

INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY FINDLEY

Alison Summers

AS: Readers will be interested in the fact that you began your career as an actor. When was that?

TF: I began professionally about 1949. I was part of a generation of actors who have all done pretty well. Bill Hutt, Charmion King, Kate Reid, and emerging at the same time, Chris Plummer and Barry Morse. It was a very live period in theatre because all this energy came back to it from the war. The war handed us new definitions.

There was a great resurgence of creative playwriting — particularly in the States, with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Here theatre manifested itself mainly at an amateur level. Hart House Theatre was doing marvellous things under Robert Gill, who had access to all the extraordinary people I've just mentioned. He gave them a showcase situation where they could shine. It was the Golden Age of Canadian radio. Andrew Allen had a series called *CBC stage* which produced a whole flock of playwrights and actors. In the early fifties, you felt that a new generation of actors had *bang* arrived, and there was an excitement to it. Then television happened in 1952/53, and then Stratford.

AS: Were you involved with Stratford?

TF: Yes. Cecil Clark, who was one of Guthrie's deputies, came over here before Guthrie arrived to cast. Cecil Clark saw me playing Marchbanks on television. That was when I got lucky. I'll never forget that first meeting at Stratford, when about 85 actors, drawn from across the country, sat down in a room with Tyrone Guthrie, Alec Guinness, and Irene Worth, and read through *Richard III*, the first play done there. The feeling was absolutely electric. It was as though in one moment we realized that a new kind of theatre was being born. And it was going to happen because we were ready; we had done our work. At the time, Alec Guinness, who became my mentor, gave me a book. In the flyleaf was written: "The readiness is all." Later I went to England with Guinness — as his protégé — and worked there for several years.

AS: In England I believe that you toured with *The Matchmaker*.

TF: Yes. Tyrone Guthrie directed that, too. It was a great romp, a masterpiece of crazy, written by Thornton Wilder. The other bonus was watching Ruth

INTERVIEW

Gordon, as Dolly Levi, perform. She had a speech at the end of the play which is a summing up, which she did alone on the stage. I watched her virtually every night for two and a half years, and it was never the same twice. She has a true genius.

That was really when I began writing seriously. I left the production to play Osrin in the Scofield *Hamlet* directed by Peter Brook, which went to Russia, and then I rejoined *The Matchmaker* after that.

AS: Didn't Ruth Gordon influence your decision to become a writer?

TF: Yes. I wrote something specifically for Ruth. We had been to an exhibition of paintings in Manchester, all done by people under thirty years of age. I was in my twenties then. When we came out, Ruth asked me "Why are you people so damned negative about everything? All those pictures were black, depressing, ugly. Can't you say *yes* to anything?" Aloud I said to her, "I don't think we're negative, Ruth." I had an argument, or rather a pleasant conversation, with her. Secretly I decided, "I'll prove that we're not." I went back to my digs and I wrote a story. I didn't have a typewriter, so I wrote it out again by hand and gave it to her. It was a story called "About Effie," about one of the maids who worked at our house when I was a kid. The next day I got word from Ruth's dresser to go and see her. Ruth was sitting in the room crying, and she threw her arms around me and said, "Oh Tiffy, you really shouldn't be acting at all; you should be writing." (Which is a lovely thing to be told when you want to be an actor.) But anyway, that was the beginning. Ruth gave me an old typewriter that she and Garson had. They had my story typed, and they asked me to give them anything else I had written. Then they showed it to Thornton Wilder.

AS: What was his reaction?

