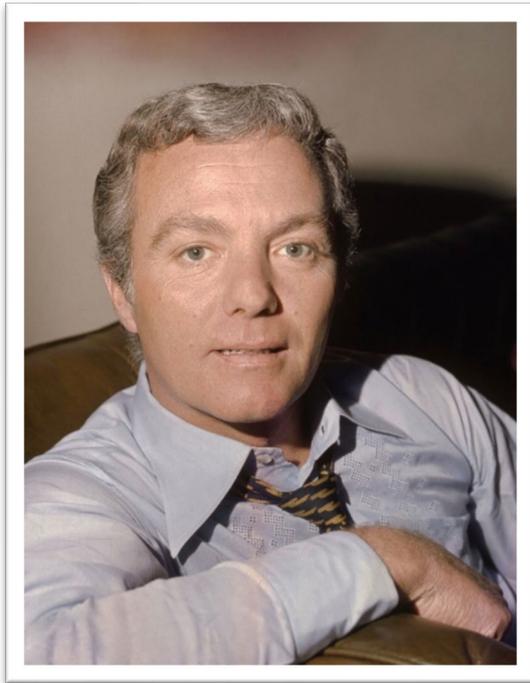


## 35. June 2020 - A case of mistaken identity

Not sure I couldn't live without Monaco, but for years Susie and I have had links with the Principality one way or another. I know I've mentioned it before, but although our respective connections were largely independent, one spot where Susie and I joined up was through Princess Antoinette, sister of the late Prince Rainier.

Susie, an ex-dancer of course, used to do regular pedicure work on the royal tootsies – which tied in appropriately enough with the ballet connection, as Antoinette had been married to John Gilpin, one of the most celebrated dancers ever to have emerged from England.



I remember seeing him dance Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* with the London Festival Ballet at the Festival Hall back in the 1960's - not all that long before leg injuries forced his early retirement.

So sad. A marvellous artist.

Even sadder than those leg injuries which put an end to his dancing career was the heart attack that carried him off within months of marrying Princess Antoinette.

She never really got over it, and lived the rest of her life in a sort of self-imposed isolation-cum-exile at the little town of Eze on the Côte d'Azur close to Monaco, where Susie would go occasionally to see to her feet.

Antoinette and I discovered through a conversation over tea (dabbling our feet in her swimming pool, as

one does in royal company), that she and I were in fact related, incredible though it may seem, which in turn led to her becoming Patron for several concerts that I conducted in the Principality during the 1990's. The concerts were unfailingly packed out – not because of their musical quality I hasten to add, but quite simply thanks to her presence, enthroned in splendour at the front where all could observe her.

That's how it goes in Monaco!

Now, more to the point, another mutual connection was established through a certain Madame Palmero – likewise one of Susie's clients – widow of a minister in the Monaco government under Prince Rainier. Mme. Palmero also happened to be a fairly prominent Friend of an opera festival in Monaco, held annually in a theatre separate from the Salle Garnier during the month of June, where I would conduct stuff like *La Traviata*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Suor Angelica*, the *Merry Widow*, *Il Campanello* (Donizetti), plus concerts featuring *La Petite Messe Solennelle* of Rossini *per esempio* - you know, good old staple diet Italian rep.

Anyway, Susie (despite having retired several years ago) has still been popping across to Monaco every now and then to visit the odd faithful client from the good old days, including the said Mme Palmero, a lady now well into her eighties, and not at all well. In fact the last time Susie saw her – quite recently - she was on distinctly poor form, increasingly fragile and becoming dispirited.

It was therefore with great sadness, but no great surprise, that we received news of her passing in a notice from a Monaco newspaper sent to us by another client of Susie's. The funeral was down to

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take place at the Monaco crematorium, and we decided that we should both attend. The only snag was that the funeral happened during the period of lockdown, and we weren't at all sure of possible limitations – numbers, things like that.

So, to ascertain, I tried over and over again to contact the chap who had run the opera festival, but his telephone simply refused to respond to my repeated efforts. In the end I just told Susie to ring Mme. Palmero's apartment in Monaco, where a family member or two would surely be staying in preparation for Monday's funeral.

