

Musical tells story of Rubinstein, founder of modern make-up

By Abigail Price

The history which is packed in to the boxes of more than 2,000 letters, telegrams and make-up recipes at a picturesque North Devon house is to get a theatrical airing.

The words between the founder of modern make-up, Helena Rubinstein, and the manageress of her London salon, Rosa Bird, have been lifted from their pages and turned in to a musical called Powder and Paint. It will receive its world premier in Crediton at the end of October.

The scribblings are riddled with references to her arch-rival, Elizabeth Arden, and also detail the heartbreak that Rubinstein felt when her husband embarked on a series of affairs. Her personal life was never the same again.

Rubinstein and her clinicians also witnessed, first hand, the horrors of the injuries that soldiers incurred, as they battled to help them with early forms of cosmetic surgery.

Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden had a great rivalry and always sought to outdo each other. Rubinstein once said of her rival: "With her packaging and my product, we could have ruled the world." And this shines through in her letters.

In one letter in April 1923, Rubinstein writes: "Yes, you are right – Arden's ridiculous advertising! It is funny. I wonder if she 'gets away with it' as they say in America."

One letter which attracts a wry smile, written in 1915, says: "Life is very hard and my tax bills are high. Please put my 27 fur coats into storage."

The fascinating subjects of the letters, which tell the full correspondence between Helena and Rosa, came to light when James Bulmer inherited the collection from his mother who had known Rosa Bird very well through her own mother who went to the London salon.

James decided to turn the great story in to a musical and, in so doing, found himself emerged in another storyline when he set out to find a librettist and a composer and found two former military men who couldn't wait to take the project on.

Retired Brigadier Ant Stevens has an excellent track record in directing musicals and operas, with a CV including Gilbert and Sullivan greats such as Iolanthe, The Pirates of Penzance and Patience. He has also written pantomimes and a review based on 'Oh! What a lovely war'. In 1982, he directed a production of Chicago, twenty years before it was a major box office hit, starring Catherine Zeta Jones and Renee Zellweger.

His ambition throughout his working life was to write a musical when he retired, and he has managed to turn that in to a reality with Powder and Paint.

He said: 'It has been a huge achievement. The real reward will be to see it on the stage and think 'yes, I have done that'. It is a very topical story and it also has the glamour of a period piece.'

Ant worked alongside retired Major General Mike Heath, who wrote much of the music.

Rubinstein built an empire making women beautiful. She developed a world-wide beauty cosmetics business which dominated America, Australia, the United Kingdom and much of Europe. She established the business in 1899 after she borrowed £250 from a friend to set up her salon. She was a millionairess by 1907 and, in 1928, she sold the American side of her business for £7.5 million to the bankers, the Lehman Brothers. She bought it back two years later and, in 1973, the whole company was sold to Colgate for \$125 million. It was subsequently bought by L'Oreal in 1988, where it has remained as a highly successful international brand.

Powder and Paint will be performed by CODS, Crediton's amateur dramatic society, from October 31 until November 3. Most of the story-line is told through the songs, performed by a cast of 24, ranging in age from 13 to 60-plus. You can get a taste of the music on You Tube. Search for 'Bitter Twist of Fate'. For more information and to book tickets, visit www.codsonline.com or www.powderandpaint-themusical.com