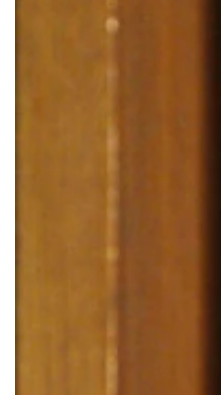


James Roose-Evans, founder of the Hampstead Theatre whose work was infused with his explorations of psychology and ritual – obituary

The Hampstead Theatre was an early champion of Harold Pinter and Mike Leigh and set the likes of Jude Law and Ewan McGregor on their way

By Telegraph Obituaries
1 November 2022, 1:12pm

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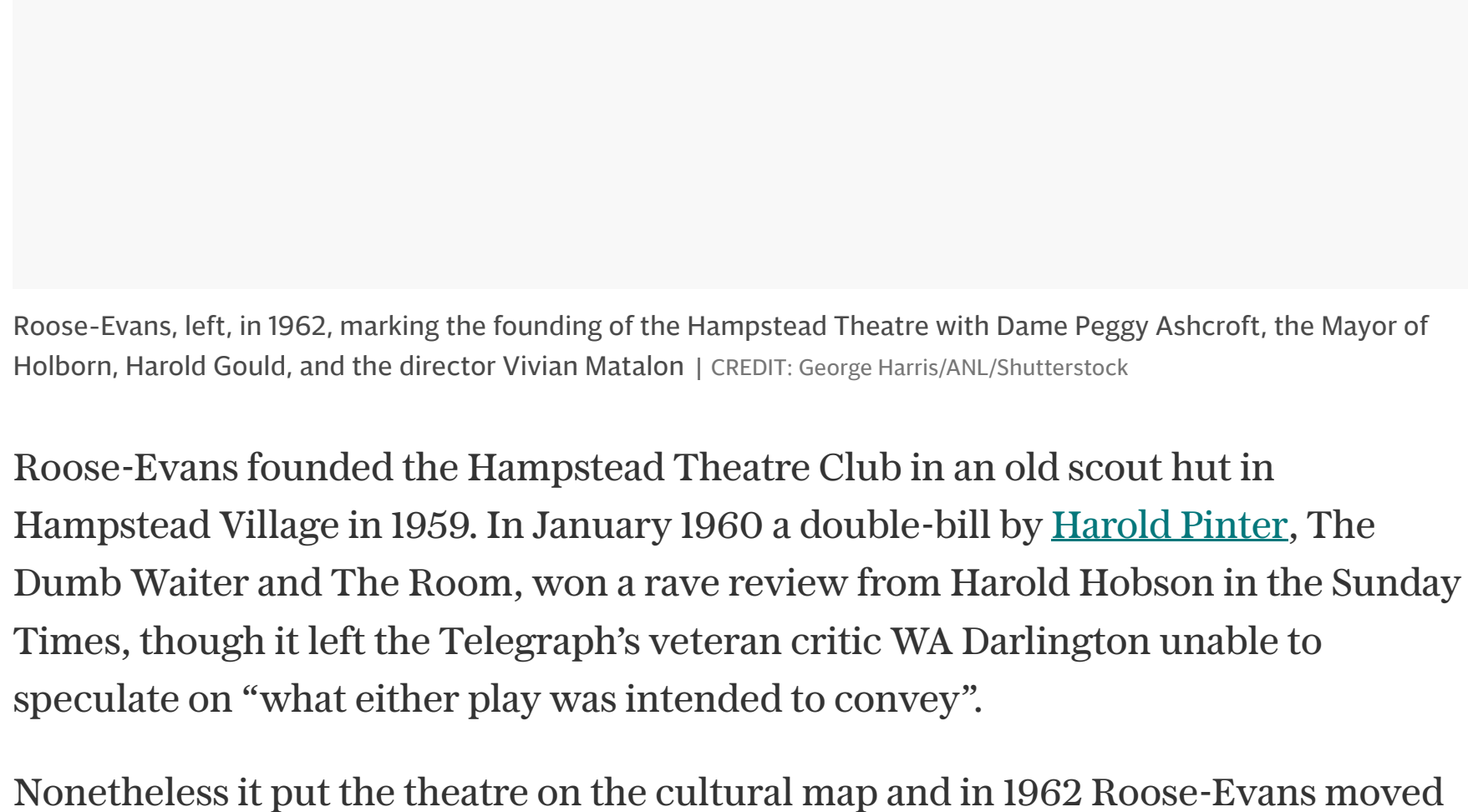


James Roose-Evans in 2006 | CREDIT: Donald Cooper/Alamy

James Roose-Evans, the theatre director, who has died aged 94, founded the Hampstead Theatre Club in London, wrote children's books and books about ritual and meditation, and was an ordained priest of the Church of England.

