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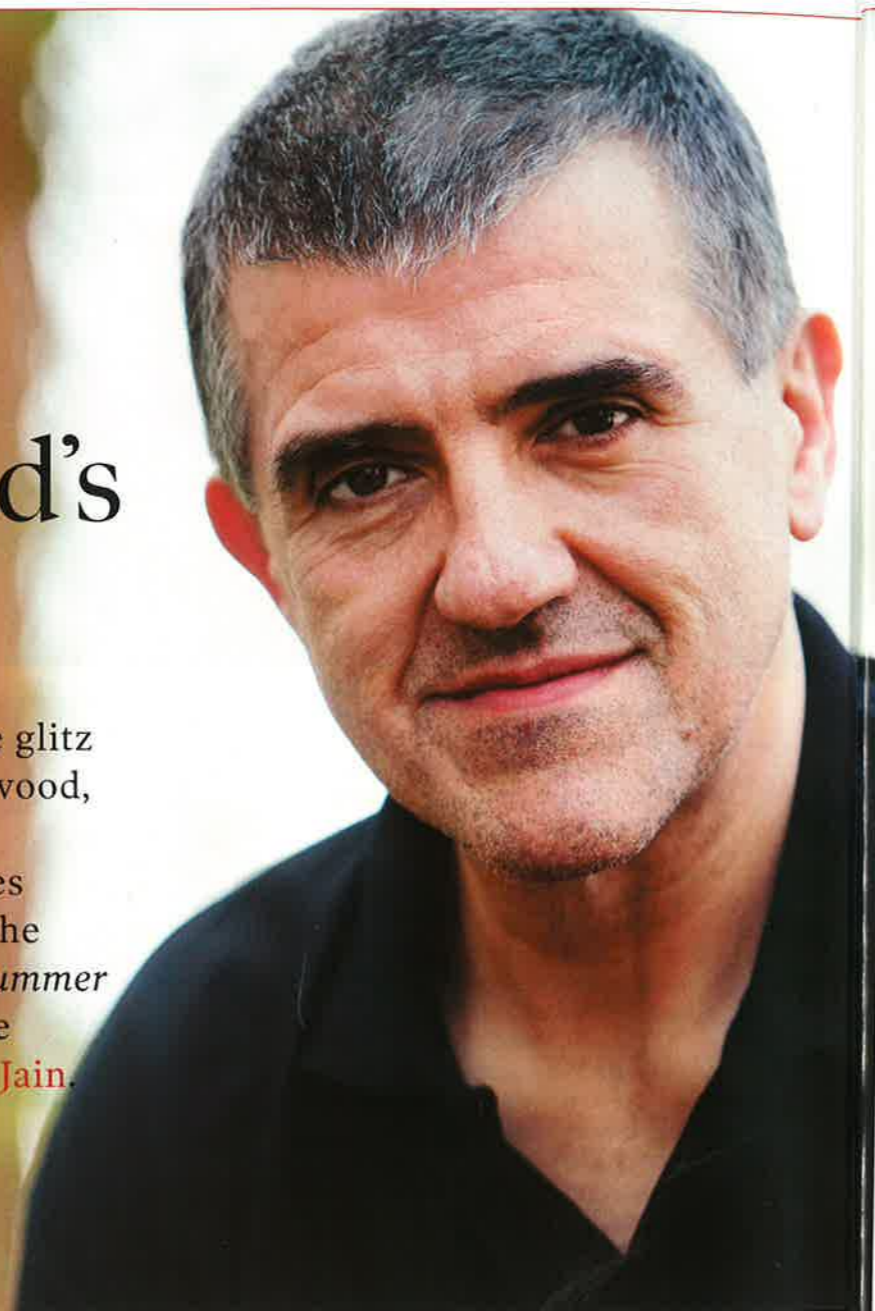
Role call

How children benefit from acting out adulthood **26**



All the world's a stage

FROM BRITISH TV to the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, Jonathan Linsley is a thespian who compares his relationship with the stage to that of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He brings the same play to Dubai and wows **Veathika Jain**. Photos by **Christopher List**



Going to meet Jonathan Linsley made me feel a little jittery. He is after all, a Hollywood actor with scores of credentials to his name. How would the interview go? But as soon as he appears my nervousness vanishes as he greets me warmly. For all his fame and name, Linsley is a remarkably down-to-earth man. Dispensing with initial small talk, he immediately begins talking passionately about staging his production in Dubai.

