

**M**ake a list all the television programmes, plays and films produced by this month's castaway Victor Glynn and it would easily fill the pages of this magazine.

In 1985, by the age of 29, Victor had produced more than 20 films with such celebrated actors as Nigel Hawthorne, Leo McKern, Judi Dench, Ian Richardson, Nigel Havers and a very young Hugh Laurie. In fact, think of any great British actor and it is a good bet that they have worked on a Victor Glynn production.

This month, Victor, who lives in Jericho, will be at The International Film Festival in Cannes with Oscar winning Argentinian director, Juan José Campanella to promote their latest animated film, *Foosball*, in which a table football team comes to life. This is a tale of triumph over adversity. And with football superstars, including Lionel Messi, supporting it, it is a safe bet that *Foosball* will be a worldwide hit.

Books are another aspect of Victor's story – and he has recently taken on an academic liaison role for Blackwells.

"Why do I do it? Because it is vital, if our society is to maintain a high degree of civilisation, that the book is vigorously defended and promoted. The bookshop in general and Blackwell's Oxford in particular – which I first set foot in 40 years ago this year – has an important place in the pantheon of scholarship," Victor said.

"To quote Masefield *'There in the Broad, within whose booky house, Half England's scholars nibble books or browse'*

And now there's the teaching.

I first met Victor while attending a diploma course in creative writing where he taught screen writing in his spare time.

"I applied to be a student on the course. I fancied working on poetry and fiction writing but John Ballam, head of creative writing at Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, persuaded me to teach on the course instead."

But how did Victor's illustrious career begin?

Born in Balham in 1956, Victor did not stay there long. His father, Christopher Glynn, a civil engineer, worked for Ove Arup.

"We were frequently on the move. I attended seven different schools including one in Kenya," Victor said. "When it came to university I could not make up my mind what I wanted to do.

I read law and then studied philosophy, drama and history over the years with differing degrees of achievement. The practice of law and I were not to prove great bedfellows and through a series of happenstance, serendipity, charm and luck I found myself, by way of the BBC Reference Library, as a production trainee.

"Most of the production trainees had, they alleged, wanted to work for the BBC since they were in nappies. It had not occurred to me until that initial impetuous decision to apply," Victor said.

"Much of the training was on the job – one moment on the *Today* programme and the next on *You and Yours* or *Woman's Hour*."

Considering his complicated and varied life, you will not be surprised to discover that Victor is a very organised man. Nearly 40 years of diaries are stored on his computer.

Which meant he could tell me exactly what



# A life in film

Sylvia Vetta meets  
celebrated film and  
television producer  
Victor Glynn

he was doing on the morning of May 15, 1978.

"I edited interviews on the *Today* programme. The big news story was the assassination of Aldo Moro, but in the afternoon I was at the Maida Vale studio recording a session with The Boom Town Rats."

Following his period of training, Victor headed for the BBC's World Service. "I worked on everything from the news to dramas," he said.

"That year (1978) I met someone who has played an important part in my life. Michael Bogdanov had been appointed director of The Young Vic and asked me to work with him. I left the BBC on good terms and they kept my job open for a year.

"When we all lost our jobs at the Young Vic, an occupational hazard in the arts, I did not

return to Bush House but headed north for the Liverpool Playhouse.

"As well as working at The Playhouse I co-presented an arts programme called *Weekend* on local radio on a Friday night. I suspect it was the least listened to programme of the week but I met interesting people which led to work for Granada TV, which had set up a base in Liverpool."

This is how Victor came to work with the so-called Gang of Four – Willy Russell, Chris Bond, Bill Morrison and Alan Bleasdale.

Willy Russell suggested they form a new company to be ready for the arrival of Channel 4 at the end of 1982. Their first submission and production was *Here's a Funny Thing*, a film version of a play Victor produced at the Fortune Theatre.



**Victor Glynn. Inset, the poster for his new production, Foosball**

*Photographs: Antony Moore*



The link with Channel 4 continued with *Good and Bad at Games* (1983) Channel 4's first motion picture. The story, told partly in flashback to 1968, concerns a clique of English public schoolboys who bully and humiliate an unpopular younger pupil who is 'bad at games'. Written by William Boyd the film was directed by Jack Gold and produced by Victor.

Victor's success continued as executive producer of Noël Coward's series *Star Quality*, which starred, among others, Judi Dench, Susannah York, and a young Hugh Laurie.

In the meantime, Victor had become embroiled in a controversy which made headlines. Charges of gross indecency were brought by Mary Whitehouse against his friend Michael Bogdanov who was by then associate director of The National Theatre who staged

the controversial production, *Romans in Britain*, which featured a male rape scene.

In 1982, while the trial at the Old Bailey was in progress, Victor reproduced the court proceedings every night at The Oxford Playhouse.

He said: "We employed the fastest shorthand writer we could find, Ruth Kibble, and she took it all down for us. On the train back to Oxford, she transcribed her notes with Guy Hibbert, the Playhouse's writer in residence, who edited it. The result was read live on stage at 10.30pm

"Hosted by yours truly the production was covered on *Newsnight* on BBC2 by its very glamorous arts correspondent, Joan Bakewell."

