



Pipeline interview of Roy Dotrice

by Steff Wilse

January 5, 1989 – From a lofty retreat somewhere in the mountains of California...

Q: How was your holiday?

A: Well, I'm still on it. It's great. We took a place up in the mountains in the snow. You need snow around Christmas. Sunshine and palm trees are wonderful in the summer, but they're not right for Christmas. So I've got a log cabin up in the mountains. It's only an hour and a half from Los Angeles but it really is delightful. It's a winter wonderland, every tree is like a Christmas tree. It's wonderful. The snow is coming down. We are in a storm at the moment and it's going to be very, very thick here in the morning. We're going to be snowed in and we're not going to be able to move out of here.

Q: I hear your mother came to visit; how is she enjoying it?

A: Yes, in fact, she spent her 92nd birthday with us on the 19th of December, just the day after she arrived. She'd never flown before and she had a great time, loved it. It's a 12 hour journey from London but she adored it, was wide awake the whole time. Taking in everything, naturally. Didn't miss a trick. She absolutely adores it up here in the snows. I start filming again on Tuesday so we'll be going down on Monday, back to Los Angeles for a few days. We just use this as a weekend place, basically.

Q: Could the snow make you late for next week's filming?

A: Oh no, if the worst comes to worst, I can get a helicopter in to lift me out. And that's what I'll have to do if it comes to it.

Q: That could be an adventure!

A: All part of life's rich pattern... I did the big thing at Christmas because my daughter Karen was here, my Mother, and my son-in-law, Alex Hyde-White, and my wife Kay, of course.

(Ed. note: Acting definitely runs in the family. A couple of Karen's best-loved performances are in "Mary Poppins" and "The 3 Lives of Thomasina." Her husband Alex (son of Wilfred) will be in an upcoming episode of "Newhart." Kay is also an actress, most recently starring with Roy in a rather kinky early '80's version of "The Corsican Brothers" – as Cheech and Chong's mid-wife!). I got the biggest sacks I could find which I filled with all sorts of goodies for them and I did the whole thing. We went to Christmas Eve service, Candle-mass, and that was wonderful. Then we went to supper afterwards. We came back here and eventually after several glasses of eggnog I got them off to bed. And when they were sound

asleep, I dressed up as Santa Claus and I got outside in the snow running up and down with jingle bells and things, pretending it was sleighbells. (Laughter) Then came in and made sure I woke up each one in turn, because they'd left me a glass of milk and a piece of cake you see, which you've got to leave for Santa Claus of course. And then I went into their bedroom, my son-in-law and my daughter's, and patted them on the head and made remarks like "My God (sniff-sniff), my God, they've been drinking whisky! Left me a glass of milk would they, when they've had whisky!" (more laughter). Made sure they saw the red form before he disappeared for another year. And then we had the sleighbells going up the street afterwards. Once an actor always an actor I'm afraid. Particularly a character actor – give 'im a pair of white whiskers and he'll do anything. (laughter).

Q: We had thought at first you were only going to have a working holiday – guest-starring in "The Equalizer." (The episode, "Trial by Ordeal," will air on CBS March 1st).

A: That's true, yes, I did that and finished up on Christmas Eve. On Monday, I think it was the 19th of December, I was filming on "Beauty and the Beast" until 4 o'clock and then I caught the "Red Eye" to New York and went straight to the studio. Started filming the next morning on "The Equalizer" with Edward (Woodward). I finished on the 23rd and got back here for the 24th. Then someone picked me up and brought me straight up to the mountains.

It was kind of a hectic week actually. It was sad in many ways that I didn't spend too much time with Edward, Michelle and the baby, Emily Beth (another daughter, and granddaughter), because it was a pretty tough schedule.

It was a very tough part for a start and I didn't think I was very good in it. It was the part of a prosecutor. "Control" (played by Robert Lansing) was on trial, a sort of mock kangaroo court brought about by the Company, and he was on trial for treason. It was made quite obvious that he was going to be executed by the Company if he was found guilty. He was defended by Edward; and I was the rather nasty prosecuting counsel.

Q: So this is a return to villainy in other words.

