

## **Richard Griffiths**

More than Uncle Monty, and bigger, and poorer

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'I hate being the subject of photographs,' Richard Griffiths says not long after being photographed. I had heard that he especially didn't like being pictured from the neck down for fear it might show him as fat - which he is, and which is the singular defining feature of his presence in a great many films and plays, inseparable from his talents as a sensitive, funny and compelling actor. I met him in a rehearsal room in Waterloo where he is preparing for *Heroes*, a hit French play translated by Tom Stoppard. There was a poster for the show on the table in front of him, Griffiths on a bench between his co-stars, Ken Stott and John Hurt, holding a walking stick and exhibiting his girth.

'That's not girth,' he says. 'That's a para-umbilical hernia. I don't like it. Here are two pretty boys [he points to Stott and Hurt]. He's pretty, and he's pretty. I'm not. I'm ugly.'

'But this is how you are,' I say. 'It's great.'

'It's a vanity thing. I'm vain enough not to want to appear in stills.' He quotes an old Jewish proverb: everybody hates the way they look, but no one complains about their brains. 'And that's true. I've always hated the way I looked, and I've never complained about my brains.'

At 58, Griffiths' brain appears to contain more synapses than most. A question will seldom elicit a simple answer, but spark a vast amount of detours and studious explanations. I asked about his childhood and his straight answer was accompanied by detailed descriptions of the double-shifts a neighbour had to work to pay for

his planned emigration to Australia. And it was a delight to hear it, because his love of language and accents and the bigness of life is such that almost every sentence is a performance. It was a constant battle to rein this in, but it made it easy to ask him about the one part in which his loquacity secured his reputation as one of Britain's great character actors.

Despite his contributions to many fine pieces of work, including, most recently, Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, it is still very difficult for those who have seen *Withnail & I* to see Richard Griffiths as anyone but Uncle Monty, the lascivious homosexual aesthete who desires to have his way in an isolated farmhouse with a young actor played by Paul McGann. 'That was almost 20 years ago,' he says, delighted and distressed. The photographer, Richard Saker, had asked him to preface an autograph with the line 'As a youth I used to weep in butchers' shops', one of the many absurd phrases in Bruce Robinson's screenplay that have become as familiar to fans of the film as their own address. I had been told that people in the street shout the line 'Monty, you terrible cunt!' as he passes.

'That's quite common,' Griffiths says. 'And now I shout it back.' I wondered if this had become a burden. 'Well, Monty has become one of the stately homos of England, along with Quentin Crisp. Not that I am. When it was burdensome was when I got a shoal of invitations to be the honorary president of endless Aids-related societies because I was some sort of father-figure for gay guys. I used to say "I don't think it's appropriate because you're confusing me with a figure in a film". But there was a deep unwillingness to believe me, and there is still today. I know that when I go around people are saying [sotto voce] "Of course, he's homosexual, you know".' (Griffiths is married to a woman called Heather, whom he praises as an excellent cook.)

Younger filmgoers may be more familiar with Griffiths as Uncle Vernon in the *Harry Potter* films, while mainstream television viewers have admired his portrayal of the detective-chef in *Pie in*

the Sky. Those who have seen him in *The History Boys* on stage will find it hard to quibble with the many awards he has received for his portrayal of Hector, the cerebral, gay, motorbiking English teacher. I asked him why he was cast so convincingly as the avuncular gay man.

'Yes, right. I think Monty behaves with extraordinary dignity and honour, even though he says "I mean to have you boy, even if it must be burglary!" In Hector's case, his sexuality is frozen. He doesn't actually do anything. I was deeply, deeply, deeply wounded and offended by several pundits, especially at the BBC. There was one guy who insisted on *Front Row* or the *Late Review* - he used the word paedophile. That really, really upset me. If you have carnal knowledge of an 18-year-old male, that's not paedophilia. Nobody in Hector's class is under 18. These boys have all completed their education and have come back to school for an extra term. Dear God, this pundit must never let himself be clinging from a balcony 120 floors up one day and asking me for help, because he'd be in such trouble.'

Was Alan Bennett also offended by it? 'Alan's take on it was, [does fair impersonation] "I can see why you're not happy with it, but, you know, it doesn't matter, it'll be gone". I said, "But it's really upset me". He said, "I know, don't worry love." He's very forgiving like that, Alan. Of course, he is a person who has two layers of his dermis missing, actually. He feels these wounds passionately, at a depth that is really destructive, but he's 70 now en plus, so he's learnt to absorb it and rise above it.'

*The History Boys* has recently been filmed and I wondered if there had been many changes. 'It's much shorter. Nick Hytner [the director] keeps on saying he keeps final control of the cut so long as it lasts 112 minutes. But the play was three hours.' Bennett has written a bit of new dialogue. 'He wrote a private joke for me,' Griffiths says with delight. 'I'm interested in horse racing, having little bets. It's steadily impoverishing any profits I make. In the film he's got me walking past Adrian Scarborough, the authoritarian PE

master, and saying in his ear "French Kiss?" Adrian becomes apoplectic, and I go "2.30 at Newmarket, what do you think?"

