

For more than twenty years Robert Gillespie was stopped on the streets—on staircases, on tube platforms and while driving—recognised for his lasting contribution to television sit-com. *Keep It In The Family* was written for him. There was *Porridge*, there was the gas man in *Rising Damp*, the long-suffering copper in *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?*, *Reggie Perrin* and dozens more.

There's the Hungarian connection—if Adolf Hitler hadn't interfered Robert might have been French!

There's school and a first foot onto a stage, there's the grand amateur society and its brilliant professional mentor. Robert's hopes for RADA were stratospheric—the reality is as funny as it is sad.

Unexpected, unbelievably, came two years at the Old Vic. On stage with Richard Burton, Claire Bloom!

Joan Littlewood hired him. Robert describes how younger actors gasp when he tells them he worked for the great guru. Well... what he writes is an eye-opener.

There's eccentric Bernard Miles, a cutlass fight with Errol Flynn's double and Spike Milligan as Ben Gunn. There is a fascinating description of West End star Peggy Ashcroft's struggle to get to grips with modern theatre—driven on by a relentless George Devine, creator of the English Stage Company.

From the cellar, from the attic—saved by a miracle—treasures have come to light, beautifully photographed by Paul Warrington to illustrate this rich addition to an 'old actor telling tales'. The book is racy and it's pacy—with a hint of more to come!

ROBERT GILLESPIE

Are You Going to do That Little Jump?



CLAIRE BLOOM HAS
THE TRUE MAGIC
14.4.54

Burton strides
to greatness
Joan Littlewood's way

"MACBETH"
ACT I
Enter... Weather

Fay Compton

A NIGHTMARE?
NOT THIS PLAY

1,000 years
younger
Ann Todd

Gielgud sees
agent after
£10 fine

THIS FALSTAFF
MAKES THE
SPARKS FLY

VIRGINIA McKENNA
Raises her voice.

CHILLY ROMANS
WARMED UP

A 'cheerio' from
the King and a
nod to Hamlet
18.6.54

ROBERT GILLESPIE IS A NON AWARD-WINNING
ACTOR, DIRECTOR AND SOMETIMES WRITER WHO
HAS BEEN WORKING CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1953

IV. The Old Vic. Year One: 1953-4



I felt extremely lucky to be starting out as an actor at the Old Vic Theatre. But it was an odd in-between time. I came into the business when the last whispers of the old grand manner were still being practised in classical plays: though many actors in the Vic company were also trying out natural, conversational styles of speaking Shakespeare. So you could come to one of our shows and on the one stage, in the same scene, you could watch Laurence Hardy as Claudius intone and sing his way through the evening, while Robert Hardy was chatting away as Laertes. As living theatre history (archaeology, almost), it was very interesting. As seamless drama, not so hot. The critics told us about it. If we'd had strong leadership, say from Tyrone Guthrie or even Hugh Hunt, we might have grown a more consistent stage style. But we had Michael Benthall. He was appointed Artistic Director.

There's a curious story. As a youngish director he'd wowed the world with his productions of the two *Cleopatra* plays—Shaw's and Shakespeare's—starring Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier. A rumour ran that, on the strength of this, he'd been given a glittering musical to direct in the West End. But it dived in days, or so went the story... After that, all that was on offer with any status was Shakespeare at the Old Vic. Half true, like the story of *Red Riding Hood*. Yes, to reach the stars you had to triumph in the West End. But the truth, so far as we know it, goes like this: *Golden City* went on at the Adelphi in 1949 with Michael directing. It was sent into the world to beat *Oklahoma!* at its own vivid, folksy game, but didn't. Lasted some months, and died.

So he, Michael, declined to the classics. You might, living now, think, 'But that's the tops, surely?' But no... The general public didn't go to Shakespeare then. They might if Olivier or Gielgud were playing, but the classics were just boring. So poor Michael accepted second best. He offered us the entire canon over five years and was allowed to kick off with two seasons. At the head of the company were Richard Burton and Claire Bloom.

