A Fortunate Life

An Autobiography

Robert Vaughn

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Introduction

With a modest amount of looks and talent and more than a modicum of serendipity, I've managed to stretch my fifteen minutes of fame into more than a half century of good fortune. As a performer in almost every entertainment medium, from stage and screen to radio and television, I've enjoyed a lifetime of adventures around the world and worked with an array of remarkably gifted artists. Along the way, I've met many famous and a few infamous people, and in these pages I haven't hesitated to drop some of their names. To paraphrase my colleague and friend the late David Niven, "If you've had lunch with Robert Kennedy, why write about the waiter?"

But I've tried to make this book more than a mere exercise in name-dropping. I hope you'll find it an interesting sketch of a life rich in incident, one rooted in show business but with forays into the larger worlds of politics and international relations. I've been lucky enough to have at least a passing connection or a through-the-window glimpse into some of the

great events of my generation, from the blacklisting of Hollywood, the struggle for civil rights, and the anti–Vietnam War movement to the tumultuous presidential campaign of 1968, the crushing of Czech democracy by Soviet tanks, and the still-unsolved mystery of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination. Perhaps the reader of this book will encounter one or two new insights into these epochal events, along with the lighter entertainment to be gleaned from my escapades as an actor.

As you'll see, a running theme of my life has been a continuing fascination with the supreme Shakespearean role, that of the Melancholy Dane—Hamlet. The epigraphs for each chapter are drawn from that greatest of plays, which remains, for me, a fount of apposite wisdom for virtually any occasion. I hope the scholars in my audience will forgive me for decorating my poor edifice with a few garlands borrowed from the master.

1

HAMLET AND ME

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines.

A wise man once remarked, "If you do the thing you love, you'll never have to work a day in your life."

I did, and I haven't.

I am a creature of the theater, in all its forms, from radio and stage to movies and television. The acting bug bit me when I was four or five, living with my mother and her parents on the second floor of a stucco house at 1826 West Broadway in Minneapolis. That was when my mother used some early form of phonics to teach me the most famous dramatic utterance in the English language, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from *Hamlet,* a meditation on the meaning of life and death by the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare.

I remember standing facing Mother as she sat almost motionless in my grandfather's wooden rocking chair, repeating the words in a rhythm that locked the soliloquy in my brain forever. When I finally knew all the lines and could recite the speech from beginning to end, she said, "Now you are

an actor." And that's when my destiny was forged during a hot summer week three-quarters of a century ago.

I guess the expression we used back then to describe the kind of person I became is "a show-off." But from that summer on, I did everything I could to try to understand what this pretending to be someone else was like, and how to do it so people would pay attention to me. I'm sure a shrink would have much to say about the process (little of it positive). But it all made me mysteriously, completely happy.

Of course, as a child of five, I had no idea what Shakespeare's gorgeous language, so encrusted with metaphor and fraught with feeling, was all about. All I knew was that the words seemed to make people smile and applaud whenever I recited them at my mother's instigation. And recite them I did, in venues that included Fourth of July celebrations, picnics in North Commons Park, firehouse parties, Catholic church socials, Easter and Christmas doings, and family gatherings. No wonder those thirty-five lines remain imprinted in my brain to this day.

I was six in the summer of 1939 when I traveled on my own for the first time, journeying to Chicago on the mighty Twin Cities Hiawatha train with my name, address, and telephone number written on a piece of Captain Marvel stationery pinned to my short-sleeved shirt. I was beside myself with excitement. Mother had sent for me so that I could meet the man who would be her new husband and my stepfather, John Ladd Connor. (She and my father, radio actor Walter Vaughn, had separated some six or seven years before.) Mother and John had just finished several seasons acting with the Chicago Federal Theatre, the regional branch of the first and only government-subsidized theater in American history. But the Federal Theatre Project had been abolished that June—alas—mainly because of Congressional umbrage over the alleged Communist sympathies of the writers, actors, and directors it employed.

