Actor Richard Harris: a great talent only occasionally fulfilled

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The actor Richard Harris, who died October 25 aged 72, was one of a number of his contemporaries who more often than was seemly traded their talent for a dubious celebrity. In some cases it is difficult to remember why they were thought to be great actors in the first place. What is remarkable about Harris is that when he found himself working on material worthy of his abilities, his gifts were still evident.

Born in Ireland in 1930, Harris came from a prosperous family, being one of nine children of a Limerick flour-mill owner. He talked later of his childhood years in idyllic terms. He was a keen and able rugby player; he played to a high level, and remained a devotee of the game throughout his life. He always belittled his academic achievements, portraying himself as a child always at the bottom of the class. This depiction of a youth characterised solely by macho pursuits is one-sided. Harris always had a vivid imagination and wrote poetry from an early age.

When he left school he worked briefly in the family mill (according to his version of events, the only thing he was fit for was chasing mice out of the barns with a stick). This kind of employment, or any future as a sportsman, was arrested by a bout of tuberculosis that laid him up for the best part of two years. It was during this period of convalescence that he began to develop the full range of his imaginative powers.

Harris began to read in a way that he had not read before, voraciously and widely. Left to his own devices much of the time, he created dialogues between a huge cast of imaginary characters. This was the beginning of his ambition to act, to make real the characters he was creating. He remarked later, "Really, catching TB was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me."

He came to England, intending to study at a London drama school. He was turned down by Central School (famous, amongst others, for having trained Laurence Olivier) before being accepted by the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA).

One of the things that remained endearing about Harris, even at the height of his stardom, was his ability to make easily self-deprecating remarks about his own shortcomings. He recounted that the principal of LAMDA told him years later that his had been the worst audition they had ever seen. When he asked why they had allowed him in, he was told that anyone who had the gall and chutzpah to perform that badly in front of an examining board was bound to be a success.

In fact, and this is the key to his success in spite of some of the work he did, his attitude to acting was one of devoted study. When Harris recounted his hilarious disaster stories (which, as a gifted storyteller, he was unable to resist) he was clearly not belittling his art. He always came across as sincere in acknowledging the learning process and the mistakes that had gone to make him the actor he became.

Not that this prevented him from mocking his own pomposity and his tendency to ham it up. Talking about one of his biggest successes, *A Man Called Horse*, he was fond of pointing out that he lied about his ability to ride a horse and was found out on the first day of shooting when his mount threw him. With a raconteur's facility he referred to himself in the third person when denouncing some idiocy or other. (On a television interview he offered an hilarious commentary to a series of out-takes from the dire *Man in the Wilderness*: "And this is Harris's improvisation," he over-articulated as we watched him destroy both his costume and the scene he was supposed to be playing.)

Yet he studied avidly and learned a great deal. He was initially inspired by the writings of the great Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski. After drama school, he made his first appearances on the London stage with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. It was there, he later said, that he learned everything he knew about the theatre.

Littlewood, who died September 20, was one of the pioneering figures of post-war British theatre. Theatre Workshop had developed out of the agitprop shows being staged under the auspices of the Communist Party. While their shows retained a definite populist feel about them, as well as maintaining a broad interest in social conditions, Theatre Workshop developed a much greater concern for theatricality. It is possible to see Theatre Workshop as a counterweight to the idea of a National Theatre that was being promoted so heavily in the 1950s and 1960s.

Littlewood's vision was not based on Shakespeare as the pinnacle of the English poesy, nor on the literary angry young men being championed by George Devine's Royal Court. In the words of Richard Eyre, "If George Devine thought of his theatre as a church, hers was more like a pub." This was a boisterous and rowdy theatre, where the acting has been described as "coarse, but not crude." She took to Harris straightaway, casting him in Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* as Mickser.

Littlewood was a great influence on Harris, not least because she too shared his views on the techniques of acting. There is a revealing moment in her autobiography, *Joan's Book: Joan Littlewood's Peculiar History As She Tells It*, when she mentions

why she did not cast Harris as Macbeth in a production to tour Moscow: “Richard Harris had fire in his belly, but his speech rhythms were pure Irish. I’d have to stay up all night long showing him how to use the iambics.” This was precisely the balance between interesting theatricality and technical experience that came across in Harris’s own comments on acting, as well as in his performances.

