

Stamp of genius

Terence Stamp, heart-throb of Swinging London in the 1960s, is still working at 73. With an eclectic list of roles to his credit, he has written his memoirs as an eBook. Here, he talks to **Ros Drinkwater**, who knew him before he was famous

In my teens, I took a job as a theatre electrician in London's West End and wrote home to my mother "I'm working with an awfully nice boy, a drama student, determined to be a film star. He could be good-looking if he weren't so scruffy. His name's Terry, Terry Stamp."

Two years later I had a postcard from Alicante where Terry (now Terence) was shooting his first film, *Billy Budd* – on his way to becoming an icon of the 1960s.

Half a century on, Stamp flies into Dublin straight from the set of his latest film, *Song For Marion*, in which he plays a grumpy old-age pensioner, married to Marion, played by Vanessa Redgrave. At 73, there's no let up on his workload. He has just recently published his fourth volume of memoirs, *Rare Stamps: Reflections on Living, Breathing and Acting*, as an eBook.

"An old friend, Richard La Plante, rang to say he was starting an electronic publishing company – a very timely idea. 'I have a title for you,' he said, 'Ten Things Every Actor Should Know'. I didn't care for the title, but the idea sort of resonated with me.

"I thought to myself, if, when I'd been starting out, Gary Cooper or Cary Grant had written a book for young actors, I would have saved up my money to buy it. And while I'm not putting myself on a plane with either of those two, that was my impetus."

The book centres on his encounters with remarkable people and how he relates the experiences to his craft. Stamp's antenna was always tuned to ways to improve. I remember him bounding into the lime box saying "Did you know Sinatra swims to improve his breath control?"

Stamp has swum ever since. In those days he'd go to matinees, calling backstage afterwards in the hope of getting an audience with a hero. On his third visit to Pinter's *No Man's Land*, Sir Ralph Richardson rewarded his persistence with an invitation to his home.

At a glance

Terence Stamp on . . .

. . . the dangers of success

Working on the Adjustment Bureau, [director] George Nolfi drew attention to something that had never occurred to me – success can make actors soft. The first class flights, chauffeured cars, [can] lull them into not wanting to dig deep. They go off the boil. It didn't occur to me because as my success was so unlikely, it's still a treat that show business embraced me at all. I approach my work as though every job is my first but, more likely, my last.

. . . a lesson learned from Muhammad Ali

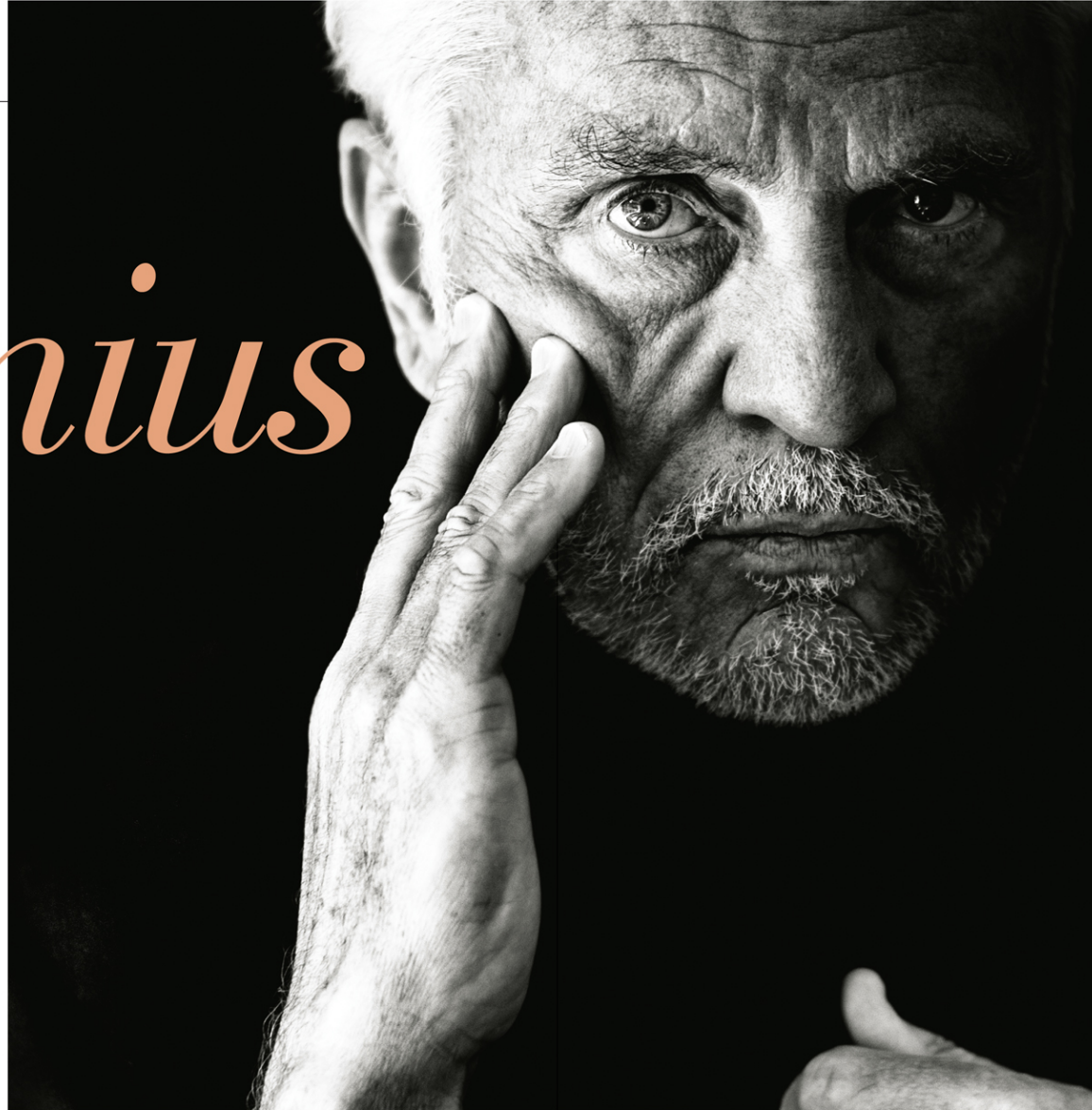
On my first flight to New York in 1963, Cassius Clay, as he was then known, was on the plane. His charisma was so overwhelming I kept up with his career, noting that when he was banned for refusing to fight in Vietnam; he stayed very fit so that whenever the call came he would be ready at an hour's notice. That was the strategy I adopted through my own wilderness years.

