

David Suchet: still on the case

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The Poirot actor on solving life's mysteries, his troubled early school days and how he rose to stardom

At first sight, David Suchet manages the improbable feat of being instantly recognisable as his famous alter ego Hercule Poirot and also appearing utterly different. He's thinner - he wears padding for the part of Agatha Christie's detective - and has a richer, chocolaty voice, tempered by a boyish chuckle. It's a tricky balancing act; becoming a national treasure by inhabiting an iconic role - the Queen and Prince Philip are said to be *Poirot* fans - without being consumed by it. But Suchet, who is celebrating his 20th year as the eccentric Belgian sleuth, is doing it with aplomb.

He is about to appear in a new American play, *Complicit*, directed by Kevin Spacey, at the Old Vic, which asks uncomfortable questions about modern America and liberty after 9/11. It is his first outing since winning an international Emmy in November for his portrayal of Robert Maxwell (no mean feat given the difference in height and girth), which was the latest in a string of awards for his compelling, varied work on stage and screen, from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* to Salieri in *Amadeus* and the monstrous Melmotte in the BBC One drama *The Way We Live Now*. In 2002, the 62-year-old actor was appointed OBE.

We meet ten days before the opening night of *Complicit*, in which Suchet, a classically trained character actor, plays a lawyer opposite Richard Dreyfuss and Elizabeth McGovern. "This is a relatively new experience for me. Without seeming too precious about it, this is like giving birth. This is the gestation period: the play is not born until an audience is there," he says. "I get very, very nervous before I go on stage."

It's a surprising admission from such an established star with roles as diverse as a Soho porn king, a deputy prime minister and a Muslim terrorist to his name. He explains that playing a part "changes my rhythms, my voice, my physicality. I become somebody else". Indeed, Suchet goes so deeply into character that he undertakes a "deprogramming exercise" devised 18 years ago by a psychiatrist friend who was worried that he wouldn't survive if he didn't learn to let go. "When my friend said, 'You've got to let go', I couldn't see what he meant. But I couldn't remember things like my children's birthdays, key telephone numbers and so on. So he taught me to run through them in front of the mirror to help me come back. It used to take ten minutes; these days it's just a quick run through and I'm out. Actually, just knowing I should do it does the trick."

"All you've got is the present"

When I ask whether theatre is his first love - assuming, wrongly, that he might regard *Poirot* as a lucrative but unchallenging second string - he rebuffs: "I have one rule of life, which is that whatever I am doing now is the most important, the most valuable and the most enjoyable thing I could ever do because it may well be the last thing that I do. And that is incredibly positive; it fits in with my whole philosophy of life, that while you are a product of yesterday, living with hope for tomorrow, the only thing you've got is now, the present."

Suchet's mother, Joan, a former professional dancer and actress, was the driving force behind his acting career. But his father, Jack, a distinguished consultant gynaecologist, who he describes as "an intellectual genius" who worked with Alexander Fleming, was not happy. "My mother and grandmother were behind it, but my father was not. And never really was until I joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. He felt I was giving him a bit of status. Conflict was inevitable. It made me more passionate, which is a good thing. But at a certain point I realised I was proving to my father that I could act rather than doing my work for the reasons I should be doing it."

Suchet and his older brother John, the newsreader, and younger brother Peter, were sent to boarding school. At the age of 8 Suchet travelled by steam train from his West London home to prep school in Kent (it has since been knocked down). Parents were allowed only three visits a term and boys were allowed home only in the holidays. "I missed home very much and I loathed every minute of it. I was quite bullied because I was very little, and I used to get beaten a lot for having sweets in my shoe locker. My next school, Wellington, where I went at 13, was a real breath of fresh air and I felt much more at home there."

Suchet had a particularly close relationship with his grandfather, Jimmy, a leading press photographer, who died when Suchet was 18. "I could go to him as my dad; I could confide in him. I never had that relationship with my father; he was a very distant man. When he came over from South Africa he was determined to better himself. He was highly respected and I remember him going to Harley Street in his morning suit. In a sense he was also nouveau riche."