Widely regarded as one of Britain's most original theatre directors and teachers of drama, Roose-Evans directed numerous West End hits, including *Under Milk Wood*, *Cider with Rosie*, *Private Lives*, *The Happy Apple*, *An Ideal Husband*, *The Seven Year Itch*, and *Mate*, a *Personal Affair*.

He adapted Helene Hanff's 84 Charing Cross Road into a multi-award winning stage play, and the letters of Joyce Grenfell into *Re: Joyce*, a one-woman show starring Maureen Lipman. In 1988 he directed an adaptation of [Hugh Whitmore's](#) drama, *Best of Friends*, in what proved to be John Gielgud's final stage appearance.



Roose-Evans, left, in 1962, marking the founding of the Hampstead Theatre with Dame Peggy Ashcroft, the Mayor of Highborn, Harold Gould, and the director Vivian Maibon | CREDIT: George Hans/ANU/Shutterstock

Roose-Evans founded the Hampstead Theatre Club in an old scout hut in Hampstead Village in 1959. In January 1960 a double-bill by [Harold Pinter](#), *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room*, won a rave review from Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times*, though it left the Telegraph's veteran critic WA Darlington unable to speculate on "what either play was intended to convey".

Nonetheless it put the theatre on the cultural map and in 1962 Roose-Evans moved it to a site on the Finchley Road, establishing a 174-seat home as a stop-gap until a proper theatre was built. These "temporary" premises became permanent until safety officers forced the theatre to close in 2003. In that time, however, the Hampstead Theatre became one of the great crucibles of new English drama, often anticipating the West End, which it regularly fed.

Mike Leigh's first play, *Abigail's Party*, was first performed there in 1977 and was snapped up by the BBC; Pinter's *Hothouse* premiered at the Hampstead Theatre in 1980, having been turned down by West End producers as too political; Dennis Potter's only stage play, *Sufficient Carbohydrate*, ran in 1983 with Rupert Graves and [Dinsdale Landen](#).

