

Tim Pigott-Smith
**DO YOU KNOW
WHO I AM?**

A Memoir

B L O O M S B U R Y

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TIM PIGOTT-SMITH

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*For Pam and my family, and our old friend
Howard Davies, who died shortly after I delivered this book*

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1

A SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD

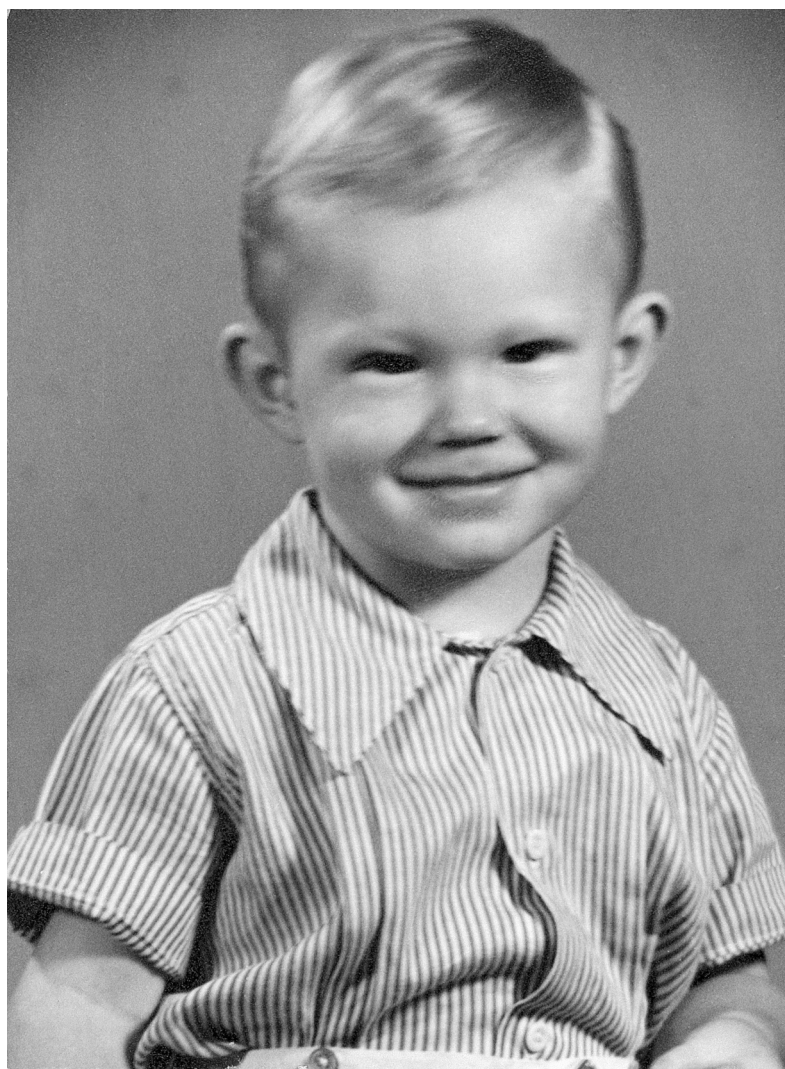
Was I born with an audience in my head? Or did one arrive later?

I have a theory that most actors are performing for one of their parents. I believe I am acting for both my parents, but if I had to choose I would have to say I am an actor because of my mother.

In the post-war baby-boom years of a surprise Labour government, the Marshall Plan and the newly formed National Health Service, 900,000 babies per annum were born. My parents were among the optimists who thought this new world was ready for their offspring, so although I was born during the first Age of Austerity, in 1946, my mum and dad weren't far wrong, were they?

My parents lived through two world wars. The world now is a darkening place, with terrorism on the increase, and 40 per cent child poverty in the London Borough of Camden where I live. My generation has survived the atomic threat, witnessed terrifying conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and – ongoing – in Syria, but we have not been through anything like the Blitz. My education was provided by the state. I own a house in London. We all live longer. We baby boomers have been pretty lucky.

My mum was a very strong woman, who would, I suspect, have become a professional actress had her circumstances been different. She was the daughter of a lower-middle-class grocer, who had a corner shop in Rugby, the town where I was born. Mum's father was portly, very strict and rather intimidating. I was both in awe of, and very fond of him. A fine gardener and vegetable grower, he kept his tools and seed trays in an air-raid shelter, just past the outside loo, in the small backyard behind his shop.



