
Acting My Life

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Chapter 1

Childhood

At some point, when actors - or probably most people - have made some kind of a name for themselves, they will seek to find the germ of their career in childhood. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, 'Anyone who has survived childhood has enough information to last him the rest of his days.' And, of course, it can be almost any kind of childhood. Childhood trauma, childhood failure, childhood misery, even (though rarely, it seems) childhood happiness. Maybe actors, like writers, need to be given a good going-over during their early years. I don't know. What I do know is that I did have some bad times (though not always perceived as bad at the time), an occasionally bizarre upbringing, and a mostly hateful time at school. Yet in the end, one accepted these things as normal.

Or, at least, normal for me. I know no other life. Who knows whether I was inordinately unhappy or not? Who can say whether those times in some way forged the man I became, the actor I was to become? Looking back, I suppose it is tempting to see each day as being part of some kind of metaphysical jigsaw puzzle, the relevance of each piece only becoming apparent as I was accepted at Rada, or went to Stratford, or featured in this or that movie, or played King Lear. But it never seemed like that. Nor should it. All lives are of a piece, though that piece is invariably fragmented and cracked.

Talking about my own life is a nervy experience, if only because it makes me feel that I've had one. On the whole, I prefer to ignore the past, or rather, to disown its obligations.

My life started in Ilford, at around two a.m. on 12 September 1931. I weighed just under eight pounds. I was a normal, healthy baby, whose birth occurred in a mental asylum. That's what I like to think, at any rate. It's what I've always believed. Barley Lane Mental Hospital in Goodmayes allegedly included amongst its facilities a room where mothers could give birth. My father, a doctor, was in charge of the place. When he was appointed, he and my mother had come down from Scotland, an exodus that only invited the rest of the family to look down on them, which they then did fairly often.

I have two early memories of my babyhood. One was being terrified by a face peering into my pram as I was being wheeled down Ilford High Street. The other was the dapper Mr Anderson, one of the inmates at the asylum. I don't know why or how I remember his name, or his oddly smart appearance, but Mr Anderson would spend his days filling a wheelbarrow with soil, and wheeling it from point A to point B, before picking each grain of dirt out and placing it carefully on the ground. At the time, it didn't seem such a strange or even unproductive thing to be doing. There

were plenty of others who seemed worse off than him, and Mr Anderson even seemed quite adult by comparison. At least he got to use the wheelbarrow, a privilege denied to children, and indeed many of the other inmates, particularly those who had been infantilized by the asylum. In fact, one of the dominant, permanent overtones of the place was this back-to-childhood, back-to-the-kindergarten element. The inmates were handled as children - not as delinquent or bad children, necessarily, but, rather, as potentially decent, irresponsible children who didn't know what was good for them, and therefore frequently had to be told.

I knew how they felt; although, of course, I didn't know that I knew. And I suppose the fact that some of the inmates had been plucked from quite ordinary existences - as bank clerks, or dental assistants, or electricians - must have encouraged me to believe that there was a certain amount of pretence going on. Given the right circumstances, any one of them could pose as an average member of the public. In other words, people were granted two lives or sets of realities, in the same way, perhaps, that my father was not merely a father. As with the old saw that 'all the world's mad except thee and me, and even thee's a little cracked', I grew up thinking that one's identity wasn't fixed, and personality could be pretty fluid.

Naturally enough, I wasn't allowed into the asylum itself, and was restricted to observing the patients as they roamed or ambled hopelessly round the garden. It was easy to spend time watching the inmates as my own home was only a very short distance from the asylum. I don't know whether such proximity influenced the way my parents were thinking, but soon we moved into a big house partially designed, I think, by my father, who had been an architect's apprentice before he became a doctor. I would like to say it was a beautiful or homely place, but it wasn't. It was hideous. I remember it only as a spacious, square monstrosity set next to a golf course. I don't know which aspects of the house my father had a hand in, but all the evidence suggests that he made the correct choice in turning to medicine.

Although both he and my mother were sweet, harmless and almost entirely undemonstrative people, my father had the strange and perhaps dubious distinction of being an early pioneer of electric-shock treatment. He was good at shocks. Once, he hid underneath my bed as I tried to get to sleep. I didn't know he was there. Why would I? He never displayed any kind of emotion or showed an inclination to act out of the ordinary. Unaware of his presence, I lay on my front, quietly shuffling and obediently closing my eyes, thinking, no doubt, that this was how good boys behaved. Good boys kept quiet and tried with all their might to get to sleep when their parents told them it was bedtime. Maybe I was dropping off when I became aware that the bed was moving. At first, I thought it must be me, perhaps on the edge of a dream, certainly drowsy, my senses scrambled. I did another shuffle and tried even harder to go to sleep. The bed moved again. I thought about sitting up, this time convinced that something was not right. When the bed moved for a third time, this time more violently, I realized that I was apprehensive. My natural curiosity at wanting to discover the cause was being overwhelmed by a growing fear of the unknown. I sat paralysed as it shifted for a fourth time. Unable to bear it any longer, I leapt out of bed, only for a pair of strong, resistant hands to take a tight hold of my ankles. Anyone listening would have heard my wild screams being punctuated by the sound of my father's laughter. Not a man noted for his sense of

humour, he nevertheless thought it the funniest thing. The result was that for several years after, I was traumatized and only able to lie on my back, afraid that if I took my eye off the room, the Bogeyman would surely get me.