

Chapter 1 – Chris learns his Trade

The Hall for Cornwall story began for me when, dressed in blue silk “pyjamas,” my voice broke on stage while playing a Chinese nurse in a school play.

Like a cat, since then I have thoroughly enjoyed several lives. The twists and turns at the time seemed to have no apparent pattern, but it occurs to me now as I sit down with Sarah to tell the Hall for Cornwall story at the ripe age of seventy-seven (how did *that* happen?), that each life contributed skills and knowledge which later informed how the Hall for Cornwall got itself built.

When I was a teenager, I hadn’t the slightest idea what I would like to do with my life. This was largely due to the fact that I didn’t have a role model in my father – he had never been engaged in any form of gainful employment. Kids at prep school kept asking me what my dad “did”, and I really didn’t know. When pressed as to how he could afford to pay the school fees, I pretended that he was a cat burglar.

I had to leave Stowe just before my seventeenth birthday because Father wouldn’t pay the fees any more. I knew this was coming, so I had a bash – with mixed success - at French and German A level and S level English in one year.

The careers department offered me the standard choices – the Army, the Church or the Law. The Army was quite attractive because I had really enjoyed the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), becoming a member of the elite Demonstration Platoon. Once again, Father put the kibosh on that plan by saying I would never be able to live on my Army pay. He couldn’t/wouldn’t supplement my pay in order for me to join “a decent regiment”. The Church had little appeal even though a distant ancestor had been the Bishop of Rochester and had paid for the font in Canterbury Cathedral. I had been one of a group of bolshie boys who had refused to be confirmed, and although I rather admired the story of a priest who lost his faith but carried on working for the sake of his parishioners, I knew the Church was not for me. And I couldn’t hack what, as a priggish lad, I saw as the amorality of the Law, whereby a QC might either prosecute or defend a person depending on who was paying.

I was due to leave school at the end of the summer term in 1961, and when I came home at Easter, we had a rather difficult conversation about my future. I could have gone to Cambridge to read English, but Father wouldn’t pay for that either because he “couldn’t see the point of it”. We had quite a row. “What are you going to do when you graduate?” he asked, “How are you going to earn a living?” I replied that I’d quite like to be a poet. I should have known better, not least because when he had found a poem of mine entitled “On Wearing Glasses” (a spoof of Milton’s “On Going Blind”), he had threatened to cart me off to a psychiatrist in order to find out “what was the matter with me”.

At this point my mother stepped in to prevent blows being exchanged – I was taller than Father and was very tempted. She took me off to Southwold, where we sat on the promenade swinging our legs and gazing disconsolately at an inhospitable brown Windsor

soup of a sea. For once she had a gentler and more sympathetic approach and she tried to tease out what it was that I might want to do with my life.

I told her how much I had enjoyed playing the Chinese nurse at my prep school. It was my first taste of what it felt like to control an audience and make them laugh. The laughter was even more enjoyable because it was unplanned. Mid song, my voice started to break and the audience laughed. So, my silk-clad nurse growled occasionally on purpose for the rest of the song. I had loved it.

At Stowe I had somehow got involved in the production side of things. I helped on an open-air Shakespeare play and my task was to get a horse and rider to appear on stage on the South Front on cue after starting over a mile away. The audience and the actors could hear it coming and they all knew that it was bringing bad news. I can't remember the name of the play but I remember the rider slipping out of the saddle and breathlessly delivering his lines bang on time.

The next year we did an obscure show called *The Strong Are Lonely* by Fritz Hochwaelder. One scene involved the prayers for the dying in Latin – *ab omni malo, libera nos*, etc. I was asked to find out how to pronounce the Latin properly and then to coach the actors. I found a Catholic priest and got him to come to rehearsals. This went very well and I ended up staging the whole scene.

I told Mother that I was constantly in trouble because I was a good mimic. When I confessed to her that I was nearly expelled because I had dressed up as the Headmaster and had been observed riding round the grounds wearing a top hat, she reckoned that a career in the theatre beckoned. This unexpectedly turned out to be acceptable to the careers department on the grounds that Ralph Richardson's son was a pupil. My friends and I were more impressed by Ralph's enormous motorbike than his illustrious career.

