

2<sup>nd</sup> October 2008

## Barry Morse 1918 - 2008

Dónal Thompson



In the 1980s I ran a small theatre-in-education company in Manchester called Foursight and we were planning to do a show about drugs. We wrote to famous people for support and among the many replies was one from an actor called Barry Morse.

Barry Morse became famous as Lt Philip Gerard in the US television series *The Fugitive*. His role was reprised by Tommy Lee Jones in the Harrison Ford version of the story. Then in the UK he appeared with Martin Landau as Professor Victor Bergaman in the TV series *Space 1999*. All in all, he played over 3,000 roles on stage, TV and film.

Barry's career was a mixture of hard work and lucky breaks. Amongst the stories he told were how a budding William Shatner (later *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk) would mumble his lines, à la Brando, when he appeared in a radio show. So Barry would improvise and say things like "What's that? I can't hear you boy!"

Barry also worked with Dustin Hoffman, Robert Mitchum and Yul Brynner. He was not impressed with this last one! He was also the only person I knew who had ever spoken to George Bernard Shaw.

So when Barry Morse offered to come up to see us in Manchester to give us some advice we were, to use the colloquialism, 'gobsmacked'.

One afternoon we were walking through the streets of Manchester city centre when a drunk sitting in a doorway commented to his drinking partner,

*"That's Barry Morse, that is!"*

Barry turned round to see who has spoken, saw the drunk and went up to him and shook his hand quite sincerely and thanked him for recognising him.

Later he invited us to tea at his luxurious apartment in London's Pall Mall district where we met his wife, Sydney Sturgess, an accomplished actress in her own right, and he regaled us with stories of his beginnings and encouraged us to keep on with what we believed in.

Barry Morse's generosity of spirit in befriending a group of small time actors was, I later discovered, typical of the man. When he died this year the stream of tributes referred quite rightly to his career as an actor but there were also many witnesses to his acts of kindness from groups like the Performing Arts Lodges of Canada, the Royal Theatrical Fund, the London Shakespeare Workout Prison Project, Actors' Fund of Canada and The Samaritans.

When he died this year I was surprised by the force of my grief. People sometimes touch us so subtly that it is only years later we realise what luck we have had to be close to such goodness. And what a vacuum is left afterwards.

Barry became the president of the Shaw Society in London after being a lifelong 'Shavian'. He ends his autobiography 'Remember with Advantages' with a quote from Shaw.

*"As long as I conceive something better than myself, I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence, or clearing the way for it. That is the law of my life."*

It was.