Ken Campbell (1941-2008): A unique theatrical talent

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The death of the restlessly brilliant Ken Campbell, aged just 66, has robbed the theatre of one of its most inspiring talents. He was instantly recognisable: a short, bald man with increasingly unruly eyebrows, possessed of an extraordinary speaking voice, once compared to an exhaust pipe with a broken silencer. He did take some commercial television work in sitcoms and soap operas, and some small film parts, but his reputation was established on the basis of the singularity of his own theatrical vision.

A writer, director and actor, with a groundbreaking series of epic productions in the early 1970s, and latterly a highly acclaimed sequence of semi-autobiographical monologues, Campbell forged a highly intelligent and energetic theatrical style. He continued to push at the technical boundaries of the theatre, staging Shakespearean productions in Vanuatu pidgin and championing ventriloquism. He had a rambunctious and vibrant theatrical vision that was not in the least bit precious. People tended to call him "genius" or "maverick," he noted, in order not to employ him.

Campbell was born in 1941 in Ilford, Essex, on the eastern outskirts of London. Keen on school plays, he was also participating in the local Renegades Theatre Company. James Cooper, who ran Renegades, was an early hero for Campbell. The son of a local brush salesman, Cooper played the leading roles, painted the sets, worked the box office, and talked a lot about Noel Coward.

Campbell told one interviewer that he decided to become an actor while hitchhiking across Germany at the age of 15, largely as something to talk about with drivers who offered him a lift. As their efforts to dissuade him became more vociferous, he also added writer, director, and theatre-manager to the plan.

Campbell was, by his own admission, an unreliable narrator with regard to facts. He told the same interviewer that *Bald Trilogy* was "basically autobiographical, but I had no worries about putting things in the wrong order. It's irrelevant whether it's true or not. It's just whether it adds up in the story sense."

His time at Renegades left him fascinated by every aspect of a theatrical production.

He went from school to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), one of the foremost acting schools in Britain. He struggled with the voice classes, which were aimed at producing actors for the classical stage. "Once you'd developed this [RADA-type] voice," he said, "You were encouraged to use it at all times—on the bus, in the pub and so on." The school by no means discouraged him. The principal told him that he was clearly a comic actor, and therefore did not need to use that voice. Instead, he was encouraged to think of his own, well-developed voice as part of a repertoire of funny voices.

Two things emerge from this. One is his mistrust of the received and standardised in the theatre. In Richard Eyre's words, Campbell was "a lifelong opponent of 'brochure' theatre...theatre that gets done because something has to be programmed and announced in the brochure."

The other is his dedication to his craft as he understood it. Drama schools are not shy about expelling students who do not make the grade. His talents were already recognised as different from those of other students, but of a high and distinctive quality.

After RADA, he joined the Colchester Repertory Theatre. In later years, he would urge a return of the weekly repertory system, whereby companies produced a new show every week. This was slightly romantic, but he learned a great deal about the craft—and prevailing culture—of theatre in weekly rep. In the monologue *Pigspurt*, he recounts a story of becoming a Third-Act Detective, and disrupting the company's routine by, first, learning his lines, and second, by getting big laughs. Such was the anger among the older professionals that he reduced himself to appearing to forget his first line so the audience would not laugh. Such events taught him a great deal about the theatre as he found it, and he used them to create a theatre of his own.

He was still, briefly, following the same course as any other young actor. He worked as a stooge for the comic Dick Emery, who poured a pot of coffee into his lap one night for getting an unsolicited laugh. He spent nine months in a touring production of Lionel Bart's *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, and understudied Warren Mitchell (a friend with whom he would work several times) in the flop *Everybody Loves Opal*.

He was beginning to move in his own idiosyncratic directions. He spent two years directing the Bournemouth Aqua Show—at any rate, "the shallow end acting bits." He had begun to write sketches. His first full-length play, *Events of an Average Bath Night*, was directed by Mitchell at RADA, but attracted little notice.

The thriving regional theatre scene of that period was really the making of him. Peter Cheeseman of the Stoke Victoria was an early supporter, inviting him to act, write, and direct there. His children's show *Old King Cole* was a notable success. He was becoming widely regarded, with director Lindsay Anderson keen to champion his work. Anderson had told Campbell about the work of Bertolt Brecht. Campbell said, "I didn't get it, but his explanation was very inspiring," so he wrote a play about the eighteenth century thief and prison-escapee Jack Sheppard. The play transferred to the Mermaid Theatre in London, where Campbell asked Anderson if that was what he had meant. No, said Anderson, but he invited Campbell to join the Royal Court as a junior director anyway.

The experience was not happy. Campbell clashed with his leading man, and Anderson took over the direction. Campbell felt humiliated and concluded that he was not cut out for the standard theatre. Later, he acknowledged that, although he could direct a bit, he only really enjoyed "directing something nobody else will. I don't want to join the who-can-do-*The-Cherry-Orchard*-best competition, because the answer is it wouldn't be me." Feeling the need "to bounce back or give up," he threw himself into his next project.

Back at a regional repertory theatre, he really hit his stride. The Bolton Octagon had money for an outreach project. Campbell was hired to run it. He assembled a brilliant young cast, including Bob Hoskins and Sylvester

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McCoy, and toured venues around Bolton performing urban legends, shaggy dog stories, and sideshow feats. McCoy earned the nickname "The Human Bomb" for such stunts as putting a ferret down his trousers. Campbell, McCoy, and David Rappaport reprised some of the stunts for the Amnesty International show *The Secret Policeman's Ball*. Clips such as this one and its related series give a good flavour of the style, and of Campbell's role as the presiding instigator.