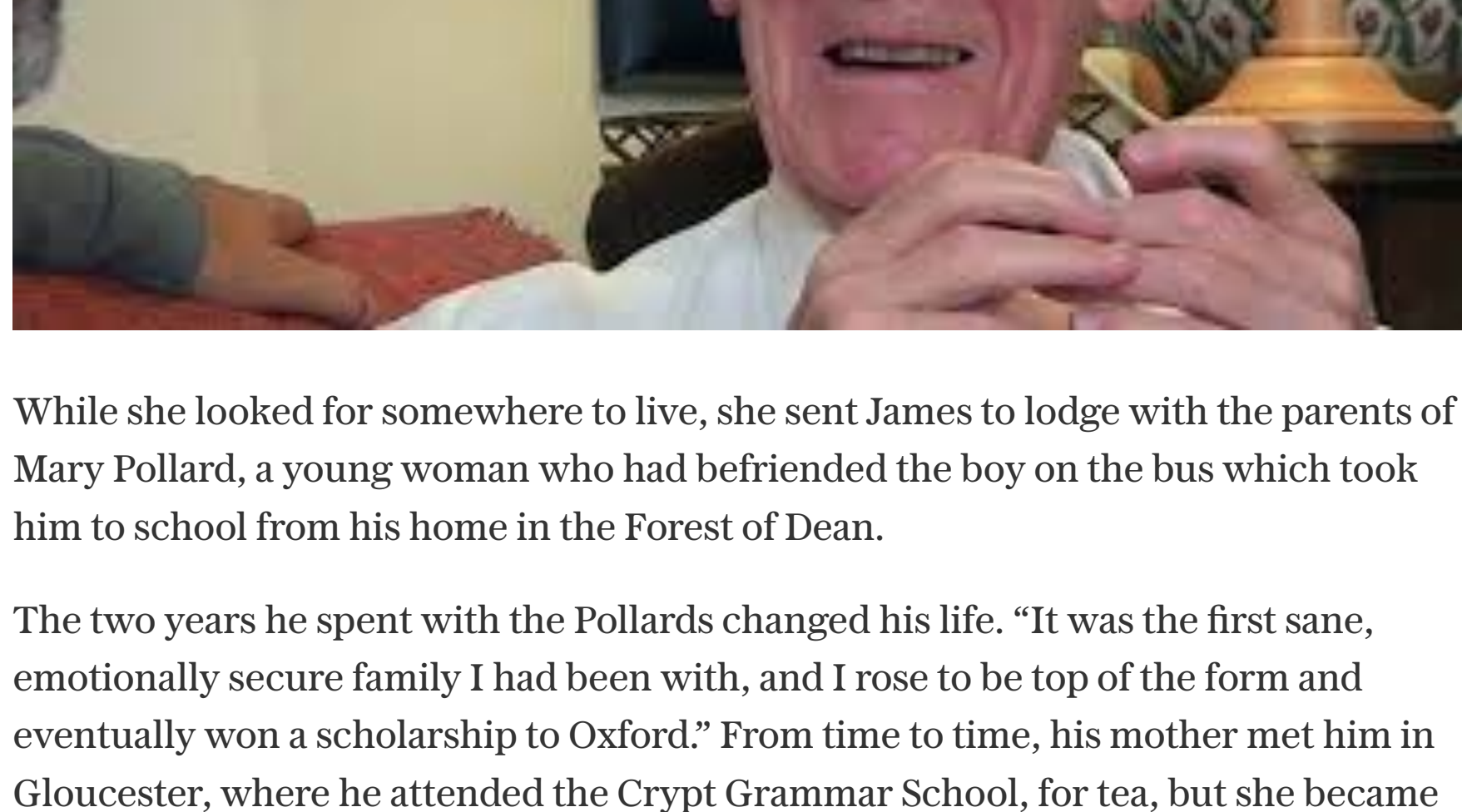


George Tovey, left, as Gus, and Nicholas Selby as Ben in *The Dumb Waiter*, part of a 1960 Harold Pinter double bill directed by Roose-Evans that began at the Hampstead Theatre and transferred to the Royal Court | CREDIT: Vander and Michelson/University of Bristol/Steve/APA

And it was at the Hampstead Theatre that talents such as Jude Law, Ewan McGregor, Rufus Sewell and Dougray Scott first spoke their lines on the professional stage.

The younger of two sons, James Humphrey Roose-Evans was born in London on November 11 1927. His father, Jack, a commercial traveller dealing in ladies' gowns, was a bully and drunkard who terrorised his family. "One Friday night, when I was seven, my mother and I saw him coming down the street, drunk out of his mind, and we were so frightened that we hid in a wardrobe and shut the door. My father came in shouting, 'Primrose, Primrose...' and making threats and swearing. Finally, he made himself a meal, fell fast asleep, and when we could hear him snoring, we crept out."

