

1) What inspired you to become an actor?

I didn't come to acting till a bit later on. I'd tried a million different jobs but always looked at acting as being a bit of a pipe dream. I think I'd exhausted all my other career possibilities so I decided to give acting a shot. I moved to New York and enrolled in a full time course there. As soon as my feet hit the stage I knew this is what I wanted to do. So I wasn't so much inspired to do it as had to do it. What kept me inspired were many things. Being applauded for being emotional was one. In Australia, our culture is one where men are often not encouraged to express how they feel, so to be able to do that was really freeing. Also, the culture in New York is very supportive of the arts...that was inspiring. You're always surrounded by people pursuing or making art. And the teachers I studied with...they inspired and encouraged me by challenging me to delve deeper and deeper into the craft of performance.

2) How would you compare your experiences in a Shakespeare production with other productions you've performed in?

Being in a production of Shakespeare is definitely more challenging than working on contemporary performance pieces. The language for one is distant from the way we speak today. So even learning 'Elizabethan English' is more difficult because both the language and time period are different from our own. Depending on who is directing you there can be obligations with breath and voice, rhythm, pentameter, cultural obligations and so on. For example, some directors may ask you to speak an entire speech only allowing you to breathe when punctuation arises. But it's also really great fun. Getting to explore huge universal themes is terrific for an actor to get his teeth into.

3) Have you faced any setbacks during your acting career?

As an actor I have to audition for most jobs I do, so every time I don't win a role it's a setback in a way. Specifically, one role I auditioned for that I would love to have got was the lead in a US television series called 'Red Road'. I believe it was the part of a Texas Ranger. Anyway, I had a great audition but didn't get it. So for me it's how I can keep my mind strong. Actors only get a small percentage of roles they audition for. I have to guard against those voices that come in saying 'I'm not good enough', or 'I'll never get another job again', for example.

4) Have you ever performed in Shakespeare internationally?

I performed several productions of Shakespeare in New York. My favourite roles include Iago in Othello, Benedick in Much Ado about Nothing, Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Launce in Two Gentlemen of Verona and Horatio in Hamlet.

5) Who has been your biggest influence when acting in a Shakespearian production?

My biggest influence was Uta Hagen. She was one of the great teachers and theatre actors of the last century. As a young girl she did some training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and she tells the story about how every girl had to stand by the bar and recite Ophelia's speeches from Hamlet in exactly the same way – pitch, tone, intonation, etc. Uta taught it in a very different way and encouraged you to bring 'yourself' to the role and not to be fearful of the language.

6) What has been your most significant role in theatre?

My most significant role was playing the role of a person suffering from bipolar disorder. I did this at an Off Broadway theatre in New York, Primary Stages Theatre. It was significant because the character I played was extremely volatile and unpredictable. It was really satisfying because the character was based upon a real person who actually came to see the play. They later told me that they felt like they were watching themselves and were extremely moved, but also perturbed.

7) What makes Shakespeare so special?

For me what makes Shakespeare's plays so special (apart from everything else that has probably been said a million times), is the language. A big part of an actor's job is to learn lines and I actually found it comparatively easy to learn his texts, mainly I think, because they have a rhythm to them but also because they are so full of imagery. We often think in pictures and when I learn a script, if it is different to my own experience, I try to attach images and meaning to them. In Shakespeare the meaning and imagery is often really vivid, so that makes it easier for me to connect to.

8) Do you have any rituals before performing? Why?

If I'm doing a play I usually get to the theatre about 2 hours before the curtain goes up. I'll do a voice warm up and a physical body warm up, including some meditation or Michael Chekov centering exercises. Then I walk through the blocking/choreography of the entire play. Sometimes, if there are scenes we are struggling with, we'll run through those scenes. This ritual is extremely important to me. It's like an athlete would stretch before competing. For me I like to get my body and voice as free as possible before performing. It helps to keep the voice intact and to allow you to be responsive and present with the other actors.

