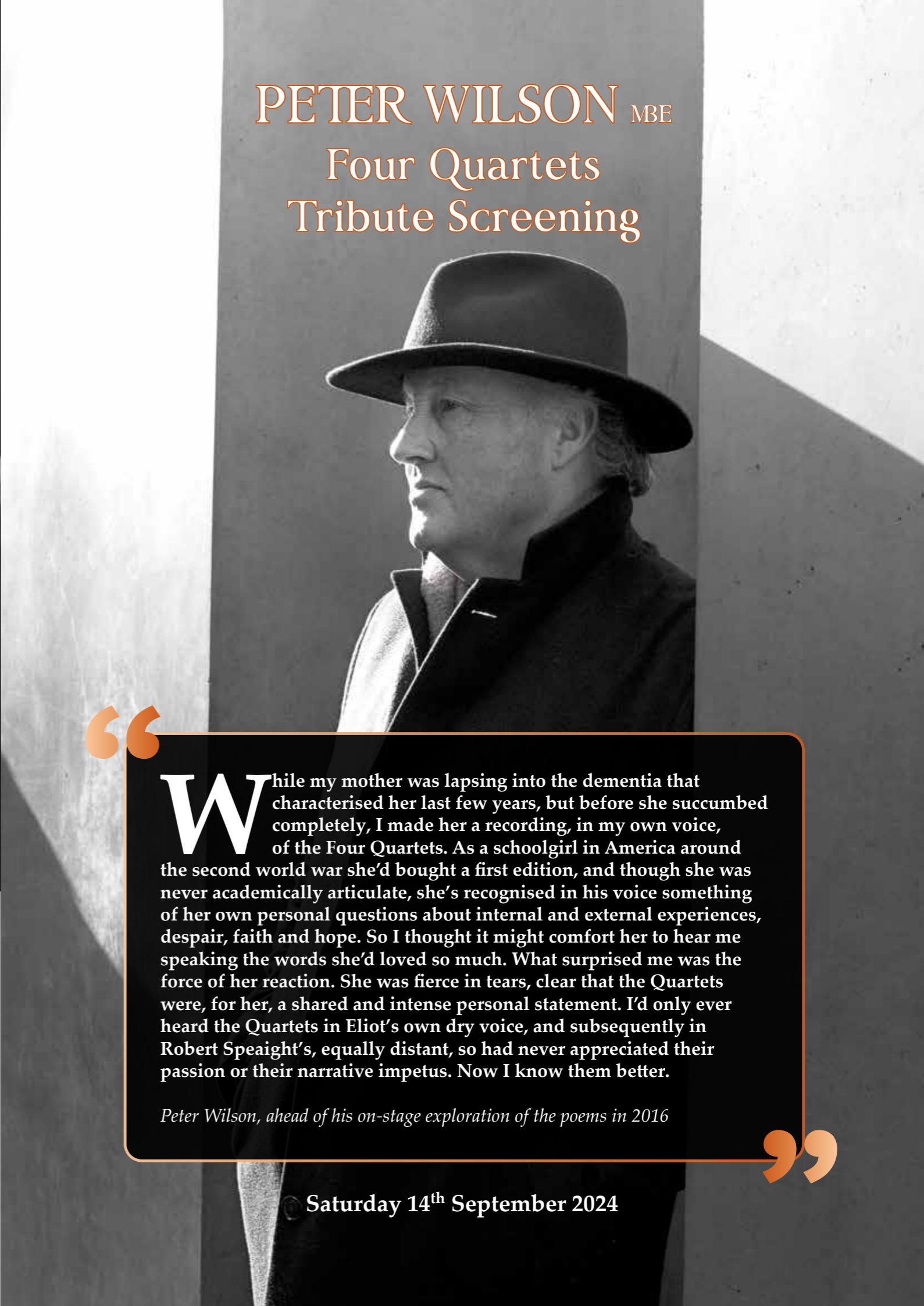




PETER WILSON MBE

Four Quartets Tribute Screening



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While my mother was lapsing into the dementia that characterised her last few years, but before she succumbed completely, I made her a recording, in my own voice, of the Four Quartets. As a schoolgirl in America around the second world war she'd bought a first edition, and though she was never academically articulate, she's recognised in his voice something of her own personal questions about internal and external experiences, despair, faith and hope. So I thought it might comfort her to hear me speaking the words she'd loved so much. What surprised me was the force of her reaction. She was fierce in tears, clear that the Quartets were, for her, a shared and intense personal statement. I'd only ever heard the Quartets in Eliot's own dry voice, and subsequently in Robert Speaight's, equally distant, so had never appreciated their passion or their narrative impetus. Now I know them better.

