THE BALL IN THE PARK

by Clifford Evans, Film and Stage Actor

“I have heard many years of telling

And many years should see some change

The ball I threw while playing in the park

Has not yet reached the ground “

Ah yes, the years have seen some change. When I was at schools, the school was called LLanelly County Intermediate School for Boys : the Inter. In the course of time, after my day, the Inter became the Llanelli Grammar School; now, it is to become Ysgol Gyfun y Graig. But for me and many of its old boys it will always be the Inter : Yr Ysgol ar y Bryn.

“Ar holl ysgolion Gwalia Lan

Boed bendith nef yn ddiwahan

Ond serch ein calon dry yn gan

I’r Ysgol ar y bryn”

In the lamb white days when I was in the Inter, the School cap was green, crowned, if you were a prefect, with a narrow red ring. The Head Master was the granite faced G.J.Thomas, M.A. late of Jesus College, Oxford; the unforgettable “Griff”. Under him were many good and sound scholars bred. The School fees, including games, were four pounds five shillings per annum, or one pound eleven shillings per term, payable in advance. Then, there were twenty shillings in the pound.

My brother Ken and I were still infants in the little Halfway Council School when mother announced “Both of you will be going to the Inter”. Thanks to our parents and there never were more loving and devoted parents than ours, to the Inter in due course we went.

At eleven years of age, with satchel and shining morning face and with a new green cap on my head, I set out on my first journey to school The year was nineteen twenty three. I was in the Inter for five years.

They were the most significant years of my life.

I started in what was then the lowest Form in the School:2D. The classroom was the old Metallurgy workshop situated next to the Fives Court. What a noble game was Fives. It was a game at which my brother excelled. He proved himself to be a veritable Cavanah.

My first lesson was Latin. The Master, alert as a blackbird, was Mr.J. Afan Jones. Had I continued my Latin studies with half the zeal that I learnt to decline Regina at that initial lesson, I might have excelled in the Classics; but my real interest lay elsewhere. Fortunately for me, it was an interest shared and encouraged by Mr. Afan Jones, whose love of the Theatre and the Art of Acting was as deep an abiding as my own. Afan failed to turn me into a Latin scholar, yet, it was he who first revealed to me the meaning of “Ars est celare Artem” and how to relate it to the Art of Acting. He, too, it was who taught me how to approach the learning of Stage dialogue and who strengthened my confidence , casting me in leading parts in annual school plays: Philip Clandon in Bernard Shaw’s “You Never Can Tell”, Honewood in Goldsmith’s “The Good natured Man”, Crichton in J.M.Barrie’s “The Admirable Crichton”, and Professor Higgins in Shaw’s “Pygmalion”.

When, later as a student in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, I rehearsed under the personal direction of Bernard Shaw, the confidence that my old Latin master had instilled in me stood me in good stead and won for me a never forgotten compliment from the great G.B.S.

I doubt if any School had a finer Head than Mr. Griff Thomas, or a more dedicated Staff of teachers than my old Masters. Each, in his own way, opened magic casements for me.

How vivid my memory, still, is each of those Masters

As I sit here at my desk musing over the past, I hear again the old school bell ringing and see again my Old Masters, their black gowns billowing, coming and going between Classes, each in a habit as he lived........Mr. T.V. Shaw (in 1937 to become Headmaster of the School)-Was there ever a more inspiring teacher than Shaw? He it was who first revealed to me the wonder of Shakespeare and the loveliness of the English language. I sense Shaw’s gentle ghost smiling encouragement over my shoulder, as of old, while I sit here trying to write down my memories.

Mr. Roderick’s tall figure stalks through the Chemistry sardonic humour, on my botched experiment sizzling under the Bunsen burner, I would never make it as a chemist. For all that it was Mr. Roderick who, with a different light in his eye, introduced me to the School Library; what a lifelong jhourney that turned out to be. He also gave me a few tips on how to bowl off-spinners round the wicket; spinners which he bowled for the School team with his flannels at half mast.

Mr. Morgan Rees of the lazy smile and eloquent gesture who made every lesson, whether in English or Welsh, a delihjt to look forward to. I acted in several plays in Welsh under his expert direction. His dream was a National Theatre for Wales; a dream that I have tried all my life into a reality. A photograph of Mr. Morgan Rees hangs on my study wall next to a signed photograph of Bernard Shaw.

Mr. Stokton, sedate, moustached, high collared and fatherly. He encouraged us onward in French. He was active in the Debating and Dramatic Societies; the first Theatre money I earned was a half crown given to me by “Stocky” for assisting with the Stage Management of a School play.

Mr. Huw Roberts, the zealous Welshman who taught me to appreciate and love my own native land and to value the language they speak in Heaven.

Mr. Hampton, the gentle souls “Hampy” whose quiet voice enticed me to make lifelong friends of Keats and Mathew Arnold.

Mr. Sydney Brown, sartorially elegant; who, with jutting jaw and slight lisp, tried to teach me to solve the mystery of S=UT+1/2 FT2. Alas, in vain; I had no head for Physics. But he too loved the Theatre and encouraged me much.

Mr. D.T. Roberts, “D.T.” cared little for sartorial elegance. With amusement in his light blue eyes he taunted us forward in French. We were intrigued by his slight stammer.

Mr. Frank Phillips, a fine Musician; he had a mane of red hair and conducted the School Choir and Orchestra, in which I sang, and my brother played the Second Violin. It was through Mr. Phillips that I first learned to love the music of Mozart. Years later when I directed Mozart’s opera “Don Giovanni” at the Cambridge Theatre in London, I had reason to be grateful for his tuition.

And there was Mr. D.E. Davies, euphemistically known as “Doldrums”, who taught “Ge-hog-raphy” with evocative if fervent persuasion. The dreaming Mr. D. Thomas, Mr. Clark, Mr. Brinley Jones, Mr. Beaman, Mr. Hayden Jones, Mr. Roblin who taught Maths with a delightfully casual air, and Mr. Alec Smith whose approach was more dynamic. The gleaming faced Mr. Etherington, who taught Geometry and left School to take up an appointment in a Russian smelting works; I have often wondered how he fared. There were the Art Masters, the droll Mr. Walker, and Mr. Pratt, who taught me to appreciate the Visual Arts. Last, but by no means least, was Lewis Griffiths, who made the past live again in his History classes. Elwyn Jones, now Lord Elwyn Jones the present Lord Chancellor, was Chairman of the Debating Society while I was at School. We met again in London a few years ago and in recalling our school days he told me how his interest in Political History had been instigated by Mr. Lewis Griffiths in a History class; the Chancellor remembered the exact lesson. Could Mr. Griffiths but know: how he would grin and help himself, as was his wont, to another of his little black throat pastilles.

Now, all, all are gone, those old familiar faces; across the chasm of fifty years, I salute them.