9) Who are your acting heroes or mentors?

Without a doubt Uta Hagen. Her career spanned over 70 years. She trained people like Al Pacino, Whoopi Goldberg and Jack Lemmon. She won three Tony awards and an Emmy and was awarded the National Medal of the Arts from President Bush. I studied with her for several years, both Shakespeare and contemporary scene study. I was also part of the documentary made about her teaching entitled 'Acting Class by Uta Hagen'. Originally from Germany, she moved to New York at a young age and immediately began working as an actor. There were many things about her I admired. She was obsessed with the craft of acting and was always digging deeper, searching for truth in the character. She developed a technique for actor training and wrote two books on the subject, *Respect for Acting* and *A Challenge for the Actor*. Along with her second husband, Herbert Berghoff, they helped form The Actor's Studio. They also created their own school, the HB Playrights Foundation. They believed that actor training should be available to everyone regardless of their financial status and would let students come to class for free if they couldn't afford the tuition. As a teacher she was incredibly generous and her insight was pretty much always spot on when critiquing a scene. As an actress she was incredibly disciplined and said that it would take her about 2 years of a show's run to finally understand the character. One final thing about Uta. Her love for the theatre was so infectious. For her eightieth birthday the New York theatre community booked a Broadway theatre. That night she read the role of Martha in 'Who's

Afraid of Virginia Wolf' to a full house. Jonathan Pryce played George, Mia Farrow Honey and Matthew Broderick the young husband (i've forgotten the character's name). It was amazing. She'd had a long term collaboration with the playwright, Edward Albee and had, earlier in her career, won the Tony award for portraying the same role. Rumour has it, that when it came to casting the film role, they chose Elizabeth Taylor because she was better looking!

10) What is your favourite memory of a Shakespearian play?

Probably seeing The Tempest on Broadway with Patrick Stewart. Just the way they created that whole world. But the production I think would have been my favourite (except for the fact that I wasn't born when it performed) was a production of Othello that toured America in the 40's and 50's (I think). Paul Robeson played Othello, Jose Ferrer (Uta's then husband) Iago and Uta was Desdemona. By all accounts it was an amazing production but also mired in controversy (race issues specifically). One other memory I have is of when I was rehearsing the opening scene of Othello for class. My partner suggested we meet in Tompkin's Square Park in the East Village to rehearse. It was the middle of summer and packed. Anyway, he suggested a spot right in the middle of the park. He was American and had a booming voice. In the scene we were rehearsing he had big chunks of dialogue whilst I only had the odd line here or there. We began and he went full out, gesticulating wildly. I was mortified. Thing was, he was also a terrible actor! Funny thing was though people hardly took any notice. I learned the big differences right there and then, in the Australian and American psyche!

11) Have you ever visited the Globe theatre?

I have. Also the one in Washington. I was struck by the 'theatre in the round' formation. Today, the actors are usually on the stage aloof from the audience who represents 'the fourth wall'. Apparently it was so much more interactive back then with the audience talking, eating, drinking and even interacting with the actors. I reckon that would have been so much more fun for the actors!

12) Has performing in Shakespeare affected your life/other performances? How?

Most definitely. I think, because Shakespeare can be so difficult, it makes working with contemporary text easier because the demands aren't as rigorous. For example, when performing Shakespeare you need a really free breath/voice connection to be able to handle the language. I think that makes it easier then, when coming to modern works, as the vocal demands aren't as great. And in life, it has definitely given me more awareness of breath. Breathing freely is a big part of Shakespeare. This has translated to my life in that I am now constantly checking in to see if I'm breathing freely or not. I do this dozens of times a day. As babies, we breathe perfectly then, as the stresses of life affect us, our breathing becomes shallower and shallower. But as an actor, without a free voice you don't have access to all the different qualities of your voice, you can't access emotional life and you can't think! In life it's the same thing but it also helps me to deal with stress and regain a sense of calm!