

The sound of laughter has always played an important part in the life of Jim Dale. Watching a performance of *Me & My Girl* with his father at the age of seven, Jim remembers the exhilaration of hearing the sound of two thousand people laughing. This moment proved to be the catalyst and there and then he decided to enter showbusiness.



JIM AT 17, A STAND UP COMIC IN MUSIC HALL

EAGLETON'S ANGLE

ACTOR, SINGER, DANCER, SONGWRITER, STUNTMAN, RADIO DJ, TV PRESENTER, CONSERVATIONIST AND REALLY NICE GUY JIM DALE TALKS TO JULIE EAGLETON IN THE FIRST OF HER NEW SERIES OF INTERVIEWS.

"When I said I wanted to make people laugh, my father said that I should learn how to move." One week after seeing the show, spurred on by his father's advice, he started dancing lessons encompassing ballet, tap, ballroom and national dance which lasted for the next six years and provided the grounding for his later acrobatics in *Barnum* and his various stunt work. Apart from his father being a self-taught pianist, Dale's Northamptonshire upbringing was practically showbiz free. "Mine weren't showbiz parents: they didn't push me by standing at the side of the stage, pushing me on or taking me to auditions, but they were very encouraging." A stint in the Royal Air Force led to two years of stand up comedy. "I wouldn't have the nerve to attempt comedy these days at the age of 17. My type of comedy then was very innocent. You couldn't use any swear words. Theatre Managers wouldn't allow you to. They were family audiences and you had to do innocent comedy. I was up against a theatre audience as opposed to a night club audience and people didn't throw things."

Currently lighting up the West End in the role of Fagin in *Oliver* at the London Palladium, after taking over the role from Jonathan Pryce last year, Dale came to the production without ever having seen the stage or screen version which was immortalised by Ron Moody. "I just approached it completely fresh. When Lionel Bart said he wrote the character to be a musical variety act, I drew on my instinct as a frontcloth comic just entertaining the music hall man. I saw Jonathan Pryce's performance but I wanted to bring over the feeling of fun. Those kids love being with Fagin and I think a great camaraderie comes across. There is as much camaraderie on stage between myself and the boys as there is off stage. I spend a lot of time with them which I feel is necessary. We are having a ball on that stage; they're not acting laughing, kids are kids and there is genuine laughter. I do things each night just to keep them on their toes."

Mention the name Jim Dale to members of the British public and odds are he'll be best remembered for being part of that great comedy tradition known as the *Carry Ons*, conjuring up visions of Dr Nooky clad in a white coat running riot in Long Hampton Hospital in *Carry On Again Doctor* or Bo, a budding legionnaire lost in the desert, in *Follow That Camel*. He appeared in 11 of the series including *Carry On Columbus* in 1992. Did being part of such an institution open many doors? "*Carry Ons* didn't open any doors for any of us. Nobody seemed to be influenced in those days by the fact that you were in a *Carry On* film. In fact, it was almost detrimental. You were in the *Carry Ons*, yet at the same time you were in the National Theatre." Dale, nevertheless, has nothing but fond memories of those days and feels sad that most of the gang are no longer around. *Oliver* can boast another ex-member of the team in the form of Patsy Rowland who plays Mrs Bedwin.

After *Columbus* was panned by the critics, does he think that the *Carry On* tradition could be resurrected using today's comedic talent? "When you see a film like *Carry On Columbus* you realise that the old *Carry On* team are being replaced by other actors who are

more stand up comics rather than actual comedy actors. It's so easy to think that you're doing *Carry On* acting but when your face is magnified up there on a 48ft screen you have to be able to act and not just be comical and that's one of the reasons which let the film down. *Carry On* acting wasn't necessarily over-acting – it was pushing it right to the edge but it was never grotesque.”

In reality the *Carry Ons* were just a small facet of a diverse career that has seen National Theatre roles under the direction of Laurence Olivier, who at one time called upon Dale to teach him how to fall off a chair for one of his roles. He smiles as he recalls Joan Plowright's disapproval of her husband's antics! He achieved great acclaim for his Shakespearean debut Autolycus in *A Winter's Tale*. Other London stage work has included *The Taming Of The Shrew*, *The National Health*, *The Card* and the title role in *Scapino*, to name but a few. He has also achieved numerous distinctions for his songwriting skills including an *Oscar* nomination for the title song in the film *Georgy Girl*. He has found success as a pop star, reaching number two in the charts with his own song *Be My Girl*, as well as hosting the popular TV pop show *The 6.5 Special*. He even spent time working as a DJ for the BBC when he hosted *Morning Favourites* for a couple of years.

Long periods of absences from the British spotlight may have cast shadows of anonymity over Dale's career here but in America a different story was emerging. He rose to become one of the doyens of Broadway and a real box-office draw. In 1980 he won a *Tony* for his Broadway musical debut when he created the role of *Barnum*. Ironically a Broadway run of *Me & My Girl* saw Dale take the lead in a show which had mesmerised him as a child and ignited his interest in acting. He won a *Tony* nomination for his role in *Joe Egg*, a *Tony* nomination for his Molière adaptation of *Scapino*. His most recent success in New York was last year's *Travels With My Aunt*, an Off Broadway, all male production of four which swept up the awards. On performing for an American audience he explains, “To be able to pull the strings and make these people stand up and cheer is another thing compared to making the Brits laugh. I know what makes them laugh, being one of them, but it's very difficult to know what makes Americans laugh. Not many good plays survive on Broadway for very long because the prices are so high. The good work is now Off Broadway and so I go to Broadway to earn the money and Off Broadway to do the quality work like *Travels With My Aunt*. Sometimes I'm unhappy about being in America and not having quality work around and realising how much good stuff there is going on in London. You have to make the best of where you live and I would be quite happy living and working in the States for many years to come.”

Home is a New York apartment which he shares with his wife Julie, a gallery owner, and his Doberman, La De Da (cockney slang for star!). When he is in New York he likes to spend two hours a day training his pet in the park which he admits is his main form of exercise and certainly keeps him trim! The Dales, great conservationists, own a 250 year old restored barn in upstate New York and a few years ago they were involved in a Save The Lake campaign. They even went a step further and bought their own lake where Jim likes to cast the rod and unwind. “I've got a very strong, wonderful life outside the theatre. I spend every minute I can sharing that with non-theatrical friends and I have many, many of those.”

Having appeared in three films for Disney, the first being *Peter's Dragon*, Dale has also sampled the Hollywood lifestyle, but has nothing but respect for the studios and thoroughly enjoyed his time there. The film *Bloodshy* saw him become an honorary member of the Association of Hollywood Stuntmen for his stunt work on the film. Having carried out some of his own stunts during his career, he maintains



AS BARNUM, THE ROLE HE
CREATED, WITH GLENN
CLOSE AS HIS WIFE

actors should “stick to acting and let the real stuntmen get on with their job”. Dale recalls a close call when shooting *Hot Lead Cold Feet* for Disney in a canoe going down the rapids in Oregon. The canoe went out of control and he was forced to jump out, managing not to get his legs mangled up in the logs which were just below the surface of the water. He still clearly remembers the sight of his canoe being sucked under by the current, smashing to bits as it crashed upon the logs. It is very difficult to think that the amiable, youthful looking Jim Dale before me is 60 years of age and when asked what he may have become if not an actor, he has absolutely no idea as nothing else fuelled his ambitions in the same way. His boyish grin spreads as he recalls a day trip to the seaside, from Rothwell to Great Yarmouth on a coach, and how he held one of his first audiences captive with impressions and renditions. The image is easy to envisage. Just buy a ticket for *Oliver* and take a good look around at the latest captivated audience. □