Michael Benthall came to us wrapped in a story of himself as a beautiful young man, a student at Oxford (already making his directorial mark there, we believed),

V. The Old Vic. Year Two: 1954-5



The second Folio season starred Virginia McKenna, Ann Todd and Paul Rogers. Michael Benthall's *Erection* was removed. Instead, Cecil Beaton's design for Frith Banbury's production of *Love's Labour's Lost*—inspired by 'a black and white cow crossing a green field'—took its place. A number of screens with green-sprayed loofahs stuck to them were moved about to alter the playing spaces. Frith Banbury had money in his own right and was a backer as well as a director of shows but, to me, he seemed unfocused and limp as a director, and the outcome was not good. The reviews were quite sarcastic. 'Banbury's one excursion into the classics—an over-careful *Love's Labour's Lost* for an under-strength Old Vic—was also unsuccessful.' We were still being scolded by the critics for under-achieving. But a person with independent means is uncrushable. Fifty years later, Frith and I met again. He was ninety-three, and moderately spritely. I said to him, 'I was in your *Love's Labour's*, at the Vic—my first job, hullo.' 'Yes, hullo. It was supposed to be a flop, but I was digging out my reviews for *L. L.* the other day and, d'you know, some of them were not that bad at all.' How arresting, how curious that he should want to massage his record after all that time. I would have loved to chat to a man with so much theatre baggage (he was the friend of an actress I was working with at the time) but I heard he'd popped off not long after.

There was an indifferent *Taming of the Shrew* directed by Denis Carey, and a passable *As You Like It* from Robert Helpmann. Virginia McKenna was Rosalind and John Neville Orlando. I played Adam, who is eighty. I was twenty-one. It was my best part in two seasons, but I'd begun to think, by then, that someone my age could not truthfully fill out a character so different from myself in every possible way; not convincingly enough to be worth the price of the ticket. But it was a universal practice at the time, and mismatching of ages was a constant topic amongst actors. It wasn't only junior company members who were miscast: many featured players had to put up with it. Depending on plausibility, we labelled these performances as their number one—old—or their number two—young—performance. Paul Daneman's

VI. Theatre Workshop



You might think that two full seasons of playing with the Old Vic company would set up a performer nicely to get more work. But agents were reluctant to represent you if all you had done was act in the classics; many wouldn't even interview you. I found this astonishing and hard. The question they asked was: 'Can you play modern?' They feared that if they put you up for a standard commercial production or television work, you wouldn't be able to help waving your arms and projecting for the benefit of some imagined upper gallery.

I learned not to mention my time at the Vic. I couldn't be trusted to sound like a real person. For nine years I worked without an agent. The very height of achievement, then, was to be cast in a West End show, but the way to that prize was circuitous and full of obstacles. I wrote to everyone, everywhere. My first TV offer was to be a strap-hanger in a mocked-up tube train in *Life With the Lyons* at the BBC theatre, Shepherd's Bush. It's what the lady booker at the BBC came up with. She apologised, but said it's a start, and will give you a first flavour of television. Rep was also a possibility.

So, when I heard about an outfit called Theatre Workshop, I felt a thrill. There was a place in London, perhaps, which practised theatre as an art. Impoverished fellow actors found it strange, and it *was* strange, but I still, sometimes, had use of a car, so I drove to Stratford East to meet Joan Littlewood. The Theatre Royal, Stratford, was a little Victorian gem sadly neglected and run down, with peeling paintwork and cracking stucco. The roof leaked, especially, if I remember well, over the stage left wing.

I can't recall anything about my audition for Joan, but she took me on. She was not a classic beauty: the company came to the conclusion that one of her parents was Chinese, but there was no consensus about which one. Her assets must have been brains and talent...

The first play I began to work on with Joan was *Fuente Ovejuna* (*The Sheep Well*), by Lope de Vega, a Spanish contemporary of Shakespeare. It's a high drama about a wicked nobleman who is horrid to his tenants in every possible way imaginable.

