



BRIAN BLESSED

Michael "Atters" Attree met Barrel-voiced Thespian Brian Blessed at Berystede Hotel & Spa at Sunninghill near Ascot, to discuss luvvies, punch-ups, yetis, the Dalai Lama's sex life and climbing Everest in tweeds

Let's start with a few warm-up questions first. Are you a luvvie?

Oh no! Can I just say, down the road from here you've got Ken Brannagh. And he has a reputation of being a luvvie. Christ! He can't stand the whole luvvie thing. It's counter-productive. I suppose I can be objective about it, because 50 per cent of my life is exploration and 50 per cent is acting.

You were on the Basil Brush show in 1984. Was his tailor up to scratch?

Christ! I'm astonished at your questions!

They do get more intellectual....

I was doing Captain Hook to Basil Brush. And I was talking to him...

God, I actually remember this!

... and he kept saying "Brian!" and I kept looking at the actor in the box instead of Basil, and the director was saying, "Brian! You've got to stop looking at the

actor! You must look at Basil! We'll have to go again!" I bugged up all the filming.

When did the beard kick in?

It started in 1970, when I was doing a film called *Trojan Women*, directed by Michael Kakkiyannis who directed *Zorba the Greek*. I got the lead in the film, because it was really a Brian Blessed character: a great warrior with a heart. And I grew the beard for that.

Bravo! And you've kept it since then?

[Laughs uncontrollably for a long while] Oh, this is wonderful... I love you – Oh thank God, you're a hell of a character! [puts his arm around Atters] I mean, so many interviewers bore the arse off me...

When was the last time you engaged in a genuine punch-up?

My last fight was when we were making the film *The Last Valley* with Michael Caine. There were 60 Englishmen in that film, with all the stuntmen. 🐾



Photographs by Russ Bell

I'll kick your teeth down your throat and you'll never act again!



We were all in a restaurant one day and the Germans came in – it was like the Second World War – to have a go at us. I was at the door and as they were being knocked out I stood by the door to give them the last punch in the face! I think on odd occasions, I just thump people; I can't stand people being bullies in our profession. Even though people loved Oliver Reed in character, when he was drunk he was dangerous and nasty. He used to terrify people. Ken Russell directed *Prisoner of Honour* and Jeremy Kemp and I were in it, as well as Oliver Reed. Jeremy said to me, "I'm nervous about this film, because Oliver can be really violent and powerful." So I remember saying to Oliver, just before we started the film on the first day, "Oliver, people say when you drink, you get very violent, and I just want to say if you turn up here drunk or you get violent here, I will kick your teeth down your throat and you'll never act again."

What was your first job?

I had to leave school when I was 14 because my father was injured in the coalmines. I became an undertaker's assistant and I made coffins. I'm going to do a big television thing soon, a bit like the Tibetan Book of the Dead, all about death and the body. You see, it's taboo in the West... when you go to die

in Sama where the Dalai Lama was, the kids are all flying kites, and I said, "Why is everyone so happy?" The Dalai Lama said, "Well Brian, we teach them about death! We almost make them experience death as a child, and therefore they see they have no fear, and that death does not exist; life does." And so they're all happy. I used to find making coffins and putting the bodies in rather farcical! I had to wash the bodies, and they all belched and farted and God knows what else!

Have you ever had an out-of-body experience?

Well, the thing is, on the giant mountains, there's a change at 5000 feet, it changes again at 10,000... like on Mont Blanc. At 22.5 thousand feet, you have 18 days to live and when you die, you die of lack of atmospheric pressure, cosmic rays, ultraviolet rays, lack of oxygen etc... at 25,000 feet, you've got five days to live. At 28,000 feet...

You're dead?

In the 1920s, it was called the lifting of the veil, the point between life and death. So at 28,000 feet, you have one foot in life and one in death. There is now no oxygen, virtually, the cosmic rays are hitting you...and you experience fluidity, and you know ✓



you can go. And therefore I have experienced out-of-body experiences several times. And I've brought myself back again. And I'm the oldest man to get to that height without oxygen.

