“Land of Hope and bloody Glory, eh?”: Pete Postlethwaite (1946-2011)

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Public reactions to the death of Pete Postlethwaite from cancer say much about his qualities as an actor. Comments have pointed to both his evident talent and his engaging personality.

Kevin Spacey’s description that “he was a guy we could all understand, empathise with and be frightened by” is an apt summary. Postlethwaite’s craggy and distinctive looks (like “a stone archway,” as the head of his drama school put it) influenced the roles he was offered, but they also enabled audiences to identify with him.

But this affection could never have been sustained by his “everyman” appearance alone. He gave complex and rich performances. His appeal was defined by performances such as his portrayal of Danny, conductor of the threatened colliery band, in *Brassed Off* (1996), but he brought a satisfying depth to such roles. He was not only recognisably like his audience, he also played characters affected by the same social crises. His performance as Giuseppe Conlon in Jim Sheridan’s *In the Name of the Father* (1993) was a compelling portrait of a victim of British justice. His talents as an actor enabled audiences to appreciate the truthfulness of his performances. Gerry Conlon said there were times he watched Postlethwaite’s performance as his father “and I think, ‘Jesus, that was my dad.’ That’s how good he was.”

He was a fine stage actor, but will be best known for his screen work. As for many actors of his generation, much of his work was in minor and sometimes poor films—although he remained a watchable and compelling presence. His better work is extremely rewarding.

One reason for his identification as ordinary was a constant awareness of his background. He was born in Warrington, the youngest of four children in a working-class Roman Catholic family. His father Bill, on whom he based much of his performance as Conlon, was a school caretaker. After initially considering a vocation in the church, Postlethwaite turned to acting in his late teens.

He felt his background militated against his chosen career, saying later, “You can’t possibly be an actor, somebody from Warrington. It’s not what you do.” At that point, he said, there was still the attitude in theatre that “you were expected to have a dinner suit and bow tie.”

He trained as a teacher, with the intention of finding out if he still wanted to act. He did. After a brief stint teaching drama, he went to the Bristol Old Vic drama school to train as an actor. He paid his way with a job in a sheet-metal factory.

Postlethwaite graduated in 1970, and was rarely unemployed. He worked at the Royal Court and various provincial theatres, before joining the Liverpool Everyman company in 1974. At this point England’s regional repertory theatres were flourishing, producing some impressive new work with remarkable young companies. The Liverpool Everyman was under the direction of John McGrath. Under McGrath and his successor Alan Dossor, the company produced new plays by the likes of Willy Russell, Alan Bleasdale and Mike Stott. Also in the company were such talents as Julie Walters (Postlethwaite’s then partner), Alison Steadman, Jonathan Pryce, Bill Nighy, Antony Sher, Trevor Eve, and Bernard Hill.

If that period is now best remembered for the calibre of the new writing the repertory theatres generated, companies were also producing some fine classical revivals. Actors were able to obtain a broad range of experience. Along with his performances in new plays, Postlethwaite was a fiery lead in Brecht’s version of *Coriolanus*, which Walters described as “the most terrifying, wonderful performance I have ever seen.”

He was a fully rounded actor. He played Restoration drama in a classical company set up by Timothy West,

and went back to Bristol to play Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Adrian Noble.

Noble was an important associate. In 1981 Postlethwaite played Antonio in *The Duchess of Malfi* in Manchester for him, with Helen Mirren and Bob Hoskins as the Duchess and Bosola. When Noble became a key director there, Postlethwaite joined the Royal Shakespeare Company for several seasons.

His time there illustrates the respect with which he was regarded by his peers and what it was in his acting that made that so. He was not playing the great leading roles, but he was a vital company player in some powerful productions: Cornwall to Michael Gambon as Lear, Exeter to Kenneth Branagh's Henry V, Hastings to Sher's Richard III, Banquo to Bob Peck's Macbeth, Ragueneau the baker to Derek Jacobi's Cyrano de Bergerac. (The last was filmed for broadcast).

Postlethwaite always insisted that the actor's responsibility was to subsume his own ego, saying, "The first thing you must do is leave 'you' in the dressing room. Don't try and make the character 'you'."

Sue Johnston, who appeared with him in *Brassed Off*, said, "There was no difference between the supporting artist and him as the lead. People were just working together."

This made him a brilliant company player, but it was not until his film work had made his name that he played more of the great classical parts. In 1997 he played Macbeth in Bristol. In 2007 he played Prospero for Greg Hersov in Manchester, and Lear the following year for Rupert Goold.

Goold has written that Postlethwaite was "so driven by a sense of emotional and psychological realism that at times technically he would be skiddy." One may or may not agree with such a judgment. But perhaps an element of the erratic reflected his experience in film acting, which makes rather different physical demands on an actor than theatre work. It may also typify a drive for something real in a performance, as well as his burning enthusiasm to live life to the full. After an earlier bout of cancer, he was very aware of his own mortality. In 2007 he told an interviewer, "Let death be your adviser. You have to live every day as fully as you can."

Postlethwaite worked again with Bleasdale in an acclaimed *Play for Today* piece following on from the celebrated *The Black Stuff*. His screen breakthrough came in 1988, with Terence Davies' autobiographical *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, in which he played the tyrannical but loving father.

His film career thereafter is patchy. There are blockbusters and remakes like *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), and *The Omen* (2006), and some very silly pieces like *When Saturday Comes* (1996). Of the thrillers, the standout was probably his performance as Kobayashi in Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), but he is rarely less than watchable even in films that do not stand up as a whole.

He brought his classical experience to bear in a number of films. He was the Player King in Franco Zefirelli's not-entirely-successful *Hamlet* (1990) with Mel Gibson, and gave a classically-grounded Friar Laurence in Baz Luhrmann's mostly unclassical *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). There was also some interesting television work. He was an excellent Montague Tigg in the BBC's superb *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1994).

In the Name of the Father and *Brassed Off*, both in different ways, show him at his best. His performances are exemplary, and both films are driven by some social concern. He once said that when he was at the Everyman, "everything had to relate to the community, it had to say something about people's lives. That never changed for me. That's why I said no to a lot of roles." In both of these films, he said, "we were trying to say something, we were trying to convey a message."

This drive for purpose clearly influenced his selection of certain roles, such as those in Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) or Fernando Mereilles' *The Constant Gardener* (2005). He was passionate on the question of climate change, about which he produced the documentary, *The Age of Stupid* (2009). The "message" he was trying to convey was often rather unformed, and tied in large part to a political sympathy for the Labour Party, but there is no doubting the sincerity of his concern about social questions. He opposed the war in Iraq, and supported the Make Poverty History campaign. The political quality that informs some of his best work is a sense of decency and humanity. It is a quality that illuminates many of his finest performances more generally.