In that final season of Federal Theatre, John Connor and Ian Keith had alternated in the Shakespearean roles of Othello and Iago—the noble, misguided hero and the mysteriously malignant villain. This was quite a

coup for John. Keith was a nationally acclaimed actor, widely considered the most brilliant American player of Hamlet in the first half of the twentieth century with the sole exception of the great John Barrymore (himself remembered today, if at all, merely as the grandfather of Drew rather than as the towering figure he was). When Keith played the role of the melancholy Dane, John Connor played his uncle Claudius, while my mother played Gertrude. (In an earlier production at the Minneapolis Federal Theatre, she had been Ophelia.)

So *Hamlet* was in the air around me as I was growing up, if not in my blood. But by that summer of '39, with the Federal Theatre a memory, John and Mother were broke, keeping the wolf from the door by tending bar and hostessing a popular dice game called 26 at a bar on Division just off State Street, Chicago's main drag. And that was where I joined them during that steamy late-Depression summer, excited to glimpse the grown-up big-city world of Chicago and the theatrical crowd among whom my mother and her husband-to-be moved.

It so happened that, that same summer, a little opus titled *My Dear Children* was occupying the Selwyn Theatre in Chicago, and starring in that production was none other than Jack Barrymore himself. He'd been on the road for nearly a year with the show, selling out theaters in nearly every burg he played. The play itself was eminently forgettable; the sole attraction was Jack's freewheeling, moderately drunken interpretation of the leading role, which found him sitting on the front apron of the stage, chatting amiably with the audience and telling slightly off-color jokes. Audiences seemingly couldn't get enough of the celebrated movie star's booze-soaked meanderings, and when he finally left the stage he inevitably received a standing ovation.

With Barrymore the play's single great asset, the producers knew that protecting his value called for prudent planning. They'd hired a six-foot-six male nurse named Karl whose job it was to escort the star on his nightly crawl of the near-Northside bars, finally delivering him in the wee hours to his splendid digs at the famed Ambassador East Hotel, where an oxygen

tent that Karl was licensed to operate had been installed as a precautionary measure.

The bar on Division Street was one of Barrymore's favored spots. One particularly warm August night, I accompanied Mother there as she delivered a large bowl of Irish stew—one of the few dishes she could cook—for my stepfather's post-midnight supper. Jack and Karl were holding forth among a crowd of admirers at the bar. Barrymore, seemingly unaffected by the sweltering heat, was wearing his black cloche hat and a black opera cloak and brandishing his FDR-size cigarette holder. It was my first glimpse of the great man whose name I'd heard mentioned so often in tones of hushed reverence.

Fortified by a Tom Collins or two, Mother decided that this would be the night that Jack Barrymore would get to see her little son's *Hamlet* act.

She grabbed me by my tiny shoulders and thrust me forward at the feet of the legendary star. "Go ahead, Robert," she prodded. The circle around Barrymore grew still; the great man himself leaned toward me, an indulgent smile on his face. All eyes were on me. It was a feeling I was already learning to recognize . . . and to like.

Leaning against a bar stool, I struck a dramatic pose and launched into the great speech with all the dignity and pathos a six-year-old could muster:

> To be, or not to be: that is the question.
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune . . .

And so on, through all those ringing, memorable phrases—"To sleep? Perchance to dream," "The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely," "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveler returns," and all the rest. When I concluded with the words "And lose the name of action," my small audience burst into applause, and Barrymore himself

rose to his feet and, at the top of his mighty lungs, roared, *"More, lad, more!"*

Unfortunately, I was a one-trick pony. But Mother, no doubt tickled by the star's reaction, encouraged me to reprise the great soliloquy . . . which I did, several times.

Before returning to school in Minneapolis in September, I managed to entertain the great man on several other evenings, adding some lines from "Casey at the Bat" to vary the entertainment.

Three years later, Barrymore was dead. He was just sixty years old.

And that was the extent of my acquaintance with either *Hamlet* or John Barrymore for most of my youth. Some time in junior high school, when I was thirteen or fourteen, I came across *Good Night, Sweet Prince,* journalist Gene Fowler's 1944 biography of (and tender tribute to) his friend John Barrymore. And I remember occasionally reading aloud from the play to classmates in my North High School journalism class, to general incredulity (not to say boredom). Otherwise, I did not get involved with the play again until my freshman year at the University of Minnesota.