It was clear to Griffiths from the first reading that *The History Boys* would be a great success, which immediately cast him into gloom (Griffiths makes a good show of being unable to enjoy things for what they are, rather than what they might be). 'I didn't want to do it. Not at the National. At the National the fiduciary circumstances are quite tough. I wished it was a West End thing then we'd all make some money.'

Instead he won every award there was going, something he didn't enjoy quite as much as he thought he would. 'My heart did go out to those fellows in those awards who didn't win. Winning is something you've dreamt about and hoped for, so that when you get there it's no big deal. But if you lose you're gutted, and the gutted sense just goes on, and I know what that's like, because I've been having that gutted feeling since 1979.'

His catalogue of not winning also serves as his mini CV. He was nominated for *Once in a Lifetime*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Volpone* and *Galileo*. *Bloody McKellen* and *Gambon*. He did once win an award as Best Newcomer from *Plays and Players* magazine. 'The prize was a years' subscription to the magazine, but in the year I won it went into liquidation.'

He says he drifted into acting 'through disappointment'. He wanted to be a painter, but his brief time at art college was filled with disillusion with the work expected from him. He says he was interested in Rembrandt, but 'everyone else was painting rainbows on twigs'. He says he continues to be baffled where his gifts with language originated. 'I hated my childhood. It was loathsome. My parents were deaf and dumb. Profoundly so. They could make noises when they were emotionally aroused, but they couldn't form it into speech.' His father worked as a steel fixer on the foundations of big buildings and would be away from home for long periods. As a youth he really did want to weep in butchers' shops, predominantly out of self-pity.

'I had to do chores for them. I was four and would go shopping for them, this very pretty blond, curly-haired boy looking like the Little Prince. My mum would tell me what she wanted in sign language and I'd sing it out at the butcher. It was horrible, such a waste of time. Now I'm one of the most efficient shoppers this side of the Ural mountains.'

Just as he is telling me this, an assistant enters the rehearsal room to arrange a cab for Griffiths's next assignment. 'Better make it a schwarzer,' Griffiths says. 'I can't take a minicab because of...' and he does a downward swooshing and scooping motion with both hands, an impression of his attempt to haul his body into a narrow space.

His parents died at the end of 1976, a couple of years before his career took off. His early television credits appear to include a role in every big series - The Sweeney, Minder, Bergerac, Boon - and he was grateful for every role. This attitude hasn't changed much. 'Lots of lean times,' he says. 'I've had a year out of work, more, and just toughed it out. There are those who think that all actors are overpaid. I beg to differ. Even when I thought I had made a lot of money in Hollywood [working on a Naked Gun movie] I came back to England and found that I ended up with 34 cents in the dollar. I thought I'd made \$200,000, and I called the bank and asked how much I had in my account and they said, "You've cleared your overdraft". Then I got a call from the IRS in America and they said I still owed them \$85,000.'

He told me that he always smiled when he read that Leonardo DiCaprio earned \$20 million per movie. He thought that after paying income tax, state tax, his agent and his lackeys he probably got \$5m. I asked if he wouldn't like to earn \$5m himself. 'Oh please God! Just one time! I wouldn't have to worry about making ends meet. But now my agent thinks that making ends meet is not going to be a problem in the future. I hope so. But the fickle finger of fate... I think there are people watching me, and if ever I manage to save £1,000 there's someone saying, "Oh, we'll invent a tax to

take that off him."

Horses permitting, Griffiths will benefit financially from his appearance as the doctor, Bayham Badger, in the upcoming episodic treatment of Bleak House on BBC1 and he will do better still from his four-month stint in Heroes. The play, which is not strictly a comedy but contains some hilarious moments, concerns three patients at a French military hospital in 1959. They talk of fleeing, but their motives are dubious.

The original version by Gerald Sibleyras was called *Le Vent des Peupliers* (the wind in the poplars), so we may assume that Tom Stoppard's translation is not a literal one. Griffiths plays a character called Henri, although there was an embarrassing moment at the first read-through, at which the producers and all technical staff were present, when Griffiths confessed to having prepared another role entirely. 'It's an extraordinary piece,' he says. 'Incredibly spare. It's all there, but for the audience to make complete sense of it you have to do a lot of work. It's a great textual detective story in pursuit of the truth. What appears to be going on is quite simple - these three old farts talking about getting out of the sanatorium. But the tides of emotion that are pulling and pushing them are huge.'

He suggests that four months is sufficient only to scratch the surface of the play. 'I told the director that I can offer only the broadest of brush strokes,' he says in his faintly regretful way, yearning for reassurance. And not long afterwards his black cab arrived, and he ventured out into a world in which he stood a good chance of being adoringly abused.