schoolboy, was alarmed to find himself pursued by her to his dressing room 'in a distinctly predatory manner. Then Sonnie, obviously aware of what was going on, breezed into the room as if nothing had happened'.

During the making of *Climbing High* in 1938, in which Matthews costarred with Michael Redgrave, she had a passionate affair with the film's director, Carol Reed, the uncle of Oliver Reed. In Hollywood in 1941, where she appeared in *Forever And A Day*, her lovers included the bisexual Tyrone Power.

In New York, where she was signed to star in a Broadway musical, she bedded another bisexual, Danny Kaye. However, the musical was a disaster, and Matthews suffered the worst of her breakdowns.

She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she was diagnosed with chronic paranoid schizophrenia. The hospital reported to Hale that she was 'on the edge of madness'.

When she returned to Britain six months later, she found that Hale, in her absence, had fallen in love with Mary Kelsey, the Norland nanny employed to look after their adopted daughter.

Matthews went back to the stage, but six months later Hale left her for Kelsey, and the couple were divorced. A third marriage, to an Army officer, Brian Lewis, 13 years her junior, resulted in another miscarriage and another divorce.

Her popularity was dwindling and she was in the spotlight less and less until, in 1963, she won the role of Mrs Dale in the BBC's hugely popular radio show, *The Dales*. By 1970, after the award of the OBE, Matthews was plump and matronly. Her great rival in love, Evelyn Laye, glimpsing her at an all-star gala, observed acidly: 'Oh look, the dear little boobs have become apple dumplings.'

But Matthews retained her allure for men. In 1973, when she was 66, a neighbour in the village of Verwood in Dorset, a 60-year-old widower, Edward Armsdon, was said to be 'completely captivated' by her.

And in 1980, when I saw her last, she was heavily involved, at the age of 73, in a physical relationship with Roy Wilson, a man some 20 years her junior. She even divorced her third husband, Brian Lewis, for the second time - their 1958 divorce was not recognised in Britain - in order to be free to marry Wilson.

Her friends suspected he was gay and on the make, but she blithely ignored this. However, when Matthews was hospitalised with cancer, he was barred from her bedside, and marched into the office of a Fleet Street gossip columnist to spill the beans.

'R. is a rat', she wrote to me bitterly, in a hand I scarcely recognised. By that time, cancer was spreading throughout her body and she died in 1981.

In 1995, 14 years after her death, a plaque was erected to her in Berwick Street, Soho, where she was born. The market stallholders, of whom her father had been one, suspended their customary cries as Andrew Lloyd Webber unveiled the plaque, the street falling silent for the first time in its history.

It was a uniquely touching tribute to a woman who, both on stage and screen and off, had dedicated her life to the pursuit of love.