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# **And Furthermore**

Written by Judi Dench

as told to John Miller

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# *And Furthermore*



JUDI DENCH

*as told to John Miller*

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

LONDON



I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE THAT it is more than half a century since I first stepped on to the stage of the Old Vic Theatre, and into a way of life that has brought me the most rewarding professional relationships and friendships. I cannot imagine now ever doing anything else with my life except acting, but it was not something that I actually planned when I was growing up. That may seem strange, as my whole family was deeply involved in theatre in one way or another.

My father was a doctor in general practice, but spent much of his spare time acting with the Settlement Players, a very good amateur group in York. He and my mother were keen theatre-goers, so my elder brothers and I were taken to the theatre from a very early age. When I saw the celebrated farce *Cuckoo in the Nest* by Ben Travers, I laughed so much when a man jumped up in a laundry basket at the end of a bed wearing those combinations they called longjohns, that I thought I would have some kind of fit. In fact I think my mother must have decided that I really was going to have a fit, because I was taken home at the interval, and only brought back the next night to see the second half of the play. We went to *Peter Pan* at Leeds, and when we came home I said, 'Couldn't we fix some wires up in the

waiting room, and I could come flying in from the consulting room to the waiting room?’ My parents must have been in despair.

Daddy was a fine actor, and a marvellous after-dinner speaker; with a great sense of timing. He had the ease of an Irishman in telling stories, and he had a brilliant sense of humour. He was actually born in Dorset, but brought up in Dublin, and only moved to York after he married. He was so very grounded as a doctor. I used to go visiting patients with him, and as he turned into roads the children used to come and hold on to the car. He became really very popular as a GP, and we hardly ever saw him at any meals, because he was always out delivering babies. People still come up to me and say, ‘You won’t believe this, but your father delivered me as a baby.’ I always try to look surprised.

Mummy also acted occasionally, but more often was responsible for the costumes. Once they went to a party with Daddy as Shakespeare and Mummy as Elizabeth I, and she made the most incredible dress for the Queen. They were also in a film about Dick Turpin’s ride to York, and I still have the picture of the two of them on the stairs at home. A man called Wilson, who taught me to ride, was in the film with them, and he left us a box of costumes from it, with various bodices and skirts.

Mummy could whip up anything, and after I had seen the Laurence Olivier film of *Henry V* I longed to go to a fancy-dress party as the Princess of France, so she made me the most beautiful dress, with cotton-wool all round the sleeve marked like ermine. I made the headdress that I had seen Renée Asherson wearing, with a piece of netting round my head and a ruler through the top. It looked absolutely terrific. (It never crossed my mind that one day I would play that part onstage.) Over the years there were all sorts of things that had just got put in the ottoman, which we were always digging through; I just thought that all families got dressed up like that.

When the Settlement Players did Christopher Fry's *The First-born* I played Tuesret, the pharaoh's daughter. Christopher became a great friend years later, and I rather regret that is the only time I have ever acted in one of his plays. When I was at Clifton Preparatory School we did a Nativity Play and I was told I was to play a fairy, which I was quite cross about, because I knew the Nativity story did not involve fairies. I also played a snail once, and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*.

My brothers, Peter and Jeffery, who were quite a bit older than me, appeared in school productions at St Peter's in York, which is one of the oldest schools in the country. In Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* Peter played Caesar and Jeff was Cleopatra. I saw Jeff as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, and Peter as Duncan in *Macbeth*. I thought it was very racy to spin round on the piano stool at home and say, 'What bloody man is that?' That was all I remembered of the play, but I did say that rather a lot.

Because of the age-gap between us I was of course sent to bed much earlier than the boys, and I remember so well going to bed and hearing them playing cricket in the garden, and hearing all that life going on outside; I simply couldn't bear it, and it is still like that. I don't like missing anything, even today I hate to be in bed and hear people talking downstairs, because I am far too nosy, I *have* to know what they are on about.

Our house was in an area called 'York Without', because it was outside the city walls. We had a long straight strip of garden, with a few apple trees. We couldn't grow very much, apart from some lovely lilies-of-the-valley and a few roses, and we used to rake the pears off the tree next door. At the end of the garden was an old barn, and owls used to live in there. When the boys had friends round playing cricket they were always knocking the ball over into Miss Lazenby's garden, and she would never give the ball back, however much we asked for it. One day Jeff found

a rat in the barn, and they did it all up and gave it to me to take it round and push through her door. Daddy heard about it, and told us all off.

My first school, Miss Meaby's, was just up the road from my brothers' school, St Peter's, so when I finished for the day I used to go and sit on the wall to watch the boys playing games, waiting for my mother to come and take us home.

When I went to the Mount School in the city there were no such things as day-girls, so I had to be a boarder all the time, but I didn't mind that at all really. We were allowed home at weekends for just a day, but not to sleep. When games were cancelled we had to go on what was called a 'wet-walk', all sorts of different walks that we had to do. So I used to go out of school, ring up home, and they would come and fetch us. We would have a huge tea, then Mummy would water us in the garden with a watering-can, drop us at a corner near school, and we trudged back soaked to the skin. I don't think we were ever caught out.