"I'm so excited to be in this region. It's our first time here and I'm loving every minute of it. The theatre management is of an amazing standard and our shows of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for schoolchildren have received an overwhelming response."

Coming from a non-theatrical background, Jonathan knew he was

made for the theatre when he went to see a production of *Treasure Island* at the age of five. He says he knew then that he wanted to act... and be a pirate. His wish was granted when he landed a role in *Pirates of the Caribbean* at the age of 50, his dream fulfilled after 45 years.

Linsley says that acting was destined to be his calling. "My father was from the south-east of England and my mother from the north-east. They had strikingly different accents and I think that contributed to my awareness of accent, language and why I wanted to become an actor."

His family moved to different parts of the country while he was growing up. "Every time I moved, I wanted to be accepted by my peers and in that process I would adopt their accents.

In the process, I became a bit of a comic," he says.

He started to act in school dramas and while acting in these plays he learnt everybody's lines. "As I child, I used to know all the lines of all the characters. It came so naturally to me, but I must've been a bit of a bully and a pain back then. I strove for perfection."

Linsley joined the prestigious National Youth Theatre in London and went on to study at Warwick University. With this solid grounding, he went on to appear in the West End's classic NYT productions in the '70s. He performed in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Peter Terson's *Zigger Zagger*, among others.

He made his professional debut as an actor in 1980 at the Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich. After a year playing in

14 shows ranging from Shakespeare to pantomime with a few musicals thrown in, he landed a role on TV alongside Ian Lavender in a David Nobbs sitcom called *The Hello Goodbye Man* for the BBC. He moved on to star as the much loved Crusher Milburn in this TV show for the remainder of the eighties.

The last 25 years of Linsley's career have seen him star in TV shows such as *Emmerdale* (Albert Mistlethwaite), *Casualty* (DC Newby), *The Bill* (Dennis Weaver), *The Governor* (Bert Threlfall) and also as a guest in *Heartbeat*, *Peak Practice*, *London's Burning*, *Silent Witness*, *Dempsey and Makepeace*, *Ultimate Force* and *Dalziel and Pascoe*. He has starred in made for TV movies which have included Ruth Rendell's *The Secret House of Death*, *The Gentleman Thief* (alongside Nigel Havers and Sir John Mills), *The Great Dome Robbery*, and *The Day Britain Stopped*.

Linsley continued his theatre career simultaneously, appearing as Frank Rowley on West End in the original production of *Up 'n Under*, which was named the 1984 Comedy of the Year. He also played Miss Trunchbull in the original production of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and starred alongside Timothy West and Jack Shepherd in *It's Ralph* by Hugh Whitmore at the Comedy Theatre. He played Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Globe and most recently in *East*, written and directed by Steven Berkoff.

With international tours to Paris and Milan, and a recent performance as Don Vito Corleone in *Echoes of Artemesia*, which toured in Florence, Rome and London, Linsley is an actor who continues to dazzle audiences with his brilliant performances.

I, ME, MYSELF

I left university and was lucky to get a job immediately in a repertory theatre, which meant doing 30 plays a year. Around the same time, I got an agent too. Amateur theatre doesn't pay well, so my agent put me up for a TV commercial. When struggling, you become easily seduced by money. I had certain ideals and I always said I don't want to be in a soap opera or get involved with advertising. But I still had to pay the rent, so I did some TV assignments alongside theatre.

But in doing so, I found a bit of fame

"I see myself as a facilitator and a mentor to actors. I want to direct them to get the best out of their performance."

through TV and so I got some more auditions for the stage. Theatre and film are completely different. I loved theatre more because it was good for my soul.

I have done both acting and directing simultaneously. When I was at university, I was fortunate to receive plenty of funding for drama projects and I was lucky to direct some great actors. I wrote some adaptations for some children's stories and I casted and directed those shows. I was in charge - it wasn't professional, but it was still my production.

