

The first time I heard of Doreen Cannon and became aware of the awe and respect with which her name was spoken, was while reading of Simon Callow's fearful lessons with her in his book, 'Being an Actor'. He wrote of his terror of her acting exercises and her constant challenges to him, never letting him get away with any less than his utmost. But that was Doreen. Never letting you settle for untruthful, empty, stale work. Never letting you tread the stage at 'Amateur Night in Dixie', as she was to tell me so many times.

I was reminded of Callow's words when I started my training at RADA in 1989. In the changing rooms and the canteen, the main topic of student gossip would not be the tastiest guy or the top tottie of the year's intake, but who had Doreen Cannon or Jennie Buckman for Acting Exercises. I remember someone saying, "Oh, you must have heard of Doreen Cannon. She's the one that terrified Simon Callow." "Thank God I'm with Jennie," I thought then, always happy to take the safe and easy option.

So, for the first year, I only heard about Doreen, or passed her in the corridors of the Academy. She was a striking and imposing figure, always dressed black trouser suits and wearing the most unusually beautiful and intricate necklace. I don't think I ever saw her without it. The only other brightness I associated with her, apart from her amazing personality, was her lipstick. She was never without that either. She was immaculate and precise in her dress and demanded the same in the work of her students. As time went on, I noticed despondency in the common room from her group. No one felt that they could get anything right. They doubted their talent – "She makes me feel I'm really shit"... etc. There was also laughter amidst this depression, though, when the legendary catch-phrases used to fly round, "Stop! Stop! Stooopppp! What are you doing!?" "This is like Amateur Night in Dixie!"

I was not to experience this myself until the first term of our second year and our first public show, which she directed. We were to perform Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* in Studio 14 and I was playing the consumptive Anna, the dying wife of the locksmith. It's a very dark, dense and moving play, full of characters who have all had hard, miserable lives and are trying to find a ray of light, some hope for the future, some reason for going on. Rehearsals took place in Room 12 and usually began with 'camels', an exercise in which you had to make a banana shape with your body, arched over, walking around on your hands and tip-toes. It was one of Doreen's brilliant animal exercises, designed to knock you off your centre and also to help you feel the exhaustion of these people. Around RADA you would find students doing exercises like this. I remember one time after asking Rachel Power why she was flapping and squawking around, being told, "We're doing *Glass Menagerie* with Doreen. I'm preparing for Amanda." These were such invaluable exercises and they helped so much. I don't know why I'm writing in the past tense, because I still use them.

During *The Lower Depths*' rehearsals, Doreen had us re-create the set in the rehearsal room, so it was our own familiar space, our home. We were given free rein to fill it with our own objects, make it ours. This familiarity was the foundation that made the play our own. We also worked on crucial relationship exercises. While I was working on such an exercise with my husband in the play, Jason Cheater, Doreen came over and whispered in Jason's ear. The next thing I knew, I had a whole pan of filthy potato water emptied over my head. It threw me completely off centre and humiliated me and I knew Doreen had meant this to be so. She always told me I was too aware of myself – Jane, spoilt, pristine, privileged. "You're just playing at being," she would say. Until this moment, I had found it so hard to let go of myself, to find Anna and her wants and needs. This really was a turning point for me.

Gradually, Doreen's technique began to dawn on me. It wasn't about this 'wanky method' as so many people who don't understand it call it. It was about using yourself, what you have, your imagination, your body and your life experiences, to fill and create the character, and her wants, needs and desires. Mind you, I don't think Doreen would approve of the way I'm talking about 'the character'. It was always 'I'. And 'using the method' meant understanding the physicality of your

part. Acting ill certainly didn't mean making yourself ill. As I said before, I was dying from TB and I wanted to find a hacking cough full of blood and phlegm. One day I really went for it in rehearsal. "Stop! Stop! Stoooppp! What are you doing? You are going to wreck your voice doing that. Go and work with Helen Strange (one of the voice teachers) on it."