In the spring of 1952, I was in my final quarter at the U, where I was majoring in journalism, covering boxing and football for the *Minnesota Daily,* and squeezing theater and radio courses into my spare time. The previous summer, I had driven to California with my recently widowed mother. John Ladd Connor had died of the demon drink in March 1951, at the age of thirty-nine. The doctors at Roosevelt Hospital called it the worst case of cirrhosis of the liver they'd ever seen in a man so young. I was brokenhearted.

But before I made my permanent departure for the coast, Chuck La Beaux and I decided to spend spring break at Mardi Gras in New Orleans. (Chuck was my closest childhood friend and became a member of the high-IQ society Mensa, a rare distinction in those days.) It sounded like a pleasant way to squander a little of what was left of the money my father, Walter Vaughn, had willed to me after his death in January 1950. But the

day before Chuck and I were to leave, someone told me there was a note for me on the Scott Hall bulletin board from Dr. Frank Whiting, the dean of the drama department. (Whiting was friends with Dr. Tyrone Guthrie, the great Anglo-Irish director, and a little over a decade later the pair would join forces to create the famous Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Their opening production would be—of course—*Hamlet*.)

Dr. Whiting's note was to the point: Jim Schroeder, one of the school's leading actors, had had to bow out of the role of Laertes in the department's spring semester production of *Hamlet*. Would I consider playing the role? *Would I?!* I immediately canceled my travel plans and went directly into rehearsal. I was later told that this was the first time in the history of the department that a freshman had been given a principal role in a senior main stage production.

The play went well, and at the end of the run, Dr. Whiting sent me another note. His decision to offer me the role of Laertes, he confessed, had been a hasty one, and he'd worried about it many times since. But now he'd realized it was the single best decision he'd made in casting the show.

When I ran into Dr. Whiting near the end of the school year, he said he'd made tentative plans to do some summer productions on a riverboat on the Mississippi. "Would you consider playing Hamlet if I need you?"

I sure would—after all, I already knew the lines.

For one reason or another, the riverboat production didn't happen. But by now I'd been bitten—but good. In the fall of 1952, I enrolled at Los Angeles City College, where for the next year I would assault my fellow student actors with all the famous soliloquys from *Hamlet*—over and over and over. . . .



Lord Laurence Olivier famously described *Hamlet* as "the story of a man that could not make up his mind." And while that bland description can only hint at the psychological complexity and life-and-death import of the drama, the life goal of practically every post-Elizabethan actor has

been to play Hamlet. And there are as many Hamlets as there are men—or women—ready to play him.

I shared the same dream as most other thespians. And at the beginning of the sixties, I thought my moment had come. I was an aspiring young actor immersed in classes, workshops, and small-scale theater productions in Hollywood when I received a call from a man in Minneapolis. The much-discussed Guthrie Theater was preparing to open, and they were checking to see whether I was interested in playing the lead in their first production—*Hamlet*. My answer was an excited yes. I alerted my agent, Stan Kamen of the William Morris office (whom Steve McQueen had introduced me to), to negotiate a deal at *any* price.

Barely an hour had passed before Kamen phoned me back with deflating news. "No deal," he told me. "It has nothing to do with the money. They want you to sign on for an entire season as part of the Guthrie repertory theater. Your career's getting ready to take off, Bob. This is no time to go gallivanting off to fly-over country." (That's how Hollywood types then referred to what today are called the red states.)

I swallowed hard, took Kamen's advice, and notified the Guthrie that I was not available.

But that wasn't to be my only opportunity to play the melancholy prince. In the spring of 1960, I was pursuing an MA in theater arts at Los Angeles State College, the upper division of Los Angeles City College. The school had just built a multimillion-dollar theater, and I was already on campus preparing to direct my friends Tony Carbone and James Coburn in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*. The school's directors hatched a plan: Why not put on *Hamlet* to inaugurate the new theater, and feature that dashing young fellow Robert Vaughn in the leading role? I jumped at the chance.

I had relatively little time to prepare once my work on the Miller drama was finished. I immersed myself in the abundance of critical literature surrounding *Hamlet*. I learned all I could about the boy/man Hamlet and his inability to satisfy the demands of his murdered father's ghost.

I decided I must get a grip on the crucial *Hamlet* debate dating back to Tudor times: Was the ghost of King Hamlet a mere hallucination resulting from young Hamlet's grief and depression, or, as most Elizabethans believed, a true appearance of the soul of a dead loved one returning to beg for help from the living? Or was there some third explanation?