. . . working

It doesn't get easier. If my outings are anything to go by, it gets more demanding. Don't be taken in by the flesh-coloured earphones that allow an off-stage assistant to read the lines directly into the earpiece. Your returns are usually related to your investment.

. . . a favourite memory

In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, standing on top of a high, narrow pub bar in a mined-out mining town Down Under named Broken Hill – waiting to lead my fellow drag queens into an alternative rendering of *Shake Your Groove Thing*.



"What grabbed my attention were handwritten paper foolscaps fixed to the picture rails bearing samples of Pinter's conundrums. He said with a wave, 'These are the lines I am working on this week.' Three months into the run and he was still mining for new meaning.

"Brando confirmed all my feelings about the importance of voice. Orson Welles gave me something to aspire to – when you're hanging out with someone like that, everything, even the most superficial conversation has meaning. Joan Sutherland taught me the importance of practising daily through anonymity, fame, penury and wealth."

Others dispensing pearls of wisdom include a chain-smoking guru in a fetid Mumbai slum, and most influential of all, Fellini.

"I think of my career as before and after Fellini. Prior to him I was always fearful in front of the camera. On the first day of shooting I was feeling very self-conscious. I was called and shown to my mark and suddenly realised that the camera was about to turn and I hadn't had any direction. I caught Fellini's eye and he looked me as though I was a puppet come to life.

"Maestro, I said, 'I need some direction.' What was charming was that there was no pause, he just moved his mouth close to my

ear and said 'You're this great, but drunken actor, last night was your last performance of Macbeth, you come from the theatre to a party, but it's an orgy, lots of drinking, lots of smoking, cocaine and fucking, much fucking, you fucking some big busty blonde, some big black guy fucking you all night. In the morning somebody drive you to Heathrow, just before you get on the plane they give you this big tab of LSD. Now, you are here.' I never asked him for direction again."

That summer, Stamp's life changed. He stopped smoking, drinking, became a vegetarian, and the legendary yoga teacher Yanda Scaravelli taught him to breathe. "I didn't realise it was something you learned. From

birth we breath unconsciously, but learning to breathe fully enlivens every atom in the body. Today, less emphasis is paid to natural voice production, but regardless of technological advances, voice still is the essence of the art. I consider every moment spent in conscious development capital in the bank."