A: That's it, yes. Well, he wasn't exactly a villain, but he wasn't exactly sympathetic either. But it was a very, very difficult part because it's full of legal jargon and one had to get it right. There wasn't much time to learn it because we'd finish filming and I was getting home to Edward's place around about 8 o'clock. We'd have a spot of dinner and a couple of glasses of wine. All felt very sleepy and then we must go and learn our parts for 6 o'clock the following morning. Well, anyway it was nice to see them. I'm going to do a convention in New York in February, and so I'll have an opportunity then of seeing them again.

Q: Last year you attended your first convention...

That's right, in Denver.

Q: What was it like being on-stage without a script as 'twere?

A: Frightening.

Q: Frightening?

A: Because one had realized there were 5,000 people there at that hotel and nearly all of them had come to see the "Star Trek" people (fellow guests Michael Dorn and George Takei)... and who was this

idiot up there that's supposed to be "Father" from "Beauty and the Beast"? They were all science fiction people basically. The first day when I started my first question and answer thing and the little chat I gave them beforehand, it ran for about an hour and a quarter. When it started the house was half empty and by the time I finished they were standing at the back. So we had converted quite a few to "Beauty and the Beast" by then.

I did 4 one-hour autographing sessions and still didn't get through everybody.

One was amazed, because the whole "Star Trek" cult has been going on for umpteen years and yet we were getting almost as much interest and appreciation of our show after just one season. So that was remarkable for me.

It bodes well I think for the future because it does seem to me that whilst we carry on getting the critical acclaim and the Emmy and Golden Globe nominations I don't think, hopefully, the show is going to go off. I do think that this year the writing has been far superior to last year. We did have some very good episodes last year, but I think by and large all the episodes we've done this year have been much better. I think "Sticks and Stones" – I've only got one tiny scene in it. But Terrylene is an absolute delight.

Critically the show is very well received. It's a show that's very well thought of by people who think a bit – the literate side of our community. But unfortunately, it's not getting the ratings that it got last year. We never dropped to the 50's last year and we were at 52 today I see. But then that was a repeat last week, if you remember.

And we've had a couple of preemptions. People get into the habit of watching a particular show and if you deprive them of that for a couple of weeks then they get out of the habit. It's very easy to lose that habit and probably switch on to another show instead. It's a great pity when they preempt but I suppose they have their reasons for it.

I think from here on in for the rest of the season hopefully there won't be too many preemptions and I think the figures should build from now on. I hope so.

Q: So the "Back 9" are not threatened?

A: The Back 9 are not threatened because we've already been contracted for them, all of us. We were contracted for 22, unlike last year when we were contracted for 13 with the possibility of a Back 9, and there was a hiatus while they decided whether we were going to do a Back 9 or not. We actually know our finishing date for the 22, which is May the 5th. So it's pretty definite that we shall finish the season. I just hope that the figures improve and we make sure there are other seasons.

Q: What do you think of this season so far, as a whole?

A: It started off wonderfully well for me. The first five episodes I had 3 wonderful parts, in "Dead of Winter," and in "Ashes, Ashes" – naturally I had a good part in that. I was very hopeful that they were going to concentrate more on the Underground world. But the last 5 shows have not been frightfully good parts for me. I just hope that they start warming up again to the idea. What happens is that they seem not to use their regulars as much as I would like them to. When I wrote my episode (and I've written another episode which I don't think they've accepted), in both episodes I tried to use all the regulars. All the Marys and everybody. And now we've got people like Rebecca and William which I tried to use and to try to weave a story around them. And if there has to be a guest artist, then the guest artist has a comparatively small part.

But what has been happening recently, and you will see this more and more in the next month or so, is that they get some artist in to play a huge leading role and the regulars – apart from Catherine and Vincent, they have to be involved, obviously. But the regulars have very minor roles, Mouse, Pascal and all those people have practically nothing to do – including Father. I do wish they would sort of make it 50/50, and half of it would be Above ground and half of it Below in the Tunnels. We still haven't exploited those Tunnels to the limit yet. There are many, many stories to come out of them.

The sort of thing that would happen, there was this episode about this boy ("Fair and Perfect Knight"), and I remember in the first scene that I had with him I had these fond farewells and I had to say, "God bless you, and look after yourself, and I wish you luck," because he'd been down there for 16 years. But I'd never seen him before! Suddenly on the first take I said "God, I'm going to miss you, and I do hope you will do well in this, and God bless you, and it's been wonderful knowing you" – and all that. And at the end of this thing I turned 'round to Ron (Perlman) and said "Who the hell is he? What's his name?" Suddenly one's embracing these people that one's supposed to have known all of one's life. And that's what happens when you get these guest-stars in. They write an episode which has really nothing at all to do with the characters on the show.

