2009

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Margaret Wolfit (1929-2008)

By Lucy Amis

My Mum, Margaret Wolfit (Amis) passed away on 20th September. I wanted to write to reassure everyone that she didn’t suffer for long and that 2008 was a decent year in many ways. As you may know, she’d been treated for breast cancer thirteen years ago and came through well for over twelve years, but in August 2007 was re-diagnosed, this time affecting her chest. At the time (August 2007) she had some fluid drained from her lungs and was more or less fine within about forty-eight hours – indeed she was performing only a few days later. The doctors then put her on one of those new high-tech pills and through the rest of 2007 and up to and including July 2008 she was responding well to the treatment and was told that the cancer was reducing. She had a full and active year, of which more shortly, and to the best of my knowledge suffered no side-effects.

Towards the end of August 2008 she started getting very puffed. Although she fulfilled a number of social commitments in late August/early September (and got a lot of fun out of meeting up with old friends), when we both went to Majorca to get a few days of much needed sun over my birthday (early Sept) she wasn’t well. On our return to the UK she went into hospital (Thursday 11th Sept). At first we thought it was the fluid on the lung again, but on the Monday after a series of tests they diagnosed that she’d had a pulmonary embolism (blood clot). The embolism blocked the oxygen flow and caused her to need oxygen to breathe but it was thought to be eminently treatable. By Thursday however the initial treatment hadn’t taken effect and they decided to move her to another hospital where they could perform a fast-track procedure. On Saturday the 20th after the move – during which she flirted with the ambulance driver – they gave her the fast-track intravenous medicine. That afternoon she seemed to be doing a little better, and her very sweet nurse – who knew nothing of her background – said she looked like a movie star! I went for a walk and to get dinner, but on my way back to the hospital I was called to say she was deteriorating fast. I was by her side less than two minutes later, but she had died moments earlier. I think she wanted to do it her way.

She had a difficult couple of weeks, but I asked her several times in the hospital if she was in pain, and she reassured me she wasn’t, she just felt weak and feeble. Even in hospital she was still planning for the future – and lined up a new RADA student to mentor. It was of course a huge shock and devastating to lose her, but a blessing for her that it was all so relatively quick. On the Friday (19th) the doctor suggested to me privately that the clot(s) was/were probably caused by the cancer and that she would likely need to undergo further treatment. So I think the way to look at it is that she was spared a long, drawn out, painful end and lived a full and independent life until the very last two weeks. Not bad going for someone just short of eighty who was joking and loving to the end, and still didn’t look a day over 70!

2008 had plenty of good times. She didn’t like the medical tests, but was basically getting on with life. She continued mentoring RADA students, and they sweetly returned her generosity by cooking her a special dinner in her kitchen. She began writing on her Apple Mac computer and continued painting. She also had the living room redone and had her piano moved upstairs and began playing again – giving her enormous joy! She and I had an absolutely magical
week's holiday in Marrakech in March 2008. We stayed for a few days at a delightful family-run Riyadh/farm among orange-groves in the outskirts of the city. They served freshly squeezed mandarin juice, treated us like Queens and Mum picked dozens of lemons for preserving. Then we moved to a hotel in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains with spa treatments, fresh mint tea in abundance, delicious food, a swimming pool and Hammam (Turkish bath equivalent), amidst stunning gardens and beneath spectacular views of the Atlas. In June we had the opportunity to visit Highgrove and walk in the gardens and munch on Duchy Original ginger biscuits. That same afternoon we went for a 3-mile walk through Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire among the oak trees. The next day we bought lots of plants and had fun visiting a garden run by nudists (though somewhat disappointingly not actually nude during our visit – the man wore a leopard skin jock-strap), after which we ate fish and chips. Later in June Mum attended her friend Mary Newman's 80th Birthday in Boston, USA and had an absolutely fantastic time. Even well into July she and I braved possibly the wettest day ever to visit the Hampton Court Flower Show and tromped through the mud and puddles in our anoraks and bought roses. At some point we went fruit picking. She saw a fair bit of my half-brother Mark and his daughter Charlotte, and in August Sarah (my half-brother Phil's daughter) came to stay for a long weekend and the three of us learnt woodcut printing at Asia House. A few days later we also went to a lecture by Greg Mortensen at Asia House – author of a book she loved ‘Three cups of Tea’ – and she got signed copies. And she still had an Octavia Hill performance job lined up when she died!

We gave her a great send off at St John's Wood Church, London on 9th October (later cremated). Around 100 friends, family and colleagues attended, and I think she'd have loved the verse (King James's!), music and singing, not to mention the blue sky and sunshine that accompanied us all as we celebrated her life and bid her a fond farewell.

* 

Margaret Wolfit and George Eliot

Margaret was a pioneer in the development of one-person shows in the theatre. She first had the idea adapting George Eliot's 'Mill on the Floss' for the stage in the late 1950s, and after a great deal of background research and some experimentation, started to bring her adaptation to audiences at venues in England in the 1960s. A great boon to her was the support she received from Professor Gordon Haight, whom she had approached for advice whilst he was visiting London with his wife Mary. Over the years Margaret also developed numerous other one-person shows, including 'George Eliot: A Portrait' and the George Eliot inspired programme 'Strange Contrasts'. A review of 'George Eliot – A Portrait' by theatre critic Basil Ashmore read: 'Margaret Wolfit's dramatic programme devised from the letters and journals and writings of George Eliot, gave me more insight into the life of that extraordinary woman than any biography has ever done'. Margaret was an active member of the George Eliot Fellowship over many years and was enormously proud to have played an important role in the unveiling of the George Eliot plaque in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.