

# Comparisons of yesteryear

## Helen Forrester's story of life in Liverpool

*Many of you may not have heard of Liverpool born Rob Fennah but, if you ask your parents they may be able help you out.*

*Rob joined his first band Buster in 1974. The group had numerous hit records overseas and received a gold album and two best seller awards.*

*His latest venture was to adapt 'Twopence to Cross the Mersey' one of the best selling books by author Helen Forrester to the musical stage.*

*The show tells the true story of a young girl and her formerly wealthy family suddenly thrown into poverty and forced to survive in the slums of Liverpool during the depression of the 1930s*

*Rob is hoping to work with Merseyside schools to give them the chance to gain an insight of how the play was put together.*



**Musical Director: Rob Fennah**

**Q. Coming from a 'pop music' background, what attracted you to write a musical play based on Helen Forrester's book, *Twopence to Cross the Mersey*?**

**A.** I first met Helen Forrester at a literary lunch - my brother Alan and I were asked to perform a song we had written called 'Butterfly in the Rain'. The song was inspired from a line I had read in one of her books. She loved the song and asked if she could use it when she was giving radio interviews. When I asked her about the possibility of me writing a musical play based on *Twopence to Cross the Mersey* she agreed - but only on condition the script met with her approval. Thankfully, it did.

**Q. Was Helen Forrester involved in the creative process during the writing of the show?**

**A.** To a point. Helen very kindly let me call her at her home in Canada if I needed to know more about particular characters. For example: Mrs Foster, the landlady of the house they stayed in when they first arrived in Liverpool; and the men outside the employment exchange who befriended Helen's father, giving him advice on how to survive in the slums.

**Q. Why do you think her book is still so popular?**

**A.** I think it's because her account is so honest. Some people have criticised her, saying that things were never that bad. But they forget, Helen and her family came from a very privileged background with nannies, servants and a private school education. When they lost

everything during the depression of the 1930s they had absolutely no idea on how to survive, unlike the working class of Liverpool. Helen's story explains, in graphic detail, just what this meant to her and her family. They were like fish out of water.

**Q. Do you think the show is even more relevant today - given the current economic circumstances?**

**A.** Without a doubt.

**Q. The book has formed part of the National School Curriculum for over 25 years. Why do you think that is?**

**A.** Probably because it gives students an insight of what life in Britain was like before we had a decent welfare system or National Health Service. We take these things for granted nowadays but in pre-war years, if one was ill and couldn't afford to visit a doctor, the outcome was often very bleak.

**Q. What message does the story deliver?**

**A.** The show is very positive. With grit and determination, Helen fought, and won, for her right to an education and, despite everything that happened to her, she went on to become a hugely successful writer. The message to students therefore is very clear; 'If Helen can succeed - then so can I.'

**Q. When the show was premiered, Helen Forrester travelled from her home in Canada to attend. What did she think of it?**

**A.** She told the press she thought it was wonderful, capturing the feeling

of her book completely. Praise indeed. I couldn't have asked for more.

**Q. What advice would you give to students interested in writing for theatre?**

**A.** Don't be afraid to ask for advice! When I first embarked on this project, I had no idea how complicated it was going to be. But, by asking the right people and taking on board everything they told me, *Twopence* soon became one of the best selling shows in the UK. Through my experience writing and producing *Twopence*, I now act as a consultant, offering first hand advice to others wanting to stage a theatre show.



**The Young Helen**