

IAN CLARK

Jamie Farr was feeling sick. The American actor, best known as Corporal Klinger on M.A.S.H., was set to star in a play at Theatre Aquarius in Hamilton, opening in a few days. When it became clear that Farr would be unable to continue, an urgent call went out for a replacement – and the phone rang in a neat suburban home in Kingston's west end with a simple question – Could Ian Clark come and save the day?

Within hours, Ian was packed and speeding down 401 to Hamilton, where he would be thrown headlong into Farr's lead role, with barely one week of rehearsal. On top of that, he had a prior commitment as a guest star on Murdoch Mysteries, which required him to be on set for a full day of filming the day before the play opened. If that sounds daunting, Ian admits that it was. But he carried it off and according to the Hamilton Spectator: "Ian Clark is perfect – playing a sexy senior with Viagra in his pocket and mayhem on his mind, he nails this comedy, lobbing home every zinger with crack timing and welcome warmth ... It's a hit!" So save the day he did.

Such is the life of Ian Clark, Kingston's busiest and most successful actor, who's worked with the likes of Richard Burton, Bette Midler, Christopher Plummer, and Nicolas Cage, who's been a member of the Stratford and Shaw Festival companies, who's starred on stages from Montreal to Miami, who's hitched a ride on Dan Aykroyd's personal jet, and who lives quietly under the radar in Kingston, his home town for 34 years.

Ian was born in Sheffield, England where his father was a family doctor and his mother an operating theatre sister (a head nurse in our parlance.) In 1966 when Ian was 16 his father received a job offer from Canada and the family moved to Oshawa.

Far from objecting, Ian was all in favour. "It sounded very adventurous."

Ian attended R.S.McLaughlin High School where two events occurred that would shape his life. He met his future wife Beverly. And he discovered acting.

Ian clearly remembers the moment that first tweaked his fascination with acting. "It was seeing the film Becket with Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole. I'd like to do that," he thought to himself. "And I think I can." Did he want to be Burton? Or O'Toole? "I didn't want to be either. I wanted to be Ian D. Clark." In a serendipitous twist, years later, Ian's first film role was in Equus, starring Richard Burton. More important than the role - "A tiny one. Blink and you'll miss me." - was the fact that he was hired as Burton's stand-in. So for six weeks Ian was on set every day, observing Burton at work with the great director Sidney Lumet (Network, The Pawnbroker). As Ian remembers it: "Acting schools weren't common then and I had no formal acting training. I learned on the job, by doing, by watching people who were better than me. And those six weeks on Equus were like a master class with the masters - Burton and Lumet. Watching them, listening to them and the other actors, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. And Lumet even forgave me for falling asleep in his director's chair one day - a classic no-no for an aspiring young actor."

In high school Ian landed his first role in the old chestnut Ten Little Indians. And while he enjoyed it, the acting bug hadn't fully taken hold. He and Beverly went to McGill and while taking an honours degree in English and French, Ian put his nascent acting career aside. "Acting seemed like a dream - not reality. In the real world I thought I'd probably become a lawyer or a prof."

In fact, he'd taken the first step towards an academic future - working on a Masters in English Lit - when another serendipitous incident changed everything. Walking down a hall at McGill he was stopped by a man who asked out of the blue "Are you an actor?" Ian said no, but something gave him pause ... and when the man reappeared Ian changed his answer. "Yes," he said. "I am an actor." It turned out that the man was an English prof involved in mounting three plays by Yeats and was looking for actors. To this day Ian has no idea why the man asked him in particular. "But I'm glad he did." Ian took a part in all three plays and from that moment the die was cast.

Now thoroughly hooked, Ian became heavily involved with Theatre Encounter, a student-run company that staged shows at the Saidye Bronfman Centre in Montreal. Ian's work attracted attention in the theatre world and he was invited to join the newly formed Theatre Compact in Toronto which, says Ian, "included Gordon Pinsent, most of the best known actors in Canada - and me." This led to his first paying gig in the Irish play *Da*, and the first of several critic's awards he's garnered over the years for his acting. "I got my first pay cheque and realized - I'm not going to be a lawyer or an academic. I'm an actor."

Indeed, Ian became so busy with his acting career that his M.A. fell by the wayside and he ended up taking six years to finish his thesis - "using every deferral in the book and some not in the book, including the untimely deaths of a few fictional relatives." He did finally land the elusive M.A., but has no regrets about the academic career that never materialized. "I've always loved acting," he says. "I've never looked back."

Ian's work on stage soon drew the attention of TV and film producers and casting agents and he was launched on a lifelong

journey of auditioning for parts, large and small. He remembers his first TV audition. "It was for a cool dude with hair down to here, cowboy boots propped up on his desk, who looked like a rock star. I was young and green and I thought that must be what TV producers looked like." Only later did Ian learn that the "rock star producer" was, in fact, Zal Yanovsky, who had a brief stint in the TV business between performing with The Lovin' Spoonful and becoming Kingston's most famous restaurateur. Ian didn't get that part but didn't hold it against Zal, and they had a laugh about it years later at Chez Piggy.