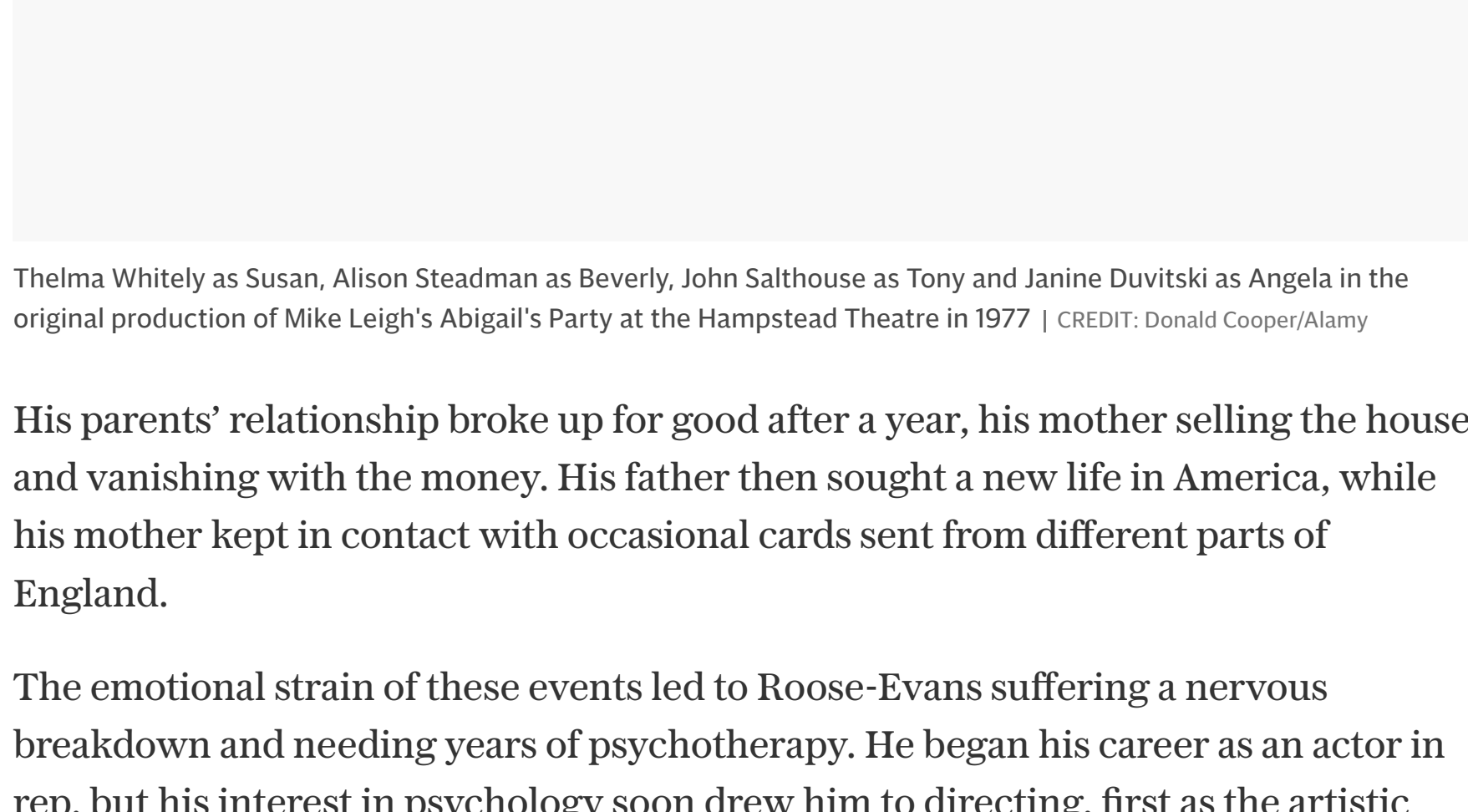
The family were often on the move and, as a result, James attended many schools. One evening, when her husband was away on business, James's mother packed up all the furniture and, with the help of a friendly local farmer, loaded it on to a wagon, leaving her husband a note to say that she and her younger son had gone.



While she looked for somewhere to live, she sent James to lodge with the parents of Mary Pollard, a young woman who had befriended the boy on the bus which took him to school from his home in the Forest of Dean.

The two years he spent with the Pollards changed his life. "It was the first sane, emotionally secure family I had been with, and I rose to be top of the form and eventually won a scholarship to Oxford." From time to time, his mother met him in Gloucester, where he attended the Crypt Grammar School, for tea, but she became jealous of the influence the Pollards had over her son. Eventually she found a cottage nearby and announced, to James's dismay, that he would be living with her from now on.

He went up to St Benet's Hall, Oxford, to read English after National Service in the Royal Army Educational Corps. At around the same time, however, his parents reunited and bought a house in Golders Green. One day the Pollards, with whom he had kept in touch, arrived to meet his mother, only to be summarily ejected by the angry matriarch, who forbade them from ever seeing her son again.