The hard work was always rewarded, though. On the last night of the play, Doreen and her husband brought in coolboxes full of frozen vodka and caviar for the cast. This was what was so special about Doreen, those amazing touches. On the first night of the next play she directed me in, (the American play *Crimes of the Heart*), we all found a Reece's peanut butter cup and a silver quarter mounted on a beautiful, hand-made blue card, inscribed with a personal message on our dressing tables. I'd never had a Reece's before and chocolate and nuts are probably the worst thing in the whole world for the voice, but she, Meg, my character, would have done it, so I did. It was absolutely delicious and I've been addicted to them ever since.

Those are the wonderful things I remember about Doreen. Praise was rare and you had to work your socks off to earn it, but when it came, it was the best feeling in the whole world, just like our first and last night gifts and rewards, beautifully thought out and with a lot of love and kindness underneath.

*Crimes of the Heart* had a cast of six, four girls (all family) and two boys – ex and would-be lovers; so it was essential that it was a close cast. There was a lot of hugging and kissing but we were full of typically British reserve, which Doreen hated. "What is all this English kissing on the cheeks?" she said, and insisting we kiss on the lips like Americans. We were, however, united in one thing – hours. Lots of them. We'd start at ten a.m. and leave sometimes around ten p.m. We also rehearsed through weekends. There was lots of groaning about exhaustion and muttering about life and getting one, and we were often told that we didn't know about hard work and that if we were serious about acting then we had to put in the time. I know we were all suitably shame-faced, when Doreen told us about her training in America, getting up at some ungodly hour, commuting to work, going to acting class after work and then commuting home again.

"Doings create the sensations," she would say, and there were hours of doings while we gave Doreen the sense of the lines. She hated us just reading the sense of the lines – "Why do you all do this?" – without trying to find out what really lay beneath the lines, what we were really saying and making him or her 'feel'.

Doreen's creed was 'Acting is Fun!' Far from it for me, I'm afraid during that time. I found it painful, exhausting and stomach churning. I was filled with fears, tears and insecurities, though I didn't dare cry in front of her. I thought, "I'll never be able to do this," and all the common room chat of, "I'm shit, I shouldn't be here," was with me constantly.

I don't want to sound doom and gloom for there was always a lot of laughter in rehearsal. Doreen was incredibly funny and always the best fun to be around, with her particular 'stance' on things. Things that stick in my head most are her 'provisions' that she would bring for the day. She always had her can holder to keep her soda ice-cold as she liked it. This would be accompanied by a semi-frozen bottle of Evian. Drinks in England were never cold enough! Food for me then was way down on the list of my priorities, but I was fascinated by the huge and delicious-looking American-style sandwiches that she brought in. English food was never tasty enough. She was also like Mary Poppins with bananas – they just keep appearing and she would direct you with them, punctuating her sentences. One time, she was particularly exasperated with me and from the back of the rehearsal room I heard the familiar terse sucking of her teeth followed by that resonant, guttural, chest rattler of a sigh and then, "What are you doing?" I hadn't a clue and she knew it. She jumped up shaking her head, her arms and the partly un-zipped banana, which flew towards me with some force! She knew all the actors' tricks and could see straight through you. Thank goodness!

Doreen was tough but I never felt she picked on me or bullied me. She wasn't cruel or unkind, she just wanted us all to be the best we could. She cared. During this time, I know that Doreen was acutely aware of my anxiety. She wanted to talk to me privately about things and so asked me to be her guide when she had to drive to the Orange Tree in Richmond for an audition for a Russian play. What I wouldn't have given to be a fly on the wall in that audition that day. At times I thought we wouldn't get there, with Doreen throwing her automatic Mini around like a New York cabbie – "It's the best car for getting around London. You can park it anywhere." Which she did. She told me a wonderful story about her daughter, Dee, when she was 4 years old, sitting in the driver's seat of the car outside the house in New York, pretending to drive, flicking fingers and swearing obscenities at passing cars. When asked what she was doing, she said, "being my Mom."