I left university and founded my own theatre company. The first play I directed for my own company was *Macbeth*, which was also the first Shakespeare play I ever read. I loved it and it was a treat being able to direct it.

As I got increasing publicity doing TV, people started to ask me to direct children's shows and pantomimes. I started directing those on a whim and continued for almost 15 years. At the time, directing plays was only a summer activity when I wasn't filming for TV or films.

I was 25 when I set up my own theatre company. It had always been my dream. That was all that I wanted



to do. I wanted to direct, act, do the lighting, set design, design the costumes... I wanted to do everything! I thought that running a theatre company involved doing everybody's job. It called for the courage to be an entrepreneur. It was a great learning curve for me to find out about sponsorship, wages, production costs...

I am... an actor's director. Of all the roles in theatre production, I actually enjoy directing the most. I think I have become a better director because I was once an actor. You'll hear a lot of people say that he's 'an actor's director' or a 'technical director'. I think actors are incredibly brave to stand on stage. It takes an enormous amount of creative energy to tell a story well, particularly in a classic play. I understand the process that actors go through and that experience has informed my direction.

I see myself as a facilitator and a mentor to actors. I want to direct them and to get the best out of their performance. It's inclusive; everybody gets drawn in to it. I worked with a director who said that the best form of direction is when actors think they have created that performance themselves. I have always tried to live up to that; I have tried to find out what they feel about the scene and the lines or how they want to approach a scene because in the end, if they are comfortable, then you can create something memorable.

I like to be... in control. I like to have my say. In theatre, the actor is in control of the dialogue and the connection with the audience. On stage, I can look out and see the eyes of the people I am talking to and the communication is reciprocated through their reactions. But when you are on camera, you can't do that. Your communication travels through the camera to the director, the editor and then eventually the producer, so by the time my performance gets to the audience - there are four people who have come between us. You are not in control.

I, ME, MYSELF

I have been told off a couple of times. When I was young, I told a TV director that a line would sound better if done like this... and he said, "Oh, I'm sure you know since you are a comedy writer." I realised then that I was being told to know my place. In theatre, the director is more flexible to change, adapting lines according to the comfort level of the actor. I have to give up control in TV and film; you have to learn to say, "What would you like me to do?"

I have never been one for winning because if there is a winner, there have to be losers. I was a good sportsman when I was young and perhaps I could have taken it up as a career, but I was more attracted to the arts, as sport is solely about winning. If I go out on stage and do a good job and the audience has enjoyed the production, then everyone wins.

I adapt very well to change. This stems from having to change homes, schools and friends as a child. I think that I'm at my best during times of adversity. If a disaster strikes, I often find the best in me comes out.

I had a life-changing experience when my mother got dementia. She looked forward to retirement all her life and when it finally came, she couldn't enjoy it. That made me realise how precious the time we have is. We have to live for the now and enjoy every second that we have on this planet.

I believe being passionate about something is not enough; it has to be combined with pragmatism. You have to know what is and isn't possible. However having a dream and having passion are important but to realise the dream, you have to be practical. You have to have the tools to build on the dream and take the necessary steps to get there.

I, ME, MYSELF

Me and *Pirates of the Caribbean*

It all started when the casting director for the English side of the film, Priscilla John, who I've known for 25 years, called my agent to tell him that the

director wanted to do a screen test with me. Walking into her office with a camera set up, Priscilla told me that the director wants me to sound as though they lived under water. I was baffled as to how to do that, so I did what I could do, and waited to see how the director responded. I never heard anything for over a month and I gathered that I had not made the cut. Until one day, I was driving when my agent called and instructed me to pull over. I was told they wanted me in *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and 3, and asked if I'd be available for the fourth, fifth and sixth films! I became a Hollywood actor!

I flew in first class, a stretch limo picked me up, I passed the Hollywood sign on the way to our apartment near Disneyland. It was wonderful, especially when compared to being an English actor working at home.

When we started shooting the film, I was like a kid – wide-eyed and in awe of the sheer scale of it. We had

a full size pirate ship – the famous Flying Dutchmen – on a metal gumbo which made it rock in the studio. Around it was a sky projection. It was windy and raining in the studio and they chilled it so our breath would show. It was as though we were at sea. I had to constantly remind myself that we were

inside a studio.