TF: He had me up to his Savoy hotel room. I was very poor in those days. I think I got about seven pounds a week, and being a very nerve-ridden person, I spent all my money on drink and cigarettes, instead of food. I had one frayed blue suit which I used to wear everywhere. I must have looked pretty bad, because Thornton Wilder felt he had to feed me. He ordered up this incredible meal. I sat eating this meal while Wilder, who had astonishing eyes behind glasses, paced the room. He said: "Findley, you're the real thing. There aren't many, so I feel obliged to do something about you. On the assumption that we both know that you're the real thing, I'm going to talk to you as an absolute professional. That was the worst story I have ever read in my life." He tore it to shreds. Ultimately I wrote a play, which he also tore to shreds: "pompous," "stop preaching," "you're not old enough to write these things, you haven't had enough experience." He was always very tough — as tough as they come — but always very encouraging. We would talk for hours and destroy things in the

fireplace. I'd think: "Why does he keep telling me that I can write, if he destroys everything I do?" But he was right. He made me very conscious that if I had the real gift, then I had no right not to fulfill it. I never really lost touch with him.

Ultimately, he became so ill he didn't move out of his home. Towards the end of his life I remember two or three times when I had arranged to visit him, and his sister would call and say: "Thorny says 'don't come.' He just can't face it." It was partly psychological, too. The end of his life was awful. He felt that he had been forgotten and that nobody gave a damn. Someone had just written a biography which tore him to shreds. That was the last thing he was aware of.

AS: How many years after that first meeting with Wilder did you decide to leave acting, and give your full attention to writing?

TF: Well, it seemed like a long time afterwards, but it really wasn't. I met Thornton Wilder in 1955, and in 1962 I gave up my acting career.

AS: You stayed in Hollywood after the North American tour of *The Matchmaker* finished?

TF: Yes, that was in 1957. I decided to stay in Hollywood, to try my luck at anything. Ruth wanted me to go on writing. After the opening night of *Anne Frank*, which Garson Kanin was directing, we all went off to dinner. I sat beside Ruth, who said "Now dear, we'll be leaving soon, so you and I won't be seeing each other for a while. I know that you haven't any work at the moment, and because I want you to go on writing, I'd like you to take this." She gave me an envelope. Inside were five cheques, all post-dated — one a month, \$100 each. And in those days that was money you could really live on. I said, "What do I do? How do I . . .?" I literally meant "how do I repay you?" It worried me terribly, because this was Hollywood, and I desperately wanted to make my own way. There was a moral edge to the profession; it was wrong to accept money that wasn't a salary. So Ruth said, "Accept it on this basis: I have taken an option on the first good thing you write." So that is the basis on which it was done.

AS: Do you think that your experiences as an actor proved valuable when you began to write for the stage?

TF: Yes, and valuable for prose, too. The major things I got from acting that are pertinent to writing are a sense of rhythm and a sense of cadence — an awareness of what the tongue can and cannot cope with. About two months ago I was reading Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, and it came to me in a blinding flash that all dialogue that works, all the best dialogue, has a similar ring — the way in which words are combined sinks them into the listener's ear. The curtain goes up, and you hear people speaking, and immediately there seems to be a kind of confidence to the delivery. A Euripidean messenger starts talking, and you know from the rhythm of the speech that you're hearing the real thing, not someone

fumbling for words. That follows all the way through Shakespeare and other great writers.

When plays don't work, it is very often because the actors couldn't find their way through the words which the writer had put on the page. When I watch rehearsals of something I've written, I can tell if the dialogue is right or wrong through watching the actors — what they do with it, how they take off on it or respond to it, what rhythms have been given. When my writing is right, that's how I know it's right — through watching the actors take off. Rhythm falls from actors instinctively, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. It may be that they simply sense the natural time to breathe.

That's one thing about dialogue that I've learned from my experiences in the theatre. The other thing I've learned was expressed one day when I was listening to Robin Phillips talk about an adaptation of *Camille* which he was directing at Theatre London. He said, "If the stage business and the moves aren't implicit in the dialogue, there is no way that they can ever be done right." That's true. You cannot make me pick up that cup in the right way if it isn't in the dialogue, if you haven't built in the moment. There will be no way that I can pick it up without knocking it over, or having to cross the stage awry, or having to manipulate something to one side. It can never be made graceful or right. Those things all have to flow through a single line. A play is a total unfolding of one line. Screen writing and television are the same. That's also what makes fiction work: when it all flows along without jarring you.