To those of us born in 1946 the war was still part of everyday life, visible in reminders like Grandpa's Anderson shelter: these shelters had been provided free to people who earned less than £5 a week, and cheap to others. Bomb damage – gaps in rows of houses – rationing coupons and the lack of basic food that rationing indicated, and fuel shortages were the inevitable aftermath of six years of conflict.

The impact of the war was also there, *invisibly*, in tangible national pride that a great cause had been fought for, and a victory over evil achieved. The BBC – the wireless – was the voice of the nation. Friendly bobbies patrolled the streets. The monarchy was cherished, and was, unquestionably, a binding social factor. There was a desire to honour what had nearly been lost – civilised values. There was a sense of national identity. When boycotting South Africa became an issue, many people were angry because they had served alongside South Africans, most notably in the desert war.

Grandpa's air-raid shelter was a low semicircle of strips of corrugated iron, half-buried in the earth, covered with moss and ivy, some seven or eight yards long, and you went down a couple of steps to enter it. It was musty, cobwebbed, eerie, but I spent quite a bit of time down there reading, and, with Grandpa, doing little jobs for him. My favourite job was helping him deliver the groceries. He had a motorbike with a large wooden box on wheels fitted to the front. He would load up the grocery boxes and bags, squeeze me into the corner, and off we would set. The roads were quieter then. Grandpa never wore a helmet – you didn't have to – but he did wear goggles. He also wore a waistcoat, with a watch and chain, and he always sported a cloth cap.

I enjoyed Grandpa's shop, too. Dark-brown shelves displayed tins of corned beef and Spam, cartons of Ovaltine, jars of Bisto. Grandpa had beer on tap, and the locals would come in with their jugs. My first memory of the shop was arriving with my mum, late at night, after a train journey from Southampton and a boat trip from Africa. Dad was working as a journalist on the *East African Standard*, and he was still in Nairobi, completing his contract. Out there we had a bungalow, and a soft-topped Morris

which Dad used to drive into the Kenya National Park where we had picnics: why we were not eaten alive I cannot imagine – you would not get into Longleat nowadays in a soft-top car! We had servants, a houseboy and a cook. I don't think Mum and Dad had ever had it so good. Or, to be honest, would have it so good, ever again. I remember it, and they talked about it, with a sort of Empire glow, a post-war colonial moment of reward for the horrors of the war, during which my mum had done some volunteer nursing and Dad was in charge of ground staff at an RAF station near Rugby.

Mum did amateur productions of plays at Nairobi's Donovan Maule Theatre, and my parents gave big parties to which they invited their Indian lawyer, incurring disapproval from some of their friends. The African idyll went sour because I became ill. Aged 4, I developed an abscess in my ear, for which the doctor gave me the then equivalent of penicillin, known as M & B. These drugs, named after the company that made them – May and Bryant – did not work, so they gave me more. And more. Until I was so sick that the doctor told my mother to get me back to England for serious medical attention. Dad left Nairobi not long before the Mau Mau became active.

On the boat home, where the drug regime was continued, I went into a coma. Things looked bad, not to say terminal. The ship's medical team broadcast a message to the effect that a child on board was very sick, and needed the urgent attention of a doctor. A doctor came, asked some questions, took one look at me, and said, 'Stop the drugs.'

It emerged much later that I was allergic to the sulphur in M & B, but by the time my life had been saved, my blood was 96 per cent white. My immune system was shot to bits. This imbalance in my blood was not righted until my teenage years. Consequently, I was a frail child, managing to catch every bug that was around, spending sometimes weeks in bed with flu, developing sinusitis and regularly being injected with courses of penicillin, to which – mercifully – I was not allergic. Penicillin, however, is thick and glutinous. The painful injections went into my backside. They

arrived with Dr Doleman three times a day. Bowler-hatted, in a black overcoat, doctor's bag in hand, he would cross the lawn funereally to our flat in Leicester, where we lived when I was nearly 6. When I was 8 my blood count was still so askew that I was admitted to hospital with suspected leukaemia. I was by then so sick of injections that on one occasion it took eight people to hold me down to get the needle in. I did not have leukaemia.

The doctor who saved my life on the boat home from Africa was Dr Leonard Hirsch, a Jew who had got out of Germany before the war. My mother was enduringly grateful for his life-saving moment of inspiration. Blue airmail letters, on flimsy Onion Skin paper, were exchanged with Dr Hirsch two or three times a year. In 1971, I was in Rome, where he lived with his sister in a smart, small apartment. Over tea, he was charming and hospitable. Mum was thrilled that I was able to thank him in person for what he had done, although he humbly appeared disinterested in having saved me. I sensed he did not like the past, with good reason, and he dodged a lot of my questions. Nor was he going to permit any emotion. The most I managed was a sort of hyper-sincere 'thank you' as I shook his hand on leaving.