Once, I was on the studio floor with Orlando Bloom. A man walked past who I didn't recognise and he and Orlando started chatting about their pet dogs. Then Orlando said: "Jonathan this is Tom Cruise." He had dropped by as he was shooting in a nearby studio. I suddenly thought, 'wow'; here I am rubbing shoulders with these people.

Me and Shakespeare

Everything I understand about Shakespeare I owe to my music teacher at university. I owe my connection with Shakespeare to him. I relate because he was an actor, a playwright, a director and a man of theatre. So if I arrive in the theatre and the set's not done or the lights are not working, I know that this was the case all the time 400 years ago.

Of all of Shakespeare's plays and



Jonathan Linsley with his wife Francis (below), to whom he's been married for 15 years. Linsley directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which recently toured Dubai.



characters, I identify with Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the most. He's a warm-spirited, wonderful and a generous guy who just desperately wants to be in plays. He wants nothing more than to be an actor and for every actor to be good. Bottom is like me.

Me and education

Without education, there's no hope. I believe good teachers shape the future. I was lucky to be able to train in theatre. I had a grant for my seven years as a student. But now getting training is difficult as the funding is limited for the arts.

Me and my family

My family is very important to me. I want them to be proud of me. Unfortunately my father passed away



while I was at drama school. My mum was a little concerned about my choice of career. She kept asking when I was going to find a 'proper job'. But when I started appearing on TV and people recognised me, she started to feel quite proud of me.

I met my wife Francis for the first time at Channel 4 TV Centre. We got chatting and gradually became friends. At the Globe Theatre when I was playing Bottom, Francis came with my agent to see me play the part. She'd never seen me work before and after she saw me in the play, she said she knew she wanted to marry me.

I think one of my biggest achievements is to have married Francis. We have been married for 15 years. In the Dubai production, she's been my assistant director. We work

well together professionally even though we are very different people with different temperaments.

Me and criticism

I used to take criticism badly, but I have learnt through experience that when people criticise, they often reveal more about themselves than they reveal about that which they are criticising. Criticising often stems from insecurity. People feel the need to show their intellect or cleverness by putting others down. That said, I listen to criticism and if I respect that person, then I heed that criticism.

Me and travelling

I adore travelling because I love meeting people, seeing different cultures and sampling various cuisines. I hope the reason I am going to stay young is that there's always something to experience. I have been fortunate that my work allows me to travel a lot.

I, ME, MYSELF

How important are awards for you?

I have no need to be given an award. I would be very surprised to meet an actor who set out in life to get an Oscar or a Bafta or any other award. My reward is the laughter of an audience or a full house. Having said that, awards do have a place in this business. I like the lifetime achievement awards

because that recognises the recipients' body of work over a certain number of years. It's a chance for your peers to show that they commend you for your life's work.

Do you get emotionally attached to the characters you play?

I am a method actor to an extent. I do get emotionally engaged in a scene and I also believe you have to put something of yourself in every character that you play. You have to see the events through their eyes. It can take a lot of energy and some roles are really emotionally draining.

Do you prefer working with new talent or those who are experienced?

I would say a combination of both. There's nothing more enjoyable than discovering new talent. In our company we have some very new talented actors and it's been an absolute joy working with them as they bring new enthusiasm to the table. But equally, there's a friend in the company who's been in the industry for as long as I have. The older actors bring all that experience and its enriching for the younger actors.

What are your thoughts on the theatre scene in Dubai?

It's our first time here and we absolutely loved it. The company 7 media who brought us here had a vision to bring Shakespeare to the UAE. I think there is a market in educational theatre not only in this country but also the Middle East region as a whole. Our productions are not offensive, and at the same time they're educational. We hope to return in the future and maybe do workshops for young actors and children.

What do you think the future holds for theatre?

I think it's going to be tough. We will have to adapt. During the boom time a lot of theatres were built and these are expensive to run. It's very rare when you see 26 people at the end of a show these days. We use school halls or even the streets, because we still want to put shows for people.

Adversity brings out creativity. If the creative spirit is alive and the desire to tell stories remains, theatre will continue to survive.

– Veathika Jain is a Dubai-based freelancer