I was a very clumsy person on the stage. Directors and actors were always complaining: "you're so clumsy." So I became supersensitive to the flow of things: how you manage a line so that it really does deliver you to that cup at exactly the right moment.

AS: Do you find it an advantage that through writing television plays you are able to reach more people than you could otherwise do in the theatre?

TF: Outside the prose, my strongest bid is for the theatre. In television I think that the most people I've ever been seen by as a playwright is about two million. That's very gratifying, but I don't feel any different about touching two million people through television than I do about touching eighty in a small theatre. Touching those eighty has the additional bonus that they were there when it happened; they were part of it. I can't believe that isn't important. I once heard a singer say, "I used to only be able to sing to 500 people at a time. Now I can sing to millions on just one occasion." And I thought, "How disappointing."

AS: To have only that one occasion?

TF: Yes. Contact is what performers are really about. That's the value of the theatre, and what keeps it alive. Part of the excitement of the live theatre is

taking that chance. No matter how long a play has run, or how many different productions it has been given, there is this marvellous feeling of the *daring* of being there. What can go wrong? What can go right? What magic can happen? Well, forget it in television. The magic is all calculated. Sometimes it's calculated out of existence. Another thing about television is that once it's done, it's done forever. I don't like that either.

These are the things I *don't* like about television and film. I would rather reach my five million piece by piece in the theatre than in one fell swoop through television. There's something magical about that damned curtain going up, that feeling in your stomach as you wonder what is going to happen here. One cannot make that happen anywhere else. It's this daring I've been talking about. The danger of failure is built into a theatrical situation — it's real in the theatre. In television and film it isn't and can't be real. You've got to trick it somehow.

AS: Some of the critics gave you rather a hard time with *Can You See Me Yet?*, when it was performed at the National Arts Centre in 1976. Perhaps because it is rather a unique play in Canadian drama.

TF: The three Ottawa newspaper critics hated it. It was not just that they didn't think it was a good play; they really couldn't cope with it. They were rebelling against what they could not understand and yet should have been able to understand. But the audiences got it. They understood that Cassandra comes in and hands out lives to people who have lost certain aspects of life while gaining others. She gives them another person to be, another aspect of themselves, or she reminds them of that aspect of themselves. Each person plays two people. The critics couldn't cope with that. And yet down the hall and up the stairs, they coped with Lily Tomlin, who would walk out on to the stage and without any more indication than turning upstage before she turned back and faced them, she was twenty people.

The world of criticism is one of the realities you have to learn to live with. From that experience I took a big step forward in being able to cope with it.

AS: Did you work in collaboration with the actors and director?

TF: Yes. In fact I had the classic situation of not knowing how to end the play. Edward Atienza's marvellous and creative performance as Doberman gave me the suggestion of what to do: Cass running to the edge of the stage, and Doberman, who has been silent throughout, crying "Don't."

Actually I have the reverse problem to most playwrights, who can't write a second or third act. My problem is that I can't write a first act. I don't know why. I remember thinking after I had finished writing this play, "The first act is terrific." I didn't know about the second act. Then I gave the play to the actors, and the second act, except for the very end as I mentioned, played like a dream. The first act was the one they had difficulty with.

AS: Another play, *John A. — Himself*, was produced in 1978 at Theatre London. How did you structure that play? Tell us something about it.

TF: It's about the first prime minister of this country. I presented his life as if it had taken place in the Victorian theatre. The first act is a series of turns: the opposition party is presented as a bunch of acrobats, the press comes across as a ventriloquist's act, and there are numerous other people who come out looking like John A. Macdonald. The final turn — the confrontation with Riel — is a pantomime-cum-circus act. Acrobats are constructing a railroad. Riel is a man with a pea-shooter who is on a trapeze; he stops all this. John A. Macdonald is flown up on his harness, and he confronts Riel up in the air over the map of Canada, knocking him down. This seems merely a theatrical gesture, then suddenly Riel rises back up again swinging from the noose, and it all becomes horrifyingly real.

