Terence Stamp (1938-2025): A supremely intelligent actor

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It is a testament to British actor Terence Stamp that he weathered being an icon of the Swinging Sixties—a trivialisation pointing to wider artistic difficulties—to remain an impressively intelligent performer. The work changed, not for the better, but his depth and range endured.

Part of his acuteness stemmed from his understanding of his class background. He was born in 1938 in Stepney, east London, the eldest son of Thomas, a merchant navy stoker. Terence was mostly brought up by his mother, Ethel, who took him to the pictures from a young age.

Bombed during the World War II Blitz—Bryan Singer's treatment of an air-raid in *Valkyrie* (2008) was informed by Stamp's reminiscences—the family moved to Plaistow. Leaving school, Stamp worked in advertising agencies, but "began to think that maybe I could actually do this" [acting] after seeing James Dean in *East of Eden* (1955, Elia Kazan).

His privacy about his acting ambition reflected the exclusion of the working class from broader access to culture. He identified himself as part of "the first wave of the educated, real, working class."

This is striking now, when working class access to culture is again being destroyed. When Stamp first started saying aloud that he might act, his father was against it: "He genuinely believed that people like us didn't do things like that."

Stamp became quieter but more determined about his ambitions. He won a scholarship to the Webber-Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art, followed by stints in repertory theatre and a London debut in 1960.

On tour that year, Stamp befriended 27-year-old Michael Caine. They shared a flat, and Stamp learned much from him about the practical sides of the business.

There were striking early film parts. In *Term of Trial* (1962, Peter Glenville), schoolteacher Laurence Olivier asks Stamp's delinquent pupil a question he cannot answer. His "I'm thinking" led one obituarist to say Stamp would "make a career of showing us what it looks like to think on camera."

Stamp's beauty led to his casting in Peter Ustinov's *Billy Budd* (1962), based on Herman Melville's novella, but he could back it up. Caine had advised him that directors do not like talkative actors. Auditioning for Ustinov, Stamp was all but silent when not reading his lines.

Again, this seems like a crystallisation of the experiences of his background. He described acting as "a kind of outlet" for the rage inside him. "If I wasn't an actor, I'd probably be a psychopath."

This made him perfect for Billy, the beatific sailor tormented until he snaps. Stamp was nominated for an Oscar and won a Golden Globe.

He had arrived, but he defied glibness even while being name-checked in The Kinks's "Waterloo Sunset." He played the lead in Bill Naughton's *Alfie* on Broadway in 1964, having been urged to take it by Caine. He was offered the part in Lewis Gilbert's 1966 film but felt he could not make it work. He suggested Caine.

Stamp's quicker success had strained their friendship. Caine wrote that Stamp "had a goal: perfection and the top. I had a panic: survival and existence." Stamp's striving for improvement seems to have outweighed anxieties over parts he was offered.

He initially turned down the psychotically repressed kidnapper in William Wyler's *The Collector* (1965), saying "I didn't want to be a spotty invisible bank clerk with a snotty nose." The film may not work completely, but his social clumsiness is fully realised. Stamp deservedly won best actor at Cannes.

The Collector, like *Billy Budd*, was one of the films he was proudest of. He said Ustinov and Wyler "saw things in me that I was unaware of myself."

Experiences with other directors who made him the face of the 1960s were less satisfactory, but their films confirm his range and the directions taken by cinema through the decade. Joseph Losey's spy caper *Modesty Blaise* (1966) is not the director's best, but its comic-book aspects gave Stamp the chance to play with his image.

His Sergeant Troy in John Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967) is a tour de force. The film is the richest adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel, and the scene of Troy brandishing his sword to impress Bathsheba (then-girlfriend Julie Christie) remains mesmerising.

This costumed flourish was followed by Ken Loach's debut, *Poor Cow* (1967). Everything was stripped down to a gritty realism in Stamp's touching portrayal of a vulnerable working class husband.

Stamp turned down *Camelot* (1967, Joshua Logan), fearing his singing would not do justice to the score. (He finally sang on screen in *Song for Marion* [2012, Paul Andrew Williams]). He regretted this later, saying "I could've done it as good as Richard [Harris], that's for sure."

The decade ended with some often brilliant films. In *The Mind of Mr Soames* (1970, Alan Cooke), he emerges from a lifelong coma and needs educating to adulthood. The last release before his hiatus was Nelo Risi's *Season in Hell* (1971), about the former poet turned arms trafficker Arthur Rimbaud.

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* [*Theorem*] (1968) is one of the most remarkable films of the era. Stamp was the beautiful and enigmatic stranger visiting a bourgeois household and seducing each of its members. It is one of Pasolini's best films, although its social sharpness is sometimes blunted by mysticism.