Meanwhile, Beverly had earned her teaching degree and done some practice teaching in Kingston and fallen in love with it. Ian visited on weekends and fell in love with the place as well. In 1984 when he and Beverly were married they settled in Kingston and it didn't take any arm twisting on her part. Toronto may be the centre of the Canadian theatrical universe, but to Ian Kingston is the perfect city. "It has so much – the waterfront, lovely stone buildings, excellent health care, a vibrant cultural scene – art, music, theatre – and my favourite spot on a summer day – the patio at Chez Piggy. It's like Aspen without the ski hill." As a bonus, Ian and Beverly's daughter Taryn also lives in Kingston.

By now Ian was working regularly at major regional theatres from coast to coast as well as the prestigious Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. At the same time he was in steady demand for work in film and TV. Even if they don't know his name, many will recognize Ian's face from his roles in shows such as Anne, Alias Grace, Saving Hope, Rookie Blue, The Associates, The Arrow, Wind at my Back, Traders, Robocop and many more.

One of his most prominent roles was on the popular series Road to Avonlea. In one of those curious connections that seem

to pop up in his life, while living in Yorkshire, his parents holidayed in Canada and stayed at Dalvey by the Sea Resort in P.E.I., which they particularly loved. Little could they have imagined that years later they would see their son on TV playing Simon Tremayne, the owner of this very hotel – called White Sands in the series but, in fact, Dalvey by the Sea.

In addition to acting, Ian, multi-talented, also squeezes in some writing. A comedy he co-wrote and starred in, A Collection of British Rubbish, toured from Western Canada to Boston and was optioned for Broadway. That deal fell through at the last minute, one of the few lingering regrets Ian has. Another co-written comedy, For a Good Time Call ... premieres in Warsaw, Poland this year.

Ian views the fact that he often goes unrecognized in his home town with wry good humour. It's somewhat of an oddity that he's never actually appeared on stage in Kingston, primarily because he's generally busy elsewhere and there's a dearth of professional theatre here. He does act frequently at the Thousand Islands Playhouse where audiences loved him in shows such as Trying, Tuesdays with Morrie and Till It Hurts.

Ian's hectic and unpredictable schedule doesn't allow much time for outside hobbies. "When you love what you do, your work is your hobby," he says. He played cricket in his days as a member of the Stratford and Shaw companies, and is an avid reader of mysteries in his down time between shows. Ian Rankin and Peter Robinson are particular favourites. He's also Beverly's chief assistant in their garden which she tends assiduously - "She points at the weeds I should pull" - and is an active member of Christ Church Cataraqui. He supports the Kingston Writers Festival and Kingston Film Festival, catches films regularly at the Screening Room, and was a charter member of the (sadly now defunct) Kingston Arts and Letters Club. In

spite of all his professional success, Ian is the farthest thing from a theatrical snob, and is a strong supporter of local community theatre, faithfully attending shows and encouraging the actors.

Given his long experience, does he have any advice for young actors? Ian is a modest chap, more given to self-deprecation than pontificating, but offers this: "Observe the people around you – their tics, their foibles, their verbal idiosyncrasies. They're your source material, your living lab. Have fun. Be persistent. And above all get used to rejection. It's the one unavoidable fact of an actor's life. The level of rejection for auditioning actors is about the same as for door-to-door bible salesman. But when you don't get a part don't view it as a failure. View it as one step on the road leading to the part you're going to get."

Ian's personal bugbear is not rejection. He's long since learned to deal with that. "It's the drive down 401. I do it almost every week and it's much worse than it used to be. I may have to spend seven or eight hours in the car in order to do a two minute audition." Two minutes? "Yes," says Ian. "For a commercial or a TV spot you generally get one take on camera – sometimes not even two minutes – and then it's 'thank you very much' and back on the road. And the law of averages being what it is, I probably won't get the part." So why does he persist? "Because it's fun. Not the drive, but all the rest of it. 401 is miserable, but it's a great place to rehearse lines. So I get the best of both worlds. I'm close enough to Toronto to pursue my career, and at the end of the day I get to come back to Kingston. Driving home, as I get closer, I can feel the tension starting to lift, my shoulders starting to relax. Kingston's a great place to be able to breathe."

Ian remains active and in demand to this day, often having to turn down roles because he's too busy. He's featured on the hit vampire web series *Carmilla*, on the new family series *Holly Hobbie*, and plays Annette Bening's lawyer in the Hollywood film *Georgetown*. Asked if he has a favourite role, he just smiles: – "The next one."

In other words, the phone is still ringing.

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Doug Bowie

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