



Between The Ears: Madame Bertaux

BBC Radio 3

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Duration 28'38"

Produced by Alan Hall and Hannah Dean.

With the voice of Sandra Jean Pierre

A Falling Tree Production

Maison Bertaux, the patisserie founded in the 1870s by former Communards, is part of the fabric of Soho life. And Michele Wade, who's worked in the shop since she was 15, is a Soho character - one of a fading milieu.

There's something of Manet's barmaid at the Folies-Bergère about her. Hanging behind the counter on the wall, there's a photograph of a younger Michele, dressed - not so much décolleté as bare-breasted - in a tableau in homage to Delacroix's *Liberté Leading the People* that was staged outside the shop one Quatorze Juillet. For props, Michele used pastries.

All sorts come to the shop: immigrants in search of work, locals who find it a home from home, tourists captivated by the shop's film-set quality, artists drawn by the exhibition space upstairs and young women, like Becks and Nancy, who work around the corner and have heard stories of the shop's risqué past.

There's something teasing, even transgressive, about the way Michele tempts customers with her varieties of shortcrust, filo, flaky, choux and puff.

V/O: ***This shop is a case of a lot of things going on...
that have nothing to do with cake.***

[Music]

Michele: You need a lot to push a day through in the shop.

V/O: ***It's always a bit on the edge.***

Michele: *It's always a bit on the edge.*

Tomas: Michele?
Michele.

V/O: ***Everybody wants a piece of it.***

Customer: What this place is about is pleasure, enjoyment and delicious cakes.

[Music]

V/O: ***It's a bit like a stage. A room full of memories.***

Michele: Well I've just looked at the top there of the window and it's got a big crack in it, like a V. Because I don't want it to fall in the street. Because once a pane of glass did fall in the street about twenty years ago on a Sunday morning.

Tomas: *Michele.*

V/O: ***Michele?***

Michele: I've got the old blind there rolled up of the shop, Maison Bertaux, and it says on it, 'Closed on Mondays' because on Mondays you couldn't get fresh cream.

I don't know what to do with that but I don't want to throw it away because the writing on this blind, it's been cut out and put on, you see.

In the old days when we had the blind - the blind goes up and the blind goes down.

What can you do with it?

V/O: ***Fondant Fancy: Castor sugar, self raising flour, eggs, strawberry jam, lemon curd, fondant icing.***

Michele: I was born in the West End. I saw this notice in the door in Grodzinski's in Brewer Street and then here saying, 'Saturday girl wanted' and I got both the jobs. Thank goodness I chose Maison Bertaux. I was lucky wasn't I really? Grodzinski's isn't there anymore. So then I started working here. I was always shaking when I carried the cups, I was shy...

Madame Vignaud was fantastic actually, the first thing she said was, 'Oh all the cakes, they're like babies they look fragile but they're not at all', and she'd put about six éclairs up her arm and put them in the window.

But she wasn't French. She came from, I think, Hertfordshire. And she had two girls, lovely girls, but they weren't so interested to have the business. But I was working and I loved it. I just loved it.

I remember sitting out at six o'clock in the evening and we'd make something to eat and there wouldn't be anyone around. It would feel so safe, it really did feel like a small town in France.

V/O: ***It's extraordinary...***

Tomas: I'm a screenwriter.

V/O: ***... when you think of it.***

Tomas: ... so that's what I'm doing most of the time when I'm not working here. It's been like five, five, six years I've been working here now.

[Music]

Michele: I went to see the play in the Coach and Horses recently, 'Geoffrey Bernard Is Unwell'. And originally the set was the pub and I went to see the play in the pub which was the set. And some of the people who were sitting at the bar were people who used to sit at the bar at that time when the play was on. Almost like watching a piece of history. Some people were sobbing at the bar because they were remembering these good old days when they used to go in there, get completely plastered and have these fantastic conversations.

