



Callow, Simon (b. 1949)

by Linda Rapp

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Versatile British actor Simon Callow has played a wide variety of roles on the stage, in movies, and on television. He has also directed the film *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1991) and numerous theater productions, including *Carmen Jones* (1991), for which he won an Olivier Award for Best Director of a Musical.

Callow was born on June 15, 1949 in South London. His parents separated when he was a child and he was educated at a variety of schools, including private schools in England and secondary schools in Zambia and South Africa.

Callow's fascination with the theater began when, at the age of seven, he heard a radio performance of *Macbeth*. As a student at the London Oratory Grammar School, he founded the Literary and Debating Society so that he and his schoolmates could read plays.

After leaving school, Callow wrote to Laurence Olivier, telling him of his interest in the theater and his willingness to work at the National Theatre "in however humble a capacity." His first job was humble indeed--he worked in the box office and the mailroom.

Deciding that he needed a university education, Callow went to Queen's University in Belfast. There he joined the Drama Society and played Trigorin in Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

More inclined to the stage than to academia, Callow soon left the university and returned to London, where he was accepted as a student at the Drama Centre. Even before leaving drama school, he got a role in C. P. Taylor's *Schippel*. The play, first produced at a fringe theater, eventually moved to the West End, where it was very well received.

In 1975 Callow played the lead in the Gay Sweatshop's production of Martin Sherman's *Passing By*. He was impressed by the text, which presented "self-accepting, unagonised, uncaricatured gay people."

Performing in this "quiet and funny play" was an important professional experience for Callow, who felt a particular synergy with his audiences. His and their reaction to the play led him to reflect on the relationship of the actor himself to his character.

When playing a gay role, Callow said, he was "able to go deeper and wider" into the part even in a play such as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in which his character "had very little to do with [him] personally, very little to do with the kind of gay man that [he was]." Among the gay roles for which Callow is particularly well known is Gareth in Mike Newell's film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

Callow has appeared in more than twenty plays and as many films. His work first came to general public attention in 1979 when he starred as Mozart in the stage version of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. In 1984 he played impresario Emanuel Schikander in Milos Forman's film of the same work.

Callow's first classical role was as the title character in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* in 1978. He also appeared in *As You Like It* in 1979 and in Sir John Vanbrugh's Restoration comedy *The Relapse* in 1983.

Callow's movie roles have allowed him to demonstrate his versatility as an actor. He earned considerable praise for his work in a string of Merchant-Ivory films, *A Room With a View* (1984), *Maurice* (1986), *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* (1991), *Howards End* (1992), and *Jefferson in Paris* (1994).

His remarkably wide-ranging film credits also include the Master of Revels in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the voice of the Grasshopper in Henry Selick's animated film *James and the Giant Peach* (1996), and a pompous official in a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie, *Street Fighter* (1994). Other recent credits include appearances in Stephen Fry's *Bright Young Things* (2003), based on Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*, in Mike Nichols' television mini-series of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2003), and in Joel Schumacher's movie of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (2004).

In addition to his acting, Callow has directed over two dozen plays in England and on Broadway. He also directed a radio play, *Tomorrow Week*, in 1999.

An excellent writer as well as an unusually thoughtful actor, Callow has written a number of books on acting and the theater as well as biographies of Orson Welles and Charles Laughton. The Laughton biography is particularly interesting as an analysis of the acting style and development of one great gay character actor by another. Callow also writes weekly columns that appear in several English newspapers.

Fluent in French, Callow has translated works by Cocteau, Kundera, and Prévert.

Callow has been involved romantically with a number of partners, including the late Turkish-Egyptian filmmaker Aziz Yehia and designer Christopher Woods. He recently described his current relationship as a happy one and described his partner as "very determined and exploratory and intellectual."

In 1991, when actor Ian McKellen was attacked by filmmaker Derek Jarman for accepting a knighthood from the homophobic Thatcher government, Callow, along with such other gay and lesbian artists as Nancy Diuguid, Stephen Fry, Bryony Lavery, John Schlesinger, and Antony Sher, came to McKellen's defense.

In 1999 Callow was named a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in recognition of his richly varied career and achievements.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.