Then came Serendipity One – I discovered that the father of a boy in my house "worked in the theatre" in London. At the next Exeat I chased this guy down the study corridor and asked him for a job. "I'll give you a job if you can get into a theatre school," was the reply. What I didn't realise was that "the guy" who made the offer was Donald Albery and that his family owned and ran four West End theatres, including the New, where the first production of *Oliver!* would soon be playing to full houses.

On the strength of this offer, my mother was able to persuade my father to pay for one year at a drama school and we eventually settled on the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School (BOVTS), largely because it ran a one-year technical course.

At the start of the interview with BOVTS, the principal explained that they were not prepared to take anyone unless they had a realistic chance of a job at the end of the course. Like a conjuror producing a white rabbit out of the Headmaster's top hat, I announced that Mr. Albery had offered me a job if I could get into a theatre school. I was in!

Father actually seemed quite pleased even though one of his friends had warned him that I would “never be the same again”. Shades of Noel Coward’s “Don’t Put Your Daughter On The Stage, Mrs. Worthington.”

So, in the autumn of 1960, just turned seventeen, I set out for Bristol. I found myself a room and a landlady who offered some cooking and a laundry service.

I loved my year at the BOVTS and the stuff I learnt was a basic toolkit for a life in theatre. We had to do stage management, stage design, props, lighting, wardrobe, set building, set painting and flying (hanging scenery). We ran BOVTS productions for both year 1 and year 2 in the studio theatre which we shared with the University of Bristol’s drama department. If we wanted to borrow anything from the department, I would simply impersonate the BOVTS principal and ring up and bellow, “Hellooooo there, Uncle Glynne (the department Professor). Uncle Richard here. Could one of my young *luvvies* come down and pick up ...” whatever prop or costume we needed. Magic.

But the bees’ knees was working shows at the prestigious Bristol Old Vic, a repertory theatre, which produced a new play every three weeks. It was the real McCoy! I worked loads of fit-ups and get-outs, becoming in the process a useful flyman thanks to a friendly Pole – called Frank because no one could pronounce his real name. And I trod those illustrious boards with no less than five walk-on parts in *War and Peace*! One role was a medical orderly, and every night me and another walk-on secretly took Paul Eddington’s trousers down while pretending to tend his wounds. He was supposed to be near to death so he couldn’t protest or giggle. Not all bad behaviour, though – eight times a week I had to throw a champagne bottle the full width of the stage to a fellow officer, who had to catch it by the neck and use it to parry a sword thrust. That’s discipline. I got to see a lot of shows and to work with a lot of theatre people. And I got to go to some pretty wild onstage parties after first nights. Now that’s real networking ...

At the end of the course, Donald Albery kept his word and took me on as a management trainee. The plan was that I should work a few months in every side of the business, and I was set to work in the box office at the Criterion Theatre in Piccadilly Circus. I bought a suit and became a box office clerk. My biggest disaster was somehow managing to sell the whole of the second row of the stalls twice in a full house ...

The “Cri” was a very ornate building with a posh restaurant in the basement, but it was also home to loads of rats, which occasionally crept into the theatre to feast on the chocolates left by audiences under the seats. After the interval one night, a lady in the audience reached under her seat and felt something furry. God, how she screamed!

More importantly than experiencing the ratty underbelly of the West End, suddenly I had access to any show I fancied because box offices all over the West End swapped complimentary tickets. Better even than that, we often got free tickets to first nights. I set out to go to every first night, and particularly every first night party. I went to so many that after a bit I was greeted by other bona fide regular party “faces” as one of them. I fell in with

a well-known comedian called Jimmy Edwards (who like me had no real reason to be there) and we used to have a fine old time at least once a week. It was schmoozing at its finest. More useful “networking”.

Next, I was put to work as a stage electrician, again based at the “Cri” but also working on other Wyndham Theatres productions. For this I was obliged to join the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees, (NATKE), which was the union for non-acting people in the theatre and film industry. I was a bit churlish about paying my 6d a week union subs, because as a greenhorn I had no idea how many doors my NATKE card would open for me in the future. In those days it was really tough getting started. Whoever made the rules might well have read *Catch 22* – you needed a card to work and you couldn’t get a card unless you were working. Equity, the actors’ union, worked on the same principle.

