

ROBERT GILLESPIE

Are You Going to do That Little Jump?

A Life in Sitcom, TV, Film and Theatre

Julie Walters

Loo threatens King's Head show: Dan Crawford pulls finger out

On Broadway with the RSC

PETER HALL

DIANA DORS ORDERS KNICKER INSPECTION

MIKE LEIGH

Wife-swapping in Purley

ROY KINNEAR

Len Rossiter: Rising Damp coin trick

Tennessee Williams

Ned Sherrin

SENSATION! Short actor cast as cop

JOHN HURT

Woody Harrelson and the goddess Kali

The Adventure Continues

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The sort of big time

Situation comedy (1968–1993)



Sitcom: it's what I'm best known for. For a number of years I was public property—some days more than others. I was accosted in the street, hailed from passing vans, interrupted strolling in Italian slums, button-holed on the site of ancient cities: and I have David Croft to thank for setting me off in the only branch of show-business where that happened.

Keep It in the Family was written for me—but that was later. On the way, I worked a fair bit for David. And by gum you learn as you go.

It all started with *Hugh And I Spy*. BBC Light Entertainment decided to liven up Terry Scott and Hugh Lloyd's domestic scrapes with foreign adventures. The episode I was called in for happened in 'Morocco' and I was there because I could do a French accent. I was asked to read for the part of a police sergeant: he was dry, downbeat, behind a desk, long-suffering and patient with idiots. And he was the first version of a character I was to play many times afterwards (he has a wonderful reincarnation in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* when Bob and Terry are moving house, and come in to report the loss of their toys: I noted down 'one rabbit, luminous'—I can still hear the laughter).

David Croft, the director, explained the intention to go exotic, hence the Morocco setting: 'it's a very good year for camels,' he remarked. The script was excellent, coarse, broad comedy; some of Terry Scott's signing and mouthing sequences when trying to speak a foreign language were inspired.

In *Up Pompeii!* (1969-70) I was part of a sequence of four actors who each had a single line that built up to Frankie's Howerd's pay-off. One of us, a lost soul, decorated his sentence—he tried to make it tell, give it content, complex meaning. Frankie's professional distress was clear. He didn't get angry: he tried to illustrate, without words, by making a simple sound, pointing at each of us 'Deh... deh... deh... deh... and then it's me; my line; and a laugh... we hope.'

He reminded me so much of Hugh Miller at RADA. As a young actor Miller worked with an American star and had sought to embellish his small part with a

Of the many fans who wrote me letters, it was David Taylor who took the pains to create a *Keep It in the Family* fanzine. He's my longest, most loyal fan and we're still in touch.

Sitcom has been the chief carrier of my professional life—fine times. (Much of it is clickable online).

But, once you've fronted a show, the Business is reluctant to offer you anything less than another lead—for some years, at least. So for a while, things went quiet. It's more a sense of status in the management mind, I think, not the actor's. Most actors are not burdened with false pride and will grab any work that's going.

And so it was pleasant to be asked to be in *Bonjour La Classe*. By this time BBC1 had picked up the 4-day rehearsal bug, to save money: that makes life hard. Peter Woodthorpe, who'd had a brilliant career—I'd been on stage with him at the time of his flowering at the Royal Court in 1956—was cast as the English teacher. The shortened rehearsal caused him great difficulty, he struggled to remember his words and as a fellow professional it was distressing to watch. Fortunately I only had a lot to say in one episode. I featured as Gilbert Herring, a music teacher. He was a surprisingly rounded character—you knew what it would be like to be in a room with his egregious self—and his life climaxed with a satisfying cacophonous disaster. I was pleased with that. You can catch it on YouTube.



Conducting Herring's Magnificat

5.15
Dolly Skilbeck (right) may be guilty of over-reacting to things in today's *Emmerdale Farm* on ITV.

8.0
Dudley Rush (Robert Gillespie, left) is in a quandary while attempting to *Keep It in the Family* on ITV.

9.0
The Manhood of Edward Robinson? What are the chances of him finding the romance he feels life owes him? Nicholas Farrel and Cherie Lunghi (above) in *The Agatha Christie Hour* on ITV.

9.0
The film on Channel Four tonight portrays the difficulties of an immigrant family trying to build a life in Birmingham, starring Shulka Bhatteercharjee (left).

