

First published in 1997 and reprinted several times. Great fun for the TV buff and highly recommended if you can pick up a copy. I found mine on e-Bay.

Sadly Sheard died in August 2005, aged 65. Shortly before his death he sent me a nice tribute to Michael Bird for the website and I am sure that he would not mind me reproducing this extract from his book.

YES, MR BRONSON



MEMOIRS OF A BUM ACTOR
MICHAEL SHEARD

FOREWORD BY ROGER MOORE

SUMMERSDALE

XXXI

And now to show you t'other side of telly. Some rather nice television parts came along after the above and I'm going to spend a few lines on TV series.

Flipping good things, TV series. Apart from anything else they go on and on. Luvly dosh. And I did need the odd extra penny at about this time. My three offspring were of a rather high academic standard - due entirely to Dearly Beloved of course! - and they were about ready to go to university. London, York, Southampton, and then, for number three, a post grad at Cambridge. Not quite all at once, but following each other very closely. And overlapping, which is almost worse financially.

I was very proud. And to make quite sure I could cover the ginormous expenses that were about to descend on me, I started a series of series, and I loved it: *The Outsider*; *The Dark Side of the Sun*; *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*; and *The Invisible Man*.

The Outsider first. Apart from the fact that I played a super part - a master printer called Reuben Flaxman - the series was made for Yorkshire Television, a very faithful employer. I played an equally good role, Superintendent Harrison, in a one-off play for them later on. As well as doing *Emmerdale* and others.

It was very nice too to return to Yorkshire. The train sequences for *The Five Red Herrings* (Lord P. Wimsey), had been shot alongside Lake Windermere. OK, I know. But Cumbria is near enough to Yorkshire for a chap from Aberdeen! Anyway my Mother was born in Menston, which is just outside Leeds, and lived there before she emigrated to Scotland and married my Dad. Hence my dual nationality. (Although I am English but definitely come from Scotland, as my Mum comes from Leeds, I can

also have a damned authentic North Country accent if required. Shush!)

As well as me, *The Outsider* boasted a damn good acting cast. John Duttine, Joanna Dunham, Carol Royale, et al. And Ted Morris, who became a very close friend.

You won't have heard of Ted. But for many of us he is the true actorbum. His kind are the salt of our business. He personifies in one small dear man what I've been trying to tell you about throughout these pages.

Ted is dead now. He died of cancer some years ago, aged only fifty-five. But right up to the end he lived for his work. He was still dedicatedly playing at Oldham Repertory Theatre the week before he died. He never earned much money, indeed he once told me that there were times when he'd had nothing but an egg to eat all day.

He'd decided that he wanted to be an actor quite late in life, in his early thirties, and took the plunge one Friday. Just like that. He finished clerking on a Friday evening and on Monday morning he woke up a professional actor. He'd no idea where to start. He'd done amateur work, but he'd never been anywhere near a professional stage, let alone drama college. So he just went down the road, Manchester accent and all, bought a copy of *The Stage* newspaper, and started from there.

Ted never married. 'Who would have me? Anyway, I couldn't afford another egg!' Never came South either. Yet he was somehow managing to buy, on mortgage, his little flat in Hazel Grove, outside Manchester, and was just able to live from his chosen love - The Business. But by gum it was hard. Oldham was the other side of Manchester, and the rep were fortunate enough to have Ted in their plays quite often. Trouble was, the pay was bad, and in order to make a little profit, he saved on fares by bicycling right around Manchester to get there. Imagine it. Two and a half hours it took him each way. He didn't get home until one in the morning.

Granada and Yorkshire Television were also lucky enough to benefit from his talent from time to time. Great for them. A life-saver for Ted, because the money was so much better. Nevertheless, a good year for Ted was £7,000, and there were many bad ones.