Along with my coma came an experience that I have never fully understood. I remember, quite clearly, getting out of the top bunk in which I was sleeping on board ship on the way home from Africa and watching my bare feet climb down the bunk ladder. I surmised that there was no one there, which was odd: my sickbed had been attended by the ship's nurses, and of course my anxious mother. I was never alone. But on this occasion I was able to climb out of bed and go, unaccompanied, through the door of our cabin. I entered a long white passage that didn't appear to lead anywhere. I walked barefoot along this unchanging white corridor for some time. The light was increasingly dazzling, blinding. From what I have read of near-death experiences, this is fairly typical. I don't remember leaving the corridor, or turning back, and I am genuinely unsure if my mind really was aware of the declining state of my body, or if it was just a dream. But the images remain clear to me.

There is a photograph of me on board ship, and I look dreadful: wan, gaunt. My mother, who is kneeling, holding me by the ship's rail, looks worse: pale and distraught. Arriving at night in Rugby was strange, too, after the gloomy railway carriage light, the rattling, smelly old train and the cold. Grandpa raised the hinged end of the counter, swung the little door and ushered me into the cosy, fire-lit room behind the shop. When my grandmother saw me, she looked at my mother and said, 'What have you done to him?' I clearly looked as ill and ghostly as I felt.

Grandpa had bought two small terraced houses opposite the shop, in which two of his sons lived – my uncles Roy and Maurice. They paid Grandpa a peppercorn rent, and eventually inherited their homes. Reg, the eldest, was more artistically inclined. All three brothers remained in Rugby, but my mum, and her sister Honor, were ambitious, and both left. My cousin Michael became a master printer and still lives in his father, Roy's, house, opposite Grandpa's old shop, which was recently destroyed by fire.

My Uncle Reg, whom my mother adored, lived in another part of Rugby, and had two daughters, the eldest of whom, Cousin Liz, maintains my contact with the family. Reg had a good job at British Thomson-Houston. Mum and Reg were close because they did amateur operatics together, both of them appearing in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Gondoliers*. To one of these productions a cub reporter from the *Rugby Advertiser* was sent as a reviewer. He saw my mum and fell in love with her. A couple of years later, in 1937, they were married, and Dad – who had two sisters and a brother – joined a family that was not just large, but, unlike his own, united. Although I discovered that this unity came at a cost.

Grandpa died of bowel cancer in 1963. Gran was devastated, but she went to live in a flat near Roy and Maurice and was quite comfortable. For the last six weeks of her life Gran came to live at our home, which was then in Stratford-upon-Avon, where Mum looked after her. I had left home by this time. Gran told Mum she wanted to see me because she felt guilty about being in my bed. I was really shocked to find her white, pasty and barely conscious,

although her hair was combed and tidy. I sat by her bed – *my* bed – held her hand and tried to talk to her. For a fleeting moment she managed to focus on me – it was like a baby whose rolling eyes suddenly fix you: you know that they have, however briefly, actually seen you. Although Gran was unable to speak, struggling to sit up, she squeezed my hand very hard. Then she faded back into some half-world. She died that night, very peacefully: a hard-working, caring wife and mother, and a woman of great personal dignity. I was so numb I managed to help the nurse lay her out.

I was unable to get to Gran's funeral because I was involved in technical rehearsals for a play: time, tide and the theatre wait for no man. Talking to Cousin Liz I discovered the most extraordinary secret about my gran. Over the next 30 years I gave my mother several opportunities to share this confidence with me, but this skeleton was well and truly shut in the family cupboard.

The skeleton was this: when Grandpa married Gran, she already had a child – by another man. In the early 1900s this was seriously frowned upon. Gran had left home as a young girl and gone to London, where she found employment in the theatre, working for Zena Dare, the musical comedy star. She became pregnant and was sent home in disgrace. Was Gran impregnated by a wicked actor? She was pleased that I went to university, but was less happy about my going to drama school. Perhaps this was why.

Eventually I asked my Uncle Maurice, Mum's youngest brother and one surviving sibling, and this is what he told me: Grandpa had married Ada, unaware that she had a baby, Sid, who was being brought up by her Northamptonshire farming family. When Ada and Eddie were married, Gran was pregnant again – with Reg! My gran! The children thought Sid was a distant cousin.