You followed George Mallory in his Everest adventure. How far did you take the re-enactment in tweed?

At the age of seven, I read in the *Hotspur* comic about Mallory and the Everest expedition of 1924, and I resolved to follow in his footsteps. The years went by and I went to drama school and I managed to get a scholarship, but this dream remained there. And then the mountaineers and other people said, "Brian we'd love you to do it and tell the story and follow in his footsteps." Christ Almighty, it took ages to mount it, because it was £500,000 and too expensive for a documentary and too cheap for a drama. Eventually, the BBC agreed to finance the whole thing. Alan Yentob said "Oh, make the bloody thing!" because we'd pestered him so much.

When they suddenly said yes, I thought, 'Christ. I'm 53.' And the doctor said, "You're fit, you bastard, but there's a good chance you're going to drop dead at any second." And Chris Bonnington said, "Brian, if you get to 21,000 feet on Everest you'll never get up the North Col. But get to the base of the North Ridge, and you can probably finish the film then, but you'll probably never get any higher...and you're wearing tweeds? Christ!" Anyway, we got all the tweeds, all the leather and furs and cotton underwear, and we discovered that they worked very well. All our modern stuff was causing problems. Plastic boots give people frostbite, because your feet sweat.

The 13th Dalai Lama was the one who blessed

Mallory in 1924. Well, he's dead. And the 14th Dalai Lama was the one who re-enacted the ceremony. So we went to Darjeeling and went on all the steam railways that Mallory went on. And eventually we got to Everest and I suddenly turned round the corner in Tibet after many months, and it's just sort of... there! And I said, "I'm 16 miles away and suddenly Mallory is real. He's just up there." We weren't going there to find his body, or ghoulishly dig for graves, but pay tribute to these great climbers and their great ideals.

Reinhold Messner, the first man to climb Everest without oxygen, said to me: "Brian, the last step depends on the first step and the first step depends on the last step. From this moment, you are now climbing Everest. You must listen to your heart, you must listen to your brain, you must listen to your body, you will start to use instincts, you'll start to use things in your body and operate differently. Brian, you will lose about 127 million brain cells. Do you understand that? But you'll get new brain cells. You'll never recover them, but others take over, and you'll develop a new kind of brain." So as an actor...

Extraordinary! [With a mouthful of chicken sandwich]

The director, David Breashears, said to me, "Brian, this morning, move up on the north ridge. Early morning, it looks magnificent." And I thought, 'F***ing hell, I'm on me own, I'm on the north ridge. And I'm heading up the north East Ridge where Mallory's body is. And I started going up there. And it was wonderful on film – my veins are pulsating, the weather's all right, so up I go: 24, 25, 26, 27,000 feet, Breashears caught me up with five Sherpas, filming away and I got exactly to the point where Mallory disappeared. We weren't allowed to get to the summit, the Chinese wouldn't let us. We got right to the point where he was last seen, so we could complete the film. Jesus, it was marvellous. And of course all the children in Tibet think I'm a yeti. Because you see Tibetans and Sherpas can't grow beards.

Oh, I see!

When Sir John Everett was sending out several Generals, orienteering, mapping the country, of course they were in tweeds and their hair goes to here. ✓

Their beards go to here because they've been out in the wilderness for three years, and they come into a village saying "Hello, hello, hello!" and the lights go on and there's a f***ing yeti! They've never seen anyone like that in their life! So many westerners have been shot as a yeti!

Tell me more about meeting the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama was amazing. I mean, we talked about his sex life and everything. He shocked his translator! He believes in reincarnation and all that, he's a God King... but he said, "Sometimes I do miss a beautiful woman." And then he said, "I do my mantras louder and then take a cold shower."