7.30 It's Freddie Starr's big chance at charades tonight on ITV.

5.15 Years Ahead
ROBERT DOUGALL
FERGUS ANDERSON
First of a new series specially for older people. The programme looks at current issues including leisure activities; and there's a news round-up. This week, there's an interview with Hugh Rossi, Minister of State for Health and Social Security, a look at Remembrance Day in the 1920s, and an introduction to some regular features. For an introductory leaflet, send a large SAE to *Years Ahead*, PO Box 4000, London W3 6XJ, or: PO Box 4000, Glasgow G12 9JQ, or: PO Box 4000, Belfast BT2 7FE. Your comments on the programme are also most welcome.

8.0 Will a shock spoil Dudley and Muriel's holiday in ITV's *Keep It in the Family*?

quick temper, says Sandra. "She's vulnerable herself and has a lovely sense of humour." And that's just what Liz needs. The moment her comedy ladies as Penelope Keith, Wendy Craig and Liza Goddard. "If I get just half-way to their standards I will be thrilled," says Sandra.

Dudley draws on the girls

★ROBERT GILLESPIE is surrounded by lovely young women when he comes back as cartoonist Dudley Rush in a second series of *KEEP IT IN THE FAMILY* (ITV, 8.0 p.m.).

STACY DORNING
Darling daughter

Says Robert: "I can still hardly believe it, I like them all very much."

"I've been in the profession a long time and tend to get cast with all blokes. This is a lovely change."

The girls in his screen life are Pauline Yates, who plays his wife, Muriel, Jenny Quayle and Stacy Dorning, who play their daughters Jacqui and Susan.

The other important member of the cast is the toy lion, Leo.

Dudley and Leo are to be seen in bed together in the first episode because Dudley has a broken ankle, which doesn't help the family's chronic financial problems.

BAILY MIRROR Jwaier Crossword Book 36

The great seductress

America and Broadway (1980)



Over the years I've known actors and directors who'd taken themselves to New York or Hollywood on spec, hoping to hustle a ticket to stardom. I'd always vowed that the US would *pay me* to go; I sensed that it would happen some time and that they could afford it. It did happen, in what proved to be a Mephistophelean bargain.

If you'd had (once again) a resounding success with a show on the fashionable fringe, and a gleeful, hand-rubbing foreigner came to you with an offer to take your wicked show to Broadway, wouldn't you be scared of feeling, looking back, a right twerp for refusing: for turning the opportunity down?

It fell out like this: the unsound David Black (an American 'Angel') saw *Fearless Frank* at the King's Head and wanted to pick it up for a showing in New York. David's record as entrepreneur was indeterminate, but he had a superlative talent for talking money out of people to back shows. *Fearless Frank* was shocking to Americans (we know how delicate their sensibilities can be) but David thought that it was just the moment to get away with a provocative, stimulating—challenging—high-octane presentation. He believed he could bring off a *succès de scandale* and make his name in the big league. He had his eye on the old Latin Quarter nightspot (renamed The Princess Theatre), a four-hundred-seater with a chequered history but RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF BROADWAY. Problem: American Equity absolutely forbade our bringing a single member of the English cast to the States. I knew the soreness around the Brits' invasion because my dear American friend Linda Barrett, fellow student at RADA and New York based actress, constantly moaned about the parts denied her by directors importing English actors. Linda is a true WASP and prided herself on her near-perfect English accent.

Now, Frank Harris in the play has roughly eighty per cent of the text, and must be able to dance and, especially, sing. What to do? We nearly lassoed Milo O'Shea for the part but he wouldn't budge unless we cast his wife as Frank's secretary. We read her and she was frightfully bad. I should have cast her: I was still too young to get that message. It takes till you're about fifty to know that you have to go along with



Filming *Mr. Joyce is Leaving Paris* (1972)

Robert Bernal as Joyce is being filmed. Behind the camera is Harry Hart. He was a pioneer of new—at the time barely thinkable—ways of shooting movies, both in terms of sequence length and mobility. Today you hardly think about how it's done when you sit in the cinema and—somehow—travel 360 degrees around a character or a scene.

Like most innovators Harry found that the film industry strongly

resisted change. He believed Mr. Joyce... to be perfect for illustrating how a quality feature-length film could be produced at a fraction of the usual cost, and as a way of recording a land-mark stage show for future audiences.

The rig was set up in a room in a Bayswater hotel. All crew were perched between the rig and the ceiling of the room. Only Harry and his assistant had to be on the acting floor. It was his way of avoiding the chronic over-crewing enforced by the unions at the time.

I remember, at the fiftieth performance of *Twelfth Night*, in the wings with Tony Britton, when he said to me, pointing with profound affection down to his feet, to the boards, to the stage 'This is where the theatre lives; this is home—eh?' And then, as the cue to enter approached he'd say 'Come, let's astonish them, let's give them a blinder,' and we'd bowl on stage together. Exhilarating; you knew why you were there.