I got very peeved with the last episode we did.

A, I had nothing to do and that always annoys me. B, what I had to do was totally inaccurate. It was about a chap that some 16 years ago had a drunken driving accident and had killed a child. He had broken from his confinement and sought refuge down in the caves; and Father knew about this and Father befriended him. He realized he was a reformed character and for the last 16 years he hasn't had a drink. And not only that, but he's brought up a family. He's got married down there to a girl in the caves and he's got a baby, a little tiny baby in a cradle. Because he's been spotted up above, Father says that he is afraid for the safety of the community and he has to give himself up. This was totally un-Father-like, you know. I had to do the scene and you will see the scene eventually. But I mean, there we are, we've had Russians down there, we've had all kinds of people down there. Young prostitutes who are pregnant and we've befriended them without ever questioning the fact that they would jeopardize our safety; and yet this poor guy has been down there totally reformed for 16 years, got a wife and kid, and there's a baby I'm rocking in the cradle and I'm saying, "Get on up there and give yourself up to the police!"

Sometimes new writers have been brought in, that don't understand the character of Father or Vincent. The gentle Vincent was saying things like, "Cathy tells me, as it's your first offense (laughter), that they might not give you the works." And that was the only kind of sympathy he was getting from us. Having lived with us for 16 years.

George Martin is wonderful and Alex and Howard are absolutely brilliant, and of course Ron Koslow is always spot on. But occasionally they get new people in who write episodes or sell episodes. They pitch an idea to Ron Koslow and he'd say "I like that; would you like to write it?" and if it's good enough then they accept it. Because they've got a lot of slots to fill. But not always, I think, do they fully understand the characters they're dealing with.

Q: Has Durrell Royce Crays, the fellow that worked on "Ashes" with you, stayed on?

A: No, a great pity because I thought he was wonderful. Such a good writer and I'd love to work with him on another episode because he so improved on my writing and my story. He was absolutely wonderful. And I've never met him! I would submit something and occasionally the twain would meet. Basically,

they brought my storyline and he wrote the screenplay; it's as simple as that.

Q: It's said that everything that's done in television is done so quickly that there's no way to preconceive anything very much; from the cameraman to the actors it's always done with a kind of professional intuition. Do you agree with that?

A: Yes, I think so. The intuition comes from knowing your character and you know instinctively when you are given words that do not fit your character. Invariably it's too late to do anything about it, because you get the script a day or two at the most before you start filming. And if you start throwing a cat amongst the pigeons at that stage and say "I think this scene ought to be rewritten," they're not terribly polite to you actually. Ron, of course, has a great deal of sway because he has to carry the show. And I've just been given to understand that the show was actually written for Linda. Therefore both these people have tremendous sway.

We are all desperate for the show to succeed, all of us connected with it. We want it to succeed and we want it to run as long as possible, and want to maintain as high a standard as possible. So, I think we should be allowed our little gripes, I suppose; everyone pitches in together, or it becomes an impossible situation.

Q: Something done by committee..

A: (A laugh) Right.

Q: Now for a few questions from Pipeline readers – one would like to know what it was like acting with Kirk Douglas (in "Heroes of Telemark," Roy's first film).

A: Kirk is a very tough professional; he demands perfection from everybody around him and he is very tough to work with. But on the other hand he is appreciative of your efforts and I think he is the arch-professional. He knows everything there is to know about cameras, about lights, and about film acting. One can learn an awful lot by working with Kirk Douglas.

I'll tell you whom I've met just recently, because as you know, Kirk Douglas' ex-wife Diana Douglas played my wife in "Song of Orpheus," and so we've become very friendly with Diana. I met Michael several times and had dinner with them over at Diana's. And he is a delightful man, Michael Douglas, absolutely delightful. Another professional who knows exactly what it's about. A very good director as well.

Q: Another reader wondered whether your French accent in the "Tales from the Darkside" episode ("My Ghostwriter, the Vampire") was genuine – from your having come from Guernsey (an island in the English Channel)?