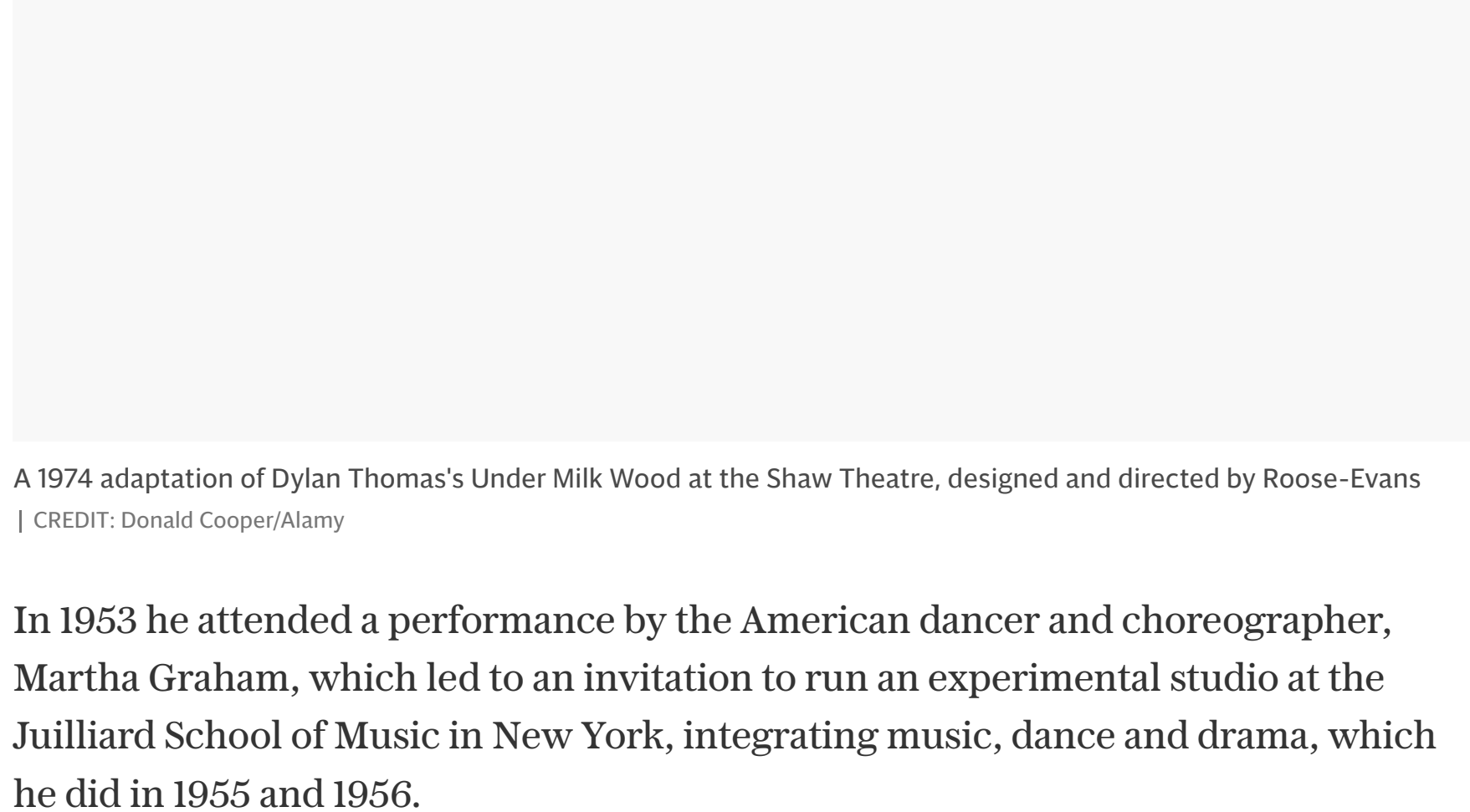


Thelma Whiteley as Susan, Alison Steadman as Beverly, John Salthouse as Tony and Janine Duvitski as Angela in the original production of Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* at the Hampstead Theatre in 1977 | CREDIT: Donald Cooper/Alamy

His parents' relationship broke up for good after a year, his mother selling the house and vanishing with the money. His father then sought a new life in America, while his mother kept in contact with occasional cards sent from different parts of England.

The emotional strain of these events led to Roose-Evans suffering a nervous breakdown and needing years of psychotherapy. He began his career as an actor in rep, but his interest in psychology soon drew him to directing, first as the artistic director of the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich.

In 1950, after seeing the first "romantic and genteel" production of *Venus Observed* he had asked a Jungian analyst to examine the play, in which a charismatic duke asks his son to select a wife for him from three former mistresses. His own version, staged at Chichester in 1992, portrayed the Duke (played by [Donald Sinden](#)) as an aging Peter Pan who can not commit himself, revealing a tension in the script that was absent from the first production.