It pains me that my lovely gran spent her life separated from one of her children, and this family skeleton explains a lot about the way my mother developed, denied any ambitions she might have had to become a professional actress.

And I think that is partly why I became an actor. Someone had to do Mum's acting for her!

2

SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHPLACE

I was 4 when we got home from Africa. Dad was working for the *Rugby Advertiser*, so we lived with Gran and Grandpa until he landed the job of news editor of the *Leicester Mercury*. We moved to a very pleasant flat in the Stoneygate area, and, although my parents could ill afford it, they sent me to a private school, where the teachers thought I was clever and pushed me too hard. I grew to hate it, so, because I sang well, I was brought to London, to audition for Westminster Cathedral Choir School. This would have solved the educational issue, but it meant leaving home. I sabotaged Mum's dream with an uncomfortable, indifferent audition, but I *did* get into the choir of Leicester Cathedral.

The choir was a five-days-a-week commitment – and you only got paid for weddings and funerals. I had just got into the top six on the descant side (a lighter soprano than the opposing altos), when my voice broke. But by then I had spent four years as a Cathedral chorister. I liked the beauty and calm of the Cathedral, the dressing up, the dramatic sermons, the ritual, the sense of history. I still love plainchant: I always enjoyed singing psalms as a choirboy.

Through my teens I went to church regularly with Mum, who was a devout Christian. Churches, temples, synagogues and mosques are the only buildings devoted exclusively to the spirit, and although I abandoned my adolescent faith there is a clear connection between the world of the spirit and that of the theatre. The theatre's roots in Ancient Greece are related to temples, and in this country to churches. The act of people coming together for

a play is an act of communion akin to a church service, and the best theatre not only entertains you, it instructs, moves, changes and improves you.

At St John the Baptist Junior School I was very happy. I didn't enjoy work that much, but because I was conscientious and well supported by my parents I did enough to get by, and, with the 11-plus looming, getting by was of some concern. Mum and Dad tutored me using past exam papers. The real problem with the 11-plus was that children who didn't make grammar school were branded failures, and they went to secondary modern schools. England was really class-conscious then, and failure carried a social stigma. There was a 13- plus, and Dad's newspaper, the *Leicester Mercury*, annually carried the story of some brave kid who made it from their secondary modern into a grammar school. This served merely to demonstrate the fate of those stuck in the failure regime. I was motivated by a desire to avoid such failure, and, to our palpable relief, I passed.

Wyggeston Boys' – over a thousand-strong even in 1957 – was probably the best school in Leicester – a grammar school with public school pretensions. David Attenborough and I occasionally swap memories, because Horace Lacey, the biology teacher who inspired David, taught me, too. It was not Mr Lacey's fault that I was more interested in English than dissecting worms.

As I wheeled my bike up the Great Drive – which was over a hundred yards long – clutching my satchel, with tie tied and compulsory cap on head, I could see, across expansive games fields, the Great Hall, where we held morning assembly. The Hall was large enough to house the senior school (800-plus), and boasted a mighty organ in the gallery. We did school plays here, and the school orchestra gave concerts of a very high standard. Opposite the Great Hall was Headmaster's House, and, next to that, *Headmaster's goldfish bowl*, as the open-air swimming pool was commonly known. Unlucky first-formers were thrown into it, fully clothed: Wyggy had public school pretensions in every way.

I was one of the lucky ones. I knew it, and seized my opportunities with both hands. The education provided by Wyggy was

superb – structured, with lots of games, which I enjoyed, although I was still a pretty skinny specimen. The school had been a hospital during the war, and the simple, low buildings thrown up as wards were now primitive classrooms. It summed up the way things were – poor but proud. During my first year, I loved gym and athletics, started learning the violin and sang in house and school choirs. When my voice broke, my extra free time was happily taken up with cricket, which I love, but never had the nerve for; rugby, which I found absolutely thrilling, and was pretty good at, and swimming, at which I was, unfortunately, very good – I was Leicester Junior Schools Breaststroke Champion at the age of 11. I hated training for swimming, and at Wyggy, under the eagle eye of whip-cracking Mrs Herbert, there was a lot. Endless lengths, with a small float under your neck, to exercise your legs. Boring.

At the end of the first year I was considered just clever enough to be put into an express stream – O level in three years instead of four. It was a mistake, but despite my faltering academic development, there was always someone I could look up to. Ed Rayner was a short, stately man, who wore thick glasses, dark suits, waistcoats, ties and polished shoes: he was a committed history teacher. I was third-rate at history, and my efforts must have disappointed Ed, but he was endlessly encouraging. The *real* bond between us was the school play.