The first play I saw at the Mount was *Julius Caesar*, with lots of big girls in bigger togas. I thought that was not at all a good play to do, and it is the one Roman play I have fought shy of ever since. But it was there that I first played Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a role I returned to with the RSC in 1962 for Peter Hall, and again in 2010 at his request at the Kingston Rose Theatre.

The teacher who had the most influence on me had been known as Joy Harvey when she had worked with John Gielgud, but at school she was called Mrs Macdonald. Her marriage had broken up, but after I left she wrote me the most lovely letter, saying that she was standing on York Station when suddenly her husband had appeared and they had got together again, years after their break-up. She seemed to me quite dissipated; she used to drink, and smoked like a chimney, but she would suddenly talk about acting in the professional theatre, and bring it all alive.

She was a good laugher, but she took it very seriously, and she was a terrific teacher.

That is why I have reservations about drama students being taught by people who have never actually worked in the theatre. It has worked sometimes, for actors like John Neville and Richard Burton, but most people need somebody to tell them what it is actually like to be in a company, how you should behave, and the homework you must do, so that you don't take up a lot of other people's time.

The other teacher at the Mount who influenced me was Phoebe Brook, the art mistress. Everybody was encouraged, in whatever they did, to do it well but not to compete. Although we swam and played other sports against other schools, winning was not the important thing. That is quite important in my book. Deep down, I suppose I don't really approve of the awards business, even when I have won them, because you can't really award prizes for acting. That is not to say that when I have won awards I haven't been absolutely thrilled – I have – but I suspect deep down that it is something that goes a bit against the grain. Acting is such a personal, imperfect kind of art.

Acting was just one of the things I did at school; I originally wanted to be a ballet dancer, until Daddy said, 'Well, if you do take up dancing, by the time you are forty you'll have to teach or something, because you just can't go on for ever, it is quite a short career.' I wouldn't have liked that. I don't like the thought of anything packing up.

For a while I wanted to be a theatre designer, and actually went to art school for several months, but then I was taken to see Michael Redgrave as King Lear at Stratford in the early Fifties, and came face to face with a theatre without a curtain. I was only used to a proscenium arch with a curtain, where they changed the set behind it in the interval. Suddenly here was this huge open stage with no curtain at all, just this enormous rough

stone that was a throne at the beginning, and turned to become a hovel or a cave, or anything else that was needed. The set was designed by the team of Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, and I sat there thinking I could never ever have the imagination to do a set like that, and overnight I thought, I don't think I can be the kind of designer I want to be. It really was a kind of road to Damascus for me.

When I was seventeen at the Mount School, Canon Purvis did a new translation of the York Cycle of Mystery Plays, for its first revival since the fifteenth century, produced by Martin Browne, who specialised in religious dramas. He came to the Mount and asked for people to play angels, so we were all taken from school and auditioned; eight of us were chosen, and I got the part of a forgetful angel. I was meant to forget everything, and I did of course forget everything; people used to get so irritated with me. We had all-white robes with a gold collar and gold wigs.

Three years later, in 1954, I played the young man in white clothing sitting at the door of the tomb, or rather in my case not sitting, as Henzie Raeburn (Martin Browne's wife, who was playing Mary Magdalene) insisted that I could perfectly well crouch there while the three Marys did their scene. It actually looked quite angelic, as when I got up there was no chair to be seen. Mummy made the costumes again, Daddy played Annas the High Priest, Caiaphas was the drama teacher John Kay who taught at Bootham's, the Mount's brother school, Joseph O'Connor played Christ, John van Eyssen the Devil, David Giles the Archangel Gabriel, and Tenniel Evans was the Archangel Michael. Mary Ure, who was in the sixth form at the Mount then, played the Virgin Mary. Three years after that, just as I was leaving drama school, Martin Browne asked me to go back and play Eve, but when I got there he said he had changed his mind and wanted me to play the Virgin Mary. Funnily enough,



I followed Mary Ure in another part after a three-year gap at Stratford. She was Titania in Peter Hall's production of *The Dream* in 1959, and I played her when he revived it in 1962 with a mostly new cast.

All three productions were done in the open air at St Mary's Abbey, and I was always rained on. It was fine for the Creation of the World, and everything was terrific for the Fall of Lucifer, but when I came on for the Birth of Christ, it just poured down. I used to bend over when he was born, and then come up and part the straw to show the baby, and as I came up I saw people pulling their macs on and putting up umbrellas, and it seemed to happen every time, but it was still a wonderful experience.