A 1974 adaptation of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* at the Shaw Theatre, designed and directed by Roose-Evans | CREDIT: Donald Cooper/Alamy

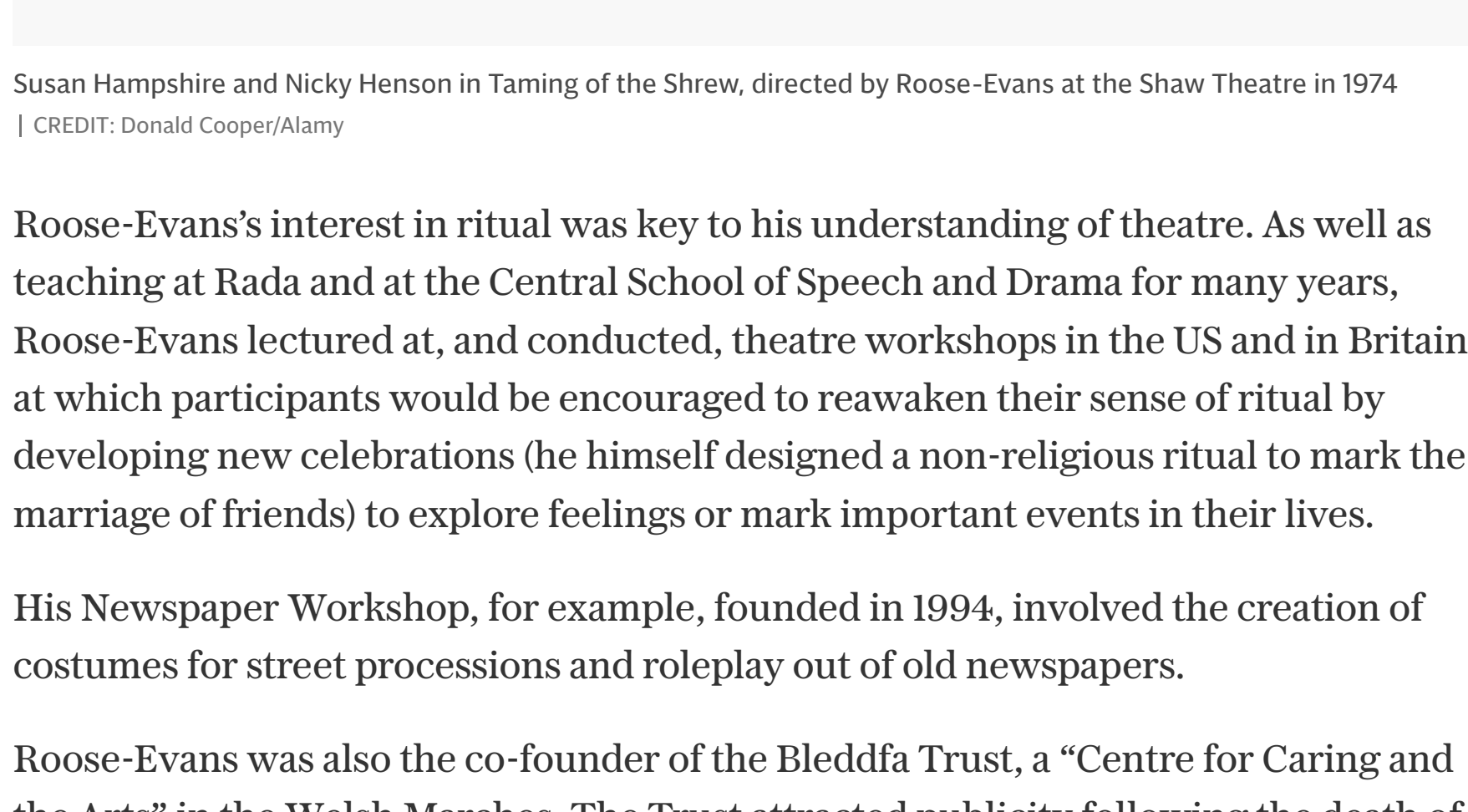
In 1953 he attended a performance by the American dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham, which led to an invitation to run an experimental studio at the Juilliard School of Music in New York, integrating music, dance and drama, which he did in 1955 and 1956.

This sparked a lifelong interest in ritual, both in theatre and in life, and which he would explore in a book, *Passages of the Soul: Ritual Today* (1995).

Roose-Evans had been brought up an Anglican, but was received into the Roman Catholic Church while in Trieste during National Service. However he later reverted to Anglicanism and his interest in ritual influenced his decision to become a non-stipendiary priest in 1981.