Seamlessly interwoven into his book is a lifetime of memories, from his impoverished childhood to his living-on-thin-air drama school days "hence the gossip among the girl students, not completely untrue, that Terence was anybody's for a boiled egg and bowl of soup".

He has one regret. "Turning down Camelot. I'd never sung, I was afraid they'd re-

Terence Stamp: 'Never turn down something through fear. Fear is only ever in the imagination'

BETINA LA PLANTE

voice me, and it would be the end of me. The irony being that they cast Richard Harris – and I sing every bit as well as he did. The lesson is, never turn down something through fear, fear is only ever in the imagination."

In 1969 he disappeared off to India. "The story went round that I'd gone on a spiritual quest. The truth was that I travelled because I couldn't get work. I was 32, in my prime, but producers were looking for a young Terence Stamp. It was deeply humiliating. Now I can see it was the best thing that could have happened to me."

Son of a London East End merchant navy stoker, Stamp grew up with low expectations. "When I asked for career guidance at school, they recommended bricklaying as a good, regular job, although someone did think I might make a good Woolworth's manager. Basically, I just wanted to be Gary Cooper.

"When I realised I could earn my living at something I truly loved – acting – what I wanted was a long career, and to do that you have to take care of the vehicle. That stayed with me through the eight years when I didn't work. I kind of had the feeling my recall would come, when it did I wanted to be ready."

His happiest memories are of working with Steven Soderbergh on *The Limey*. Stamp's way is to nail his performance in the first take. "A second take is anathema, and worst still is when a director asks for another take 'just for Lloyds'. Steven loved that I got it in one, I loved that he got it in one and I loved that he was the camera as well as the director. Wherever I go in the world the only person people want to talk about is Steven – he's a god to young film-makers – and to me."

He is no stranger to Ireland. "I first visited Dublin early on in my career with a touring production of the *Long the Short and the Tall*. My empathy with the Irish comes from my paternal grandmother who married my grandfather fresh off the Cork boat.

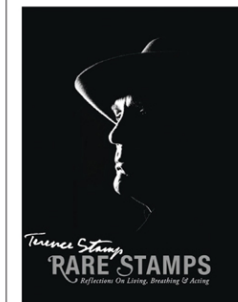
"We're descended from the Drews – if I have any talent as a writer, I reckon that's where it comes from. When I was planning on getting married I started house hunting over here and found a property with a magical view in West Cork. I spent a year in a B&B planning how I'd restore it, but my future wife, despite being an O'Rourke from Co Mayo, decided it was 'a bit in the wilds'. These days my life goes into a suitcase and I have no fixed abode."

Eyebrows were raised when Stamp wed Elizabeth O'Rourke, 35 years his junior, in 2002. They were divorced in 2008. "I was great while it lasted – I've always said I'll try everything once except incest and Morris dancing. She was very young," he adds with a rueful smile. "In the end, she got bored with me."

His next project is a film script he's written. "It's essentially a love story between two people of a certain age. He's been in prison for 20 years, she's married his friend who had him put away so he could get her – something she doesn't know. So he's had 20 years thinking about her, how he'll revive the relationship and have his revenge. I'm very happy with it. With the way of the movie industry, the odds are it won't happen – but I'm living as though it's going to."

Rare Stamps: Reflections on Living, Breathing, and Acting is published as an eBook and audio book by Escargot Books; www.escargotbooks.org

EXTRACTED



Rare Stamps

By Terence Stamp

I had waited my whole career to work with Marlon, in '77, the chance arrived. He'd been hired reputedly for a million bucks for twelve days' work, and on the thirteenth (which he gave them 'gratis') we faced each other on Krypton. Sadly, I was only his eye line, not even in the shot. Probably, Marlon wasn't expecting a lot of input from me doing my lines off camera, and his demeanour and approach was casual. On "action", I gave it my all; eight years without a job, fresh from the ashram in the East where awareness was the benchmark, I unholstered the Magnum I'd been packing since my arrival on set. Even before my outburst singed his eyebrows, he acknowledged my commitment: no ashes from yesterday in this take, only Jor-El and Zod on the high wire. I experienced the energy of his Waterfront Terry, the magnetism of Emiliano Zapata.

We discussed our approach to performing, and basically he acknowledged the domain of the medium belonged to the director, for whom he had devised a test. On the first day, Marlon would produce a take in which he invested himself. If the director didn't feel it or see it and requested more takes, Marlon stopped trying. He just coasted through the film, going through the motions and picking up the cheque. I know the feeling. I don't have the clout or the stature to pull a Brando, but I sure know the feeling.