

THE ACTOR

By Charlie Allan

ACT I

Standing on stage looking at his heavily made-up face it was hard not to pinch myself and wonder how he - a true Hollywood great - came to be playing the dame in our cosy community Christmas pantomime.

Aberdeen's Torry Battery certainly isn't the stage you expect to see trodden by a thespian so great he has played kings, war heroes, scholars - even animated toy characters.

An acting genius who has a whole library of memorable roles behind him.

I speak from a position of strength, having watched him perform, often in awe, from the comfort of a seat in my local multi-plex for as long as I can remember.

He was actually there though.

Giving the dame as much as he did those to those performances that earned him plaudits, applause - and two Oscars.

The official line was that he chose the trip to Torry to fuel a long-held desire to perform at least once at the ancestral home of his fore-bearers.

'Common fisher folk', as he described them, before adding how one chose to break from the family tradition and fulfil a dream of travelling and making a new life in far off America.

Only now, with fame and power to pick and choose his own work, did he feel able to return and give something back to the community where, biologically anyway, it all began for him.

There was a brilliant back story of his great, great, grandmother spending her life toiling outside a rundown granite dwelling in Old Torry, sweating for many hours weaving the nets that her trawler men husband - and later her sons- used to gather their catch.

Those treasured fish were then sold in the once bustling Aberdeen fish market, which at that time was the heartbeat of a city relying on the spoils gathered from the North Sea to keep the economy thriving.

Sadly, all evidence of what was a more simple way of life has long since been demolished to accommodate the requirements of the multi-national companies who helped transform Scotland's Granite City into Europe's Oil Capital in the 1970s and 1980s.

Old Torry and the homes that stood there were swept away by the bulldozers and replaced by office blocks and yards bulging with equipment waiting to be used to extract the black gold that had also enticed people from all parts of the globe to reverse the trend of the actor's ancestors and come to Scotland hoping to make their fortunes.

The actor spoke of his sadness that the wipe out had been allowed to happen and also described how that ancient family tie to the sea was forged by a real tragedy.

He revealed that several of his ancestors had perished in the wreck of the Oscar, a whaling ship that became stranded on the rocks off the shore of Torry, just a few yards from safety and in full view of many of their loved ones.

The awful scenes inspired Scotland's worst ever - but never the less much celebrated - poet William McGonnagall to pen the following:

'TWAS on the 1st of April, and in the year of Eighteen thirteen,
That the whaler "Oscar" was wrecked not far from Aberdeen;
'Twas all on a sudden the wind arose, and a terrific blast it blew,
And the "Oscar" was lost, and forty-two of a gallant crew.

Our double Oscar winner was now performing but a brisk walk away (up through the middle of the golf course at Balnagask if you are looking for a short cut) from Oscar Road, the Torry street named in tribute to those who died in the disaster.

That unexpected coincidence added to his the actor's tale of how he came to be where he was this day, one that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

As did further details about the ancestor who earned the wrath of his peers by swapping life working on the often perilous North Sea for one of books and a self education that inspired a belief that there surely must be more on offer than catching and selling fish.

How that man, the actor's own grandfather, found courage to leave his loved ones behind and head for America, with what little money he had been able to muster, in the hope that this strange new land would provide better opportunities.

There had been much excitement when the actor called the press conference - in Hollywood - to announce he was heading to Scotland to perform in a locally produced charity Christmas pantomime.

The massed media became almost frenzied when he repeated the tale about his Scottish roots, the link to an almost forgotten tragedy and how those had fuelled his desire to make his debut as a pantomime dame in Torry , back where his ancestors had once fished, lived, loved, laughed - and cried.

My friends at the Torry Drama Group thought I had lost my marbles when, a few hours prior to it becoming public knowledge on the other side of the Atlantic, I revealed to them that one of the world's biggest movie stars had asked if he could be part of our next production.

"Away and bile yer heid!" was the immediate response from one, who remained unconvinced even after the press conference and being shown the handwritten letter, ending with the actor's distinctive signature, detailing why he was so keen to come to our part of Aberdeen.

There could be no doubt now though as we watched him giving his pantomime dame's dress a final pat down before the curtain rose ahead of the first of his performances.