In the second form, I auditioned for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – Ed was nothing if not ambitious! I was in the running for the role of Grusha, the lead girl. It was between me and one Daryl Runswick, who became a renowned King's Singer, and branched off into jazz, taking up the double bass. *He* landed the role of Grusha, while I became an unlikely mother-in-law and various serving maids.

The play I did with Ed that I most enjoyed was *The School for Scandal*. It was elegantly staged and quite funny – largely because of Simon Hoggart as Mrs Candour. His father, Richard, had joined Leicester University; famous for *The Uses of Literacy* and infamous for his role in the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial, he was a key witness in support of Lawrence's racy book.



*Sir Joseph Surface in School for Scandal, Wyggeston Boys School, 1961,
in a bad wig, and a costume made by my mum*

I played Sir Joseph. The school magazine said my scene with Sir Oliver Teazle was of a professional standard, but at 15 I had no idea what I was doing. I said the words in the right order, and, as I spoke quite well, it must have sounded better than it felt.

Ed lived near the bottom of the Great Drive and in the mid-eighties we walked up it together. Wyggy had become the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College. The Great Hall stood empty and neglected; the organ had been boarded up and secured with a padlocked chain. There was no curtain on the stage where we had performed, and, in the body of the hall, two boys were playing badminton.

Ed led me disconsolately across the drive to Headmaster's House. As boys we had not even been allowed inside the garden gate, which now hung off its hinges, rusted, unpainted. The front door was ajar. Round the walls of the spacious hall were cages containing games kit. Shorts and plimsolls stuck out between the bars, and socks and football boots littered the unpolished, scratched parquet floor. There was an air of desolation, heightened by the tangy odour of the changing room. Ed had tears in his eyes. After a few moments, he said quietly, 'Headmaster used to hold dances here.' It was a fleeting image of a lost beauty. Ed had not long retired, but there was clearly nothing left of the beloved school to which he had given his life. His lovely wife, Pam, died all too young, and although he was well supported by their children he missed her badly. He died last year, in his late eighties. Goodbye, Mr Chips.

The summer before I went to Wyggy I was first taken to Stratford-upon-Avon. Theatre in Leicester in the late fifties was poor, particularly when the old Haymarket closed. A touring company called Century Theatre performed in their caravan auditorium, playing an adventurous repertoire that included O'Casey and Ionesco, but for a mere ten shillings (50p) Leicester's Provincial Coach Company transported you to Stratford's Memorial Theatre, and provided your ticket.

On my first trip in 1956, to see Emlyn Williams as Shylock, I was sitting near the front of the coach, and as we got closer to Stratford I watched the country road with eager anticipation.

Approaching one particular bend, seeing the green bank, the gnarled tree and the clement curve of the road, I could hardly breathe. 'I know this place,' I thought; 'I have been here before.' As the great baseball player Yogi Berra said, 'It felt like déjà-vu, all over again!' Thanks to Provincial, I enjoyed many great productions and actors – a star-studded parade of Olivier, Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Sam Wanamaker, Judi Dench, Peter O'Toole, Peggy Ashcroft, Paul Robeson, Vanessa Redgrave, Christopher Plummer, Dorothy Tutin, Albert Finney and Eric Porter.

Moving to live in Stratford in 1962, when Dad became the editor of the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, was a dream come true. Every week his front page carried a quote from Shakespeare: 'I wish no other herald, no other speaker of my living actions.' My new school was the King Edward VI School. It is more than likely that the Bard was the school's most famous old boy, a connection that was not lost on me.

On our first night of actually living in Stratford, Dad said, 'Let's just go down to the theatre and see what's on.' The Shakespeare season ran from April to October, and for the rest of the year there was opera, ballet, the local amateur operatic society and occasionally plays on tour: that night *The Rehearsal* was playing, a confection of Jean Anouilh's bound for the West End, which made accessible the then popular themes of illusion and reality.

When the play begins, the actors appear in seventeenth-century costume, but when they start to talk about aeroplanes you realise they are not *of* the seventeenth century: they are costumed because they are rehearsing a seventeenth-century play by Marivaux. *The Rehearsal* is clever, somewhat dated in its naivety; great theatre but not, in the end, great writing. The cast was stellar, boasting a flamboyant, red-heeled Robert Hardy (leading actors at the Comédie-Française used to wear red heels), the remarkable Alan Badel and the young Maggie Smith. If this was life in Stratford, then it was certainly for me.