Sometimes it was like a wild night in there, the atmosphere was like blue-touch paper and that's what Soho was like then it could suddenly get very exciting.

Customer: It's a bit like a stage *and this is what the place is about, pleasure.*

Michele: But that was an evening going to see that play because I realised all those people were there all trying to have a moment of what they remembered.

V/O: ***And this is what the place is about... pleasure.***

Michele: *Because it was almost as if their life was being re-enacted in front of them again you know, the stories. It must have been very strange for people.*

V/O: ***These people shouldn't just disappear.
All sorts come in here.***

Becks: A nice cup of tea...

Nancy: Be nice to stuff our faces and go into work with a sugar rush so that we can bulldoze all those customers into submission.

Becks: Sugar high.

Nancy: ...and rob them of all their cash.

Becks: Yes.

Nancy: And all the while having cake in our systems.

Becks: Greedy girls.

Nancy: Yes.

Becks: That's what they call itm isn't it?

Nancy: Gluttony.

Becks: Yes gluttony – seven deadly sins.
Do you know what, I don't know what all the seven deadly sins are but I'm sure I've committed most of them!

Tomas: It was the people from the commune in Paris in 1871 when they'd been like exiled. A lot of them come here and like open this shop.

Nancy: Sloth...

Tomas: Soho as well has been changing quite a lot in the past one hundred years

Nancy: ...not with your figure.
Well here we are.

Tomas: Like, before it was only peep show and before Paul Raymond [sex shop owner] came along it was literally nothing and now everybody wants a piece of it, you know.

[Music]

V/O: ***Everything is changing. That's how life is. I think that's natural.***

Michele: I remember there's a play by Wyndham Lewis.
And one of the stage directions in this play it says:
'A Belgium family sit on the other side of the restaurant eating Pêche Melba'.
...
Because that was named after the opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba because she liked this dessert. So it must have been created properly in Soho.

Michele: Hello?
Hi Conrad how are you?

Conrad: It's strawberry.

Michele: No, I said not strawberry.
When you go up to the bakery do not touch the window – the window's got a big crack in it I've had to call the glazier.

Conrad: Okay.

Michele: Come here darling, don't be scared.
Strawberry's too sickly...

Conrad: Yeah it's too strong.

Michele: Okay did you get the strawberry one?

Conrad: I got the strawberry but it's too strong – the one that you had originally they don't have it, they said they would have it by next week.

Michele: Okay we'll leave it then.
How are you, are you alright today?

Conrad: [unintelligible]

Michele: You're up and down.
Conrad: Huh?
Michele: You're up and down?
Conrad: Yeah.
Michele: Okay, I'll be there, I'll be there.
Just like a drop-in centre! He's my friend, he's rather nice.
All sorts come in here.

Becks: Have you got a table for us, a table for two then?
Waiter: Is there a table next door?
Becks: Let's have a look.
Ah, isn't it lovely in here?
Nancy: Doesn't it smell like cigars in here as well?
Becks: It does smell a bit like cigars.
Becks: Do we order here?
Alright ... what's good?
V/O: *There girls – they've got a bit of swagger, haven't they?*
Becks: What's that called, Caesar éclair?
Nancy: Caesar éclair. It looks like a piece of artwork.
Becks: It does look like...it's too pretty to eat, in fact.
Nancy: Yeah...
Michele: And I know all the cakes, I can look at a cake and I can always smell if they're not right. I know how they should all look and I'm so fussy.
People say, 'what's wrong with that? There's nothing wrong with it' and I say, 'It doesn't look right to me, the raspberry tart' or something.
I mean what could be wrong about a raspberry tart with raspberries and a little rosette of cream but sometimes it doesn't sit well.
Nancy: What's this one right here?
Waitress: That's cheesecake with chocolate on top.

Michele: Little friends I've been looking at for years and years so I know how they should all look.

Nancy: Shall we share one of those Becks, that one there?

Becks: Let's get a couple. I would like that little fruit tart there.

