

A star who shone across decades

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East End Life

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By John Rennie

COCKNEY actor Barry Morse, who died last month, journeyed far from his Bethnal Green roots in the course of his career, one that spanned 70 years and hundreds of roles. The much-loved star was a familiar face to generations of fans.

Herbert “Barry” Morse was born on June 10, 1918 above his father’s shop in Bethnal Green. He wasn’t much of a scholar and, after leaving school at 15, he was working as an errand boy when “a series of flukes and coincidences” led him to acting and an audition for RADA in 1935. One of the judging panel was Dame Sybil Thorndike, who – rather ambiguously – described his performance as “curiously touching”. The young Morse was the youngest ever student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. At the end of his studies, he would perform the title role in Henry V, in a Royal Command Performance for George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

Stage work followed, as well as work in the earliest days of TV, with the BBC shooting its first programmes at Alexandra Palace. Veteran actor AE Matthews warned the youngster off the new medium, saying it was “a rich man’s toy” which would be “forgotten by Christmas”. In later years television would make Morse a rich man, but during the late Thirties he toured the country in repertory theatre, playing more than 200 parts and building the acting skills that would serve him a lifetime. And it was in rep in 1939, in Peterborough, that he met the actress Sydney Sturgess. They soon married and were together until her death 60 years later.

On the outbreak of war he tried to enlist in the Royal Navy, but a bout of tuberculosis put paid to that. Instead he went on to make his West End debut, while also playing small parts in movies including *The Dummy Talks*, *Thunder Rock* and Will Hay’s Nazi spoof *The Goose Steps Out*. But a visit to his wife’s family in Canada in 1951 changed the course of his life dramatically.

Television was taking off in the country, and Morse and family moved there. Barry, bearing a letter of introduction from Val Gielgud, the head of BBC drama, soon found work at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He also became a director at CBC, and during the 1950s was rarely out of work, whether on or off screen.

Most fans of Sixties television will remember Morse for his role in classic show *The Fugitive*, with David Janssen in the title role. As Lieutenant Gerard, he would tirelessly pursue Janssen. Barry would also go on to direct some episodes.

Unusually, he was a stalwart on the small screen in Britain, as well as US and Canadian TV. He was ever present in series produced by ATV's ITC subsidiary, including *The Saint* and *The Adventurer*. To Seventies viewers, Morse would become a familiar face in *Space 1999*. In the 1980s he would appear in the ITV satire *Whoops Apocalypse* alongside Rik Mayall, John Cleese and Alexei Sayle, playing Johnny Cyclops, a B-Movie actor turned US President. And he would be on British screens into the new millennium. Having returned to live in London in recent years, he had appeared in *Waking the Dead* and *Doctors*.

Alongside the TV and movie work, Barry was a constant both acting and directing on the stage. Taking control of the nascent Shaw Festival at Niagara on the Lake in Canada (Morse was a lifetime fan and performer of George Bernard Shaw's work), he corraled a group of Canadian actors to work for a flat \$150 a week, making financially secure a festival that still thrives.

He would later act in a play based on the letters between Shaw and Lord Alfred Douglas, alongside his son, actor Hayward Morse. He latterly worked a great deal for charity, raising money for the Performing Arts Lodge (a retirement home in Toronto for musicians and actors), and to combat Parkinson's disease (his wife having suffered from the disease). Wife Sydney died in 1999 and his daughter, actor Melanie MacQuarrie, in 2005. Son Hayward survives him.

Barry Morse, born June 10, 1918, Shoreditch; died February 2, 2008, aged 89, in University College Hospital, London.



Barry Morse with wife Sydney