When I first met him he was going through probably the best work patch he'd ever had. He'd been doing a little something for Granada - an episode of 'The Street' I think - and now he was playing my mate in *The Outsider*. He loved it and we loved him. It was a privilege to spend three months with such a talented and likeable guy. He used to keep us in stitches at meal breaks, talking of the times when he'd had only that egg to eat. 'The local butcher took pity on me. He always let me choose the biggest egg.' 'One October I found a specially nice one which was covered with brown speckles. I sat on it for three months in the hope that it might turn into a chicken in time for Christmas.' By no means an easy thing to do, to make merriment out of one's hard times, but I never saw Ted down or despondent. He was a cheeky chappie too. In *The Outsider*, a super lady actor called Pauline Letts (her brother Barry was a producer at the Beeb, *Dr Who* et al.), played the matriachal owner of the newspaper where Ted and I worked. In one scene Pauline visited the printing press and had to be very stern and angry about something.

Nobody knew, but Ted and the director had arranged it between them, probably to relax everyone on a cold Monday morning. Came the first take of the master. We were all there, John, Carol, Joanna, Norman Eshley (remember him, once married to Millicent Martin?), Ted and I of course, and the entire crew. The doors are slammed open and Pauline strides in. It really is very tense, and everyone is looking suitably afeard. Everyone that is except Mr Ted Morris who calmly steps forward, tugs his forelock in the best yokel tradition and and says, 'Morning, Miss. Can I fuck you now?'

Thank heavens we kept in touch. Ted did of course come South occasionally, when a programme from the North he was involved with required some southern location work - *Lost Empires* was another nice piece he did for Granada - and he always stayed with us. And when I went up to Manchester to do *Bulman* and *Coronation Street*, etc., I stayed with him.

Ted never got the parts he deserved, and there were times when he really did have it very tough. I asked him on *The Outsider* if he wasn't angry that the business hadn't treated him better and he looked at me aghast. 'Michael, please never even think it. I couldn't be happier. I'm doing this television series with you and all these other grand people, and when it's finished I've got a part coming up at Oldham rep. Why, I can buy two eggs now!'

Hey-ho. I haven't told you much about *The Outsider*, have I? A damn good series in which I too am superb! Indeed, I have a show tape in which two of the scenes are from this series. One is with John, Ted and me, the other is just Ted and me. Notwithstanding blowing my own trumpet, I do not agree with Sir Donald Wolfit. If you are going to give of your best as a bum, on stage, film, television, radio, voice-over (or show tape), you must have the best actors to work with, not the worst as Sir Donald used to have it. I trust these lines show in what high regard I hold Ted Morris, and how darn lucky we all were to have known him. He is greatly missed by many.

The Dark Side of the Sun. Wow, what a gig! I knew none of this whilst we were making *The Outsider*, but 'Dark Side' was being set up even as we were filming in Yorkshire. And no sooner had we finished, than I was asked if I'd like to go to Rhodes (again), and play an ex-Nazi called Col. Dietrich Von Reitz, in a six-parter set in Greece, written by the man who had penned both series, Michael J. Bird. Would I...?!

Michael is one of the best writers I know. He started out as a journalist, but had always wanted to write for the screen, and he made the jump very quickly. After his first play was produced, he was soon inundated with commissions. He's written some marvellously original series for TV, and because he's had a love affair with the country all his life, a number of them have been set in Greece - *Who Pays the Ferryman* and *The Lotus Eaters*, for instance. He is a super guy and very shrewd. Well, apart from doing deals with Olympic Airways and lots of high-powered businessmen, he suggested me for 'Dark Side', didn't he?!

I happen to know how 'Dark Side' came about and it illustrates, I think, how highly Michael is respected. Whilst riding on the top of a bus, or in the bath or something, he had this great idea for a series, about a strange cult in Greece, who had a leader who was possibly a living dead. He scribbled the idea down, literally on the back of an envelope, and took it to the BBC. The Beeb said yes please, here's the money, a producer, and the crew, go and make it! When I accepted Reitz, Michael admitted that he wasn't yet sure how the story would turn out as he'd only written one and a half episodes. But he said not to worry, the Colonel would certainly feature all the way through. And he did of course.