Nancy: And then a piece of this one...

Waitress: So that's cream and fruit cake.

Becks: Lovely and a pot of tea.

Do you do prosecco? Could we have two proseccos please?

Nancy: No, screw the tea!

Becks: Screw the tea!

[Music]

Customer: I walk around here a lot when I try to find ideas and I often pop in here to get a cake, which is marzipan with a truffle centre which I really like.

Becks: What is that a photo of Queen Elizabeth in her youth on the wall?

Nancy: Beautiful.

Becks: Mixed up with 'liberté égalité fraternité'.

Customer: You can feel those important things hanging on the walls, the pictures...

Becks: When was that photo from, up there on the wall?

Waiter: This one? ... 1920s, something like that ...

Nancy: Wow!

Becks: Beginning of the century...

Customer: This place has not stayed the same, exactly the same all over the years.
Something new has come. Something has gone. I think that's natural.

Michele: This used to be the bakery in the basement. And they used to have the marble table here then they used to have the telephone then they had to roll the pastries through here but of course here was the oven.
You see it says 'made in Willesden Green'. And they would have put the coal, the coal hole is up there.

They would have thrown the coal down and then they would have been baking under the road.

Can you imagine? I don't know *how they ever managed it*.

When we used to do the plays upstairs, we did Measure for Measure and Hamlet and we used to start at nine o'clock, the theatre and Johan and myself would act out a live advert for Maison Bertaux ...about a woman who was berating her husband and he tried to offer her all these things because he was late home and in the end he offered her a cake from Maison Bertaux and then she suddenly melted and that was the advert!

So we used to do the advert before, they'd have their drinks, then they'd go up to the tea room and then we'd do the show.

[Music]

V/O: ***The blind goes up...***
The blind comes down.

Nancy: I wish I'd been around here during the 80's, that's when it was all kicking off, you know.

I feel like the world's party was right here.

[Music] '*What's good sitting alone in your room?*'

V/O: ***It's almost as if life is being re-enacted in front of people.***

Michele: People often, who were real drinkers used to come in from the Coach and Horses and sit there and fall asleep on the table like Geoffrey Bernard in the corner and then wake up and go into the pub and used to have a coffee éclair and go in the pub at five o'clock when they reopened.

And the staff used to be leaning up against the wall in louche manner smoking away. Everyone was just smoking away. It's really extraordinary if you think of it isn't?

[Music] '*...Come to the cabaret*'

V/O: ***Night and day.***
For one split second anything is possible.

Michele: Today is a very special day, today is a Quatorze Juillet – Bastille day. We used to do these celebrations on Bastille day so I thought we could do living tableaux to do with the French Revolution and other things associated

with the French Revolution, such as the death of Marat in the bath.
That's the picture there. There we are.

Nancy: Gorgeous isn't it?

Becks: Mmm

Michele: That's me!

Becks: Mmm! Oh that's delicious.

Michele: That's me there.

Nancy: Oh my god, that's so good.

Michele: Marianne leading the French people to victory.
She's there with her flag and her breast is out and she's leading them,
everything has just a part slightly at that moment.

Becks: Wow.

Michele: It was *one split moment*.

Becks: I love these fresh roses on the table...

Michele: But I remember the girls came and they were complaining that I was allowed
to be topless in the street and they weren't and they weren't allowed to be.
They were always being told off by the police for everything.
Maybe that was the hey-day of the shop. But not it's moved onto a different
period now.

Nancy: To being insatiable.

Michele: Cheers, yes.

V/O: *You couldn't focus on anything else.*

Michele: 'An appreciation to Madame Leon Vignaud with kindest personal regards and
best wishes, May 1946.

The background to this appreciation is extremely unhealthy jungle country.
It is along the famous railway of death along the Burma, Sian line. My friend
was very sick and had stood facing the burning sun holding a spade above his
head until he dropped. "Come on old chap. You must eat something. Just
think it's a plate full of those delicious pastries made only by Bertaux".