As you would expect, every one of them would be in front of packed audiences of the sort we could never have imagined during the years of doing our stuff in church halls and the local community centre.

We were happy however because we knew it would mean more than a few extra pounds to pay for the festive hampers delivered to the elderly and needy in Torry every festive period.

To perform at the Torry Battery, which had been totally transformed into an impressive outdoor theatre of dreams for our production, was a huge step for those of us more used to a scattering of chairs and standing room only at the back in those other, cramped, venues.

I suspect the actor may not have shared our enthusiasm - but he had still come.

For the benefit of those reading this not blessed with a knowledge of the history of the north-east of Scotland, I should explain the Torry Battery is a well known local landmark that has overlooked Aberdeen's harbour since 1860.

Originally constructed as an army barracks, the building - which to my eye resembles the US Cavalry Forts often seen in old western movies - once contained three 10-inch smooth bore and five 68-pound smooth bore guns, installed to bolster the city's defences.

The 1st Aberdeenshire Royal Garrison Artillery (Volunteers) were later based there too and the Battery was seen as an important part of the city's defences during the two world wars that took place in the 20th century.

Finally decommissioned in 1956, Torry Battery was used as temporary housing for those affected by the Germans bombing parts of the city - including Oscar Road - during the second of those wars.

In later years, it was well known as a place where young Torry lovers escaped to enjoy private moments of passion.

It would be no surprise if some of those in the audiences at our pantomime watching the actor were also reminiscing about happy days when they came for a kiss and a cuddle rather than to boo and hiss, as we hoped they would be doing when their heavily made-up Hollywood hero got into full flow.

The record ticket sales meant those festive hampers would be packed with extra special goodies this year.

Our drama group's future, on the back of what had been the most challenging of years in 2020, would also be secure thanks to spin-offs like programme sales and our special guest agreeing to allow us to sell autographed pictures of him.

I had mine framed the morning after his first appearance and it now has pride of place on the mantelpiece, replacing the family images there before.

The actor even pledged a slice of any money raised should Hollywood ever decide our tale was good enough to transform to the big screen.

If his Hollywood bosses knew the true story of how all of this had come about it would have been a guaranteed blockbuster.

That, however, was known to only two people.

The actor.

And I.

Now that I have your attention, I shall tell you the real story of how I - an amateur actor whose biggest role before joining the troop in Torry was playing the baddie in a school production of a play called The Thwarting of Baron Ballygrew - came to be working with a such a Hollywood icon. The fact it happened in 2020, of all years, may offer a clue.

Yes, the year of Covid-19, the Corona Virus, call it what you may.

The worse pandemic to hit man since a similar virus killed many millions between those two world wars in the previous century that I have already mentioned.

The 2020 strain chose its victims at random, which meant even Hollywood legends were not immune.

The actor had the misfortune to catch up with the virus during a secret visit to the north-east of Scotland, looking at possible locations for his first plunge into movie directing.

Local Hero and Braveheart are among many great movies of the past with a tartan tinge to find favour with Oscar too, so why not his one?

The actor arrived in Scotland early in the year, just as tales of a strange virus in China began to emerge.

Exactly how or where he caught the virus isn't important to our tale.

All you need know is he did and ended up in the very ward in Aberdeen's main hospital where I do my proper job, as a nurse.

For 40 years and more I'm proud to say!

It's a profession I knew I would go into since the day, while still a schoolboy, I looked on in admiration at way the nurses caring for my beloved grandfather during the final weeks of his life went about their business.

Like so many in the profession, it has been a struggle dealing with the complexities of a previously unknown virus and finding the best way to treat those unfortunate to catch it.

Even more so because the hours worked, shielded behind uncomfortable and restrictive safety masks and clothing, were extended, day by day, as our own colleagues joined the increasing sick list.

Despite all of that, I confess there was still a flutter of excitement in my belly when, because of my more senior position and experience, I was asked to provide specialist care to the celebrity patient now recovering in one of the private rooms in the intensive care ward.

That excitement was quickly replaced by concern because, by then, my knowledge of this awful invader causing such havoc across the world was such that I knew it could be deadly, even to the rich and famous.

They say you should never meet your heroes because they always disappoint.

As far as the actor is concerned, it has been totally the opposite.

Despite being understandably worried about his prospects of making a full recovery, he was a wonderful patient.