I could not keep away from the theatre, and would often go down to join the queue at five in the morning to get a cheap seat for that evening: it only cost two shillings to stand (10p).

I stood through five separate performances of a plain but lucid *Julius Caesar* featuring Tom Fleming – who went on to become the voice of the nation on royal occasions – as Brutus, and Cyril Cusack as an irascible Cassius. Roy Dotrice was an extravagant, epileptic Caesar. I also stood to see Paul Scofield in Peter Brook's revolutionary *Lear*.

To add to the excitement, Peter Hall was turning the old Memorial Theatre into the Royal Shakespeare Company, and some of the great names I had seen performing became founder members of the RSC – the new face of British theatre. At this time, Olivier was sowing the seeds of the National Theatre in Chichester. But most of provincial England was a very different kettle of fish.

In the history of twentieth-century theatre, my life stands at an interesting point. I am a sort of bridge between a lost past and the present. I do not want that old world – and its actors – to be forgotten. Charlton Heston did not say much that was sensible – although as a former president of the National Rifle Association he was unnecessarily articulate about the right to own a gun – but he did say 'Acting is smoke.' I want to try and capture some of that smoke. To give you an idea of the excitement created by the RSC, you need to know what theatre was like elsewhere in England.

Post-war, there was an amazing, countrywide network of repertory theatres which had begun as a movement in 1912, led by Miss Annie Horniman at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester. 'Rep' is a demeaning word that is slightly unfair to what was, before film and television, a great source of entertainment for most people. As well as a few great stars, when I started work in 1969, there was still an army of unsung actors who kept repertory alive. As with the well-made play, which became unfashionable in the wake of *Look Back in Anger* in the late 1950s, not everything about the fedora-wearing, loud, devoted ranks of strolling players was so out of date that it needed discarding. These people had phenomenal memories and strong voices. Loud they may have been, on and off the stage, but they could move from

drawing-room comedy to Shakespeare, from thriller to farce, from Ibsen to panto with total ease and competence. They fuelled the fire at one-weekly, two-weekly, three-weekly and four-weekly reps in – Bolton, Derby, Lincoln, Margate, Southwold, Frinton, Dundee, Amersham, Liverpool, Horsham, Ipswich, Leatherhead, Colchester, and many other cities.

Companies were built around a leading man and lady, plus character actors and juveniles, and the rehearsal structure was rigid so that, in the limited time available, the entire play was read, blocked (placed on the stage) and rehearsed, allowing sufficient free time for learning. The youngest, least experienced actors would play the small parts; they might have to dress up as a yokel or as an aristocrat, in which case they were contractually obligated to provide their own evening dress! In addition to some stage-managing – responsibilities being related to the size of the company and the play – they would frequently have to act somebody a lot older. Lighting was less sophisticated then and make-up more important. At the age of 19, you might find yourself playing Scrotum, the wrinkled retainer. You needed to know which of the many sticks of Leichner in your make-up kit to apply to your baby face to help you age. If you wanted to wear a moustache or beard, you would have to make your own, steaming open, and straightening, bunches of crêpe hair, fashioning it yourself, and sticking it on with Spirit Gum. Actors had their own substantial make-up kits – sometimes kept in battered old cigar boxes – and an essential ingredient was Crowes Creme – thick white removal cream.

The book *The Art of Coarse Acting* by Michael Green captures the vulgar aspect of theatre then: how do you do a soliloquy in theatre in the round? You stand in the middle and rotate slowly. If you have been stabbed, and have to lie dead onstage, make sure you are almost entirely concealed behind a sofa, with just your feet sticking out at one end, and the handle of the knife visible above the sofa back.

There were many silly stories in circulation, such as the actor who forgets the knife in the murder scene and is obliged to

kick his victim to death, explaining as he does so that his boot is poisoned. Things were much less formal, less structured, and mistakes were made. In one play we did during my first professional year, the telephone failed to ring on cue. The girl running the show unashamedly called out, 'Pring-pring!' loudly from the prompt corner. Five actors leapt at the phone! Audiences were relatively untroubled by such mistakes: they would notice them, be amused by them, but not allow them to spoil their evening. They were happy to go with the flow, and for reward were treated to a fantastic range of work – everything from *The Boy Friend* to *Dance of Death*. Actors gave years of their lives to provide entertainment in return for a meagre wage and an itinerant lifestyle.