Which she did – the telephone rang for two seconds before the maid picked it up. Recognised Susie's voice immediately. "Ah, Mme Suzanne! Would you like to speak to Mme. Palmero? She's sitting right here."

Gloop!

Turns out we'd been lamenting the passing of the wrong Mme. Palmero.

Oh well....no social distancing worries at least.

Social distancing. Another one of those de rigueur formulaic inventions that pack prudence – aaargh!

Nothing modern about it - it's actually a time-honoured concept, as was perfectly exemplified by the principal flute of the ENO orchestra during my time working there in the 1970's. He couldn't abide his colleague on second flute, and as a result they weren't on speaks.

So if you were conducting, you'd be likely to get a request from one or the other to "explain to my colleague that we're not going to breathe in the middle of bar 62" or "bar 20 is marked *piano*, not *forte* – please tell him".

This, despite the fact that they were seated less than a foot from one another, while the conductor, through whom communications passed, was about 20 feet away. It was all about as stupid as the aforementioned expression, but at least the little fiasco entertained the orchestra. In fact one wondered if it wasn't a deliberate setup to relieve the unspeakable monotony of 10 o'clock-in-the-morning rehearsals....

You know how I adore acronyms – we've been into all this before – but I bet you don't know what PHN stands for...? Some kind of a code to unlock your computer or mobile telephone, maybe?

Nah – gotcha! It's a contracted version (an annoying one of course) of Postherpetic Neuralgia.

Wassat?

Well, I can tell you for starters it certainly **is** annoying. An after-effect of shingles, especially in folks of a certain age – mine for example - it lingers on way after the actual shingles rash has abated, when most people smile and breathe again.

Last year at exactly this time I spoke of being stung by a huge jellyfish just off the beach at Villeneuve Loubet, likening the sensation to someone dragging barbed wire across my skin. The initial shingles symptoms are not dissimilar, though in their most joyful manifestation rather more akin to being barbecued alive by a strapping gent armed with a flame-thrower.

Anyhow you run screaming down to the doctor for help – in my case a wonderful lady doctor in our village, who taking one look was smitten with admiration "Mais c'est beau – qu'est-ce que c'est beau!"

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She put me on all sorts of nice druggy things – opium, cocaine – you name it. Actually they helped quite a lot, and the shingles symptoms – I mean the pus and blisters to which she was referring (yuk) – began gently to abate, by stages.

The sensation had by now calmed itself into something roughly equivalent to my skin being sandpapered – the administering agent having given up on the barbed wire and the flame-throwers. The lady doctor informed me that the actual shingles was now a thing of the past, but that there might well be lingering after effects, about which I could do basically nothing except take painkillers and stick huge gungy Lidocaine patches all round my back and chest – bet you know what those are.

That's where I am now – PHN. Public Health Nerd. I've scrapped the painkillers and patches and have taken to chatting with a nice lady on the telephone every few days. Nothing to do with social distancing, though she lives in the north of France and sends healing vibes down the tubes.

All on the advice of my doctor, mind, so not entirely loopy.

I'm also into Moxibustion (betcha dunno wot that is either). Well, let me tell you, it's an ancient Chinese remedy which involves holding a burning stick close to the skin – no, not on the shingly bits aaargh - but against a strategic spot on the ball of the thumb (aka hand-buttocks in Danish – did you know that?). In that respect Moxibustion is distantly related to acupuncture, and seems to possess the desired soothing effect. Every bit helps, after all. My PHN condition has now been downgraded to a sensation of being gently stroked by a stinging-nettle, so we're making progress!

We have all suffered through this period of virus and lockdown so I mustn't go on *too* much. But one of the most boring aspects has been the mind-numbing press briefings given by politicians, propped portentously against their lecterns designed for the slightly over-corpulent.



Nicola Sturgeon's accent makes her totally incomprehensible at the best of times - thus the need for the lady to her right, who seems to be reinforcing the message in a rather less courteous, yet effective, manner than Scawtland's Firrrst Meenisturrr can muster. Eeeeeeh.....maybe the teetxt could do with a wee tweak : och aye!