Even during the spells the actor was gasping as if the next breath could be his last, he did his best to express gratitude for the way all of us on the ward cared for him.

As the one who spent more hours than most by his bedside, he showed a genuine interest in what my life was like away from work, when times were better.

For obvious reasons, I was reluctant to mention my passion for amateur dramatics.

In time though, it became easier to speak about and how much I enjoyed the annual transformation from hard working nurse to pantomime dame, feeding off the reaction from the audiences at our modest charity gigs.

The actor was kind enough to listen and even laugh at my stories of disasters like the occasion my false breasts mysteriously deflated and emitted a loud hissing noise, which inspired unscripted, but much appreciated, laughter from the audience.

The actor offered genuine sympathy when I spoke of how disappointed all of us in the drama group were that the global pandemic meant we would be unable to put on a pantomime this year. Only afterwards did I think, why on earth did I chose to bore him, of all people, with stuff like that? Just occasionally, the actor would respond with precious nuggets about what it was like making some of the movies I have so enjoyed watching him act in.

He admitted it was difficult recreating how a soldier landing on the beaches of Normandy in the 1940s would have felt.

The efforts he made to convince us he could be believable as a president, a teacher and a cowboy, even if only for a couple of hours up there on the big screen, were like receiving a private lesson in the art of acting.

I particularly enjoyed him explaining how he went about the task of finding the right voice to suit the animated character he helped to create that is now much loved by children - and adults - across the world.

I've watched that series of movies at least once every Christmas since they were made.

Those secret tales added to the enjoyment later when, as a way to unwind after each long shift, I watched the DVDs of some of the films he had spoken about that day.

I have all them, piled high in the corner beside the television in my wee one bedroomeed flat in, of course, my beloved Torry.

God's country is what those of us who hail from the former Royal Burgh that lies to the south of Aberdeen, just across the River Dee, call it.

I'm a proud Torry Loon and never slow to tell the Toonsers - that's the folk who come from any other part of the city - that they will never be as lucky to come from a really special part of Scotland.

Many people from Torry stay for life, even when improved finances offer the opportunity to perhaps shift over to one of the more affluent areas of the city.

That love for Torry is also why so many of us seek out ways of giving something back, which in my case involves taking part in a charity Christmas pantomime each year.

When I responded to that wee advert in the local newspaper all those years ago - asking for volunteers to help out with a 'local drama group who work to raise money for charity' - nobody could have predicted it would lead to sharing the stage with one of the biggest stars in Hollywood history.

You can understand why I'm so pleased it did happen.

That's because, as I'm sure you have already worked out, the actor - thankfully - made a full recovery.

How we kept having someone so famous being treated in our ward a secret is beyond me, but we did.

The actor was particularly grateful I, the one who spent most hours with him during those worrying weeks in hospital, told no-one.

Not even my own brother.

Not that I ever would have.

It's about patient confidentiality you see.

It's guaranteed by every medical professional as soon as you have a need for us.

Even though it was never in question, I'm sure that's one of the main reasons why, when the actor eventually left hospital, he did so with a pledge to return to Aberdeen and star in our next amateur pantomime.

I happily accepted his offer - and even agreed to give up my prized role as the dame - but only if we could come up with a rational way to explain why a man of his stature would choose to perform on a make-shift stage at the Torry Battery.

As a nurse, I argued it would be morally wrong if the manner of how we actually came to meet became public knowledge.

The actor, understandably, agreed, adding he would also prefer no-one, other than his close family, knew he was so ill and, at one stage, close to death.

That is how we ended up where we are now.

It was the actor's idea for the back story about having Torry connections, of ancestors in the historic fishing community and a burning desire to return to his roots.

Combined that with the good advice from his own well versed team of publicists and it was job done.

As soon as the virus had been tamed enough to allow us to re-emerge into the world, we were able to get on with setting the whole, crazy, thing up.

As a self confessed fan of the actor, it was easy to convince people that a hopeful letter to the actor asking if he would be kind enough to donate something we could auction to raise funds for our acting group was actually sent.

Even more so when it mentioned he was chosen because we had discovered he had ancient connections to Torry.

The rest quickly fell into place and so here we are - much to my own amazement- reunited at the Torry Battery, waiting for the jeers and cheers to begin.