As well as his work with the Hampstead Theatre, a high point of his career was his stage adaptation of Helene Hanff's 84, Charing Cross Road, her book about her 20-year correspondence with the antiquarian bookseller Frank Doel. Roose-Evans directed the world premiere at the Salisbury Playhouse in 1981, and when it transferred to the West End it won awards for [Rosemary Leach](#) as Best Actress and for Roose-Evans as Best Director.

After the play transferred to Broadway with a new cast it won another slew of awards, including Best Director and Best Play awards for Roose-Evans. He continued to direct the play on tour and in 2015 returned to Salisbury with a new production starring Janie Dee and Clive Francis.



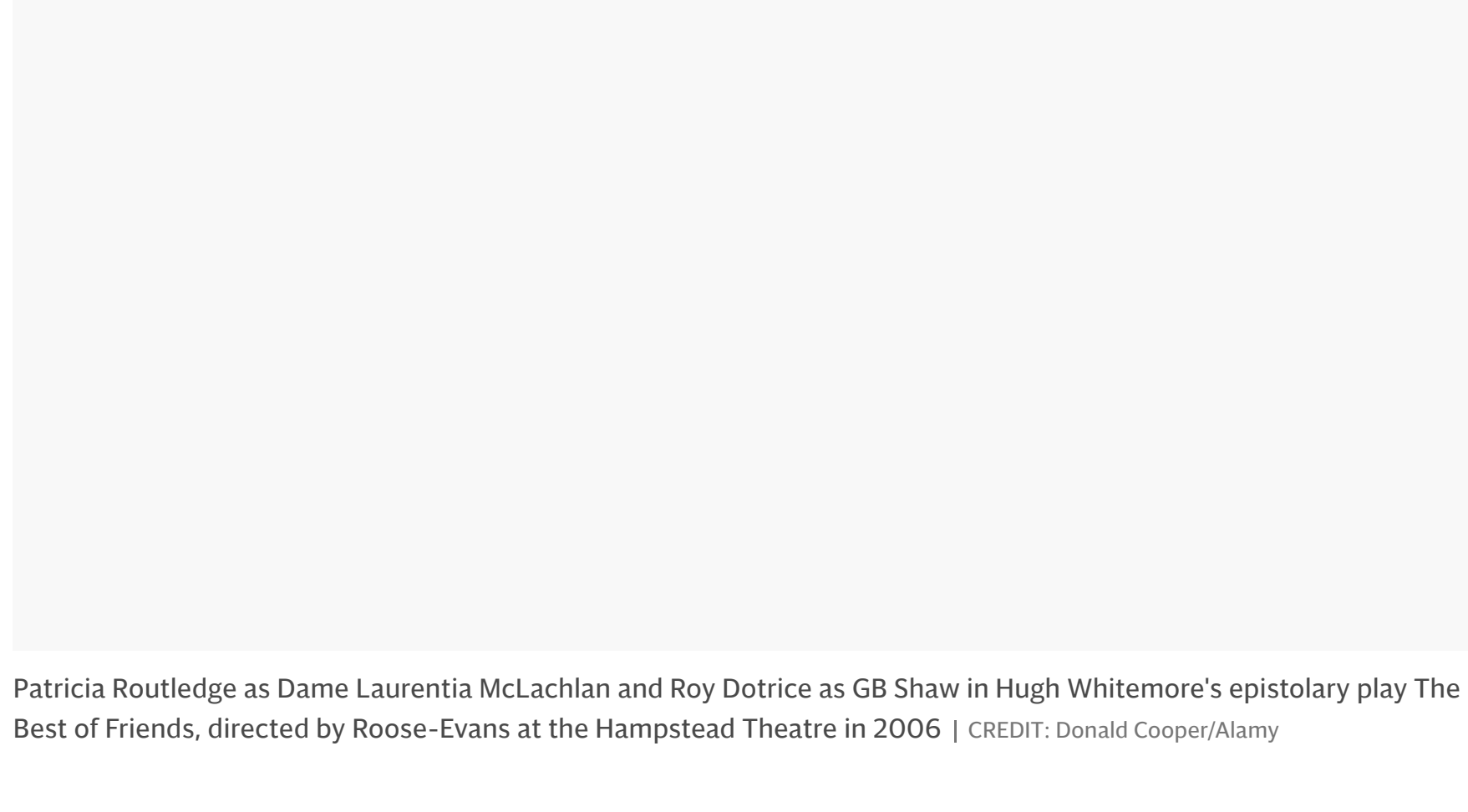
Susan Hampshire and Nicky Henson in *Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Roose-Evans at the Shaw Theatre in 1974 | CREDIT: Donald Cooper/Alamy

Roose-Evans's interest in ritual was key to his understanding of theatre. As well as teaching at Rada and at the Central School of Speech and Drama for many years, Roose-Evans lectured at, and conducted, theatre workshops in the US and in Britain at which participants would be encouraged to reawaken their sense of ritual by developing new celebrations (he himself designed a non-religious ritual to mark the marriage of friends) to explore feelings or mark important events in their lives.