Between them, Theatre Workshop and Devine’s Royal Court had created a new market for actors. The polished upper class stereotypes of an earlier theatre had begun to give way to rougher looking actors with regional accents. Harris, with his rugged good looks and background, was ideally placed to take advantage of this trend. He became a West End success in J.P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*. Kenneth Tynan, a passionate champion of the new, fiercely demotic, voice in British theatre, called Harris one of the three best young actors on the British stage. (The other two, in Tynan’s opinion, were Albert Finney and Harris’s close friend Peter O’Toole).

This development on the stage was also beginning to make itself felt on screen. Lindsay Anderson had been at the Royal Court before making his first film *This Sporting Life* in 1962. Harris was canny and inspired cast as the rugby professional Frank Machin. It was a performance of inarticulate rage and power, and remains among the finest achievements of Harris’s career.

The problem from here on is that the work available seems almost to have been too plentiful. Having appeared in such films as *The Long and the Short and the Tall* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Harris later became cheerfully indiscriminate in his choice of work. The critic Clive Barnes’s account of him as one of a new type of actor, “rougher, tougher, fiercer, angrier and more passionately articulate than their well-groomed predecessors ... roaring boys, sometimes with highly coloured private lives and lurid public images,” indicates how Harris’s off-stage persona was integral to both his appeal as an actor, and his shortcomings. His reputation as a hellraiser and a big drinker was coming to dominate and even overshadow his work. He himself would admit this later, when he said, “I consider a great part of my career a total failure. I went after the wrong things—got caught in the ’60s. I picked pictures that were way below my talent. Just to have fun.”

The strange juxtapositions that this threw up were apparent from the outset. In 1964 he had a miserable time working for Michelangelo Antonioni (a fine judge of actors at the peak of their trendiness) on *Red Desert* and a much happier time arguing with Charlton Heston whilst working with Sam Peckinpah on *Major Dundee*. Heston thought Harris played at being a “professional Irishman,” while Harris saw this as a good way of irritating Heston.

Harris was continually in work, was more often than not turning in good performances, but was not in any way judging the material in which he was performing. Many jobbing actors cannot turn down work because they cannot afford to. This was not the situation with Harris. Like so many others who join the ranks of stardom, he became a little greedy, a little lazy. Harris enjoyed all the trappings of success. His share in the rights to the musical *Camelot* was making him wealthy and he even had a massive chart hit with the awful *MacArthur Park* (with lyrics all too memorable, but for all the wrong reasons—“Someone left a cake out in the rain,” for example, and once voted the worst song of all time). Occasionally a film would appear in which he could shine. *Cromwell* remains the best of his work during this period, although *A Man Called Horse* is probably better known. By and large, though, the decline throughout the 1970s was rapid and obvious.

By the end of that decade Harris, who had by now become a drinker of legend, was reduced to playing in such abominable tosh as *The Wild Geese* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*. Even in nonsense like this, he turned in relatively serious performances. No matter how bad *Tarzan* might be there is not, in Harris’s drunken years, an appearance as catastrophic as that of Peter O’Toole in *Caligula*, for example. The same love of the craft of acting was still evident, even though the material was all but worthless.

Harris lived in semi-retirement for much of the 1980s. After his second divorce, and having been warned by his doctors, he cut out the drinking and got himself back into shape. The result was a series of small triumphs. He returned to the West End with Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, a play that he had long wanted to stage. He garnered critical acclaim on screen again with Jim Sheridan’s *The Field*.

The performances were still as robust, as engaging, but the self-parodic roaring boy character had gone to be replaced by an older and wiser persona. Directors were keen to employ his screen sense and his developed weight as an actor. He was memorable in Clint Eastwood’s *The Unforgiven*, as the braggart and low-life “English Bob,” and it was a more avuncular Harris who appeared in the recent *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* —a job he said he took because his granddaughter had threatened not to speak to him again if he refused.

What remained as a constant throughout Richard Harris’s career, and what makes that particularly checkered career worthy of note, was his continued belief in the value and power of acting, and his continued study of the craft. When he famously fell out with Marlon Brando during the filming of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, one of the reasons was that “Brando could not, or would not, learn his lines.” Harris was subsequently critical of Brando’s performance in the earlier *Julius Caesar*, suggesting that Brando created problems with the cadences of Shakespeare’s verse by not memorizing it.

Harris may have played the part of the devil-may-care hard man, but there was a keen student of acting lurking not too far beneath the surface. He leaves a flawed legacy, yes, but one that when at his best shines brightly.