A: Not really, no; it isn't Guernsian. That would be a terrible mixture of the French, English, and the ancient language of Normandy, because the Channel Islands were a part of the Duchy of Normandy. My family, yes, was French – well actually, Belgian; my father was Belgian. But the family came originally from Austria. They were high-ranking officers in the Austrian army and they came across with Marie Antoinette. During the Robespierre persecutions they fled to Belgium and they all settled in a little village called Stambruges. They were known as d'Autriche, meaning "the Austrian," and the name became bastardized to Dotrice. For about 150 years the Mayor of Stambruges was always a Dotrice or d'Autriche. In fact if you see any of the engravings of Marie Antoinette, it always says "Marie Antoinette d'Autriche." So that's where the French part of my upbringing came in. My grandmother, whom I spent

every summer holiday with, couldn't speak English, she could only speak French.

Q: So you really grew up bilingual?

A: Just a bit; I used to be, anyway.

Q: And one last reader's question: what was your inspiration for "Ashes, Ashes"?

A: The inspiration was basically a film-script I wrote many years ago, and we never quite got it produced. In those days the clothes of the London gentry after they were finished and had been worn for 1 or 2 years were sent up by London tailors to the country tailors. And the country tailors used to copy these designs and then they would be sold to the country gentry. So the country gentry were always a year or two behind the styles and fashions of London. This film-script traced a packet of clothes that were coming out of the rat-infested, plague-ridden streets of London up to this little village in Derbyshire, which still exists to this day.

In this little village, called Eyehan, there were about 350 people who became infected with the plague. They had to make a decision as to whether they were going to seek help outside and therefore spread the plague or whether they were going to commit suicide by blocking themselves off. So they built a ring of stones which they painted white around the perimeter of the village, and people brought provisions to the stones. When they had gone away the villagers would come out and collect them. They prevented the plague spreading into the north of England. But in fact, I think at the end of the film as I wrote it, and indeed the end of the historical story, there were only 27 people left out of the 350.

It's a similar situation, in other words, down in the caves where one is trapped, and how easily plague could spread – it struck me that it might be a good episode. A microcosm of what the plague was like in London when no one knew how to cure the plague.

I called my screenplay "Ring of Roses" because that's how that ditty, "Ring around the Roses," goes. The ring of roses was the actual rose or strawberry marks you used to get 'round the neck. And "pocket full of posies" – the Elizabethans thought that the plague could be dispelled by carrying around a posy of dried herbs; also the smell from the plague was dreadful, so it helped to diffuse the smell. The first symptom was sneezing so you got "Achoo, Achoo." And "We all fall down–," we die.... So it was quite a sinister little poem actually.

Q: A favourite moment in the episode was when Eric (Joshua Rudoy) was writing his letter in the wardrobe and he hands out a sheet of writing paper to Father.

A: Yes, I loved that bit. He was so good, that little kid, too. He was very tiny and those big glasses he wore really made him rather pathetic. I thought that his sister Ellie (Kamie Harper) was terribly good in that. You see all our good people DIE in all of this! We should get rid of some of the bad ones and kill them off. The guy who played Winslow (James Avery), I thought he was a wonderful, excellent actor with tremendous strength and HE had to go and get killed.

Q: The episodes seem different this year, more of what the viewers said they wanted to see...

A: You know, all of the successful shows on television have got a very different formula and their success has been mainly due to a formula. The same thing happens each week basically. We have a sort of formula with our show that every show ends with a little scene with Vincent and Cathy. That's a kind of formula, but beyond that I was hoping that we weren't going to become just another formula

show and that we were going to be fairly original every week, so that the “clients” did not know what to expect. That I thought was going to be the success of the show. If you remember that episode with the boy Rolly, who had been the musician, and Vincent found him a drug addict (“Chamber Music”), one knew very well that he was going to come down and play again in the caves with Father. The wonderful thing about it was that he didn’t. It was a most successful show from that point of view. That’s when I think the show is at its most successful.

Q: One viewer’s 2-year-old had a strong reaction to Rolly; she walked up to the television set and said, “He’s sad, Mommy, turn it off!”