His heavy sunken eyes opened. He smiled, "Bertaux...Bertaux of Greek Street, London... I can see the shop now"

[Music]

V/O: **Michele?**

[Music] '*Un point précis sous le tropique*'.

Michele: When I first came to work here I was in a play at the Lyric Hammersmith called The Wild Duck, I played the young girl in it, by Ibsen.

[Music] '*Do Capricorne ou do Cancer*'.

Michele: And it got really fantastic notices. Madame Vignaud had all the reviews cut out and they were on the petit four – the silver trays.

[Music] '*Depuis j'ai oublié lequel*'.

Michele: Madame Vignaud was fantastic, she loved the shop as well. I remember one Saturday morning we were working together. She was very strict but she was bustling around and she looked at me and we had the same feeling of enjoyment. I can't put my finger on what it was but we just knew this is what we really loved doing; making sure people were having a lovely time.

[Music] "*Sous le soleil exactement*".

Michele: *We just found the thing that we really enjoyed to do...*

[Music]

Michele: ... which is being here.

[Music] "*Pas à côté, pas n'importe où. Sous le soleil, sous le soleil. Exactement juste en dessous*".

Michele: When I actually bought the shop in Manchester in the Seagull. So I was sort of running the shop from this bedsit up in Manchester.

Michele: "I can see the smiling face of the chef, I can smell the coffee".
He had a son, yes. We didn't know then that he was also a prisoner of war in Germany.

"Bertaux. Patisserie française".

To which I added,

"et des belles femmes".

Becks: Right now I'm seeing a few of my favourite things; we've got a piano, shall I just give it a little...

Nancy: Lovely, beautiful.

Becks; There we go.

V/O: ***If you're protecting yourself, you can't give any more.***

Michele: This is a box which everyone thinks it's one of our old boxes, but it's isn't. It must have been a theatre show because someone found it in Cornwall. It's got, 'Daniel Bertaux, 21 Rue de Arc de Triomplé, Paris.'
So a stage manager must have looked up French patisseries and got this name and he put it all wrong!

[Music]

V/O ***You feel frail inside but people can't see the frailness.***

Michele: I was married I had the party in here, the wedding party. It was lovely. We were married in the church in Soho. Yeah, it was lovely. And the restaurant in this street here, Romilly Street. They did a running buffet. I remember we had the white table cloths and everything was pleated, it was a beautiful day.
Fantastic... And that's enough said about that.

V/O: ***Something new has come.***
Something has gone.

Michele: This is the shop in maybe about 1907. You can tell by the length of the aprons and the dresses. And there's a stranger there. No one knew who he was he just popped in.

This window here says 'Teas, coffees, chocolat, glâces, Sorbets,'
maybe it was butter cream and meringue, maybe almond cakes or walnuts.

And this is Mr Bertaux – Mr Bertaux here.

And then the three lovely girls with their hair all piled up. And they've got these aprons and *she's got a bit of swagger, hasn't she*, with her hand tucked into her waist.

Becks: Sometimes when I come to work though I feel like taking on different personas. So it's quite hard to make that distinction between your personal and private life. That's why you really have to be an actress.

Nancy: I mean, I do it now without realising it just comes naturally to me so... you know it's like the same as putting on your clothes, putting on your personality. Because I'm actually a very soft person but I find it tends to serve me well to be a bit more dominating at work.

Michele: Oh sorry, this man used to be the kitchen porter we'll have to say hello. How are you?

Porter: I just came to say hi to you...whenever I pass by.

Michele: Yeah nice to see you, these are my friends.

Porter: Hi. This lady has helped me tremendously.

I came here about fourteen years back and there was no one to help and she really, really did and I'm really grateful so whenever I pass by I just come to say thanks and express my gratitude.

Michele: Aww. It's good to see you and all's well with you, yes?

Porter: Yes, amazing. I'm really sorry to disturb you.

