

British actor Bob Hoskins (1942-2014): “When you’ve got something to give, give it without hesitation”

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The death of British film, television and stage actor Bob Hoskins on April 29 evoked genuine popular sadness. Hoskins was a fine performer, never less than watchable, and able to combine vulnerability with explosive anger. He was also a working class actor who had achieved unconventional leading man status. In his own words: “I came into this business uneducated, dyslexic, 5ft 6in, cubic, with a face like a squashed cabbage and they welcomed me with open arms.”

Hoskins seems to have remained decent and generous, with an instinctive distrust of the establishment. In 2005 he dismissed the idea of accepting a knighthood if one were offered: “No, I don’t want to be one of them ... Why accept a tribute from a society I have nothing in common with?” When asked which living person he most despised Hoskins named former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, saying, “He’s done even more damage than [Margaret] Thatcher.”

This continued identification with those outside the upper echelons made him a sympathetic figure. His qualities were shaped by the achievements of the working class in the post-war period.

Hoskins was born in Suffolk in 1942, where his mother had been evacuated during the war, and grew up in north London. His father, Robert, a bookkeeper and lorry driver, was apparently a Communist Party member. He credited his mother Elsie, a school cook, with instilling in him the belief that he should, as he later told his daughter, “Accept who you are, you’ve got no one else to be ... Be yourself and if anyone else doesn’t like it, they can fuck off.”

Hoskins was small, and picked on as an adolescent. This seems to have been the source of some of his toughness, a quality he brought to his best performances. He said later there was “A common misperception ... that I am a tough guy. You don’t end up looking like me if you are a tough guy. I just have a big mouth with little to back it up.”

Because of his dyslexia Hoskins struggled at school. He left at 15 for a string of jobs as a bouncer, market porter,

window cleaner and merchant navy deckhand. There was also more exotic work, including banana picking on an Israeli kibbutz and camel-herding in Syria. He did some circus work, and abandoned an attempt to go into accountancy.

He never trained as an actor, and remained proud that he had never been to a single acting lesson. There is some bravura here: he did admit that a teacher had inspired an early love of acting, and he was clearly passionate about it.

Later remarks clearly revealed a man deeply thoughtful and serious about acting, even where he dressed this up with bluster and anecdote. Discussing his rejection of an early offer of elocution lessons, he explained that “If I’m going to present something as real, I have to cling on to some reality myself.”

This may also explain his dismissal of Method acting as “bollocks.” Actors, he once said, “are just entertainers, even the serious ones. That’s all an actor is. He’s like a serious [television presenter] Bruce Forsyth.” Despite the joke, there is a serious view of acting here.

So we should not take his claim to have fallen “sideways into acting by mistake” entirely at face value. The story goes that in 1969 he was accompanying an actor friend to an audition at the CP-founded Unity Theatre. Hoskins, drinking at the bar, was mistaken for the next actor and called to the stage. He auditioned and was offered the lead in *The Feather Pluckers*. He was signed by an agent immediately, and spent the next year in repertory theatre.

Hoskins earned a reputation during this period as a performer who would do anything, including fire-eating and running into brick walls. As they were passing a hat round for money, he explained, and he had a family to support, “I wasn’t going to say no to anything that was for the good of the show.”

He was fortunate to work with the mercurial actor-director Ken Campbell (1941-2008) in the latter’s “Road Show” in the early 1970s. The wildness of Campbell’s entertainment

was informed by a fertile intelligence, and this fearless approach to theatre work would inform and shape Hoskins's later screen work.

It also led to some important theatre work, including the premiere of Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971). Hoskins worked in theatre throughout his life. Although often stereotyped as a "cheeky Cockney chappie," to quote one reviewer, Hoskins gave some important classical performances, including an outstanding Bosola in *Duchess of Malfi* with Helen Mirren in 1980-1. He also did classical work on television, giving a fine Iago in Jonathan Miller's BBC *Othello* (1981).

His early television work is among his best. His first role came in a BBC adult literacy programme. *On the Move* (1975-76) concerned Alf, a removal man, who has learned to write late in life. Hoskins's performance as a proud man trying to hide his difficulties was sensitive and moving. It brought him attention far beyond its intended audience but it also, to Hoskins's joy, brought correspondence from those who had benefited from its advocacy of adult education.

His fearlessness and range made him ideal for Dennis Potter's six-part television series *Pennies from Heaven* (1978). As sheet-music salesman Arthur Parker he was touching, surprising and frightening, and able to carry off the shifts in tone with sublime lightness of touch. He compared himself to "a little hippopotamus" in it, but his deftness was no accident, as he proved with his Nathan Detroit in a defining National Theatre production of the musical *Guys and Dolls* four years later.

Where *Pennies from Heaven* established him in television, his film breakthrough came with John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1980). Hoskins played Harold Shand, a London gangster looking to redevelop Docklands with the support of the American Mafia for a future Olympics park.

In the film organised crime are attempting to carry out a development that would be carried out by the Thatcher government and its successors. It is a brutal film, with a definite sense of time and social context. As Shand increasingly finds himself up against hostile forces that are undermining his criminal authority, Hoskins's performance transcends simple violence and displays an astonishing range.

At this point Hoskins was able to move through an impressive range of material. In Neil Jordan's *Mona Lisa* (1986) he played an ex-convict driving cars for a high-class prostitute. Hoskins's ability to portray vulnerability in otherwise invulnerable characters was a major factor in the film's success.

The actor who had been running headlong into brick walls 15 years earlier turned this craft to extraordinary effect in the part-animated *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988). Required to act in scenes with animations not yet screened, he was

forced to develop an imaginative and bold performance technique. He based it on watching his daughter playing with her imaginary friends, and it is a performance of some virtuosity.

The period that followed saw directors develop an idea of a "Bob Hoskins type", with the result that the work was sometimes patchier. *Super Mario Bros* (1993) was the only film he ever expressed regret at having made. This is no small matter for a man who once advised, "Don't be afraid of failure and disappointment ... Disappointment is temporary, regret is forever."

Although he was always watchable, the film performances in the 1990s and beyond did not always look so innovative, although there are some highlights and some interesting moments among the work evidently done for the money. In 1999, speaking of his Hollywood experiences, he said, "You don't go to Hollywood for art, and once you've got your fame and fortune—especially the fortune in the bank—you can do what you want to do. It's basically fuck-you money."

Despite this he seemed less willing than some to abandon interesting work altogether, although his later work was often of a more sentimental character. He continued to work in theatre and television right up to his retirement in 2012 following the onset of Parkinson's disease, giving a fine Mr Micawber in a 1999 *David Copperfield*. There were also two directorial efforts, 1988's *The Raggedy Rawny* (which he co-wrote) being the better of them.

The film's star, Dexter Fletcher, has written of Hoskins's acting that it was "honest and real ... We don't feel we're getting a 'performance,' we're getting time with him, and time with Bob is a good time." There was a sincerity and depth to his best work that will endure.



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