In the mornings we did theatre maintenance, which included rewiring Donald’s motorboat on the river at Marlow, and in the evenings, we ran the shows. My job was to operate the lighting board while the Chief checked out the next day’s horseracing. The first show that I worked starred Wilfred Hyde-White and a young Richard Briers. Wilfred’s chauffeur used to give the Chief lots of hot racing tips and I was included in this favour because each night my Mini, with the addition of a few crates, was used to reserve a space for Wilfred’s Roller. When Wilfred wanted to go to the races, he simply arranged for his understudy to cover the matinee! The next show lacked this glamour but it featured a very young Michael Caine fresh out of RADA.

Next up, I was a stagehand working mainly matinees in almost every West End theatre and doing fit-ups and end-of-run breakdowns and get-outs. What a fantastic grounding that was – I got to see how these big shows worked and what top designers could do. The show that really inspired me was *Blitz*, which had, amongst other amazing effects, two huge towers on wheels joined by a bridge. The towers could move up and down stage while the bridge, with actors on it, could be raised or lowered at the same time. There was also a wonderful theatrical sleight of hand which Kneehigh would have been proud of. The illusion of a tube train leaving a station was achieved by a very long cloth on rollers. The actors remained stationary while the background cloth flashed past them.

It was a very thorough no-nonsense old-fashioned bottom-up apprenticeship learning the mechanics of the theatre. As well as all the technical stuff, I was also allowed to attend the occasional rehearsal. After I’d worked in the West End for several months, two shows transferred from the Bristol Old Vic to Albery theatres and I felt very chuffed because I knew the casts and the crews; but seeing all the Bristol Old Vic people again made me realise that I was increasingly missing being around actors.

One day, Serendipity 2 found me working at the Haymarket while the theatre was being used for a Goon Show rehearsal. I was mesmerised. Gradually, everyone in the building stopped whatever they were doing and crept into the auditorium to watch the rehearsal. This was a lightbulb moment. From then on, I wangled my way into as many rehearsals as possible, but it was perfectly clear that Donald was never going to let a nineteen-year-old

loose on one of his West End shows. So I resolved to go to a university where I would be able to do some directing using student actors. I chose a three-year degree course at Bristol University which covered radio, film and television as well as theatre. I think they let me in partly because on the application form I had put Bristol, Bristol, Bristol for all of my three choices.

As well as three hours of improvisation every Friday afternoon for three years, I did get to both act and direct. One show I directed featured a young Tim Piggot-Smith in *Next Time I'll Sing To You* – which was the show with Michael Caine which I'd watched every night for three months at the "Cri". A bit of a cheat?

As a drama student, I found all the practical things I had learnt in my three years of real theatre work gave me insights into how to get the texts we studied academically from page to stage. I became particularly interested in the staging of the *Ordinalia*, the wonderful mediaeval Cornish cycle of Mystery Plays. More of those later, because they belong to Serendipities 7 and 8.

Just before going back to three years of student life studying theatre, radio and television at Bristol University, Wendy, the girl I had met at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, and I got married. It seemed a good idea at the time, not least because my wonderful grandmother had offered me three years' living money, in advance, in one lump.

It seemed a lot of money to spend on living, so I used it to buy a tiny cottage (with a chemical toilet!) for £2,200 at Webb's Heath, just outside Bristol.

My new wife was a designer and she managed to get a job doing props at Bristol Old Vic – so we could eat. And here's another not so small serendipity – she was my introduction to Cornwall, because her father had recently moved his optician business to Truro. Which was where we had got married.

I was also able to pick up casual work at Bristol Old Vic and managed to wangle one spectacularly well-paid day a week working as an assistant floor manager on two children's serials at Westward TV. One day, I was in the office when the director's PA came in and shouted, "Can anyone ride a horse?" I put my hand up and ended up with several days filming on *Children of the New Forest*. I was a New Model Army Puritan on a pony and had to have a sword fight on horseback with a member of the Household Cavalry mounted on a 16.3 hand charger. I had to wheel my pony round and round a static camera, "attacking" it as if it was my opponent. My sword was so heavy that I nearly took my pony's ears off and I certainly scared the hell out of the cameraman! Then I had to flee the field, galloping off followed by my comrades, thus causing the Battle of Gloucester to be won by the Royalists. Well paid fun – which was to prove useful later.

After graduation, I found it hard to find creative work. My wife had given birth to our son in Bristol, so I badly needed to do something.