Tony was startled when I told him that I was fifteen when I first saw him on stage in Machiavelli's play *Mandragola* at the Library Theatre in Manchester, being splendid in Noel Iliff's company.

Tony and I had been in *Robin's Nest* together; there was an unforgettable moment in one episode (I was playing a detective sergeant) when Tony had to go along a line of suspects at an identity parade, and hear each one of them give a meal order to a waiter. Something like 'Veal, courgettes and roast potatoes.' Tony never got through a single rehearsal without collapsing with laughter; same rehearsing in the studio. I thought, he's got it out of his system—once we're recording, he'll keep a straight face.



With Tony Britton, a wonderful Toby Belch: 'This is where the theatre lives'



Move over—of course I can drive

Directing



All actors have opinions about directing, but few care to try it. I'd tried it once at my grammar school with a very short version of *Hamlet* adapted by a famous critic of the day (Philip Jenkinson played Ophelia).

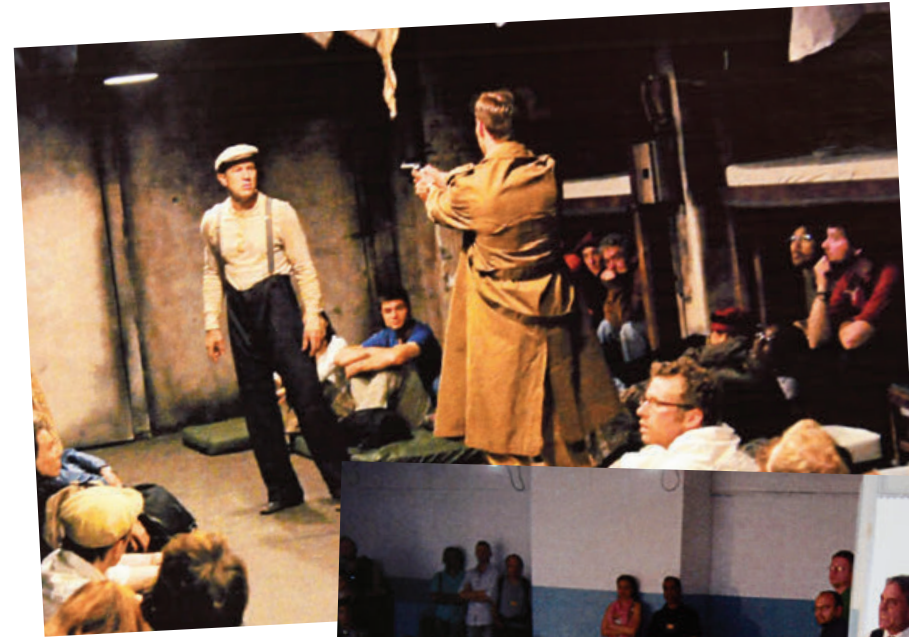
Later, what deepened my inclination to direct was a growing feeling that not everyone who had the job could find the words to help a particular actor.

Belatedly, Equity had begun to stop seeing directors as arbitrary and capricious controllers of actors' careers, working closely with management: the enemy, almost. Directors had themselves been partly responsible for this stand-off. Gradually, the Union began to think of representing them. As a director I was being regularly reviewed—but I worked both sides of the line, so Equity approached me seeking a detailed description of how directors operated, what characterised them and their methods. I was thrilled to offer them my two cents' worth—be able to help them out...

There are three kinds of director: there is a handful of outstanding people working at any one time who make the miracle happen—between five and ten, say—their work is almost always thrilling to watch; there is a small group of living disasters—wreckers who impose monstrous, mis-interpretive ideas on inoffensive, respectable texts; and there is the vast majority—steady journeymen who have the sense to cast carefully, apply workable stage-craft and wait for a bubbly cast to pour out ideas, editing shrewdly from this wealth of material, till they put together a plausible, good show.

You might care for a couple of examples of the latter. I was once The Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Arcola, just after the venue opened. The play starts with a character tossing a coin and throwing ninety or so heads in a row. This tells us immediately that the laws of the universe have altered (it's statistically not possible for that many tosses to come out anything but roughly equal) and it prepares us for the ideas running through the play: can Rosencrantz and Guildenstern change the outcome of the story? Have they free-will enough to control their own destiny? Is it inevitable that they be killed? How pre-ordained are

Dan Crawford, Brendan Smith, Diana Fairfax, Tony Doyle, Me



*Mincemeat,
immersive
theatre*