IX. The Mermaid: 1961-62 and 1964-65



Once, for seven years, I lived around (but never with) a lady who drank herself to death. Very talented as director, producer and writer—but said she felt permanently thirsty. I had never meant to become a student of self-destructive behaviour. Chance has taken me in that direction.

Bernard Miles was a good, successful supporting film actor, as well as stage performer. He was a professional countryman, though born in Uxbridge, and played almost everything with his trademark ‘Mummersetian’ burr. He was a wonderful storyteller and a consummate persuader. By instinct, he was an old-fashioned actor-manager. First, he planted a small theatre in his back garden in St John’s Wood; I heard Kirsten Flagstad sing there—something from *Dido*, I recall. Bernard also had a strong emotional link with the ancient city of London and its traditions, so next he worked on the rich burghers of the city of London to fund him the first new theatre in the City for centuries. The Mermaid was born, and its early incarnation—I saw it—was as a pageant cart pulled by big horses in the City streets, near the Royal Exchange—a publicity coup and money raiser. When I was engaged to work at the Mermaid it had settled in a smartly converted warehouse beside Puddle Dock in Blackfriars. Bernard’s rich friends would moor alongside in their Thames barges for a chat; the restaurant was over the river and looked out on it. Imaginative, magical, a scintillating start. From the beginning, every show played twice nightly at 6.15 and 8.40. Bernard’s pitch was to persuade City workers to miss the rush and see a show before they went home. The place opened with a naughty musical, *Lock Up Your Daughters*, which did well. I was first hired to play in *Treasure Island*. R. L. Stevenson’s masterpiece became a Christmas show standard for Bernard, a way of recouping, if the previous shows hadn’t done well enough. A dear man, Colin Ellis, directed *Treasure Island* and cast me as Israel Hands, who has one scene and a terrific cutlass fight, and then dies. Bernard talked Spike Milligan into playing Ben Gunn.

Spike wasn’t used to sticking to a text; but he made a stab at it. For the first week of performance, his scene wouldn’t flow. And then, and then, for a whole week, as

X. Commercials



In the 70s, I appeared in about a hundred commercials. Sometimes, I shot three a week.

A lugubrious guy, whose name temporarily escapes me... he was a publisher of military and adventure books, amongst other things... hired me to front a hotel and tourism publicity film he was shooting in Mallorca. David, let's call him that, ran things as if he were a last representative of some outpost of the British Empire. I was with him on a commercial shoot, later, in Nigeria and he also got very interested in the *Joyce* play at the King's Head Theatre.

Mallorca is split by a mountainous spine with the lovely, unspoilt wedge to the north, where Robert Graves was living and the unspeakably cheap hotelised south, with its poor materials and no building controls. Franco was still in power and it was the attitude of the Spanish camera crew that interested me. Of course we'd brought our own key people and so we had with us a very young, curvy English girl P.A. But the riggers were locals. They were swarthy, hairy guys of various ages and I've never seen blokes stare at a woman the way they did when our P.A.—who was very sparky and indispensable—addressed them, or came anywhere near them. I'd never seen raw, undisguised, panting, staring lust before. The second assistant was Spanish—a pleasant, young, educated chap who spoke French; so we got talking. I remarked that the Spanish crew tracked any passing female, as they built the lighting, just as a hyena might size up prey on the hoof. The assistant explained that these guys, from puberty onward, were conversant with only two kinds of women; their wives and prostitutes. 'What were they talking about,' I asked. 'They are uttering a constant stream of indescribable filth all day long,' he said; 'I'm really getting sick of it. These fellows are caught between the vile and hypocritical grip of the Catholic church and Franco's phoney puritanism; can you be surprised that they are crude and uncouth beasts?' At that time, if you entered a Catholic church in Spain, you found yourself in almost pitch blackness; full of drama, in a way, with just the light of candles and murmuring or chanting. Death and ecstasy, like Lope de Vega, like