

The Morse code for a lifetime

From his first steps in theatre under the supervision of George Bernard Shaw to his latest role in *The Icon* at the age of 86, **Barry Morse** reveals a lifetime of experiences collected in a 70-year career in acting where he played hundreds of roles. CHARLES MIFSUD visited the actor of *The Fugitive* and *Space 1999* in his apartment in London.

THE EERIE WHISTLE of a flying rocket bomb suddenly died. Barry's and Peter's eyes fixed each other in awe. This was a signal that the bomb had run out of fuel and was about to crash in the vicinity.

They were stranded in the top of a double-decker bus. The driver of the bus stepped his foot on the pedal and the bus raced away. A shattering explosion left a trail of devastation just a few meters away from the bus. Fortunately, nobody was hurt.

This was a real life experience of the English actor Barry Morse. Barry is mostly remembered for his role as detective Philip Gerard in the 1970s TV serial *The Fugitive*. He also played Professor Victor Bergman in the famous science fiction serial, *Space 1999*, alongside Martin Landau and Barbara Bain.

It was late 1944 and Morse and his friend actor Peter Cushing (famous for his roles in Hollywood horror films) were returning from a performance in a local theatre in London. At the time London was being bombarded by German V1 rocket bombs.

This was Hitler's ultimate weapon in a desperate attempt to win the war. As buildings collapsed into a pile of rubble, panic-stricken people sought refuge from the terror. Still, London buzzed with activity as the theatres were kept running.

The wartime incident would make the perfect script for a theatre piece. In his apartment in Pall Mall, London, Barry said his career was shaped by a series of flukes and incidents. His acting career has included roles on radio, television, the stage and in film.

Despite his personal vicissitudes, his determination helped him to survive. Barry recalled another incident that occurred before the war. He had applied to join the Navy, yet in the medical examination he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. This was a serious disease at that time.

Fortunately, Barry was cured in time. Due to his frail health, he was advised to quit his career as an actor. But Barry had other plans. In fact his career in the theatre flourished.

His resolve to challenge the odds can be traced back to his childhood. He recalled how at school his teacher beat him because he was left-handed. At the time this was thought a bad habit which should be corrected.

"I realised that my life is a struggle. I had to challenge the received opinions of the society I lived in," Barry recalled. Since he came from a poor family, he dropped out of school when he was 15. Yet on his own steam he auditioned for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA). To his surprise he won a scholarship.

These challenging episodes in life helped him amplify his perceptions for acting. The characters he portrayed on stage were often derived from his life experiences. To bring a character alive he often asks questions like: What could this person's upbringing have been like? How would this person react in particular instances I had to face?

In his recent performance in the TV mini-serial *The Icon*, alongside Patrick Swayze, Barry plays the part of a futuristic President of Russia on the verge of a military coup. He had to revert to all the experiences of his life as an actor to create a personality who had to face imminent death.

Barry believes that what makes drama unique is the individuality of the characters. Their clashes and conflicts, compassion and love are what keep the audience intrigued.

"Take Shakespeare. He is not simply words on paper but human feelings expressed in words," Barry insisted, his penetrating voice carrying that hint of passion, which has enchanted audiences worldwide.

Shakespeare demonstrates a sharp perception of human emotions, Barry argued. Most of the audience in his time was illiterate, yet they could still identify themselves with Hamlet.

Barry referred to the great writer George Bernard Shaw who had developed this

instinct. Shaw was a very shy person. Participating in debating societies helped him overcome his inhibitions and develop a passion for acting. This passion was later translated into the writing of many plays, which have become classics.

Barry recounts his first encounter with Shaw, when he was a student at RADA. Barry was rehearsing the part of the lion in Shaw's play *Androcles and the Lion*. Suddenly Shaw suddenly appeared on the scene, hurled himself to the floor, as he mimicked furiously to Barry, then aged 16, how the part should be played.

This incident amply displays the writer who, through his acting, empowers the characters he creates in his script. Shaw was an influential member of the RADA board at the time. He often forwarded personal notes to the students with tips to help them improve their performances. But nobody kept these notes because nobody at the time considered him an international celebrity but a simple gentleman who was a true friend.

Few of today's young actors could experience theatre the way Barry has. By the time he was 21 he had already participated in over 40 plays. Barry said the theatre is the ultimate experience in acting.

"Every time you go on the stage you can grasp the reaction of the audience to your lines. The same lines acted a thousand times can evoke a thousand different emotions," he said.

Barry believes that in a theatrical production one can gauge the live feedback of the audience as the performance unfolds. This is different from TV and radio, where the reaction of the audience is inert.

Barry's portfolio includes both classic and contemporary drama. And yet he says that most of the times playing in a contemporary production is more challenging than doing a classical play. However he brings to life both heroes and villains with the same passion and believability.

One of the characters for which Barry is still remembered is that of Lieutenant Steven Gerard in the famous 1960s TV serial *The Fugitive*. This is still considered by many as the best TV serial ever produced.

The main character, Dr Richard Kimble, played by David Janssen, is wrongly accused of murdering his wife. Escaping from police custody, he becomes a fugitive, who struggles to find the real murderer of his wife.

Gerard, on the side of the law, makes it his personal mission to chase Dr Kimble and bring him to justice. Gerard believed that the law was sacred and it was his duty to bring even an innocent person to face justice.