Michele: No you're great, thank you for that. Thank you.

...

He's lovely isn't he?

I always think this shop is a case of a lot of things going on – nothing to do with selling cakes.

[Music]

Becks: I mean she sounds like an interesting lady, doesn't she?

Nancy: She sounds like a true character. I'd love to meet her, she sounds very glam. She sounds like a performer to me.

V/O: ***How did they ever manage it?***

Michele: As the economic climate changed and became more brutal, you just couldn't leave the shop in fact I couldn't even go down the road I was here *night and day*. And it was as though *you couldn't focus on anything else* except the shop, the shop, the shop, the shop.

But I thought in those days it was all possible, *everything was possible* that you could have a shop and do the theatre and everything was...

It wasn't what you imagined at the very beginning. And that's a sadness, in a way.

[Piano]

Customer: *Everything is changing, that's how life is.*

Michele: But that's 'Oh How We Danced On The Night We Were Wed' but...

Michele: Be careful, be careful.

V/O: ***We just found the thing that we really enjoyed to do.***

Michele: That's the stage. Here's the stage up here.

V/O: ***It wasn't what you imagined at the very beginning... Was it?***

Michele: I don't know how many people they used to sit in here maybe four or five or something like that. So the girls they used to wiggle around on here and people used to sit down there.

Well it's enough just to take your clothes off I suppose.

[Music]

V/O: ***The most peculiar combinations of people.***

Nancy: I'm verging on nauseous, the best feeling when you've just about eaten too much cake.

Becks: Enough that you're just about to be sick.

Nancy: Oh, Lovely.

Becks: This not healthy food and are you experiencing any kind of guilt?

Nancy: Well I don't really tend to feel much guilt.

Becks: No shame.

Nancy: No shame darling.

There shouldn't be any shame in eating cake and there shouldn't be any shame in experiencing human pleasure.

Becks: Would you say you're more of a fondant fancy or a fruit tart?

Nancy: I'd say I was the fondant fancy and you were the fruit tart.

Becks: I am definitely a fruit tart.

Nancy: You're the fruit tart yes, that's right.

[Music]

Michele: And this person here – this is a lovely painting of a German woman which was in her flat in Greek Street who was a prostitute. And she was a German prostitute who came here after the war and...
She then went blind but she still had her clients right up until she died which was only about five years ago.
And she owned the whole building up the road in Greek Street which was worth well over a million.

Becks: Well I mean this was the story wasn't it.
There was a peep show downstairs from here.

Nancy: That would be amazing wouldn't it? You could go and sit downstairs and eat your cake whilst watching the peep show.

Becks: Sounds lovely, it's all very indulgent. Shall we have a wander around?

Nancy: Shall we have a look downstairs?

Becks: Yeah let's go and have a nose about, hey.

Michele: Hilda, I think her name was.

[German]

...so we'd always have a little chat in German so *that was fantastic!*
So this picture; she'd got her long, flowing blonde locks and she's holding her

hand, she's got a blue v-neck, silk dress.

And she's looking at you as though, 'no one can touch me'.

Yeah I like the picture, It's not a very good painting but I like it.
Because I think *these people shouldn't just disappear.*

Nancy: Oh my gosh!

Becks: Wow.

Nancy: This is not what I expected.

Becks: Not what I expected at all.

Nancy: I mean, these images on the wall...

Becks: And what have we got over here? I think this is where they used to have the peep show stage. It's a small stage!

Nancy: It is small.

Becks: Limited room for manoeuvre.

Nancy: Oh look at this painting over here. She looks very beautiful.

Becks: A bit like a Grace Kelly.

Nancy: She does, she looks like a total film star.

Becks: Doris Day.

Nancy: She's got those beautiful big, blonde curls and those very feminine features and sort of a smudged red lip. She looks like a seductress doesn't she?

Becks: Yeah, but classy.

Nancy: Yeah, completely classy.

Becks: Yeah, classy...

