

# “I will stir the smooth sands of monotony:” Peter O’Toole, 1932-2013

By Paul Bond  
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Peter O’Toole, who has died aged 81, was in some ways an actor out of his own time. His love of the barnstorming performers of previous centuries did not quite sit comfortably with the theatre of his own age, although he was able to bring some of their rollicking theatricality to a different medium, the cinema.

The recklessness of his performances sometimes rather obscures his real qualities as an actor, while the achievements of his later career seem not so much the fruition of earlier promise as the product of its glorious derailment. That derailment, of course, was not simply his personal problem, but associated with some of the cultural difficulties of our time.

It was rare to see an unmemorable or dull performance by O’Toole. That is a double-edged remark, but applying his own self-assessment it would constitute some sort of success. Speaking to a press conference in 2003 after receiving an honorary Academy Award, he told journalists “I’m an entertainer. That’s my job.” In some way this was a fulfilment of his promise in an early poem to “stir the smooth sands of monotony.”

He was also blunt about the need to take any work over none. “If there isn’t a good part,” he told the *Independent on Sunday* in 1990, “then I do anything, just to pay the rent. Money is always a pressure. And waiting for the right part—you could wait forever. So I turn up and do the best I can.”

At his worst this left him dangerously close to self-parody. During one performance of his critically panned *Macbeth* at the Old Vic in 1980, he joined the audience’s laughter when an ambulance siren outside accompanied his appearance after Duncan’s murder: “I was dripping with blood. The ambulance howled ... I got the giggles. So did the audience. It was bloody marvellous.” At his best, as in Richard Benjamin’s *My Favorite Year* (1982), this presentation of himself as an entertainer allowed him to find real depth in a character’s charm.

The strengths of this rambunctious self-presentation can be seen in his two volumes of memoir, *Loitering with Intent: The Child* (1992) and *Loitering with Intent: The Apprentice* (1997), covering his childhood and his first years at drama school. They reveal him to be a talented writer, but their discursive and engaging style deceives as much as it delights. The reader feels buttonholed by a brilliant barroom storyteller who has managed to sustain a consistently magical and poetic atmosphere through his digressions. The cumulative effect is overwhelming, but the books also bring home how far O’Toole was the inventor of his life as much as its central character.

It is unclear whether he was born in Ireland or Leeds in West Yorkshire, although he grew up in Hunsbeck, south Leeds. His mother was a nurse, his father a metal plater who also worked as a

bookmaker. O’Toole was devoted to his mother’s warmth and charmed by the sometimes violent sophistication of his father’s world.

The family was Catholic. He renounced the religion in his teenage years, but returned to it later in life. There was some disruption to his education because of his religion, and he moved around various schools in the city.

The blending of these influences, combined with a vigorous outdoor life (cricket, swimming and so on) and an early enthusiasm for Arthurian legends and tales, sparked and developed the romantic self-image he was to cultivate.

It was also shaped by the growth of fascism and the eruption of World War. His memoirs are alive with the horrors of the war, and as a child he developed the image of a romantic hero who could assassinate Hitler. The viscerality of the response is naïve and sincere, and as an adult he seems to have continued to respond to political events in the same way.

Meditations on Hitler dominate his first volume memoirs, while his performance in *Rogue Male* (1976) was driven by that childhood vision. *Rogue Male* was a television adaptation of Geoffrey Household’s 1939 novel in which a British sportsman unsuccessfully targets an unnamed European dictator whose regime had killed his Jewish lover. O’Toole read the novel only after the war, but identified closely with it because it echoed his childhood instincts.

That marked sense of what is decent and best in society (and, conversely, what is abhorrent and worst) can be seen in many of his remarks, although it remained politically amorphous. Welcoming the election of Harold Wilson’s Labour government in 1964 he declared himself a “total, wedded, bedded, bedrock, ocean-going, copper-bottomed, triple-distilled socialist.” At the time of the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972, in which British soldiers shot and killed 26 unarmed civil rights protesters and bystanders, O’Toole would express some sympathy for the Irish Republican Army. The actor was an outspoken opponent of both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

The actor and man O’Toole was to become were shaped by the horrors of the war and relief at its end. O’Toole once identified his sociality with his generation: “We were young people who’d been children throughout the war—well, you can imagine what it felt like in 1945 to be free—not to be bombed, not to be rationed, not to be restricted. There was a tremendous amount of enthusiasm.”

At the same time he was finding drama a cultural form that could express the inward sensations generated in such a period. He had taken several jobs but was increasingly interested in theatre. With a friend he hitchhiked to Stratford-upon-Avon to see Michael Redgrave play King Lear.

This is often described as the moment O'Toole knew the theatre was for him, but he had been pushing towards it for a year. He had previously seen Donald Wolfit's production of *King Lear*. Wolfit, one of the last grand actor-managers in the Victorian style, variously influenced many of O'Toole's generation. O'Toole was impressed by his "volcanic" Lear. Harold Pinter, who acted in Wolfit's company, was struck by his intense silences.