His Newspaper Workshop, for example, founded in 1994, involved the creation of costumes for street processions and roleplay out of old newspapers.

Roose-Evans was also the co-founder of the Bleddfa Trust, a "Centre for Caring and the Arts" in the Welsh Marches. The Trust attracted publicity following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, for hosting a "Diana Weekend" at which participants were invited to explore the conflicting emotions occasioned by her death and explore the differences between fiction and the myth.

Active into old age, in 2015 he founded Frontier Theatre Productions, a London-based theatre company, in order, as one website put it, to "highlight the contribution that older actors can make in a world obsessed by youth". In May the following year he directed its inaugural show – a production of Marguerite Duras's gripping tale of provincial murder, *The Lovers Of Vienne*, starring [Charlotte Cornwell](#) and Martin Turner. The Telegraph's critic Jane Shilling found it "a masterclass in how these things should be done".



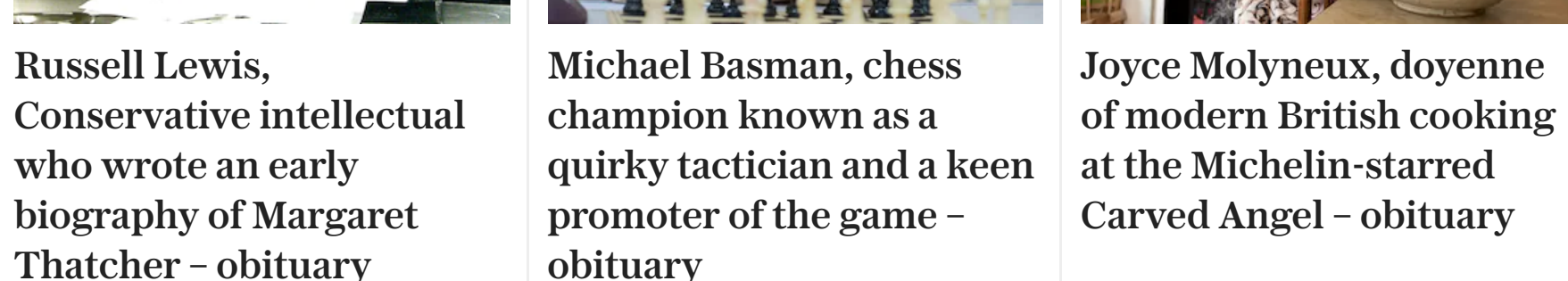
Patricia Routledge as Dame Laurentia McLachlan and Roy Dotrice as GB Shaw in Hugh Whitmore's epistolary play *The Best of Friends*, directed by Roose-Evans at the Hampstead Theatre in 2006 | CREDIT: Donald Cooper/Alamy

A rumbustious man, Roose-Evans wrote books on theatre, as well as a series of children's books in the 1970s. He was a generous host and a good cook, gardener and raconteur with a fruity line in stories about the theatre. His duties as a non-stipendiary priest were not particularly onerous. "I'm very proud of marrying the crime editor to the woman's editor of *The Guardian* in Suffolk" he told an interviewer in 2005. "I also bury the odd person, and preach a few sermons mainly at venues like Westminster Abbey and Winchester Cathedral, though I'm still waiting for St Paul's."

In 2020 Roose-Evans was invited to Lambeth Palace to receive the Dunstan Award for prayer and the religious life "for his distinctive contribution in exploring over 65 years the relationship between art and life, the creative and spiritual". His last book, *Behold the Word: 52 Visual Meditations*, written with John Rowlands-Pritchard, was published in 2020.

In 1958 James Roose-Evans met the actor Hywel Jones, who became his partner. Jones died in 2013 and in 2018 Roose-Evans wrote *A Shared Life* (2018), a memoir of their relationship.

James Roose-Evans, born November 11 1927, died October 26 2022



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