Most Christian belief consigns the dead either to heaven or to hell. But in Catholic theory, the majority of those who have passed are in a place beneath the earth called purgatory, waiting to be cleansed of their unexpiated sins and then transported to the eternal bliss of heaven. But old Hamlet is not asking for relief from the burden of sin—he seeks revenge for his murder through the killing of Claudius, stepfather of young Hamlet and husband to the recently widowed Gertrude.

Educated in Wittenberg, young Hamlet seems to share the more advanced doctrine of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Shakespeare's England—that there are no true ghosts, and that all seeming apparitions are delusions or, worse, disguised devils. But by the evidence of the play, his attitude wavers. First, Hamlet says he believes he has seen an "honest ghost." Then he becomes uncertain, saying, "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil." Needing further proof of the ghost's reality, Hamlet asks a troupe of visiting players to the Danish court to stage *The Murder of Gonzaga* before Claudius and Gertrude, but to include a play within the play, written by Hamlet himself. He hopes that when the players replicate the murder as described to him by his father's ghost, Claudius will betray himself and so resolve Hamlet's doubts.

Hamlet, then, is a man torn in several directions—between duty and doubt, certainty and fear, reason and faith, science and superstition. In this ambivalence we see one source of his enduring appeal for the actor.

Then there is the question of Hamlet's "madness." Is it real? Is it feigned? Does he move from sanity to derangement, or does he occupy some halfway zone between the two?

Over the centuries, scholars have argued for all these positions, and actors, including the greatest, have played Hamlet according to every imag-

inable theory. As for me, I believe that Hamlet crosses the line from sanity to insanity during his first confrontation with his father's ghost, and that he does so not willingly but helplessly. The same thing happens during his next and final contact with his father's spirit, during his visit to his mother's chambers after the play within the play has confirmed to young Hamlet his stepfather's guilt. In between these contacts with the ghost, I believe that Hamlet *simulates* madness when speaking with Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and so on. He does this deliberately, to test them and to provoke a revealing response. Hamlet all but admits his deception when he confides in Guildenstern, "I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." "Though this be madness," as Polonius properly observes, "yet there is method in it."

That Hamlet would feign insanity may seem strange or unbelievable, but it's not an unknown phenomenon in the real world. The voluntary production of psychiatric symptoms, known as the Ganser syndrome, nearly always affects men, especially those suffering from depression. In Elizabethan times, what we call today "clinical depression" or "situational depression" (the latter afflicting people suffering from such profoundly disturbing events as a divorce, the death of a loved one, or a serious illness) was called *melancholia*. Hence the epithet "The Melancholy Dane" often used to describe Hamlet.

Many years ago, I dubbed Shakespeare "the first lay analyst of Stratford-upon-Avon." The evidence for this observation was the nonpareil mind of his most famous and oft-performed character. But even licensed psychiatrists find it hard to decide whether Ganser syndrome is a genuine psychiatric disorder or just another all-too-human ploy in the battle for personal survival in a hostile world. So it's not surprising that the debate over Hamlet's madness should persist to this day.

My 1960 performance went well. The *Los Angeles Times* said my performance could be favorably compared to that of the Old Vic's John Neville—heady praise indeed for a young actor.

Hamlet has continued to follow me through life. I've seen some fifty Hamlets, from the British actor George Russell Meade, who was a bit portly, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (warm and sincere, but not terribly vulnerable, theatrical, or romantic) to Ralph Fiennes, on Broadway in 1995 (the best I've seen). I even recorded an album of *Hamlet* during my stint as television's Man from U.N.C.L.E.—a sincere artistic effort on my part, but a mere money-making gambit on the part of the record producers, I'm afraid, designed to capitalize on my fame among the teenyboppers of the mid-1960s.

I'm convinced that *Hamlet* will continue to fascinate me until I "shuffle off this mortal coil" and pass to "the undiscovered country from whose bourn, no traveler returns"—if there is such a country after all. And perhaps the final words that escape my lips will include some fragments of those thirty-five lines committed to memory in a Minneapolis summer oh so long ago . . . a show-off to the very end.