Out there, with BBC cameras and Breashears and all that, we started filming and when you're with him you're utterly honest. We lie in silence, we lie in noise and he'll be out there in his big villa and I was going, "Out! Out! Out! Stop being so impatient, your holiness! You're the Dalai Lama, self realized and you're a human Buddha and you're so impatient! Out out! We're not ready."

And he loved all that. And at the end of it all, I said, "You know, your holiness... (when you're with him, it activates things inside your head) "You make me sick! You're so bloody good! And look at me: I've chinned a few and all that. Don't you ever, ever get mad?" He says, "Yes, the other day I was going abroad, and the Doctor had to inject my arm and he stuck it in too deep and it hurt and I thought 'I hate that Doctor! He was a terrible doctor, he was fatter than...'" And I said, "You were going to say he was fatter than me, weren't you? I am hurt, your holiness!" And he says, "Forgive me!" And the camera crew couldn't believe it, they filmed it all. I said, "On your knees!" and the Dalai Lama went on his knees and I said, "It's ok, I'm a forgiving man, get up." "Oh, thank you so much!" he replied. He's a wonderful f***ing comedian! And he's got Joe Louis's boxing gloves!

A lovely, lovely man. I said to him, you're the most fortunate of all the Dalai Lamas, but you're also the most unfortunate because you lost the kingdom. And he went, "Yes, yes. Love enemy. It's easy to love, but loving your enemy is the acid test, Brian." So I said, "So you love the Chinese?" "Yes." "You do realise, as I talk to you, they're in Tibet. Tibetan women have got their legs wide open and there's

nurses and doctors sterilizing them. They're going to wipe you out. You still love them? He says, "Yes, they are unhappy, Chinese here in Tibet. It's too high for them." He was so impressive. Nothing negative about him. He really genuinely loves all.

What in your opinion is the best part of your body?

Oh I love that I've got a huge 53-inch chest! And I can bench-press 400 pounds and I'm 76 years old. My feet! I've got deformed feet from my parachute jumping. People ask how I climb mountains and the thing is that I did 76 parachute jumps, and one day we missed the airfield and landed on concrete. Some broke their necks and backs and legs but I smashed my right foot. So therefore I have a bit of a wobble when I walk. In films you'll notice it a bit; people think it's a character thing but it's not, it's me!

Have you ever followed any fashions?

No, but I've always loved a blazer. I like f***ing blazers [gestures to the one he's wearing]. I've got different blazers. I mean, the point is, that I'm only half-dressed, and I've not got it down below, you see [points to his unironed navy blue trousers]. The thing is, I've got plenty of underwear, about five blazers, a few shirts and that's it. Because I've got so many animals, and there's so much hay everywhere, that all my money goes on looking after all those animals.

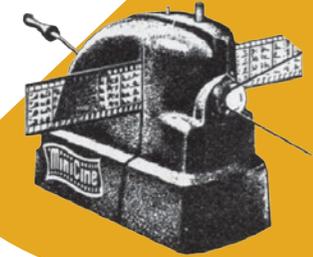
Right! Where's my present?

I didn't realize [said rather sheepishly]. I'd have brought something. I'll tell you what - I have something quite esoteric for you and I'll make sure you get it. On Everest, at 27.5 thousand feet, Mallory was found on something called The Yellow Band. It's kind of this lovely yellow ore. I will send you a piece of the yellow band from 28,000 feet.

It looks like gold. When you see it, it flashes.



FILM REVIEWS



By Robert Chilcott

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL BLIMP

ITU Studios Home Entertainment, 12.99

Now considered to be the first of their five-year run of masterworks, and indeed claimed by many as Blighty's very own *Citizen Kane*, Powell and Pressberger's 1943, nearly three-hour-long Technicolor epic was in fact butchered into a 90-minute version after its initial release and left unrestored until the 1980s. In this new Blu-ray version of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, even more of the dirt has been scrubbed up, though, like its battle-scarred hero, every classic needs its scratches, lost frames, lens flares and blemishes.