A clash between Campbell and the Octagon was inevitable. Neither party felt that Campbell's work reflected the productions in the main house. The Octagon let Campbell go (calling his work "an outrage"), but he now had a company and some experience at putting shows on cheaply in small venues. He and the company carried on as the Ken Campbell Road Show. At Anderson's invitation, they returned to the Royal Court.

Campbell was enthusiastic about the improvisational work of companies like Keith Johnstone's Theatre Machine and the American Living Theatre, and was looking more and more at producing theatrical events. He became increasingly critical of directors' theatre, which he was to describe as "the slowest way of getting a show on." He was much more interested in collaborative energy, although this might mean fierce directorial efforts and abuse to encourage greater input from his cast.

Richard Eyre, always an admirer, took him to Nottingham Playhouse to produce *Bendigo: The Little Known Facts* (about a prizefighter) and *Walking Like Geoffrey* (based on a local legend of people pretending to be lunatics to avoid paying taxes). Eyre described the shows as "unclassifiable, part musicals, part comic extravaganzas, part circus."

He also made the most intelligent use of Campbell as an actor on the classical stage, casting him in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist*. The verbal wit, theatricality, and physical knockabout of Jonson suited Campbell perfectly, and indicated his forebears. He was never less than professional and serious in his commercial work, but his description of television as "tie acting" (where you have to mumble into your tie) indicates where his real interest as a performer lay.

His own productions were getting bigger. He established the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool, in part so he could socialise with science fiction writers, whom he found "much more fun than playwrights." With Chris Langham he co-wrote a five-play, eight-hour version of *Illuminatus!* which was used as the opening production of the National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre. Campbell was critical of the Royal National Theatre (as it now is) for not mentioning the production in any of its promotional brochures about the theatre.

There was even bigger to come. *The Warp*, which consisted of 10 plays over 22 hours, was the story of Beat poet Neil Oram. It showed Campbell's increasing fascination with the paranormal, mixed into a startling theatrical event. *The Warp*, which he claimed to have funded by lying to the Arts Council, went hand-in-hand with pranks against the British theatre establishment. In 1980, a letter, apparently from Trevor Nunn, claimed that after their successful adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Royal Shakespeare Company was dropping Shakespeare for Dickens. The letter invited participants to join the newly formed Royal Dickens Company. Nunn's embarrassment was heightened by the number of responses he had from people refusing or, worse, accepting "his" offer. Campbell admitted the hoax after two weeks of chaos.

He accepted more television work in the 1980s, making regular appearances in *Brookside* and rejoining Warren Mitchell for *In Sickness and in Health*. Although always a welcome sight, this was a diversion from his real interests. He was nearly cast as Dr. Who in 1987, but lost out to Sylvester McCoy: insiders said his reading of the part was "too dark."

Campbell remained fascinated by science, both official and fringe. He once told the critic Michael Billington, "I don't believe in the pararnormal, but I allow or enjoy it." Aside from the paranormal themes that run through the *Bald Trilogy*, he also hosted several popular science programmes on television, including *Brainspotting* and *Six Experiments That Changed the World*.

He worked these elements into the semi-autobiographical *Bald Trilogy*, so called because the (David) Hare Trilogy was playing in the next theatre at the National Theatre. Wide-rangingly entertaining (his show *I'm Not Mad, I've Just Read Different Books* was aptly titled), the plays introduced his latest theatrical obsessions (ventriloquism, pidgin) and tied them into a narrative of coincidences and conspiracies. The shows may have looked like random streams of consciousness, but they were built "like a piece of music."

Ken Campbell was a great enthusiast. Sometimes the enthusiasms were silly (his argument that Jackie Chan was the greatest living actor is a good example), but they were worked into his theatre with skill, energy, and a frenzied intelligence. This reflects the man. Friends equally delighted in, and dreaded, his late night telephone calls. Simon McBurney recalls Campbell waking him to talk about a musical sequel to the *Ballad of Eskimo Nell*, and vegetarian sausages.

For Campbell, theatre was a vibrant, engaging, hectoring, art form that should strive for heights of imagination and entertainment. When he staged a one-man show based on his application to run the National Theatre, he made a case for it to host the remaining great comics. (He was a great admirer of Ken Dodd.) The show, *If I Ruled The National Theatre*, was a sustained attack on what he called "the law of little imagination." His theatrical ideas, like the Enantiodromia expounded in *Pigspurt* (that each half of the asymmetrical face has its own character), have opened new possibilities for actors.

In recent years, he had been enthusiastically encouraging improvisation events. The 2005 *Improvathon* attempted a 36-hour performance without a script. When he died he had just returned from the Edinburgh Festival where he was involved in another improvisational piece, turning fictional newspaper reviews into musicals.

Improvisation, the least predictable form of theatrical game-playing, is also one of the most imaginative. Ken Campbell's best work was almost manically joyous and optimistic. (He had been teaching his parrot Doris to mimic his voice, so that it would live on after him.) He fought constantly to unleash the imagination, to learn more about people and science and to express this in a full-blooded, inventive, theatre. This unwavering commitment to his theatrical vision deserves recognition and praise.

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