[Music] *'Oh how we danced on the night we were wed...'*

V/O: ***Sometimes it was like a wild night in there.***

Nancy: This is where all the perverts used to congregate after stuffing their faces with cake. You can imagine some man like snorting around like a pig and stuffing his red face with all this chocolate cake and then coming down and drooling at the girls.

Beck: All red and drooling

Nancy: The poor girls.

[Music] *Dear, as I held you close in my arms. Angels were singing a hymn to your charms...*

Nancy: We're probably standing where some of the women used to do their performances.

Becks: I know and now we are the modern day equivalent.

Nancy: It feels very claustrophobic does it?
Oh God! I suppose we are the modern day equivalent!

Becks: I mean, we'll have to be shooting off to Sunset Strip soon, won't we?

Nancy: We certainly will.

[Music]

Michele: 'I am home again and my first visit to a shop in London was to Bertaux. I've heard French spoken like sweet music to my ears. I've had some coffee and like the greedy boy – I've eaten and enjoyed many wartime Bertaux pastries. Still the finest in London!
An ex-prisoner of war; Singapore to Siam, 1942-45 ...
And an old delighted customer'.

V/O: ***Beat the butter and sugar until pale and creamy.
Whisk in the eggs and fold in the flour.
Turn out and cool upside-down.
Spoon a dollop of fondant icing on each cake.
Top with jam.***

Michele: I was in this play called The Good Soul Of Szechuan and I was working in the shop as well. And I was getting weaker and weaker and I kept thinking, it's because I'm doing this. And I'd be lying down on the floor in the basement sleeping and then I'd go to the theatre and I'd fall asleep at the interval on the floor. And I'd be saying to the other people, 'oh, is the play exhausting?' And they kept saying, 'oh yes, it's exhausting'.

I had no idea I was so ill. Until they did the bloody tests and things.

When you've been very ill nothing's external.

You feel frail inside but people can't see the frailness.

It can be rough...it sounds a funny word to use because it's a cake shop, but lots of different things can happen and if you're not up to it you can't deal with it because that leukaemia just took it out of me.

Luckily I had my acting ability, I could sort of act my way out of it but I wasn't so strong. Sometimes I'd come all the way here... I'd come all the way here on the bus ... and then I would cross the road and go all the way home because I didn't have enough to cope with it.

That's what I mean it's about ...I suppose *if you're protecting yourself* because you've been ill, *you can't give any more*. And I was up to the limit.

Anyway that's it.

V/O: ***That's enough said about that.***

[Music]

Michele: What was really interesting and amazing about being in hospital was that I had so many visitors. I mean, of course people thought that I was going to die so I was seeing people I hadn't seen in twenty years. They were turning up. It was like This is Your Life. You're all on drugs and then they were going by, all these people! And the mini-cab drivers from next door, there was people from the theatre. And then in the room you'd get...I was on all these tubes and you'd get *the most peculiar combinations of people* sitting there at the end of your bed, people who would never ever come across each other. So people would come and bang up against each other who you'd never ever get.

Fantastic!

That's what helped me get better really, the customers.

So, Maison Bertaux helped me get better really.

V/O: ***It's fantastic!***

Michele: It's a bit like a show isn't it? The cakes are a show, the service is a show, everything's a show - it's the show must go on and even when terrible things are going on we have to keep going. [Waitress, Michele?]
...Yes?

Waitress: The glass people are on the phone for you.

Michele: Oh excuse me...

[Music]

Becks: So, Nancy darling.

Nancy: Yes?

Becks: I guess we best be off to work really.

Nancy: Off to work yes.

Becks: We are now the treats.

[Music] ***'La vie en rose, La vie en rose, La vie en rose, La vie en rose...'***

Becks: Thank you very much, bye bye.

Nancy: I'm having too much fun, I feel like bunking off.

Becks: I feel like bunking off!

V/O: ***She's looking at you as though no one can touch her.***

