

SPINETTI, VITTORIO GIORGIO ANDRE ('Victor') (1929 - 2012), actor, director and author

Name: Vittorio Giorgio Andre Spinetti
Date of birth: 1929
Date of death: 2012
Partner: Graham Lewis Curnow
Parent: Giuseppe Spinetti
Parent: Lily Spinetti (née Watson)
Gender: Male
Occupation: actor, director and author
Area of activity: Performing Arts; Literature and Writing
Author: Robert Hyde

Victor Spinetti was born on 2 September 1929 in Marine Street, Cwm near Ebbw Vale, the eldest of six children of Giuseppe Spinetti and his wife Lily (née Watson). His father opened a fish and chip shop there in 1926, and all of the children were born in the accommodation above the shop. Spinetti's grandfather Giorgio had walked from Bari in Italy to Wales to get work in the mines.

Spinetti showed great educational promise at an early age, and could read before he went to school. Things progressed well until the outbreak of the Second World War, when Spinetti's father was arrested in the middle of the night and interred as an 'alien'. Spinetti commented that life became quite difficult - 'One day I'm Welsh, and the next I'm a spy!'. He was shunned by friends, bullied at school, and one day was set upon by two youths on his way home, causing a loss of hearing on one side which lasted for the rest of his life. A teacher stepped in and wrote to the authorities to expedite Giuseppe's release and to try and maintain Victor's education.

Spinetti continued his education at Monmouth School, where he thrived. He was not particularly good at sports, but did take to the dramatic activities the school offered and was involved in amateur dramatics outside. After leaving school, he tried to help out in the shop, and in other businesses, but never showed any aptitude for it. He was called for National Service, but it was discovered that he was partially deaf, and he was subsequently discharged early through ill health, having spent a long time in hospital with pleural effusions.

Returning home, he enrolled at the Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff, and his journey to being a professional performer began. He was virtually never without work. It was in college in Cardiff that he met his partner, the actor Graham Curnow, and they stayed together for more than forty years. Throughout the 1950's he spent a lot of time as a cast member in many stage plays, most notably getting a call in 1954 to join the cast of '*South Pacific*' as it was moving to the West End. He joined rehearsals, and ended up sharing accommodation with one of the other cast members - a fresh-faced Sean Connery.

Several smaller roles continued, and then Spinetti landed a role in *Expresso Bongo* in 1958. He went on to take part in Bernstein's *Candide*, and joined Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in Stratford East (as he called it - his 'university'), where he stayed for six years. One day in 1960, Brendan Behan walked into the theatre and asked for Spinetti to play an IRA officer in *The Hostage*, which was transferring to Broadway. Despite it being a big success, Littlewood asked him to come back to join the cast of *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*.

The most stimulating collaboration with Littlewood was undoubtedly the 1963 show *Oh What A Lovely War*, which introduced Spinetti's fantastic portrayal of an army drill sergeant. Littlewood demanded that he never rehearse the commands he gave in the show, and they were famously complete gobbledegook. The show transferred to Broadway, where it was an enormous hit. Spinetti won a Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical, which he was not prepared for. He made his winning speech in 'Welsh', which he did not speak with any great fluency, and like his winning character portrayal, made up as he went along.

From there he made films with the Beatles at their request, having seen him in *Oh What A Lovely War*; and was described in some quarters as the Sixth Beatle. He starred with Jack Klugman in *The Odd Couple* in the West End, and filmed *The Taming of the Shrew* with **Richard Burton** and Elizabeth Taylor in Rome. He also made a formidable appearance in the sitcom *Two in Clover* with Sid James which began in 1969.

Spinetti had a diverse and seemingly random direction to his work, moving between styles and genres. In the 1970s he directed several musicals, notably *Hair* in Amsterdam and Rome, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Paris. He wrote the play *In His Own Write* at the National, looking at the life of John Lennon. He was a noted performer with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and gave wonderfully villainous performances in later years in the stage shows *Oliver!* (as Fagin) and *Peter Pan* (as Captain Hook). Spinetti's own one man show *A Very Private Diary* played all over the world. He also played Mog Edwards in the 1971 film version of *Under Milk Wood*, playing in an all-star cast that included Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole, David Jason and Ruth Madoc.

For children of a certain generation in the 1980s, Spinetti is the voice of villain Texas Pete in the English version of the Welsh cartoon *Superted*, and he was for many years 'the man of a thousand faces' in the children's show *Harry And The Wrinklies*. His later film work included *The Attic: The Hiding of Anne Frank* (1988), and *The Krays* (1990).

Spinetti was also an author of many pieces of work, and his poetry was published, notably in *Watchers Along the Mall* (1963). His autobiographical memoir, *Victor Spinetti Up Front*, published in 2006, is full of the stories he used to tell as a raconteur.

In later years, Spinetti was made an honorary fellow of both the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and the University of Wales Newport.

Spinetti's partner Graham passed away in 1997. In February 2011, after collapsing on stage and fracturing a bone in his back, Spinetti was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He died in a Monmouth hospice on 19 June 2012.

Author

Robert Hyde

Sources

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Victor Spinetti, *Up front: his strictly confidential autobiography* (London 2006)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: Victor Spinetti

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