While referencing the comic strip of Colonel Blimp by David Low, it was actually a deleted scene from their previous film, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, that provided the inspiration, the line "You don't know what it's like to be old". This movie version traces the 40-year journey of Major General Clive Wynncandy, from the Boer War through the trenches and up to the Blitz, and the friendship he maintains with a German officer, who is portrayed as more down to earth and realistic than his British counterpart.

Having worked their way up through the system,



Powell and Pressberger, under their nom-de-plume "The Archers" and with their own five-point manifesto, including: "No artist believes in escapism. And we secretly believe that no audience does. We have proved, at any rate, that they will pay to see the truth, for other reasons than her nakedness", ensured their idiosyncrasies and their romantic pessimism were at odds with the mainstream. In satirising the British army, they could just as well be mocking the local film industry and its bureaucratic heads of department.

Original choice for the lead Laurence Olivier wasn't allowed leave from the Navy, so the main role went instead to the wonderful Roger Livesey, in the first of many collaborations with the filmmakers. In a vigorous mix of pomp and bluster, all "Me auld 'orse, me auld steeplechaser", his Blimp, too fair 🐾



to hit back, stands stubborn in his belief that good manners are the most important thing. After a dispute in a café with the German Kaunitz while on leave in Berlin, he is ordered to a duel with a randomly chosen officer (Anton Walbrook). The camera pans away from the swordfight, perhaps realising its futility, and we next see them in a convalescence home where they recover from their wounds, and where they become firm friends (Blimp's subsequent moustache covers up the permanent scar on his stiff upper lip).

The film was heavily scorned by the Sidneyan Society, a rightwing Presbyterian Scots outfit, in an extended propagandist pamphlet: "A highly elaborate, flashy, flabby and costly film, the most disgraceful production that has ever emanated from a British film studio." Even Churchill considered banning it, and Powell was informed that if it was screened he would not receive a knighthood. Powell's gravestone read 'A Film Director and an Optimist' – and while the film explores that incurable condition of what it means to be English, Powell points out that this 100%, arguably Great, British film was photographed by a Frenchman, written by a Hungarian, scored by a German Jew, costumed by a Czech, and the leading players Austrian, Scottish and Welsh.

Often suggesting that Britain needs to fight dirty in the face of such an evil enemy, our hero, unable to accept change, stands firm: "The Germans have bombed hospitals, sunk ships, used poison gas, and we won – clean fighting, honest soldiering, have won". While Blimp himself is sometimes a reactionary old buffoon, the film is sympathetic, paying tribute to the irascible obtuseness of a certain type of upper-class Englishman, and the paradoxical nature of the British character and resolve. Pompous but proud, Blimp is ultimately defeated by his own common sense and reserve: "Nobody starts to fight foul until he sees he can't fight any other way". Just

as he won't concede to Nazi methods, nor is he able to declare his love for his dear Edith, letting her marry his Prussian stiffneck pal, he spends the rest of his days attaching himself to those that resemble her (all three parts are played by Deborah Kerr).

Perhaps the film is more a love story, an elegiac hymn to memory and loss. Even though Walbrook gets the dame, war becomes the enemy of love for both men – the gallant German officer finally arrives in the UK as a sad refugee from the Nazis. Powell and Kerr were lovers, though he refused to move to Hollywood when her MGM contract beckoned. They shared a birthday and every year on 30th September, right up to the year before his death, he sent her a bouquet of flowers with the note: "Happy Birthday, Darling."

For trivia chaps, there is a reference early on in the 1902 sequence where Candy claims to have met Arthur Conan Doyle, then publishing *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in installments in *The Strand* magazine: "A bit of a facer for poor old Watson, sir". The actor playing the subordinate Major Plumley in this scene had himself played Dr. Watson in a series of early talkies at Twickenham Studios a decade earlier, and the actor who played his Sherlock Holmes also appears in a small role later in this film.



