

An Alternative Career

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I always wanted to be an actor, in spite of early reverses.

I started out at the age of seven as a pixie in a school play in Bombay. My costume was made of orange crepe paper and half-way through the little pixie dance I had to do with several other pixies, it fell off.

When I was twelve, I played the 'Promoter' (that is, prosecutor) in Shaw's *Saint Joan*. I had to sit at a table in a grubby white cassock and make copious notes with a quill pen. The only quill pen that could be found in Bombay was actually a ball-point with a large red feather attached. I scribbled away merrily. After the play someone congratulated me on my performance and said that they had been especially impressed by the fact that I had been able to write for so long without ever needing to dip my quill pen into the ink.

At school in England the difficulties continued. In one production I played a swarthy Latin hound who got poisoned at the end of Act One. I was permitted a wonderfully melodramatic death-scene full of staggers and clutches at the throat, before crashing down behind a sofa. In Act Two, however, I had to lie behind the sofa for an hour with my legs sticking out. Stage-hands climbed up above the stage and dropped peanut shells on to my face, trying to make my legs twitch. They succeeded.

Next I was cast as one of the lunatics in Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Physicists*, but then illness struck down the boy actor playing the megalomaniac hunchback woman

doctor in charge of the lunatic asylum in which the play is set and I was told to take over (It was a single-sex school, so we were obliged to follow the boys-only casting philosophy of the Elizabethan theatre.) I wore thick tartan leggings, a tweed skirt and a Mad Cherman Akzent. The play was not a success.

At Cambridge I built myself a putty nose extension for a part in an Ionesco play, but on the first night, bending over a lady's hand, I squished my fake hooter sideways and looked more like the Elephant Man than I would have liked.

In a badly under-rehearsed production of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, playing to a first-night front row full of English literature professors, I suddenly understood that the line I was speaking was the answer to the question I was about to be asked. The whole cast immediately panicked and began improvising in something like Jonsonian metre, dying to find our way to a bit – any bit – we knew. It took what seemed like hours, but we managed it. Not one of the assembled luminaries of the Cambridge literature faculty noticed a thing.

After graduating I spent a while involved in London fringe productions. In a production of Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* I was required to insult an audience full of people in wheelchairs, attacking them for their apathy about the war. Why were they not marching in protest, why had they not been at the Grosvenor Square demonstration confronting the mounted police, I demanded righteously. The wheelchair people hung their heads, abashed.

In another production I went back into drag, wearing a long black evening-gown and a long blonde wig to play a sort of *Miss Lonelyhearts* figure in a play written by a friend who has since become a successful writer. To make the Nathanael Westish point that such figures are often men, I also sported a prominent black Zapata moustache. My friend the now-successful writer still threatens from time to time to publish photographs of this performance.

After playing the blonde, I understood that I had a limited future in this line of work and ceased to tread the boards. The itch remains, however. A few years ago another frustrated actor, the writer, editor and publisher Bill Buford, suggested that we should sign up one summer in the most out-of-the-way American summer stock-company we could find and spend a few happy months playing pixies, swarthy Latins, cassocked prosecutors, mad doctors, etc. It never happened, but I wish it had.

Maybe next year.