Anyway, en route to Richmond we talked about my problems, why I had this 'eye to eye' interaction all the time, my physicality, observing myself, not losing myself and hardly ever being in action. Doreen felt that I was bringing myself into rehearsal – including my own clothes, which were totally unsuitable – 'I', Meg, wouldn't wear that. She said, "You'll use yourself differently if we find the right clothes, shoes, etc." So, she sent me off to the brilliant RADA wardrobe where I found the right stiletto mules. They did the trick. Immediately, I felt sexy and predatory. My inner rhythm changed. I had to use myself in a completely different way. They threw me right off balance, off my centre, as Doreen knew they would.

Doreen took the work home with her as much as we did. We committed because we knew she was – heart and soul. This became evident a couple of days later, when she presented me with a shirt. She said, "When Dee came round the other night, she had this on and I knew that it would be good for you, so try it. Wear it pulled up and tied in a knot. See how it makes you feel." She took the shirt off her daughter's back because she thought it was right for one of her students. That afternoon, in rehearsal, I had on my shirt, some tight leggings and my extraordinary footwear and instantly things felt different. During notes after the run, Doreen said, "It's coming. You're getting it. Now relaxez-vous!" I floated off to the coffee shop on Tottenham Court Road and had a huge cream cheese bagel in celebration!

Doreen, from day one, had had Charmian Hoare, then RADA's dialect coach, in to work with us on our Mississippi accents. In fact, we had to speak in that accent all the time, so it became part of us, in the body. Of course, American food was de rigeur and so Doreen asked Ron Li Paz, an ex-American Air Force pilot, to go to the 'PX' at the American Airbase in Ruislip with a shopping list, which included Aunt Jemima's pancake mix and sauce (I got to make and eat one every night) M&M's, Domino sugar (Suzanne Hichmough had to make a pitcher of lemonade every night and the English sugar wasn't sweet enough. Doreen was right, it was delicious and cold! The pitcher was jammed full of ice, of course!), Jergens hand lotion (for her, not for the play), Hershey's Kisses and a special kind of candy box that you can only get in the States. She had a phenomenal eye for detail. Creating the right environment, so that the actors as well as the audience felt involved and caught up in the world, was always vital to Doreen. I can remember her saying to me, after she'd been to see a play at the National, "I just didn't feel involved with the character. I didn't care about them or what happened to them," and that was hugely important to her. She had such a capacity for belief and trust. She would let you go as far as you could, or as big as you wanted, so long as it was filled and truthful. We trusted her completely, either to pull us back or leave us alone with it, but we always knew she was coming along with us. Her focus, concentration and energy were always present, positive and one hundred percent committed.

We were not always sure, during the run of *Crimes of the Heart*, whether Doreen was 'in' all the time. I know she would do this in order to keep us on our toes and stop us from thinking, "Oh well, I've set my performance, I'll just phone it in." Doreen always made you want to strive and to achieve creativity and fulfilment in performance. There was always a nervous buzz around all the dressing rooms as to whether Doreen was 'in' or not, because everyone valued and respected her

opinion and wanted positive feedback. There was always a lot of anxiety about asking Doreen's opinion, because you knew you were always going to get the truth straight up, no frills.

I was in rehearsal at the Shaftesbury Theatre when I read in the Guardian that she had died. It was a terrible shock, even though I knew she had been ill. She was such a fighter and I could never imagine the cancer getting the better of her. But she hasn't left me. I feel incredibly lucky to have worked with Doreen so closely and whenever I work now I still hear her voice in my head challenging and questioning, never letting me be just a 'talking head' and keeping me clear of 'Amateur Night in Dixie'.

And by the way, she was right. Acting is great fun and I thank her for showing me how to enjoy it.

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