Pasolini indicated he had altered his central character "to the physical and psychological person of the actor. Originally, I intended this visitor to be a fertility god, the typical god of pre-industrial religion, the sun-god, the Biblical god, God the Father. Naturally, when confronted with things as they were, I had to abandon my original idea and so I made Terence Stamp into a generically ultra-terrestrial and metaphysical apparition: he could be the Devil, or a mixture of God and the Devil. The important thing is that he is something authentic and unstoppable."

Stamp never felt any rapport with Pasolini but found new dimensions in his performance through Pasolini's lack of communication. "Because he was filming me secretly," Stamp said, "he doesn't want to know what I can do, he wants what I am." Stamp was interested in finding an unexpected inner core, although he preferred directors who more directly encouraged him towards that. He acknowledged that Pasolini "had an enormous mind."

By contrast, he thought Federico Fellini "one of the most wonderful human beings I've ever met." Fellini was booked for a three-part Edgar Allan Poe anthology, alongside Orson Welles and Luis Buñuel. The other two fell through, replaced by Louis Malle and Roger Vadim. Stamp said he would have loved to work with Buñuel—but Fellini had already been paid, so he made *Toby Dammit* for *Spirits of the Dead* (1968). Stamp was perfect as the dissolute and persecuted actor haunted by the industry and the devil.

Stamp liked Fellini because his approach allowed the actor's instinct free rein. He saw Fellini's personability as contributing to his work, unlike Pasolini or Michelangelo Antonioni ("who's like this dry, boring academic in real life"), although he did not rule out good work from their methods. Stamp's emphasis on instinct may have downplayed what else directors might bring to filmmaking.

And then it all stopped.

Some of it was economics. Stamp called *Hu-Man* (1975, Jérôme Laperrousaz) his "only serious film" of that period. It was shot a few days at a time, as independent financing came in.

He was also saddled with being a 1960s icon. His agent told him, "They are all looking for a young Terence Stamp."

His response showed strengths and weaknesses. He argued that a long career involves either a late start or a lull in the middle. This, then, was a lull. He remained determined that his career was not over.

But he also turned to "the whole canvas of mysticism," spending years in Indian ashrams seeking enlightenment. What "turned me inwards," he said, was the end of his relationship with model Jean Shrimpton. "If I'd just been a little bit more dumb, I would have chased after the next supermodel."

Quitting drugs and alcohol, he saw his spiritual practice in acting terms: "I was adding to my performing skills… voice, movement, breath, presence. I thought when the call comes I'll be really ready."

It did allow him to transition from leading man to character actor. When the calls finally came, he was offered character parts. He took them, "because I was hungry to get back into the industry."

His inner examination often made diverse performances—in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) or Frank Oz and Steve Martin's *Bowfinger* (1999), say—more self-contained than ever.

This was true of his return to work, as General Zod in *Superman* (1978, Richard Donner). He needed the work, but he mostly jumped at the chance of working with Marlon Brando.

The return was bumpy. Broke, he made a television series in 1983 (*Chessgame*), although he hated the medium. During shooting he met director Stephen Frears, who cast him in *The Hit* (1984), with Stamp's informant ex-gangster being tracked to Spain by two hired killers.

He tried to filter work by quality, saying "From then on in, anything that's good I do." That was perhaps over-optimistic, given the wider conditions, but he still thought about what he was doing.

He distinguished Donner's *Superman* films from later comic adaptations and sci-fi blockbusters, asserting the director "wasn't making them for the lowest common denominator." Stamp knew what he was talking about, saying working on one of George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequels was "just bland… It's about kids and toys and special effects."

He wrestled with his fears of a leap into the unknown. He took the part of trans woman Bernadette Bassenger in Stephan Elliott's *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) because it was "a challenge I couldn't resist because [otherwise] my life would have been a lie." Dreading the experience, he found it "one of the great experiences of my whole career… probably the most fun thing I've ever done in my life."

That speaks to his better qualities as an actor, his determination to find something new in himself, and his willingness to allow a director to open him up to it. His list of favourite films suggested a gratitude for new insight as much as anything else. He particularly enjoyed working with Steven Soderbergh on *The Limey* (1999), an intelligent if ultimately unsatisfying film. His compelling Wilson, an ex-convict investigating his daughter's death in Los Angeles, led David Walsh to comment that "Stamp has taken Wilson more seriously than the filmmakers have." The review took note of one remarkable moment in which "we get to see Stamp, after a beating, slither to his feet from a prone position and into the frame as if his body were made of rubber, but with a face set like stone."

In a clever and moving device, Soderbergh uses clips from *Poor Cow* as flashbacks of Wilson's younger life. It is poignant for reasons far beyond the film, speaking to something of Stamp's resilience as an actor. The work available to him did not always reflect his talent, but his performances were always marked by a rich inner intelligence.