

TIMOTHY SPALL

The *Harry Potter* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* star on loneliness, brushes with mortality – and refusing to audition

Since making his TV debut in 1983 as Barry in *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, Timothy Spall, 66, has become one of our most beloved and versatile actors. He has played Peter Pettigrew in three *Harry Potter* movies, made several award-winning films with director Mike Leigh, and starred in *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, *The Damned United* and *Mr Turner*. Notable small-screen credits include *Our Mutual Friend* and *Summer of Rockets*. Spall's latest role is in BBC1's fact-based, four-part drama *The Sixth Commandment*, written by Sarah Phelps. Spall plays elderly academic and author Peter Farquhar, who was murdered in 2015 by Benjamin Field, the young churchwarden to whom he was "betrothed".

Were you aware of the story behind Peter Farquhar's murder before you took the role?

I wasn't, and I was surprised, considering it's such a remarkable and harrowing tale. I was intrigued and touched, and slightly horrified. It's a very unusual and peculiar

sequence of events.

How did you research the part?

I read Peter's diaries, to see what his quotidian existence was like; they're transcribed from police files. I watched a documentary about the case, and I found footage of him elsewhere. I wanted to look at him. I find it important to catch things in between what people say, that aren't obvious. I get as much information as I can, then it becomes about me and a character.

Was it hard to strike a balance between being respectful to the real people involved and making compelling drama?

By the very nature of crime, often the perpetrator becomes the celebrity. We rarely see the victims. This series isn't sensationalist, it's very quiet. Sarah Phelps is a brilliant writer – how she distils the essence of dramatic situations is astounding. What's so tragic is the optimism and hope that was instilled in these elderly people. It's so much about loneliness and love, and dreams being fulfilled that are actually too good to be true.

There's much talk these days of a loneliness epidemic, particularly

among older people...

The spotlight has come upon it, perhaps because of Covid, but there has always been horrendous loneliness. We all have moments, but some people are wretchedly stuck in it. There's less stigma about it now, and one only hopes that, in the process of talking about it, something can be done.

Why are we so fascinated by seemingly mild-mannered killers such as Benjamin Field?

Because it's probably more accurate about how things happen. That wonderful term, "the banality of evil" – that's the way life is. It's not cut and dried, it's grey and strange. Often people don't know what their motivations are; it's this complexity that drama tries to make understandable. Drama can investigate the poetry of the situation and capture things that are inexplicable.

Do you ever take the darkness of a role home with you?

You carry a certain amount of it with you, because you think about it a lot. But I always have

my mind on the fact that there is me and then there is the character. I use myself as a toolbox to play the part, but

that's all. You're only borrowing from yourself.

In the 90s you were diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia. How did that change you?

I was peeking over the precipice! It gave me an understanding of what suffering was really like. The possibility of not making it and leaving a young family, the most important things in my life, made me focus on what is and isn't important. That won't go away. It's in the bank, as a wonderful benchmark to work against. I don't recommend it as an aide-mémoire for making you a better actor, but it certainly gives you an idea of what it's like to feel really up against it.

Your son Rafe is a successful actor. Do you compare notes?

It's like bricklayers sitting around – they might talk about mortar or rendering, but it's organic. There's technical stuff we refer to, but it's just in our everyday life.

For which of your numerous roles are you recognised most often?

It's still *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, because it's always on somewhere. Or Harry Potter because it's a global phenomenon, and it's not

just kids. Somebody asked me to sign some Hogwarts merchandising and he said, "It's for my daughter. She's 30!" I also spend a lot of time not being recognised, which I like.

You were supposed to play the detective Atticus Pund in *Maggie Murders* but it fell through. Are there any roles

that you regret missing out on?

I had a personal matter to deal with, so I couldn't do it. These things happen. On the whole, you're a hostage to fortune as an actor, unless you develop things yourself, which I do a little. Luckily, I don't have to self-tape: set up lights and do a bit of acting to get a role. I'm not going to do it. It might be arrogant of me, but I think I've been around long enough! **GRAEME THOMSON**

The Sixth Commandment starts on Monday at 9.00pm on BBC1



VETERANS
Spall with
Sheila Hancock
in *The Sixth
Commandment*

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