

# TO GEORGE, WITH LOVE

The History Of The Real George Love by MARK SHANAHAN

"Do you know Brick Lane, George?" Asks Adelaide, in **Karoline Leach's Tryst**. *"I don't suppose you would if you've never been to Bethnal Green. Lots of little poky houses. All black and filthy and piled together. And the children ... you can't think of them as children really."* In those brief lines, Karoline reveals where this character came from, and perhaps why he creates such a remarkable persona for himself as he preys upon his lonely victims.

Audiences of **Tryst** are often surprised to find out that our play is based, in part, on a true story. In fact, the real George Love was indeed a serial bigamist and a far worse and more celebrated criminal than one might imagine. And where Karoline has crafted a tale based on the methods George used to woo and desert his brides, her creation of **Adelaide** (**played by Andrea Maulella**) is a wholly original character, comprised of a compilation of traits held by many of George's real-life victims.



MARK SHANAHAN at Brick Lane, London

Of course, I can't get too much into this without giving away the the twists and turns of our play and inviting comparisons between the outcome of the real George and the one we present for you in **Tryst**. Suffice it to say, no matter how you encounter George Love, he provides you with one heck of a story.

What I can tell you is that the real George did indeed know Brick Lane very well. Just as **Tryst** implies, he was born George Joseph Smith in Bethnel Green, on Royal Road in 1872. His father, George Thomas Smith, an insurance agent, noted his boy's criminal tendencies and sent him to a reform school at the age of nine. Eventually, he came home to live with his mother, Louisa, but by his early teens he had already mastered his persuasive powers over women, convincing them to do his bidding.

His first and only legal marriage at 19 was to Caroline Thornhil, whom he convinced to steal from her employers. When Caroline was sentenced to jail, she identified her partner in crime as husband George. But he fled and temporarily evaded the police, eventually serving several months in jail.



The real GEORGE LOVE (George Joseph Smith)

But, by this time, Smith had stumbled upon his preferred method of crime. Over a span of years, George married a number of women (how many is impossible to tell) and, after wooing them, always ran off with their money. His scheme targeted modest, unattached women with small savings. Whereas, in **Tryst**, our Adelaide Pinchin is a lonely milliner who works in a back room, the real George preyed upon similarly lonely boot makers, governesses, maids, nurses and spinsters.

Always, George crafted fantastic stories of his life, telling tales of his service in the Boer War or his overseas travels. He left a trail of names on his marriage certificates: Henry Williams, Oliver Love, George Rose, Charles Oliver James, Oliver George Love, and, as in our play, George Joseph Love.

How did he do it? Although photos of him don't reveal much, the man must have had an incredibly magnetic persona. "The power lay in his eyes," claimed one of his victims. *"Horrible staring eyes, capable of drilling right through you."* Just as stated in **Tryst**, George lived on his "wits and charms, an did quite nicely."

One can imagine George setting down the rules of the game. Always dressed well, George spent his days walking the parks and seaside resorts, where he would strike up conversations with the women he targeted. Sometimes he would confide his sorrows and engender their sympathies. But his end game was always in sight. *"He insisted on seeing my bank book,"* recalled one "wife". In record time, these women would agree to a

"secret marriage" and be whisked off to honeymoon in Weston-Super-Mare, Blackpool, Kent, or Brighton.

The women often wrote home and proclaimed their happiness at being, at long last, "loved." Usually, these letters were sent with additional requests for money to be sent. When the brides' parents or relatives understandably asked about George's background, he would become irate. To one "father-in-law," he wrote back, *"Sir, in answer to your application regarding my parentage, my mother was a bus horse, my father cab driver, my sister a rough rider over the Arctic regions. This is the only information I can give to those who are not entitled to ask such questions as are contained in your letter."*

And soon, when the money was in hand, George would be on the next train back to London. Remarkably, one bride ran into George by chance some time after he had abandoned her. George claimed she had given him a venereal disease and he felt justified in leaving her. When she protested, he "forgave" her. She remarkably took him back, only to be taken by him a second time. However, as he accumulated wives and the years passed, the real George Smith became a wholly other kind of criminal.



BESSIE MUNDY, one of George's Mrs Love

Audience members wishing to learn more about George Smith's fascinating criminal history are directed to Jane Robin's excellent book, **The Remarkable Spilsbury**, which recounts the life and times of the real George Love and Bernard Spilsbury, the man who pursued him, obsessed with bringing George to justice. Robin's book provides a wonderful look at English life just as the terrors of the Great War were beginning, examining the evils found on the homefront.

And yet, there is nothing like investigating the story first hand. A few years ago, my sister was living in London. On one trip to visit her family, I decided to venture to Bethnel Green and walk the streets where George had grown up. The name George Love conjures an almost Dickensian character, and as I set out to his old stomping grounds, I imagined a sort of Oliver Twist-like background for him among the crooked streets of East London.

The neighborhood's geography matches the lines I speak in the play. As I climbed the steps of the tube stop, I found myself imagining the landscape as it was just over a hundred years ago. There was Brick Lane, with its "pokey houses" still intact. And where the street bottoms out, there was Whitechapel High Street, where, in our play, good old George claims to have bought his brass wedding ring for Adelaide. Nearby, I found Royal Road, where George was born. And everywhere, nearly unchanged, were the many buildings and windows he had passed as a boy.

Brick Lane today can still be a bit rough, though it hardly has the cruel, inhuman look described by Adelaide. It is an ethnically diverse, working class neighborhood filled with people going about their lives. Dotted with many fast food and cell phone stores, it still has its fair share of wild denizens, stumbling the streets and shouting to the wind. But that doesn't phase me - I'm from New York! As I walked the area, my imagination was filled with images of the real George Smith and the world in which he lived.

**Under Joe Brancato's expert direction**, Andrea Maulella and I have performed this play a number of times over the last six years at many different venues, starting at The Alley Theatre in Houston. Joe has always had the insight to see the play as a haunting tale of damaged souls. Certainly it is a sexy thriller, but we have also come to appreciate **Tryst** as a mournful love story. What a rare experience and how lucky we three have been to grow with the play. With each production, we alter the staging and our interpretation, working with Karoline to tighten the script and discover everything anew. In fact, we have completely reworked the ending for our Hartford performance!

At TheaterWorks, we have renewed our passion for **Tryst**. Rehearsals were filled with passionate discussions about these characters. The wonderful, intimate confines of TheaterWorks have allowed us to re-stage, reinvestigate and reinvigorate our love for this play. Like George, the performance changes every time we tell this story. And then, just as George would do, we steal out of town and wait for the chance to do it all again!

Thank you, for welcoming us at TheaterWorks. We hope you enjoy our show.

**Mark Shanahan - George Love in TheaterWorks' production of Tryst.**