This lost world of rep was pilloried in the radio series *Round the Horne*, in the Noël Coward-based characters of Dame Celia Molestrangler and ageing juv Binkie Huckaback. Weekly, they played scenes of suppressed British passion, based on the stiff-upper-lip style of *Brief Encounter*. This world is captured more mundanely in a, possibly apocryphal, story about an actor who ruled the roost at Oldham weekly rep for many years. His name was Hughie Wallingford. Imagine the scene: the play is *Dracula*. The curtain rises and the designer has gone to town: a room of Gothic majesty elicits a round of applause from the audience. Bats (probably umbrellas) flit past upstage windows in the moonlight. Owls hoot. Downstage centre there is a coffin in a green spotlight. The lid of the coffin creaks open, and a hand, with very long black fingernails appears, followed shortly by another. The footlights flicker. There is lightning. A head emerges and, as the actor clammers laboriously out of the coffin, swirling his black cape, there is a clap of thunder. The make-up is staggering – a long black wig, dark rings under the eyes, black lipstick and blood trickling from the corner of the mouth. And a lady in the front row says, 'Eee, look! It's Hughie Wallingford!'

No actor today would go to Crewe to find work, but back then actors, in transit between jobs, often bumped into each other on Sundays at Crewe station, where they had to change trains. As they did so, they exchanged information about jobs, calling from

one platform to another: ‘Did you know they’re doing *Hay Fever* at Liverpool next month?’ This lifestyle inevitably bred jokes about actors travelling. One such story involves a leading actor who is desperate to get to his next place of employment, and, finding no trains or buses available, begs a lift on a barge transporting horse manure. The bargee takes him on board extremely unwillingly. As they progress at a snail’s pace along the canal, a passing fellow boatman calls out: ‘Ahoy, matey! What have you on board?’ The bargee replies, ‘Shit! And an actor.’ The actor turns to the bargee and says, imperiously, ‘Do you mind if we discuss the billing?’

To sustain this itinerant world, there developed a network of theatrical digs. These were beyond basic, and some of the landladies were notorious. When I started, Ollie Pingle of Cardiff, a dictatorial woman who offered nylon sheets and a greasy breakfast, was famous. In Leeds, Basil Hartley, a retired actor who worshipped Ivor Novello, ran two enormous houses of ‘rooms-to-let’ called Novello House and Villa Novello. You had your own gas meter and were advised to turn up with a supply of shillings! Around the walls of the rooms were numerous pictures of Basil’s hero, and, one suspected from the way he stroked them, one-time lover.

One actor, whose name did outlive him, was Robert Atkins, who ran the Old Vic from 1921 to 1926. He was less ‘rep’ and more actor-manager. I saw him onstage once when he was very old, playing a wondrously rich and naughty Falstaff. Atkins founded the Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre and later ran the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; here, stories about him abounded, many of them told me by Tony Church, a founder member of the RSC and the best Polonius ever to David Warner’s Hamlet. Because of a certain dryness of character, Tony was known as ‘the Established Church’.

Atkins was famed for his combination of bad language and elegant phraseology. The most frequently quoted anecdote tells of his fury at being informed that, because of his notoriously foul language, he was not going to be asked to read the lesson in Holy

Trinity Church on Shakespeare's birthday, a duty and privilege for the artistic director of the Memorial Theatre. Espying the vicar in the street, just after he had received this humiliating news, Atkins hailed him, 'My good man!' The vicar turned, inquisitively. Atkins boomed across the road, with full voice, 'My dear Vicar, advance me one cogent reason why I shouldn't read the fucking lesson!' Atkins impersonations were accompanied by a wrist-shaking gesture of the right hand – fingers splayed – moving vertically up and down at waist level. The gesture alone told people who you were taking off – you had to do it! To it you added a deep, actory voice, with fruity, extended vowels. In some versions of the 'fucking lesson' story, Atkins expatiates on his theme: 'You can take your church, my good man, and the steeple, *and* the bell – which has a most melodious tone – and shove them up your capacious arse, wherein, I am sure, there is ample room!' Such people are easy to laugh at, but they gave colour and life to the theatre.

It has to be a good thing that theatre has moved on from this ramshackle world, but it is easy to underestimate what a local rep meant to its community. It was a place of valued entertainment, a mark of local pride and a social hub. Audiences went to the theatre regularly before the predominance of television. People did a bit of shopping, then dropped in to the theatre, not just for a cup of tea, but to see what was on. It was cheap, and, although standards varied from the tatty to the surprisingly good, it was something people shared.