At school, he wanted to follow his father into medicine and there is still a tinge of regret that he didn't. "I would like to have been a doctor. I've always felt that I wanted to heal; I still have that in me today." But he was bitten by the acting bug after performing in a school play and his English master at Wellington suggested that he join the National Youth Theatre. He went on to the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, where he innocently turned up in rugby kit for movement classes. Thirteen years at the Royal Shakespeare Company were the "most magical" time of his career. One critic hailed his *Shylock* as the best since Olivier's.

Nowadays, there is something reassuring and grounded about Suchet, which must have a lot to do with his 32-year marriage to Sheila, who was also an actress, and his children Robert, 27, who is in the Forces, and Katherine, 25, a trainee physiotherapist. He enjoys

contentment-inducing hobbies such as messing about in narrowboats and photography - inspired by his beloved grandfather.

He admits that it was hard hitting the big 6-0. "Turning 60 was the hard one for me," he says. "When I hear myself say 'I'm in my sixties', there's something in me that rebels because I don't feel any more than 25 or 30. And I'm blessed to have a lot of energy, although I no longer survive burning the candle at both ends."

A quality rugby and tennis player in his youth, he goes to the gym three times a week and watches his weight more keenly as he gets older; he has never been a drinker. Creative stimulus is key too: he keeps his finger firmly on the artistic pulse and feeds off London's rich cultural life. He is passionate about the capital, despite a nasty road rage incident three years ago when an angry cyclist opened his car door at a traffic light and attacked his wife. Suchet still feels upset that the culprit was never brought to book and these days the couple take care to lock all the doors before driving off.

He is sustained by his Anglican faith. As a young man he was "always looking for something beyond" and explored Zen Buddhism in his late twenties and early thirties. Raised by a Jewish-turned-atheist father and a non-church-going Christian mother, Suchet was confirmed two years ago, 20 years after a turning point in a New York hotel. "I was lying in the bath in my hotel, thinking about my grandfather. And I remember thinking isn't it interesting that I feel my grandfather is with me and yet I don't believe in an afterlife? So I went straight out and bought a Bible and read St Paul's letter to the Romans. He describes how to be as a Christian, and it slotted right into what I had been searching for: something beyond, something quite mystical, but also a way of being that I could relate to."

"Outsiders seem to attract me"

Suchet found out more about his family's Jewish, Eastern European roots than he ever gleaned from his parents when he recently took part in BBC One's *Who Do You Think You Are?* celebrity genealogy series. But, having always thought of himself as an outsider, the biggest surprise was discovering how British he was. "I always thought that I was a complete outsider. Outsiders seem to attract me: Melmotte, Maxwell, Shylock, Caliban; they are all outsiders. And Poirot is the biggest outsider of anybody," he says. "I thought a little, bitsy part of me was a Brit, but it's a huge part."

So what next? Suchet's conversation keeps coming back to his passion for Shakespeare, yet he has no hunger for the great roles - not even Lear. And while you might think he could be sick of Poirot, his goal is to make all of the 39 novels and four short stories; a new one, *Appointment with Death*, will be shown on ITV this year. In all, there are ten to go, including *Curtain*, which finds a thin, wheelchair-bound Poirot fading away in an old people's home.

"Agatha Christie never said how old Poirot was, although we know he is retired and he probably dyes his hair. The only things that changed in Poirot's life were the width of the stripes on his morning suit trousers. So I try as much as I can to keep him ageless, but

I've got to get on and do the next ten, otherwise he is going to look really old."

Suchet insists he is in no hurry to retire from the role. "I will not do it (Curtain) I know that every other book is in the bag - not for a million pounds. I am desperate to leave that body of work behind me when I go to my theatre in the sky. The sadness, of course, will be having to bury Poirot. He is part of my life now."

Complicit is at the Old Vic until February 21; box office 0870 0606628,
oldvictheatre.com