A quick word about the logistics before I transport you once again to Rhodes. We did all the exteriors on Rhodes. Every bit we could possibly film was done there, a good deal of the inside of the castle included. Then we returned to England and the BBC rehearsal rooms in North Acton - the Acton Hilton - to rehearse the interiors. And every fortnight we went to Glasgow to spend two days in their studios putting said interiors on tape. Can you appreciate how this old Scottish bum felt? Ten weeks in Greece, with Dearly Beloved coming out to join me for a holiday, then

back to my spiritual home every two weeks. Who could ask for anything more!

The actorbums: Peter Egan - I called him the Big P - played the dead/alive leader I mentioned. A sweet vegetarian called Emily Richards, who'd made a big impression in the Royal Shakespeare Company's superb production of *Nicholas Nickleby*, played the girl, and Patrick Mower played her husband, who was killed in the first episode but kept coming back as a ghost, or as Peter Egan. Equity member 40307 played the Big P's deputy, who took over the organisation when it was thought P had died a second time, and there was lots more actor cream, some from Greece (one lovely lady in particular), playing lots more good parts. For even if it's small, Michael J. has never written a bad part for an actor. He is the ultimate sympatico. He knows how much an actorbum can treasure even a tiny part, if it is well crafted.

I've been unfair to the 'lovely lady in particular', mentioned above. Betty Arvaniti is one of the foremost Greek actors and she played a leading role in 'Dark Side'. One evening later on, a few of us were sitting in a tiny taverna, way up in the hills above Rhodes. Suddenly the owner was upon us with three bottles of his best vintage, a gift he said because we were working with his beloved Betty.

And so I returned to Greece. Clear blue sea, constant sunshine, sandy beaches. At least that was our climate after the end of March. We arrived in early February, and there can be some rather nasty storms at that time of year. Of course I knew Rhodes from my heady days working on *Escape to Athena*, and thus had a distinct advantage over the rest. I knew where the post office was - remember, always post your letters and make your calls home from the post office, not from the hotel - I knew where the best restaurants were to be found, where you could hire bikes,

find a cinema, go for walks, swim...everything. I was terribly popular for a while!

The hotel. I must mention the hotel. Yep, the same one. Along the road from Rhodes town, where Stephanie Powers had raced me to humiliation. Not quite the same room. I did ask, but the floor where my 'Athena' room had been was being redecorated for the coming summer and I had to settle for a room on the floor below. Nearly but not quite. But it was a mirror image of my old room - bathroom on the right as you entered, main two-bedded bedroom/sitting room beyond, with balcony overlooking the sea. I think it's close enough to be included in the coincidence of same hotel, same room. Apart from anything else, that makes it three times it happened. Three is lucky, and, by the Colossus, I sure was being lucky about now!

I haven't mentioned the producer and director. Perhaps my getting this wonderful engagement wasn't entirely due to Michael J. If you cast your mind right back to my start in television, both David Askey, the director of 'Dark Side', and Vere Lorrimer our producer, (little Vere), were Directors on dear old *Dixon of Dock Green*, in those not forgotten, but far-off days. I'd worked with them both off and on since then - do you remember a series called *The Expert* with Marius Goring? I gave a super Judge in that, which Vere directed - but our association started in black and white with Jack Warner.

Back to Rhodes. The Greek Air Force made a storm for us with their helicopters. They took it in turns to hover just out of shot, about twenty feet off the ground, and the swishing blades did the rest. Bloody dangerous actually, and of course they didn't have to do it. Above and beyond the call of duty and all that. But the pilots loved it.

We travelled and filmed in Lindos, which for my money anyway is the most picturesque town on Rhodes. It's...so Greek. All white and shiny, with little winding streets

which go up and up and...up. Our Costume Designer was named David Beaton. We were filming almost at the top, and when David had staggered the last few yards - it really was a hell of a flipping climb - I asked politely, 'Are you Beaton, David?' He was too out of breath to answer, otherwise I think he'd have given me at least a fourpenny one!

We did some grand work all round, especially in the newly-restored castle in Rhodes town. It must be my addiction to swashbucklers which makes me single out that particular location. I loved doing 'Dark Side', but when we were working in that castle, with its turrets, its long, wide stone corridors, its vast banqueting halls, and its battlements, it was hard not to pretend that I was dressed in Lincoln green and making yet another version of 'Robin Hood and his Merry Men'. 'Have at you, you varlet!' Up and down the huge staircase I went, pretend sword in my hand - when we were not filming of course. The others must have thought I'd gone barmy!