A: Oh no, really? That’s wonderful, to get that reaction from a 2-year-old is extraordinary. What I find strange about this show is that people seem to be believing now in this fantasy world. When I was in Denver at this convention I met 5 girls from New York. One of them said to me, “I hate to tell you this because you’re going to think I’m an absolute idiot; but when I’m walking along the streets of New York and I see one of those grills, if there’s nobody around I invariably shout down, “Are you all right down there, Vincent?” And the other 4 girls said “Oh God, you don’t, do you?” Then they said “Well, we all do too!”

It may be because we’re dealing with subjects from a fantasy situation and yet we’re dealing with fairly relevant subjects. Subjects like child-abuse, or drugs, or old people getting tossed out of their homes, prostitutes. Whatever subjects we deal with are fairly relevant and part of today’s scene. So therefore maybe they’re beginning to believe that that fantasy world is real, and that the people in it are real.

Q: I know that in some ways the show gets used... almost as a tool. I’ve heard of one woman who had known a child who had been killed in a fire, a very sad and painful thing for her, that she couldn’t manage to get over. After watching “Ashes, Ashes,” she wrote the child a letter, burned it, and it helped her put the grief aside.

A: That’s very true actually. I remember a psychiatrist phoned me just after that episode and said, “Do you know, it was so very real for us because when we find that someone is suffering from bereavement, what we do — because they’re desperate, thinking that they’ll never be able to communicate with the person again — we sit them in a room with an empty chair, and we get them to visualize that person sitting in the chair opposite and then to have a conversation with them until they can actually feel that they can see them.” And that means of confrontation and that means of attempted communication is sometimes a process of exorcism in a way. Like they’re getting rid of a great deal of the remorse that is invariably attached to such a bereavement.

Q: So you hit on truths that aren’t necessarily social truths even, but just plain, solid, ordinary “what it’s like to be a human being”-type truths. Perhaps that’s where the reality of the show comes in.

A: Yes indeed. You know I spent 3 1/2 years in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Which in many ways was rather like being in the Tunnels and the caves because we were totally cut off from the outside world. Certainly the Germans didn’t allow us to go out through the barbed wire whenever we wanted to. We were stuck there and we had to fend for ourselves. The interesting thing for me looking on — I was very young at the time (I spent my 16th birthday in this prisoner-of-war camp) — and I don’t think it was a particularly English trait — was how quickly we got organized. We remained together as families, in “combines” as we called them, in groups of 10 or 20, and we went through hell and high water together. There were so many individual and kind of family stories that came out of prisoner-of-war camps. The way things were organized always intrigued me. You’d get stuck in a place where there were just empty huts and 3-tier bunk beds and a lot of sand. They always put us in a sandy area because it was very

difficult to tunnel into sand, it always collapsed on you.

And yet within days things were organized. Not only did we have sports activities, but we would set about building a theatre and put on productions. We would have debating societies. We would find out who had been a sailor beforehand and he would make a little sewing shop where we'd make escape clothes out of bits and pieces. There were all kinds of organizations there, other people who had been shopkeepers would make little shops where you could barter certain goods you had for others that you wanted.

The organization in a prisoner-of-war camp was quite unique. I'd like to see some of that down Below. We've never seen anybody eat down there yet, or drink.

Q: About to – ah...

A: Well, we did sort of in "Dead of Winter." Because Winterfest is all about a banquet. But I doubt very much if you ever saw Vincent actually eating or drinking, or Catherine for that matter. I thought that looked absolutely wonderful, that episode. It was very medieval with all those people coming down the stairs with the torches, and the whole of the banqueting and lighting of the candles. I thought it was strange because people were in modern dress, a lot of them, with the helpers coming from Above. And yet the whole atmosphere was one of medieval England almost.

Q: Definitely – and the feeling, again, of family. As you say with the prisoner-of-war camp, a bringing of normalcy into the situation.

A: Absolutely, you're absolutely right. And that's the thing we ought to concentrate more on – the family. Mary – who knows one thing about Mary? Not one thing do we know about Mary. Ellen Geer is a very good actress. Did you know her father was Will Geer (played "Grandpa" in "the Waltons")? She runs her own outdoor Shakespearean Festival out in Topanga Canyon – an open-air theatre there that her father started many years ago.

But that's where the stories should come from – the family that exists down there. The stupid, wonderful things that Mouse can do, the way he's reprimanded by Father. There're so many stories that we can do that we haven't touched yet.

END

Many thanks to Steff, for allowing reproduction of this interview from her blog!