The network of repertory theatres has dwindled in the last 40 years. If you ask a young actor today what rep they have done, they might say *Twelfth Night*. To actors of my generation, that is shocking. 'Rep' did not mean one play, it meant a six-month contract at least, during which you would perform a minimum of six plays, possibly 20.

In 1963, work began in Stratford on the play cycle that would dominate the following year, the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, when the eyes of the world turned to his birthplace and the work of its thrilling young theatre company. *The Wars of*

the Roses began with *Richard II* – the young David Warner – progressed through *Henry IV* and *V* – the young Ian Holm; on to *Henry VI* – David Warner again – ending with *Richard III* – Ian Holm again. This huge cycle of seven plays was adapted by John Barton, who reduced the three parts of *Henry VI* to two plays, *Henry VI* and *Edward IV*. John had been at Cambridge with Peter Hall – an unlikely meeting between a sophisticated young don and the son of a Suffolk stationmaster that was to shape the British theatre in the latter half of the twentieth century. John was an intellectual star with a profound knowledge of English literature and an in-depth understanding of Shakespeare. The company's co-founder and resident academic, he became its soul. The RSC grew fast, and it was exhilarating to see this simple summer season theatre growing into an ensemble of great stature, with an international reputation.

And it was my local rep.

3

SHAKESPEARE'S SCHOOL

From the school website:

William Shakespeare was educated in what is still known as 'Big School'; from the age of seven, Shakespeare would have been taught Latin, Rhetoric and perhaps Greek. Lessons began with prayers at six o'clock in the morning during summer, and continued until 5 o'clock in the afternoon. In winter, although boys were expected to bring their own candles, the poor light meant a shorter day.

By 1962, things had improved a bit.

That summer, at King Edward's, I won the Edgar Flower Reading Prize. Readers chose one prose piece, had to sight-read a sonnet and you were judged by someone from the theatre. In 1962 it was Tony Church and Patience Collier; in 1963, when I won again, it was the marvellous Donald Sinden, who amused us all with his huge theatrical voice and fruity vowels. But in 1964 it was Dame Peggy Ashcroft, who, as Margaret of Anjou, dominated the season, ageing from 16 in *Henry VI*, to the 80-year-old mad Margaret in *Richard III*. She shook off her years as the young Margaret and was terrifying in the great scene when she taunts the captive York (Donald Sinden) with a paper crown drenched in the blood of York's young son. She was pretty scary, too, as the older, unhinged Margaret, with long, grey hair, haunting the court with her crazed curses. She curled her r's audaciously to give a Frenchness to her character. I can still hear that guttural 'r' –

DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?

I had an Edward till a Rrrichard killed him.
I had a husband till a Rrrichard killed him.
Thou hadst an Edward till a Rrrichard killed him.
Thou hadst a Rrrichard til a Rrrichard killed him.

When I heard that Peggy Ashcroft, our greatest actress, was to judge the reading competition I was pretty nervous, so I chose my prose piece from *Richard of Bordeaux* by Gordon Daviot (or Josephine Tey, to give the author her better-known pen-name), which had made John Gielgud a star in 1933. As Gielgud had been a champion of Peggy's I thought this was something she would enjoy hearing again. When it came to the judging, and she got to me, the first thing she said was 'I'm afraid I never liked *Richard of Bordeaux*.' It was killing. I learnt then that you should never try to manipulate your audience: you simply do what you are passionate about.

As our august judge dismissed my prose offering, *and* criticised my sentimental delivery, you can imagine how apprehensive I was about the sonnet. I could not bear the thought of further humiliation at the hands of somebody I practically worshipped. To my astonishment, because of my sonnet reading I was given a first-equal prize. I was stunned. I have never forgotten Dame Peggy's verdict: she said she had 'never heard a sonnet read better'. This was a delicious, heady compliment to an 18-year-old who nursed vague dreams of becoming an actor. The frustration was, although I went through the sonnet afterwards with a fine-tooth comb, I never really worked out *why* she thought I'd read it well.

When I started at King Edward VI School its ethos seemed stuck, very happily, somewhere in the epoch which produced its most famous son, circa 1570. In the autumn term of 1963 we had a new headmaster, Stephen Pratt. Philip Larkin's poem made 1963 famous, but sexual intercourse wasn't the only thing that began that year! Stephen ushered in a new era. Stratford is a reactionary place, but Stephen's smiling urbanity masked keen political skills. Things began to happen so fast you could feel the school lurching towards the twentieth century.



Hal in The Famous Victories of King Henry V, King Edward VI School, Stratford, 1964 (me, extreme right)