Hey ho. I could go on and on about this one, and our time in Greece. Vere very sweetly arranged the schedule so that we could have a little holiday in the middle: 'because you've all been working so hard'; and Dearly Beloved came out and joined me for a week. My room in the hotel had the two beds and was thus classed as a double, but they didn't charge extra for Dearly B, all we had to pay for was the food. (Mind you, we did only use one bed!) We had a really super time.

Except...We got talking one day to a retired RAF air traffic controller, who had sold up back in the UK, and bought a catamaran. He and his wife were now sailing round the world. Great life. Very nice people. They even invited us to go for a trip - just out into Rhodes harbour and a quick turn round the bay. The harbour was fine, but once we passed through the entrance, which the Colossus used to stride, it was rough. Terribly rough. I became

dreadfully sick again and they all laughed at me. Even my missis!

But Dearly Beloved had a lovely break and so did I. When she returned home, we did another five weeks of very enjoyable work before we followed.

We now started recording the interiors in Scotland, and again I was the expert. Nobody else had been to Glasgow before either. ('What a lot of super work the man's done. What a lot of interesting places he's visited!') I took my fellows to the Ubiquitous Chip Restaurant in Byers Road, which is just down from Auntie (Glasgow) BBC, and of course I introduced them to the fruit machine in the BBC club. And I still won. Just a smidgin embarrassing actually - I won the jackpot again, twice!

It was an excellent engagement with splendidly fine performances from everyone. There is one odd point concerning this production, however. The BBC (London variety, where most of the big decisions are made), never repeated it. Michael J. Bird had even set up the ending to suggest a sequel - P. Egan, having been killed in Greece, suddenly turns up buying an estate in Scotland - but it was never made. Funny that. Internal politics no doubt...

Auf Wiedersehen Pet was quite extraordinary. I have never known anything like it in my life - before or since.

First there was the fact that I nearly didn't do it at all. Dearly Beloved always reads the scripts that are sent to me for consideration before I do. I get an unbiased opinion that way which is second to none; well, most of the time I do! Her reaction to 'Auf Wiedersehen' was that I should definitely turn it down. So I did. I merely flipped through the pages and said that I was grateful for the offer, that there were certainly some amusing set pieces, but that I was hoping for a movie which would clash. (You must never say exactly what you think - always leave the door slightly ajar.)

In all I turned down 'Auf' three times. But they kept coming back and putting up the money. They rolled two parts into one to make my part more attractive, and they even promised to let me have time off to do other things. How long can a chap hold out? It wasn't as if there really was a movie in the offing, and the 'Auf' scripts were by Dick and Ian, (Clement and La Frenais). Many years before I'd been in their very first series, *The Likely Lads*. (It was my second TV part and a very young Wendy Richard was also featured. Long before *EastEnders* of course). Dick and Ian had gone on to write hunks of smashing stuff: *Porridge* and *Going Straight* for TV, and big movies like *Villain*, for instance. I read their *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* scripts again, in detail this time, overruled Dearly B., and accepted the role of Herr Grunwald, the boss of the building site.

Not often I do that - go over Dear's head - because, apart from being Dearly Beloved, she really is nearly always right. But no one can be a hundred per cent, can they? I think it was probably the theme which she didn't care for on this occasion. Anyway, I'm delighted that I did put my toe down for once, for 'Auf W.' turned out to be a tremendous show to do, a ginormous success, exceedingly enjoyable, and it was repeated. It's selling well on video, too.

We did some of the location work on a building site in Hamburg, and some in the city itself. Then we came back to the UK, where a duplicate site - the complete thing, including sleeping quarters and administration huts - had been built on the back lot at Central TV's Elstree studios. The rest of the series, apart from the scene where the lads find me in a porno cinema, was filmed there.

(Incidentally, shortly after we finished *Auf Weidersehen Pet*, Central TV sold Elstree studios to the BBC, and on the back lot, where our building site stood, there is now a rather famous square, Albert by name.)