

Book review

Lady Peel was a funny woman

By VINCENT EGAN

When Bea Lillie died at age 94 about a year ago, an older generation mourned - and smiled at the memory of her comedic talents. A younger generation shrugged, not knowing who she was.

Lady Peel (to give her her formal designation) had been one of the most popular stars of the English-speaking entertainment world - and, what's more, born and raised a Canadian.

And, in the classic manner of so many great comedians, she lived an off-stage life that brought her pain and tragedy in large measure.

Beatrice Lillie: The Funniest Woman in the World, by Bruce Laffey (McGraw-Hill Ryerson; 296 pages; \$27.95), is an anecdote-filled story of her life, written lovingly by a man who served as her stage manager and friend for more than 30 years.

Beatrice Gladys Lillie was born May 29, 1894, at 68 Dovercourt Rd. in Toronto's west end. (Laffey starts off shakily, writing on his very first page that this was in Cabbagetown, a neighborhood that is actually five km away, to the east.)

Her father, John Lillie, was a homespun immigrant from Ireland by way of India, where he had served in the ranks of the imperial army. Her mother, the former Lucy Ann Shaw, was, on the other hand, a proud and self-assured lady, an accomplished pianist and trained singer.

Mrs. Lillie was determined that Muriel, the first of the couple's two children, would become a professional pianist - and, almost as an afterthought, that younger daughter Beatrice would sing professionally.

COMIC GIFT

Although Bea was blessed with a fine singing voice, she soon proved to have an unusual talent for impersonation and comedy as well - inherited, she always maintained, from her father.

John Lillie, a loving parent (although largely ignored by his wife and growing daughters), scraped together enough money to allow the three females to leave him and travel to seek greater show-business opportunities than Toronto could offer in 1912.

In one of those ironies of life, it was on the day preceding the outbreak of war in August, 1914 - which plunged the world into four years of darkness - that 20-year-old Bea Lillie signed a contract that was to send her to the top ranks of the entertainment world.

Her "discoverer" was the renowned impresario, Andre Charlot. He placed Bea Lillie in a succession of ever bigger roles in London stage productions.

In one show, Charlot assigned a youthful Gertrude Lawrence to be Bea's understudy. They became

lifelong friends and, through Gertrude, Bea also formed a long-standing and mutually rewarding association with Noel Coward, then on the brink of a great career.

LADY PEEL

Soon after the First World War, Bea Lillie received a visitor backstage - Robert Peel, tall, dark, the scion of an aristocratic family, but impecunious.

Bea felt that she could trust him, he was fascinated by the theatrical scene, and her mother was thrilled that Bea might eventually acquire a title. Without necessarily being in love with each other, Bea and Bobby were married in January, 1920.

The marriage was almost a complete failure, although it resulted in the birth of Robert (Bobbie) Peel, the sixth and future baronet, in December, 1920.

Bea Lillie's stage career, on the other hand, was marked by one success after another throughout the period between the wars, in London and later in New York and Hollywood.

Fate wasn't always benign, however. Her father died in 1933, her husband in 1934 (of peritonitis) and her only son in 1942 - killed at sea, serving aboard a Royal Navy destroyer.

"She was devastated," writes Laffey, "and never for the rest of her life recovered from the loss of her son." As she had done in the First World War, Bea frequently, and gladly, entertained the armed forces during the second world conflict.

LONG CAREER

Bea Lillie continued to star on stage, screen and TV and in nightclubs for decades. Her last movie was Thoroughly Modern Millie, made in 1967.

By then, her memory had almost completely failed, and countless "takes" were needed for each of her scenes. (The author says Bea received generous and understanding support from the two stars of that film, Julie Andrews and Mary Tyler Moore.)

A relatively unimportant performer named John Philip Huck attached himself to Lady Peel in the late 1940s, trying - with considerable success - to control her life and to keep her friends away from her. At the age of 94, she died in England on Jan. 20, 1989 - and Huck dropped dead the following day.

-Vincent Egan is a Toronto-based reviewer and travel writer.

RSPs are popular item in January and February



IT'S YOUR MONEY Paul J. Rockel

RSP (Retirement Savings Plan) is great. Every financial writer will tell you the same thing. It's the first way you should put your savings to work. (It's also a great incentive to save).

What makes them so great? Well... there are dozens of reasons, but the first one is that it is tax-deductible. Another is that they all gain in value while in the plan, without incurring any tax (until you start taking the monies out).

Another reason is that you can use different kinds of investments; you can have more than one RSP; you can transfer from one RSP to a hopefully better one, etc. etc.

Have any of us ever thought about that "different kinds of investments" reason. Can we do better than what we are doing, as far as investment return is concerned?

Most of us, in these months of January and February, quickly look for an RSP, because we know that if we want to save some tax dollars for the past year, the deadline for doing so is 60 days into the new year (in 1990 it's March 1). For so many of us, saving tax is the great incentive.

And... it doesn't matter where (or how) you invest those dollars, the tax-saving is exactly the same for you.

But where (or how) you invest those dollars can mean a great deal to your future, particularly that future called retirement. In fact, this writer is of the opinion that the "rate of return" is equally important, and maybe even more important, but which is most important?

Let's take someone age 30, who earns \$24,000 a year, and decides to save 10 per cent in an RSP (\$2,400).

The combined federal and provincial tax would be in excess of about 28 per cent, so that someone will save at least \$672 in taxes, making the "true cost" only \$1,728 (\$144 monthly).

That person put the RSP savings into an annual investment that averages 10 per cent per year, and put the same amount (\$2,400) away each year, through to age 65. The value would be \$650,458. Wow!

But... another person was able to achieve 15 per cent per year on the same savings of \$2,400 per year. (The "averages" of many equity mutual funds over the past 10 years are about 15 per cent). That person's value, at age 65 would be \$2,114,808. If they invested monthly (200) averaging 15 per cent (which is actually what would happen) the value would be \$2,935,436. That's almost \$3 million!

By the way, if inflation were just

to average five per cent per year over the next 35 years, it will require \$132,384 then to match the purchasing power of \$24,000 today (what our young person in this illustration is earning now). It means that the person who earned the 10 per cent, ending up with a value of only \$650,458, would provide \$65,000 income per year, which would be over \$67,000 short of the purchasing power he has today.

By increasing the rate of return by 1/2 again as much (10 per cent vs 15 per cent) the investor ends up with three times (or more) the value (\$650,458 vs \$2,114,808).

Rate of return can make a big difference in YOUR retirement values, achieved through your RSP. Maybe, just maybe, rate of return is even more important than the tax savings (the tax-savings are the same, no matter what the rate of return).

Do you agree?
For information, ask for "RRSP Brochures" and contact Peter C. Masson, 10 Fagan Drive, Georgetown or phone 877-7218.
Paul J. Rockel is the author of the best seller "Why I Invest in Mutual Funds" and President of Regal Capital Planners Ltd.

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