Barry's portrayal of Gerard was so effective that many TV viewers worldwide despised him for his ruthless chase of the innocent Dr Kimble. Gerard ended up the most hated person on the side of justice.

To this day Morse recalls that he remains the only English actor who played the part of an American in such a production. He paid tribute to the late Quinn Martin's direction. "His foresight and knowledge as a director were pivotal for the success of the serial," Barry said.

Martin presented various scripts to the actors and discussed the best possible ways to develop the plot with them. Barry also directed a number of episodes of *The Fugitive*.

He believes that a director must look at best ways to develop the characters in any production. In the famous 1970s TV science fiction serial *Space 1999*, Barry said, this was completely lacking. He played Professor Victor Bergman alongside Martin Landau and Barbara Bain, who had become famous in the TV serial *Mission Impossible*.

The producers of *Space 1999*, Sylvia and Gerry Anderson, were keener to develop special effects than characters and plots. Barry says that Shakespeare wrote for a theatre that had no scenery or special effects; nonetheless he created the greatest drama mankind has ever seen. Also, he believes

that any form of fiction in drama should stimulate our imagination to where the impossible becomes conceivable.

The episodes he enjoyed most in *Space 1999* were the ones concerned with ideas, philosophies and human reflections. He recalls one episode, *The Black Sun*, in which he and Landau were facing imminent death in a fast-approaching black sun. As they drank brandy for the last time, much of their dialogue was improvised from the feelings that surfaced at the time of shooting this scene.

But did the *Star Trek* serial with William Shatner offer better material to help us ponder on the future of human race?

Barry recalled how he introduced Shatner to the world of show business. Still, Shatner, according to Barry, failed to project philosophical depth in his portrayal of Captain James T. Kirk.

"Shatner's and the serial's success owe much to the stars and to the fact that he has been where no man has been before" Barry said with a smile, while sipping some red wine. I jokingly told him that maybe the reason behind Shatner's success could be his *Enterprise*.

Barry thinks that Patrick Stewart in the role of Captain Jean Luc Picard in *Star Trek the Next Generation* carried much more profoundness and assertiveness. In London I had the opportunity to watch Stewart in the comedy *A Life in the Theatre*, currently showing at the West End.

Barry said Landau's and Bain's performances did try to add depth to the hastily written scripts of *Space 1999*. They also had to overcome family problems. It was not easy for them settling in England with their two children.

Barry here offered a thought for his own family. His wife actress Sydney Struggess gave up her career to raise their two children, Hayward and Melanie. Sydney passed away in 1999.

Barry's face twisted with emotion as his thoughts shifted to his daughter, Melanie, who passed away the week before I met him in London, aged 59. In a telephone conversation, he insisted that he would not cancel our appointment because Melanie would have wanted him to follow his agenda as usual.

But Barry has fostered other children around the world. Kitsie is a South African who met Patrick Macnee, a personal friend of Morse's (Macnee played John Steed in the TV serials *The Avengers* and *The New Avengers*).

Macnee forwarded him a letter from Kitsie in which she explained her dire situation. She did not have the money to finance her studies, so Morse helped her to achieve her goal.

He recalled that in 1977, when he was in Malta shooting *The Martian Chronicles* with Rock Hudson, he met a young artist whose surname was Fenech. He had bought his

Fact box – Barry Morse

IN A CAREER spanning more than seven decades, Barry Morse has played hundreds of roles, totalling 3,000 appearances on radio, television, stage and in film.

In the 1950s he emigrated to Canada, where he was a pioneer in the first TV shows.

He is a five-time winner of Canada's Best Television Actor award and former artistic director of the famed Bernard Shaw Festival of Canada, still being held annually in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The film/radio performances in which he featured won several awards. The *Odyssey*, a radioplay in which he performed, won the Pulitzer Prize for the best play in the US in the 1950s.

He worked with top Hollywood actors, among them Robert Mitchum, Peter Cushing, Peter Ustinov, Christopher Lee, Roger Moore and lately Patrick Swayze.

paintings to encourage him to pursue his passion for art. Barry proudly showed me a painting with two colourful finches with Verdala Palace as a backdrop, saying he hoped this person was still painting today.

Barry always does his utmost to help others. In a prison project he helps demotivated prisoners. find a feeling for life through the words of Shakespeare, producing Shakespeare plays and writing their own poetry.

Barry's motto for them is his own creed or "Morse code" for life: "As long as I conceive something better than myself, I am striving to bring it into existence."

But how is Barry experiencing life at 86? "Well, the best I can," he replies in his solid voice. *The Icon* will be shown in America next month. He travelled to Bulgaria last summer to shoot the serial. He still follows the Bernard Shaw Festival, held in Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario, Canada, every summer. Barry was the creator of this festival, which today has matured into a worldwide event.

Barry is also president of the Bernard Shaw Society in London. He entertains theatre enthusiasts at his apartment in London while they enact Shaw's plays.

Surely, the message he imparts to all drama lovers is a Morse code for all of us: "As long as you believe you can become someone better, you can do anything." This is his experience of a lifetime.

This article is dedicated to the memory of actress Melanie Morse Macquarrie (1945-2005), Barry Morse's daughter, who passed away recently. Special thanks go to my friend Mario Azzopardi for his support in making this interview possible.



BARRY MORSE showing pictures of stage and screen actors and other memorabilia at his London flat