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Dame Eva of Oklahoma

**The British went
all out celebrating
her 90th birthday
— little knowing
she is really a Sooner.**

When it comes to celebrating an occasion, no one can top the British — especially when the honoree is a national treasure like the incomparable Dame Eva Turner, the greatest dramatic soprano of her day, the greatest English prima donna of any day — especially when the occasion is Dame Eva's 90th birthday.

Naturally, Dame Eva was flat-

tered by the elaborate preparations for her birthday but somewhat dubious. "Will anyone want to come?" she asked. Everyone did.

The Friends of the National Opera packed the London Coliseum with the greats of the musical world. Personal and professional friends and opera lovers came to share recollections of Dame Eva's remarkable career and hear recordings of her greatest roles. Then followed a reception at the Italian embassy, a special performance of the opera

Above: Eva Turner in her most famous role, the cruel princess Turandot.

"L'Egisto" and a concluding gala at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Throughout the week's events, anecdotes abounded about this Lancashire lass with the plain English name who, without wealth or influence, made the dizzying climb to the top of the operatic world. Every program featured tributes to her magnificent voice, her classic portrayals, her vibrant personality, her warmth and unpretentiousness. Then three visitors from the United States were introduced — Professor Margaret Swain, OU's official representative, and Dale and Genevieve Vliet. Dame Eva's London friends learned, most for the first time, of the "missing 10 years" of her life, 1949 to 1959, spent as "visiting" professor of voice at the University of Oklahoma.

The American adventure began with a letter from an old friend, the late Joseph Benton, who had returned to teach at OU after an Italian operatic career as Giuseppe Bentonelli. Benton had persuaded a skeptical President G. L. Cross to offer a nine-month appointment to Eva Turner, who had just ended her illustrious performing career with one last "Turandot," the most famous role in her extensive repertory. Much to everyone's surprise, the great lady accepted, "just as a lark."

She still delights in telling the story of two of her friends who met on the street, several months after her departure, when the musical "Oklahoma!" was playing in London. "I haven't seen Eva lately," the first remarked. "Oh, don't you know?" the other replied. "She's in Oklahoma." "Good heavens!" the first responded. "What role?"

If her friends in London knew little about her sojourn in the American southwest, Oklahomans knew even less about their charming, bustling, somewhat eccentric guest. That she held an exalted place in the rarefied world of grand opera was of only passing interest. What was more important was her rollicking good humor, her vivacious life style, her willingness to plunge into any new undertaking and her absolute devotion to her students.

Perhaps her relative anonymity

contributed to her happiness in Oklahoma, which repeatedly caused her to stay just one more year. In London, where formality reigns, she had a definite role to play. In Norman, she could do as she pleased. She learned to cook and babysat with children of her new colleagues. She threw herself into University activities and even became an ardent football fan. She often could be heard at the airport greeting Bud Wilkinson and his victorious teams with shouts of "Bravo! Bravo!"



Eva Turner as a Sooner in 1955.

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Her commanding voice, with its delightfully precise British accent and musically rolling r's, was recognizable throughout the campus, as was her rapidly striding figure. Observing her walking at her usual break-neck pace, President Cross remarked that her whole body leaned forward at 10 degrees from vertical so that she wouldn't walk out from under herself.

The general public may not have known exactly what a prize the University had captured, but the school of music certainly did. To be a student of Eva Turner was the

epitome for the OU voice major of the 1950s. As a teacher, she was demanding, often reducing her pupils to tears, but they always came back for more, true to her repeated injunction, "If you can't deliver the goods, my dear, you might as well shut up shop."

Each year of her stay in Oklahoma, she returned to England for the summer, leaving an anxious music faculty and administration in fear that one day she would fail to return. In 1958, the "visiting" was dropped from her professorial title, but the following year the inevitable finally happened. The Royal Academy of Music, her alma mater, made her an offer she couldn't refuse, a lifetime chair with the opportunity to teach leading singers at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. For "compelling personal reasons, as well as professional considerations," Eva Turner submitted her resignation and sailed for England. In 1963 she was made a Dame of the British Empire, the equivalent of knighthood.

Remarkably, the 90-year-old diva has managed to defy the passing years. As the London *Daily Telegraph* commented on her birthday, she still is a prominent figure in London musical circles, giving advice or a lesson to some young aspirant who has caught her ear, adjudicating at a competition, attending performances at the opera house or concert hall, even flying off to New York or wherever for some premiere.

When she was interviewed in 1959 by *Opera News* upon her return to London, she spoke enthusiastically of her new career in teaching which had begun in Oklahoma.

"Don't run away with the idea that there's anything primitive or 'backwoods' about Oklahoma," she warned the reporter. "It has one of the most beautiful university buildings you can imagine, and I worked and taught under the most satisfying conditions."

The reporter concluded, "Although she has come to live and teach in London now, I have a suspicion that Oklahoma will always own a large slice of Eva Turner's heart."

—CAROL J. BURR