FILM REVIEWS



By Robert Chilcott

Adelphi Diana Dors Double Bill

The Great Game
Miss Tulip Stays the Night
BFI, £16.00

Continuing its noble commitment to rewriting a parallel history of British Cinema, the BFI brings us another double bill of second-run features from the family-run Adelphi stable. *The Great Game* gives Diana almost top billing, though she's only in a handful of scenes, playing a second fiddle secretary to Thora Hird. Clad in a tight black dress throughout, the only significant contribution she appears to make to the drama is to ladder her nylons.

Miss Tulip Stays the Night stars Patrick Holt, a fellow graduate of Rank's Company of Youth, playing a successful crime writer, with Diana as his dotting wife. As always, Dors is introduced with an opening shot that caresses her calves, and in the first reel a clumsy plot diversion with a flat tyre affords her the chance to fall flat on her back in a muddy ditch.

The remaining hour has the couple holed up in a country retreat with a dotty old lady who mysteriously turns into a corpse by the morning. With cardboard sets, screen wipes, a flimsy drawing-room plot, bungling village bobbies on bicycles and a crackling microphone, it's a technically incompe-



tent effort. Shot at Nettlefold studios in Walton-on-Thames, its 'hilarious' set piece involves the copper, a Dixon of suburbia, slapsticking around with a faulty kitchen tap splashing water all over his face. Never allowed to aspire to anything more than quite good entertainment, it is of curiosity only as a time capsule artefact typifying the 'also-ran' production assembly belt of the time, prohibited from thinking outside the box or getting ideas above its station. "It isn't honeysuckle, it's wisteria." 🍷



The Bullet Bra of Suburbia

Robert Chilcott finds out what prevented Diana Dors from becoming the British Marilyn Monroe

Born in Swindon in 1931 to a railway clerk and a housewife, the young Diana Fluck's interest in cinema began at the age of three with regular trips with her mum to the cinema. A pampered child, at private school she wrote of her desires to be a Hollywood film star "with a cream telephone and a swimming pool". After a year at LAMDA she got a break as one of the earliest signings to the Rank Charm School, where pupils were trained in the techniques of cinema acting and handling the public, and how to behave themselves on and off set.

Uncredited walk-ons and bit parts followed, racking up a half dozen appearances as assorted dancers, delinquents and other pouting jailbait.

Her talent was swamped in an image, and the narrative of her private life would prove far more interesting than the films she made. She lost her virginity to Norwegian 19-year-old Gil Gynt, and took fellow actor Anthony Newley's virginity soon after.

In *Lady Godiva Rides Again*, Dors plays Dolores August: "Christened 'Doll', but the 'ores' was added just to give it class". The film itself is largely forgettable, but notable more for the debut appearance of Joan Collins as a fellow beauty queen, and also, in her only film screen appearance, Ruth Ellis. Dors struck up a friendship with Ellis, who had been groomed by Stephen Ward, and five years later would gain plau-



dit for her role in *Yield to the Night* as a woman sentenced to hang for murder. Dors would later count executioner Albert Pierrepoint as one of her pals.

During the filming of *Lady Godiva*, Diana met and married sleazy publicist Dennis Hamilton at Claxton Hall. She had forged her parents' signature of consent, and when the registrar challenged this, Dennis threatened to knock his teeth down his throat. Dors was clearly attracted to criminal glamour – she and Hamilton would become friends with property con-man Peter Rachman and The Krays. Somewhat inevitably, Hamilton became her agent-cum pimp, setting up Diana Dors Ltd. Billing her as the English Marilyn Monroe, Hamilton ensured she had the lifestyle attachments of a sex-symbol – she was the youngest registered owner of a Rolls Royce at 20, even though Hamilton had got it on HP and smooth talking.

At their Thameside residence they would host sex parties, with cine cameras concealed behind two-way mirrors, setting up starlets with producers in order to 'influence' them with some mutual benefits. One victim of the set-up was a 24-year-old Bob Monkhouse, who rumbled their game early on and chickened out – though he did have his own moment of privacy with Dors a few years later.