On day two, Whitehouse's solicitor issued proceedings against Victor for contempt of

court. The trial ended with the intervention of the Attorney-General. The prosecution argument rested partly on whether an act that appears to be a crime on stage should be treated as if it were a crime. They knew they were in trouble when tested on the legalities of *Macbeth* and *The Moustrap*.

Also in 1982, Victor met the woman who was to become his wife.

He said: "I met Gill when she was working as a press officer at the Playhouse. She later worked for Modern Art Oxford. I proposed to her in Paris in the Tuileries. Recently my son Phin proposed to his girlfriend Lucie on the same spot.

"I asked him if she said 'yes' and he replied 'Of course'. What I did not tell him was that

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*Victor with his Russian dolls*



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Gill said 'no'. But, after some persuading, changed her mind and we were married at Church Enstone. A photograph captioned "West End producer marries Enstone publicist" appeared in *The Oxford Times* on April 19, 1982." Tragically Gill died young in 1999.

Victor and Gill had three children – the oldest Katie (29) is a teacher in Wantage and has made Victor a grandfather. Phin (27) is a film producer and will be getting married next year.

His daughter Harriet takes after her father in that, aged just 24, she produced the movie *The Life of Riley*. Victor also has a son by another partner – Alfie, aged eight.

In 1984, aged 28, Victor became head of production at Portman Productions, one of the UK's longest-established film companies.

"One of my desert island choices has to be from another production in 1984, *The Chain*. It was the first time my name appeared on a poster outside a cinema," Victor said.

"It would remind me of some of the great actors I have worked with. The comic plot centred on a house-selling chain involving seven couples with couple representing one of the seven deadly sins. Among the cast were Warren Mitchell, Denis Lawson, Leo McKern, Nigel Hawthorne, Anna Massey and Billie Whitelaw."

Victor maintained his involvement in theatre as a director of the English Shakespeare Company from its inception in 1986 under the joint direction of Michael Bogdanov and Michael Pennington. Among their productions was the *Wars of the Roses* (with a Falklands War setting).

Victor also produced Mike Leigh's 1987 short film *The Short and Curlies* and Leigh's multi-award-winning *High Hopes*, a slice-of-life look at a sweet working-class couple in London.

There is another strand to Victor's life which takes us Australia in the 1980s, where he worked with Channel 7. He explained: "Channel 7 cancelled *Neighbours* because the show wasn't rating. It was taken up by Channel 10 where it went on to be a huge success. Huge embarrassment all round.

"One of my colleagues, a brilliant man called Alan Bateman had the idea for *Home & Away*. I ended up co-producing the pilot, something that ironically did not mean much at the time. *Neighbours* was being broadcast in the UK by the BBC and ITV also wanted a teatime soap. I persuaded them to buy 22 episodes of *Home & Away*. It did more than OK and then the time came for renewal."

Victor's negotiating skills came to the fore and he completed the biggest ever sale of a single title in television history at the time – for \$45m.

In 1993, Victor was developing a film project about the fall of Mikhail Gorbachev following the 1991 coup and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "Our film proposition was a simple one – four people standing in different places observing the same event.

"The witnesses were Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, a journalist who was outside the Russian Parliament with the crowds and a KGB General who had aided and abetted the conspirators. These characters in our drama saw different things and as a consequence came to conflicting conclusions. There was one key question we simply could not get an



**Victor with his Punch Havana cigar and (inset) the Corgi Ford Zodiac**

answer to. One day we will I hope."

Victor showed me a set of Russian dolls, one of his desert island choices. The largest doll is Gorbachev, inside him is Yeltsin and inside him are ten other rulers, going back beyond Ivan the Terrible to the foundation of Russia.

The dolls remind Victor of an incredible encounter with Mikhail Gorbachev in New York.

"After standing around for hours my group concluded that the meeting would not take place. But the doors opened and there stood Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and last president of the USSR, with his wife, the late Raisa.

"As I was working on developing a Sony production for the BBC, Mrs Gorbachev's tale about how she kept going during their darkest days at their Crimean Dacha by listening to the BBC World Service on her Sony radio delivered immediate commercial gratification," Victor said.

You cannot write about Victor and Portman without mentioning Morse. In 1992, Portman, which Victor now owned, acquired Zenith, the producers of the *Morse* series which was, of course, based on the books by his fellow castaway Colin Dexter.

"For a while we owned the fabulous red MK2 Jaguar, but sadly, I was not allowed to drive it," Victor said. "However, if I was thinking of taking a car to the island it would have to be this Corgi model of a Ford Zodiac."

Victor's father had a Zodiac like this in Africa and his first literary achievement, aged four, was to inscribe his name with a stone on his father's pride and joy.

Last year, Victor had a triple-bypass operation at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford. Afterwards, Victor's friend, Oxford cardiac surgeon Ravi Pillai, who performed the operation, presented him with an aluminium-cased Punch Havana cigar with instructions that he must never open it. Another possibility for the island.

So, was his desert island choice *The Chain* film poster, the cigar, or the rare Russian dolls?

"The Russian dolls have to win. The poster will get soggy, the cigar too tempting and the car will rust," Victor decided. "The dolls will give me a constant reminder of history, ancient and modern, which is a passion of mine. They will also be a reminder of elements of my career and, if nothing else, may be the basis for writing new stories in my head."