

“ Recalling Warren Mitchell”

“ Warren... What are you laughing at?”

“Him... He’s just like me when I was a young actor”

That was TV Director Philip Saville talking to Warren Mitchell when Warren and I , as father and son were rehearsing a scene from “Moss” a BBC “Play for Today” by Bernard Kops in 1975. Back then, the Beeb had a big tall building in North Acton chock- full of rehearsal rooms and a sizeable canteen on the top floor packed with hungry producers and directors and where you could purposefully bump into a potential future job. Back then, there were regular single dramas by new and established writers. We rehearsed. And for days on end. And in the studio. And enough already.

That little exchange above came about during a black comedy moment in which I had to mouth off in a horribly lairy manner to Warren who was lying on a bed semi comatose with guilt and grief . He sat up , started laughing in the middle of it and then blurted out the remark. It was a bonding and affectionate moment and one that was to pay big dividends for me 4 years later when The National Theatre announced the revival of Arthur Miller’s masterpiece “Death of a Salesman” with Warren playing the great tragic hero Willy Loman .

Without my knowing, Warren had suggested me to the Director Michael Rudman for the part of his troubled eldest son Biff, whilst my then agent, the superb Ben Gannon, had also communicated with him on my behalf. I was summoned to the National to read the part with Rudman up in rehearsal room 3, which went well enough for us to go to his office where he telephoned Warren at home and asked if he would come in right away and read with me. I heard his familiar voice crackling through the earpiece in unmistakable fashion

“ Right away ? You’ll be lucky, I’m ‘aving my fucking lunch”
“Well then, when can you get here” . “ When I arrive” and
hung up. “He’ll be here within the hour “ said Michael... and
he was.

Meeting up again with Warren after a four year gap was like
a warm family reunion and we fell into the scenes as if we’d
been rehearsing them for weeks (Truth to tell, we ‘d
probably been rehearsing them all our lives) and during one
of them , Michael called out “Alright Stephen, That’s enough”.
I looked over at him in confusion, he was looking at Warren
and then looked at me and in a quite matter of fact way said
“ You’ve got the part” . I grabbed Warren who was chuckling
but also very emotional . He knew what this meant for me
just as he knew what it meant for him to be playing Willy
Loman. We all had a famous, happy and successful run in
Rudman’s fine production . Arthur Miller came over from
Connecticut to work with us and on meeting Warren for the
first time in the stalls of the Lyttleton Theatre remarked “
Amazing . You’re exactly how I always imagined Willy to be”.
Warren said “I hope you don’t mind we changed the word
Walrus to Shrimp because as you can see , I’m not very big “
Arthur said “ But I wrote the word shrimp originally and we
had to change it to Walrus because Lee J Cobb who
originated the part was a large man — Now its back to the
way it was !”

The show became one of the National’s all time great
winners with Warren deservedly carrying off every major
theatre acting award going including the Laurence Olivier
award. Rudman and I were also nominated for one of those
but lost out. During the evening Warren wandered back to
our table brandishing his award in one hand and a flute of
Fizz in the other. He took one look at our faces and
proclaimed in a glass shattering voice “What’s the matter
with you two , can’t you even win a fucking award ? “

A last poignant recollection of this feisty, generous, rumbustious and oftentimes completely impossible man was him ringing me at home late one evening and leaving a message to call him back ASAP. Our 10 month contract was coming to an end and we were all offered a 3 month extension with no salary increase but a short paid holiday. Warren and I were the last ones to hold out against it and when he finally capitulated that left me last man standing. I had spent the evening trying to find my way out of a brandy bottle and rang him back as soon as I picked up his message. "Stephen" he said in a quiet growl "I'm sorry mate. I just couldn't let this part go ... not yet and what's more I don't think you want to either. Have a last think. I can only tell you that I'll miss you and I can't imagine doing it without you but know this: I will respect you always, whatever you decide"

Racked with cowardly doubt now, I had a miserable coward's restless night but come morning, Warren had helped me to see the light and I too capitulated. Rarely in my life have I ever felt so happy, grateful and relieved about hand breaking sharply into a U turn. He was a life force, a mini hurricane was that man Warren Mitchell ... A legend both in and out of his own lunchtime ..No fucking doubt about that.