Hamilton discouraged Dors from serious dramatic roles, claiming that art films wouldn't break her in Hollywood. Deferring to his judgment, she turned down a role with Laurence Olivier in *The Beggar's Opera*. While her film work remained on the modest side of tit-

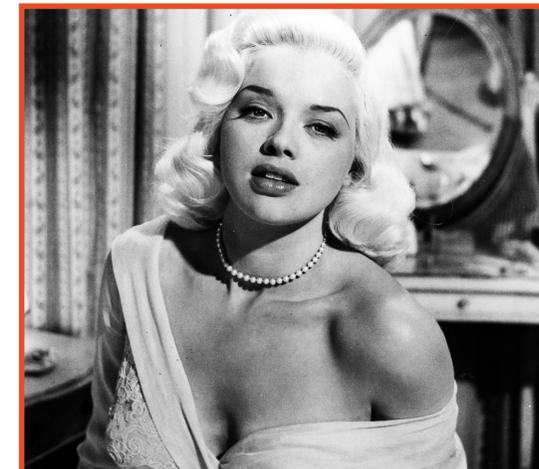


illating, Hamilton did cash in on the first 3D boom and produced a nude booklet of Diana. They moved to Hollywood in 1956, and a five-picture deal was secured with RKO, but this was cut short after a launch party ended up with Hamilton beating up a photographer. Following an alleged affair with Rod Steiger, RKO cancelled her contract. Hamilton later held a shotgun to Dors and demanded she sign over all assets to him.

Complicit with the tabloids in controlling her media image, Dors, in order to pay off the taxman for her extravagances, serialised open and frank interviews, detailing all the real and fake celebrity participants in her engineered Babylon of orgies. The mayor of Swindon denounced her for bringing shame on the town.

A career in America did come to fruition a few years later, though it was the Vegas cabaret circuit and small screen variety shows that exploited Diana, doing comedy skits with her second husband, comedian Dickie Dawson. Returning to Britain in the mid sixties, her hourglass figure and seaside postcard cleavage had become anachronistic, with the new youth of Biba twiglets and mop tops. While the majority of her films were forgettable, her prolific diversity, perhaps more by accident than design, ensured her a place in some recently rediscovered gems, including Jerzy Skolomovski's *Deep End*, with Jane Asher, also released on the Flipside label.

“THEY ASKED ME TO CHANGE MY NAME – THEY WERE AFRAID THAT IF MY REAL NAME DIANA FLUCK WAS IN LIGHTS AND ONE OF THE BULBS BLEW...”



By the 1970s, the image of Diana that most endured was that of the brassy old trollop, a Hurricane in Mink, first in the short-lived sitcom *Queenies Castle*, then via a slew of inept sex comedies – *Keep it Up Downstairs*, *The Amorous Milkman* – and some less softcore ones, such as her brothel madam in Jo Sarno's exploitative *Swedish Wildcats*. In the 1980s she turned up as the Kommandant in *The Two Ronnies'* cross dressing yarn *The Worm That Turned*, and her iconic status was immortalised as Cinderella's Fairy Godmother in the pop video for Adam & the Ants' *Prince Charming*.

Finally finding love and happiness with third husband, alcoholic actor Alan Lake, Diana wrote several more volumes of sensational autobiography before settling into the role of agony aunt on TV-am, also offering dieting tips. Anne Diamond recalled that she would shed pounds of weight merely by removing her jewellery. For her last film role, she finally went topless for director Joseph Losey's *Steaming*, alongside Vanessa Redgrave and Sarah Miles, as a group of women who protest at the closure of their local sauna. Never the best friend of HMRC, a Channel 4 documentary asked viewers to decipher a coded sheet of paper that may lead to an estimated £2 million fortune hidden in banks all over Europe. The Kinks paid tribute to Diana in the lyrics to their 1984 song *Good Day*: "She couldn't act much, but she put on a show/ She always smiled, even when she felt low/I used to fancy her a long time ago." 🐘