

Antony Sher pushed the boundaries of Shakespeare's plays

The South African-born actor died on December 2nd, aged 72

The Economist, Obituary, Dec 18th 2021

HIS FATHER had already started the car and was reversing down the drive. “Hang on a moment,” the young man said, and hopped out. All morning he’d been putting on a brave face about flying to London and starting drama school, but now he ran back to the house that glowed with Cape Town’s blue, blue light, and knelt next to his little dog, Tickey. He stroked her tight, confused face, let her lick his hand. Tickey was runtish, dark, ugly, scared—him in animal form, he always said. She’d been found as a stray and he liked to tell her his fears: about being small and needy and bad at sports, about being drawn to boys, about not fitting in—in school, in his own country, in the world.

Antony Sher knew he had to leave South Africa. Drama school in Shakespeare’s England would be his escape, though it almost didn’t happen after he made the mistake of choosing to play the tall, fat, indolent Cardinal Wolsey from “Henry VIII” for his audition. His two preferred drama schools turned him down before a third eventually said yes. The Webber-Douglas Academy would provide practical lessons in voice, movement, dance and fencing. It also offered singing (from which he was instantly banned for his tuneless tone) and make-up (which he relished), as well as a class called “Speaking Shakespeare”, which helped ease those South African vowels. But it did not teach him to act.

The actor, he would come to understand, is a portrait painter—of others, but also of himself. Only when he learns to inhabit his own skin can he convincingly don someone else’s. Encounters with directors, texts and a wide range of roles provided vital lessons. Steven Berkoff, from the East End of London and, like the Shers, of Jewish east-European origin, charmed and frightened the drama students. He devised a violent, funny, sexy version of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” in which Mr Sher played a demotic Puck. He felt it gave him the edge over those English students who could only speak Shakespeare beautifully. Where they came across as awkward under Mr Berkoff’s direction, he felt released. His small body that seemed so inadequate on the playing fields of South Africa, he said, here exuded a strange kinetic energy, an electric muscularity that he invested with the dancing walk and razor-sharp gestures of the young men he used to watch on the beach at Cape Town’s Sea Point.

He also picked up forthright views on acting from Alan Dossor at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool, who offered him the chance to play the Fool in “King Lear” when he was just 24 and a year or so out of drama school. “What do you want to *say* as an actor?” Dossor asked him one night over a drink. He didn’t understand. What did he want to *say*? Actors didn’t *say* anything. Acting was interpretative, not creative. “Bollocks,” Dossor retorted. “You won’t become a really good actor till you put yourself on the line, till the job’s vital—*which* plays you do, *why* you do them, *how* you do them—it’s got to mean something to you before it’s going to mean anything to the audience. Otherwise just go be a plumber.”

As he left, he felt his head tingle with booze and excitement. Actors were taught to be passive, he had always thought, to be grateful for any work, to do as they're told, to not think for themselves. He realised that he was catching what Jean Cocteau called "the red and gold sickness": falling in love with theatre. Until then he'd only been in love with acting.

That conversation led to two crucial decisions that would influence how he worked for the rest of his life: to take only lead roles (essential if you're physically slight and don't have a naturally commanding voice) and to involve himself early on in every production, whether shaping a new text, discussing where to set a Shakespeare play or in designing the staging and lighting. He also recognised that although he had briefly been married to a woman, he was gay. He didn't want to pretend anymore.

Those decisions in turn shaped the parts he chose: Arnold in Harvey Fierstein's hymn to Jewish New York drag queens, "Torch Song Trilogy", Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman", Pam Gems's Stanley Spencer in "Stanley"—all prissy and precise—the title role in "Primo" (his own adaptation of Primo Levi's memoir of Auschwitz). And of course Shakespeare's Richard III, the performance of his life.

He discussed the part with his shrink. He read up on evil men, studying their intelligence, cunning and sick humour. Hanging over him was Laurence Olivier, who had made Richard his own. Mr Sher found himself scurrying around Olivier's vast shadow, always trying to find a way in, some little peephole. That he chose to play Richard on crutches made him seem bigger and stronger than he'd ever been, allowing him to charge forwards across the stage like a bison, sideways like a crab. It also gave the audience a fresh take, nearly 400 years after it was written, on Shakespeare's bestial imagery. Queen Margaret's special curse is "bottled spider".

Transformation

He was a slow learner. Whether it was driving three-tonne trucks while on military service in South Africa, or learning new methods of breathing at drama school, or the sword-fights and dances that he had to master at other stages of his career. It would take for ever. But then he'd reach a tipping point, that moment when he was convinced he couldn't do it, but he didn't care. Only then would his performance fall into place. He would stop being little Ant, hopeless at sport, mocked in the showers—and become anyone he wanted to be. ■

This article appeared in the Obituary section of the print edition under the headline "Spiderman"