The second act then becomes an acknowledged melodrama, which is what the second part of an evening of Victorian theatre always was. Everybody had separate stages. Downstage from Macdonald's stage, which was the largest, was total reality, where Macdonald walked in front of a cloth and talked to the audience. Then he would return to his platform and do his other numbers.

AS: Is Tennessee Williams a playwright who has influenced you?

TF: Oh yes.

AS: I asked that question because Cassandra seems very much to follow the Williams tradition of heroines — damaged and delicate people, like Blanche DuBois and Laura Wingfield, who retreat inwards from the brutality of the world.

TF: Yes, and I think whatever hardness Cass has too, the ironic, cynical side of her, is also like that in some of Tennessee Williams' women. There is a very good reason for that. I first became aware of what the theatre really meant to me at the same moment that Williams was emerging as a playwright. That particular play *Streetcar* had an enormous impact on me. The other playwright who has been a tremendous influence is Thornton Wilder. I did two of his plays when they were new. I also did *Our Town*, and I had long conversations with him. I learned a lot about writing under his tutelage. He, too, has that master rhythm I was talking about. There is a scene in *Our Town* where two women sit stringing beans with their hands into a bowl. They're talking about the most mundane things, and by the time that scene is over, the audience is inevitably in tears. Just two women sitting on the back porch of a house somewhere. How did he do that? The book I'm finishing now is greatly influenced by the way he deals with historical material in his book *The Ides of March*, which is his version of the assassination of Julius Caesar.

AS: What other dramatic material have you been working on recently?

TF: I've done a television drama called *Other People's Children*. I like it so much that I've thought about turning it into a play. It's about a 15-year-old girl who has spent all her life in foster homes, and it concerns those totally unscrupulous people who make a business out of what is in essence *renting* children from the Children's Aid Society. They treat these children like commodities. A marvellous young actress was found to play the part.

At the moment I'm working on three ninety-minute dramas which really constitute one long play. It's set between the years 1914 and 1919, so it covers the same period as my book *The Wars*, although it is unrelated to it. It's about a family living in Toronto, and what the consequences of having passed through that period of time does to them as a family. When you first meet them they're very happy, and the future looks good. Then the war begins. The father decides that he can make money out of the war, but in so doing he moves against his own integrity; this ultimately destroys him. The mother doesn't want her son to go to war. She becomes protective in a new way, and that relationship drifts in a bad direction. The theme basically revolves around how people use one another — as well as events and crises — to get what *they* want. That is inevitably destructive for everyone.

AS: Do you have any regrets about giving up your acting career?

TF: Oh yes, very much. My biggest regret is that I didn't play enough of Chekhov. Also, I think that knowing the kind of actor that I was — and I think it's dumb not to acknowledge that I was a good actor — I could have had a career. I'd never have been a star, not in a thousand years, but I would always have been a useful actor, a good second string — which in a sense is the best thing to be, because you do go on forever — not being dependent on star stuff, you can play anything.

The playwrights I missed out on altogether were Pinter and Albee. I have an instinct for that kind of playwriting. I know I had the talent to deliver something of what they're writing about. I would have loved to play George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I'd love to be able to do plays like *No Man's Land* when I'm older. The other aspect of my acting career is that I had just begun to flower. If I had continued acting, it would have been the next ten years — between fifty and sixty — that I would really have hit what was naturally mine. That's when you're learning, building in terms of who you are. And I regret that terribly. But I don't regret having made the choice to write at all. There's nothing negative about that decision. I'm not big enough to encompass both things. I don't know how Coward managed to do it.