

FOREVER YOUNG (2)

As an actor, stereotyping is one of the worst things you can face. Most members of the general public think that we actors love nothing more than taking a regular role in a long-running show, becoming associated with a popular character, or just being known for playing, say, doctors or grumpy old ladies. But the whole point – for me, anyway – of acting is to hone one’s craft, to develop your skills as a performer. That’s why so many actors who have played one sort of character – a famous spy or a time traveller – take as their next role a completely different character. Versatility is something we actors strive for, and the best of us, if I can use that expression, fear stagnation and cherish variety.

So it was hard for me when I decided to become a child actor. After all, most people knew me as an adult actor, and at the age of 47 I was persistently typecast in adult roles: doctors, policeman, fathers, uncles, that sort of thing. Even my agent, Roger Waltz of Waltz Morgan Fenwick, who previously had been nothing but supportive to me, didn’t get it.

“Listen, Allan,” he told me one afternoon on a Zoom, “You’re doing fine as it is, there’s no need to rock the boat. Allan Warrender may not be a household name but you’ve got your fans. And you’re always in work.”

“I want to stretch myself,” I told Roger. “I’m tired of being Mister Grown-Ups. I want to play - ”

I searched my mind for the great child roles.

“Harry Potter,” I told him. “Tom Brown. Kevin.”

“Kevin?” asked Roger.

“In Time Bandits,” I said. “Hell, I’d even consider Romeo if it was age-accurate.”

“Romeo’s fourteen,” Roger said. “You’re 47. Listen,” he went on, “There’s a new Star Wars spin-off, and they’re looking for someone to play a battle-hardened general. You’d be perfect for it.”

“Is he a battle-hardened child general?” I asked.

Roger ended the call.

“I’m with you,” said Kendra.

We were sitting on the terrace outside the National. It was a non-smoking area but nobody seemed to mind. Besides, Kendra had just done six months in Enders as a tough-talking DI so she was still radiating a lot of FU energy.

“You’re an actor,” she went on. “Look at Olivier, playing Othello.”

“That’s a terrible example,” I said.

“I know,” she admitted, “But to be honest, darling, there are very few positive examples. Oh!” she exclaimed. “Dame Judi Dench as Hamlet. If a Dame can play the Dane, then why can’t Allan Warrender play - ”

She searched her mind.

“Oliver!” she said.

“I can’t sing,” I told her.

“Tiny Tim, then,” she said.

“I’m not tiny,” I said.

“Ah,” said Kendra. “But think of it, Allan. An enormous Tim, *roaring* GOD BLESS US ONE AND ALL!”

A few heads turned as Kendra's voice boomed out. She gave them her Stenders face and they turned away.

My phone buzzed. It was Roger.

"I have to take this," I said, "Thanks Kendra, you've inspired me."

"Not at all," said Kendra with a regal wave. "Just think of me when your name is in lights outside the Lyceum."

I hadn't been inside Roger's office for months.

"Good news," he said.

"Is it an adult role? Because - "

"Yes, and no," Roger said.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a play. A new telling of the life of Dickens," he said.

I thought of Enormous Tim but said nothing.

"I said no adult roles," I reminded Roger.

"You wouldn't be playing an adult," Roger said.

"But - "

"It's a movie. Independent but they've got a decent budget," said Roger. "It tells the story of Charles Dickens' life. In reverse."

"Pardon?"

"It begins with Dickens in late middle. He's a broken man, tired out by overwork. Then it moves to his youth: the onset of fame and his golden years. And it ends with Dickens as a child. Working in the blacking factory. We see how the man forms the child as well as the child forming the man. It's very Borgesian."

"I see," I said, although I didn't. "So I'd be playing - "

"All three Dickenses," said Roger. "Dickens in age, Dickens as a young man and – Dickens as a child."

I let his words sink in.

"No," I said.

"What?" Roger said.

"I'll play the child, but not the others," I said.

"But that will wreck the entire conceit," Roger replied. He seemed agitated.

I shook my head. I may have smiled.

"Hear me out," I said. "I will play Dickens as a child. A young actor will play Dickens as a young man. And Dickens in age will be played by a boy."

Roger's face was a conflicting sea of emotions.

"Or a girl," I added.

To my disappointment, he shook his head.

"No, a girl's a leap too far," he said. "But the rest? Brilliant!"

Roger stood up.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've just turned a good show into a hit show."

He was right, as well. The Three Ages of Dickens has so far enjoyed three hundred and seventy performances in the West End. The public love it, and so do the critics, most of whom singled out Allan Warrender's performance as Boy Dickens for special praise ("In Warrender's performance, the child is father to the man and vice

versa,” said the Times. Soon it will transfer to Broadway and there’s even talk of a movie. All because I stuck to my guns.

It just goes to show: sometimes, dreams *do* come true.

DAVID QUANTICK