Peter Wilson, ahead of his on-stage exploration of the poems in 2016

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NORWICH SCHOOL



Saturday 14th September 2024



A POETIC MASTERPIECE THAT MUST BE HEARD - The Standard

Peter shared a number of characteristics with T.S. Eliot: an Anglo-American family background, a plainness of religious belief (at least in Eliot's early adult life), a classical education of huge breadth, and a degree of self-doubt. He loved Eliot's poetry for its restless questioning, its beauty, and its relentless apparent simplicity. He also loved it for its poetic ventriloquism. Anyone who knew Peter knew he was full of voices – every story, anecdote, joke he told was accompanied by (usually) several vocal impressions. One of the rejected titles of 'The Wasteland', Eliot's first blockbuster poem, was 'He Do The Police In Different Voices'. By the time he wrote Four Quartets, Eliot had stripped back the multi-vocal approach, but one of the striking features of Peter's performance is the distinct characterisation between sections of the poem.

It was Eliot's last poem; although he lived for another 20 years after its publication and continued to produce plays and criticism, he never wrote another. There's a sense of completeness about it, as if it marks the end of a significant chapter of a life. It looks back and forward, and it meditates on time, love and faith. In the end, it reaches an accommodation with itself, which is one of the reasons Peter decided to set himself the monumental task of memorising and performing it after he'd retired from the Theatre Royal. It was also so he could try and discover its meaning – watching his performance, you see him wrestling with the language, discovering the emotion of his character, chasing down thoughts and ideas to show them to the audience. I saw him perform it live twice, about a year apart, and it was obvious how he'd unearthed so much more significance the second time. Peter's performance is not the culmination of a life's work, in the way the poem was for Eliot, but it represented a reflection on his life in the form he knew best: live, in front of an audience. Sadly, this film is now the only way we can share that reflection with him. I hope he'd be proud of it – he should be.

Mark Hazell

(Mark worked closely with Peter at the Theatre Royal for 25 years)

Peter was kind, brilliant and inspirational. I loved him. Peter's heart was in the theatre and he shared it with performers, management and audience alike. He believed that everyone should have the opportunity (as he had been given) to experience its magic. As a key part of his incredible life's work, he facilitated a unique opportunity for thousands of children through the Norfolk Schools Opera Project to create and perform their own operas on the Theatre Royal stage, based on whatever repertoire was coming to town. His huge influence ensured that the participants would then see a production from Glyndebourne, Richard Alston, Matthew Bourne, RSC, English National Ballet and many others. I will never forget the thrill on Peter's face during a Glyndebourne performance of 'The Magic Flute' when adult heads turned in disbelief as ninety children joined in with The Queen of the Night's aria! Peter enabled the next generation of potential theatre goers to be in 'his' theatre, experiencing great works of art from the inside out at the highest level. He gave back what he had been given in multiple quantities. He wanted to offer them the very best performance conditions if their engagement was to be guaranteed. No 'dumbing down' was allowed and I feel honoured that he entrusted me with the role of artistic director of the project for twenty years, working alongside the fantastic management and creative teams that he put together. He believed in a focused artistic freedom, uncompromisingly involving established opera singers, directors, musicians and dancers at all stages of the project.

Whenever I met Peter for a drink in the Theatre Royal foyer, he would often sing some of the songs from previous projects with utter delight - both the ones that the children had made themselves as well as many melodies of the great composers that had become unforgettable with the children's lyrics. He always loved coming to the children's performances to discover the next set of interpretations of a timeless story. He would give a hilarious welcome speech to the audience, stand in the wings with his natural authority and occasionally share his wise directorial eye.

Peter got involved as a stage director for some of the forty projects. One project coincided with a particularly intense business deal for his London production company. He would have to make urgent calls between sessions but never projected that energy into the creative sessions. He had a remarkable way of clearing the air

with wit and humour, carrying on with utter integrity. As a director, whether in a meeting or rehearsal, he could distil the essence of what everyone was trying to express in a few brief phrases. We all learned from him, not just from the ways that he shared his incredible knowledge of theatre but from the way he treated everyone in it.