ACT II

And there our story could have ended.

Except that it didn't.

You see, I am that actor and you are reading this as I get ready to go to make-up, ahead of filming my next scene.

The movie?

It's about a well known actor who once went to Scotland to scout possible venues for a picture he hoped to be the first he starred in as well as directed.

Unfortunately, he has the misfortune to be struck down by the corona virus that, sadly, cost the lives of so many in 2020.

Were it not for the tender care received from the nursing and medical staff at the hospital in Aberdeen he might not be here to tell this tale.

Fact merged with fiction in a manner that I hope will prove popular.

Having been that patient for real, I begin my performance from a position of strength.

My gratitude for the way I was cared for in Aberdeen has no boundaries.

One member of the hospital staff, a strapping male nurse who never seemed to mind me saying he was, shall we say, at the more mature end of the scale, was particularly kind to me.

I confess to feeling a little apprehensive when I first saw him towering over bedside.

Who wouldn't be when confronted by a beast of a fellow, all six foot six two of him, whose only visible features from behind the plastic screen he was forced to wear were thick black rimmed glasses and neatly cropped red hair, generously decorated with specks of grey that gave clues to his age.

He proved to be a gentle giant and I owe my life to that man.

In my darkest moments, when my struggles for breath became so bad I genuinely feared I was about to die, he was there by my side, keeping me calm with his reassuring words as well as making sure I received the proper treatment.

I would not be here today were it not for my personal guardian angel and the rest of his dedicated colleagues.

As my health improved, I learned more about his life away from the hospital even though, as far as I could see, he appeared to spend almost every hour of every day by my bedside.

I was delighted when he told me he took part in amateur dramatics - and performed as a pantomime dame every year to help raise money for local charities.

Like most Americans, I'm fascinated by the British tradition for staging those curious musical comedy shows they call Pantomimes every year.

I've always loved the way you Brits join in the fun by singing along and shouting what have become familiar phrases at the various performers.

As an actor, it was only natural to show a particular interest in the part played by the pantomime dame, a star one traditionally performed by a heavily and comically made-up middle aged man in drag.

I often wondered what it would be like as the one out there, wearing the big hair and dress, milking the audience of their laughter.

It was while talking about that this particular middle aged man had his moment of inspiration.

What better way could there be to repay this amazing person for his kindness than to come back and appear in his pantomime - and at the same time raise some money for a good cause?

As you can perhaps understand, he took some convincing that I was being serious.

Once he was certain the offer was genuine there wasn't even a hint of hesitation when I said he would need to give up his beloved role as the dame for it to happen.

Unselfish in play as well as at work, that's definitely him.

We exchanged details and stayed in contact once I was able to return to my home in the USA to long months of recuperation.

Like him, I was shocked my illness had been kept under wraps, I'm the sort of person who is danger of inspiring an unwanted headline with a simple scratch of my nose.

To have spent weeks in hospital close to death and come out the other end without a single word leaking out was nothing short of a miracle.

Despite what he has wrote, he is the one who insisted the real reasons for us meeting should never become known, although I was never going to disagree.

It was his brilliant mind that suggested an ancestral Scottish link might be a good method of explaining things without attracting too much suspicion.

Having never even been to Scotland prior to my unfortunate encounter with the covid virus, I was at the mercy of his local knowledge help make that story seem credible.

He is the one who told me about the great history of Torry, of the fisher folk and of that terrible tragedy, when the whaling ship Oscar sunk.

He rightly suggested that would make a great beginning for my fictional family back story.

Once we had a tale to tell we quietly searched for a suitable venue to stage my debut as a dame. We wanted it to be big enough to ensure a decent sum going to their chosen charity.

He, quite rightly, insisted it should still be in his beloved Torry.

Which is how we came to pick the Torry Battery, which I must confess I never knew existed until he mentioned it, as the arena where I would make my debut as a dame.

With everything in place, we went public and were delighted with the response.

My fictional past was convincing enough to persuaded big sponsors in Scotland, and much further afield, to come on board.

The tickets for the seven performances planned over the course of the week - you must never forget the traditional afternoon matinee - were snapped up almost as quickly as they were printed.