Shakespeare's *Lear* also made sense for O'Toole's view of theatre and society. Denouncing attempts to play Lear as someone "who deserves all he gets," O'Toole wrote that "there is no justice, human or providential, in the play; there is no redemption; for three hours we share Shakespeare's unflinching gaze at the extreme nature of man's estate, within and without, human and cosmic, the condition and predicament of humankind."

In 1681 Nahum Tate had rewritten the play with a happy ending, and O'Toole's scorn points again to the traumas of the twentieth century, fully understood or otherwise: "Events of the subsequent centuries shatteringly demonstrate that such tinkering didn't do the delicate sensibilities of many much lasting good, and in our period, after Auschwitz, to perform the play in a way that provides any character with a dainty justification for his or her actions is perversely silly."

He went to RADA (the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) on a scholarship. British theatre was undergoing a radical overhaul in playwriting and acting in the 1950s. In place of plays set in bourgeois drawing rooms a new realism was developing with plays set in bedsits and terraces. Regional accents were no longer eradicated, and anger was the defining emotion.

Although his Irish-Yorkshire background and enthusiasm apparently suited O'Toole well to this movement, his instincts were somewhat apart. He remained, at heart, an actor in the grand classical tradition. He was not embarrassed by Wolfit's style, as some of his generation were. O'Toole's hero was Edmund Kean, of whom Coleridge wrote that, "Seeing him act was like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning." O'Toole remained hostile to a theatre driven by directors, preferring actors to be at the centre of the craft.

But he worked on a broad repertoire. After RADA he spent three vital years at the Bristol Old Vic. There he played in Osborne, Becket, Shaw, and gave an electrifying *Hamlet*. After a successful return to London in Shaw he spent a critically acclaimed season at Stratford playing Petruchio (*The Taming of the Shrew*) and Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*).

He loved the theatre, but film offers were beginning to come in. He turned down an invitation to join Peter Hall's company in order to make his fourth film, David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). The vibrant intensity of his performance, coupled with his good looks, made him a star. As he would note later, "Stardom is insidious. It creeps up through the toes. You don't realise what's happening until it reaches your nut. That's when it becomes dangerous." The film earned him the first of his eight Oscar nominations.

What followed was patchy. The riotous lifestyle certainly contributed, while his good looks generated some lucrative but bad film offers. He also remained determined in his vision of acting. He was again nominated for an Oscar for Peter Glenville's *Becket* (1964) with Richard Burton, but his theatre production of Brecht's *Baal* was not a success. Laurence Olivier invited him to the newly formed National Theatre at the Old Vic to play Hamlet again. Olivier's production did not create the same stir as O'Toole's Bristol performance had, and the actor described it as a "humbling and

humiliating" experience.

The films are dizzily eclectic: Clive Donner and Woody Allen's *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965), a silly, sometimes amusing movie in which O'Toole is thoroughly charming; *The Lion in Winter* (1968), during whose filming co-star Katherine Hepburn told him he was "profligate" with his talents: *Under Milk Wood* (1972), again with Burton; and the over-sentimental *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1969).

Many of O'Toole's performances are remarkable, like his unbridled turn as an aristocrat who believes he is Jesus Christ or Jack the Ripper in Peter Medak's *The Ruling Class* (1972), but there was an increasingly self-indulgent streak to them that outweighed the quality of the material. By the 1980s he was doing some execrable rubbish. Of course, by then a great deal of execrable rubbish was being made.

Between films he had also started working again in theatre. Productions of Shaw and Chekhov in Bristol were lauded. There were good Becket productions in Dublin and Nottingham, and he returned repeatedly to Shaw and Coward. The low point came with his London return in the 1980 *Macbeth*. Critics slammed his mannered and monotonous central performance, and he said later that thinking of that show "makes my nose bleed."

In his drinking days he had started to give "Peter O'Toole" as a constant theatrical performance, which further limited his acting range. He finally quit drinking after losing part of his intestine to surgery for pancreatitis, but he turned the autobiographical performance style to his advantage. *My Favorite Year* gave an early indication of what he might do with the style, but the real triumph came with Keith Waterhouse's *Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell* (1987), about the alcoholic *Spectator* journalist. It showed O'Toole at his best, touching, funny and above all honest.

It is to his credit that he was able to enjoy something of a renaissance thanks to his capacity to present the frailties of age. In later film work like *Venus* (2006) O'Toole is much more affecting and touching than his earlier performances might have suggested. After the limitations of his range during the 1970s and 1980s, he seemed to regain some sureness of touch in the last two decades of his life. Despite announcing his retirement last year, he continued to work.

O'Toole undoubtedly possessed great gifts as an actor, although these were not always put to the best use. He retained a determined vision of himself and the theatre that did not quite sit comfortably with the world around him. This quality, that hampers so much of the work in which he appeared, also enabled him to be such a striking presence.

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