Peter loved the theatre and he loved the way it can bring people together from every walk of life. His smile alone would make us all feel better as soon as we came into his presence. He showed us a culture of how to come together through the arts.

Now it's up to us. Thanks Peter - no pressure!

Howard Moody

Composer/Artistic Director of Norfolk Schools Project

**What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened.**

Burnt Norton, TS Eliot

Peter and I left the Theatre Royal around the same time (2016/2017) ahead of big milestones in both our lives; he was retiring from his Chief Exec. position and I was leaving to have my first baby. It was Peter that helped me turn my waitressing job there into the Education Manager role. I'll always fondly remember standing by his side in the wings, looking proudly on as the Norfolk Schools Project raised the curtain for, and aspirations of, another bunch of kids.

Now, with both my own children at school, I have been able to fully return to my career in the local arts scene and felt delighted to be working with Stash who has supported my ambitions in the same way that Peter did. Stash has given me the chance to deliver work again, that Peter would support through his role as Patron of this festival. I was heartbroken that our paths were not to cross again.

Recently, as I found myself walking back along the path by my children's school hall, I heard a choir singing. And I know who's leading them - it's Mrs Furness who was the class teacher we all worked with on The Magic Flute opera for the Norfolk Schools Project all those years ago. I like to think of the teachers, school staff, children and their families that we met along the way, feeling empowered and sharing the power of music with generations to come.

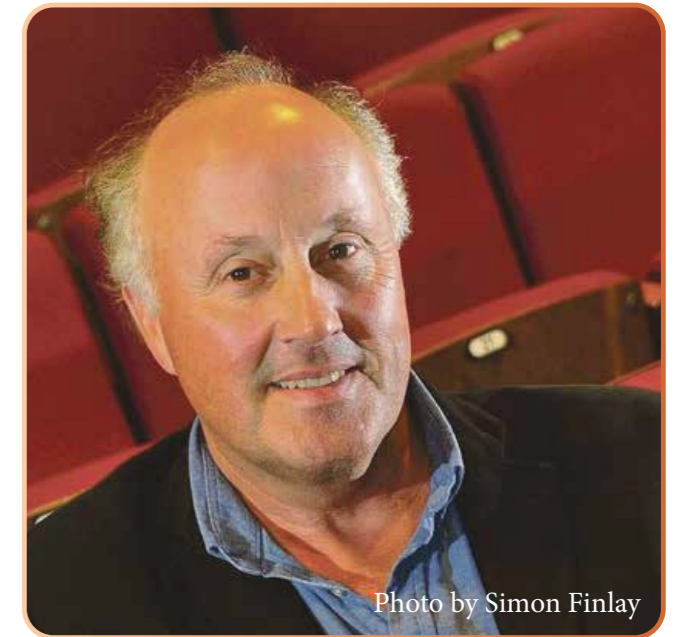


Photo by Simon Finlay

This is part player in Peter's legacy. He had a gift for opening doors to new realms, always believing in our capabilities - trusting us to trust ourselves - we discovered unbelievable rewards.

In the year that has gone by, since Peter sadly died, I have found myself on a quest, as they did in The Magic Flute. I knew he'd performed the Four Quartets live, but what I did not know, and discovered for the first time when he passed away, was that there was a filmed recording of Peter reciting them, and this work has brought us all back together here this evening. But my quest began long before his passing, and will continue for years to come. People like Peter shall live on for all times, in the hearts of those they touch.

When Peter and Stash staged Four Quartets together back in 2016, no one could have predicted we'd be here today, in these particular circumstances, about to see Peter again deliver the poems that he so fondly took to his own heart.

We will always remember him for the depth of goodness he brought to the world. He has left a legacy of inspiration and love and it's impossible to say how many people's lives he changed for the better. I hope you all enjoy reconnecting with him tonight, through this powerful text.

Victoria Jenkins

PA to Artistic Director,
The Autumn Festival of Norfolk

**I see the path of progress for modern
man in his occupation with his own
self, with his inner being.**

The Wasteland, TS Eliot