I was only too happy to sign a few pictures to sell because I knew it would help him and the drama group continue the good work they had been doing for years.

Playing the dame was as I had dreamed it would be, and a lot more.

I can't describe how wonderful it was to see and hear how much the audiences at all seven performances appreciated my efforts.

There is none of that while sitting at home sipping a glass of wine as your latest film is being viewed by the public for the first time.

What really made it for me was the fact he was still fit enough to be by the stage to watch it all unfold.

It saddens me to say, there were fears that might not have been the case.

It was typical of him to give no clues about his own failing health while we were exchanging the many e-mails and phone calls needed to get to the point we could go public with our plans. Unfortunately, like so many of those working on the frontline to combat Covid-19 in 2020, he had contracted the virus too.

He knew, because he was near to retirement age and not exactly at the peak of fitness, that he was in the high risk category.

It didn't stop him working those long hours, ever day for months, looking after the many, like myself, whose own lives depended on the expertise of him and his colleagues.

I was told his concern for others continued even after he caught the dreaded virus.

He had insisted the other patients in his ward, many of whom he had actually been caring for prior to becoming unwell, received treatment ahead of him.

It saddens me even more to confirm that, unlike myself, he was unable to make a full recovery.

It was the month before I was scheduled to return to Scotland before he finally confessed to me that he had been told he had only a short time left to live.

The damage the virus caused to his liver and kidneys meant my first Christmas pantomime would be his last.

When you reconsider all that he did for me in my hours of need, being asked to keep how serious his condition had become secret from the other cast members was easy.

How he looked that week must have raised suspicions, but he told the other actors it was because working such long hours at the hospital and then catching the virus meant it was taking him longer than expected to fully recover.

It also helped explain why he was content with helping me prepare for my debut as a dame rather than take on another role, as he had originally planned to do.

He must have seen my tears as I looked over at him, smiling as best I could, after every performance.

When the run finished he handed me a notebook containing the words you read in Act I.

He said he wanted me to have it as a constant reminder of just how much agreeing to perform as the dame in his pantomime had meant to him.

It is the most moving thing I have ever cast my eyes upon.

It came with an enclosed note suggesting it might offer a few ideas for a movie script if I ever found the desire to make a third visit to Scotland.

Six weeks later I received the call I had been dreading.
It was from his brother, confirming he, the man who did so much to save my life, was gone.
Which is why I'm heading to make-up now to get fitted out with the red wig and thick rimmed
glasses that I've worn almost every day for these past few weeks.
The glasses aren't props by the way.
They were actually his, gifted to me by his brother.
I'm finally getting my Scottish movie made.
Once I told them what I was planning, there was no problem securing the required backing in
Hollywood.
It's about a true Scottish hero, one who deserves to be celebrated in the same manner as the
main character in Braveheart has for centuries.
As writer, director and star, I made no apologies for grabbing the lead role for myself.
I play the humble nurse from Torry, a little suburb to the south of Aberdeen, who once helped
save the life of a famous Hollywood actor - and countless others - despite knowing there was a
fair chance the disease they had could end up killing him.
Even after becoming seriously ill, the nurse delivers on the promise made to that actor that he
would be able to come back to Scotland and play a pantomime dame with nobody knowing the
real reasons why they met in the first place.
This time, the dame is being played by another who has also starred in many a Hollywood
blockbuster.
They were queuing up for the part once the full story came out.
It meant having to admit the delightful tale about my Scottish ancestry had been made up.
It wasn't easy going back to Torry and apologising to all of those people who bought tickets for
the pantomime on the back of that and felt cheated.
I can only hope they agree it was a small price to pay for ensuring this remarkable man's true
story is told.
The money from the movie rights he mentioned?
There will be more than enough to build a small theatre in Torry, where his beloved drama group
shall perform from here on.
Fittingly, it will bear his name.
There is also talk of a statue of him being put up beside the gates of the Torry Battery.
I look on this role as the biggest challenge of my career.
I'm eager to do well because I want the movie to be a lasting tribute to the kindness he showed
to me and countless others in the most challenging of circumstances.
The sort of movie I'm convinced we are all desperate to see after what happened in 2020.
It was a year to forget - but he deserves to be remembered for ever for the unselfish way he put
the health of others ahead of his own at a time when it was needed most.