Having abandoned my first two ideas of a career – dancing or designing – it is hardly surprising that I settled on acting, which was entirely due to my brother Jeff. Peter had followed in Daddy's footsteps and gone off to study medicine, but Jeff only ever wanted to be an actor. He didn't talk me into it, but it was his stories of the fun he was having at the Central School of Speech and Drama (to give it its full title just this once) that inspired me. Our parents only ever encouraged us in anything we wanted to do, but my father did say, 'You've got to get your O- and A-levels, because it's a very precarious life. You might have to think about something else at some time, so for goodness' sake work hard. By all means go to Central, if that's what you want to do, but you've got to get those exams.' I got my A-levels in Art and English Literature, though Daddy still had to pay the fees at Central for both of us.

The audition was a written exercise, and I had tonsillitis at the time, so they sent it to me to complete at home. The question paper asked a lot about Greek theatre, which fortunately I had learnt about, though I have always taken care not to appear in any of those plays in the years since: I don't fancy playing in a mask.

The Central School was still based at the Albert Hall in my day, only moving to Swiss Cottage in North London after I left. We used to cut some lectures and creep into the Albert Hall to listen to people like the great Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli rehearsing. Alfred Hitchcock was filming some scenes from *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 1955, and one morning we went in and James Stewart was walking towards us, dragging his mac behind him, and said ‘Good morning’ to us, while we were all completely flattened against the wall. Nobody went to any lectures that day, we all stayed to watch.

I had a lovely time at Central. I stayed right across the road at a hostel run by Charis Fry, daughter of the cricketer C.B. Fry, next to the Royal College of Organists, so there were a lot of musicians and actors living there. It was only a four-minute walk to Central in the morning, and I saw every play in London during those three years. I was there with Jeremy Kemp, Philip Bond (father of Samantha Bond), Ian Hendry, Julian Belfrage (who became my agent), Vanessa Redgrave, Rowena Cooper, and Jenny Daniel (with whom I shared a room).

For the first year we weren’t allowed to open our mouths, we just learnt to do a lot of breathing exercises and the Alexander Technique. Clifford Turner taught us dialect, and although he couldn’t do an accent he was a brilliant voice-teacher, and so was Cicely Berry, with whom I have worked throughout my career. I used to adore movement classes with Maggie Rubell, leaping about all over the place, learning relaxation and co-ordination of the body. Nobody ever cured me of falling over, however, which I still have a habit of doing on first nights.

That marvellous old actor Walter Hudd, who was Head of Drama, told us that at some point we would be asked to do a mime, and we wouldn’t know when it was coming, but we had better be prepared. Well of course it flew straight out of my

head, and then one morning we were all sitting there, and Walter said, 'Right, this is the morning of the mime.'

I thought, The mime? The mime! Good grief! And then Walter called me up first. I could still do it now. I thought that this could only be minimalist. I will walk into a garden that I had been in a very long time ago. So I bent down and picked something and smelt it, then I picked up a stone and threw it into a pool, and just stood there watching the pool, and then I sat on a swing, and that was all I did. At the end of all the mimes Walter gave me top marks, to my astonishment. 'You're like a little Renoir,' he said to me. I will never forget it. I got this fantastic notice from him, and it was in my report at the end of the year. So suddenly I thought that perhaps there is something in this, I do really badly want to do this. It seems terrible now to say that when I went to Central I still didn't know for sure that that was what I wanted to do.

Later on I got really told off by Walter for laughing. We did a performance of J.B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways*, and at one point I was hiding in a bay window. Richard Page-Jackson had to come and pull open the curtains so that I was discovered, and one night he pulled the curtain so hard that it came off the rail and the whole thing came down and hit me on the head. My next line was, 'I suppose you do that to all your girlfriends', and the audience howled, and I howled too. I was weeping with laughter, and I was rightly told off for it. Walter said I was highly unprofessional, it was a very naughty thing to do, and I was never, ever, ever to do that again. However, when I got to the Old Vic Walter Hudd was in the company, and I have never seen anyone laugh onstage like him. I was playing the Princess of France, wooed by Donald Houston as Henry V. Walter was the King of France, and he laughed his whole way through it. I thought, Oh my cup is full, it's come full circle.

At the end of our third year at Central we all had to do our

final show at Wyndham's Theatre in the West End, with only about six people present from different theatre managements. I did Miranda's speech from *The Tempest*: 'Alas now! Pray you, work not so hard.' Julia Wootton was there for the Old Vic, and she must have gone back and said something, because Walter Hudd came to me and said, 'Judi, they want you to go and audition at the Old Vic.'

I thought they wanted me to walk on, and that was my dream come true. But I was terrified when I got there, because there were masses of people, and John Dexter was organising the auditions. He said, 'Oh, Judi, would you come forward please,' and I did Miranda's speech again. Then Michael Benthall, the Director of the Old Vic, came up and said, 'Will you go away and learn Ophelia's speech: "Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown?"' He kept asking me my height, so I really thought it was to walk on. I went back on a Saturday morning and did the speech, and Michael walked up on to the stage and said, 'I'm going to take an enormous risk, I'm going to cast you as Ophelia. If it's not working, I'll ask you to step down and you can understudy. I don't want you to tell anyone. OK?'