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From Lillian Gish to Gregory Peck

New Book by IWU Alumnus Profiles Stage, Screen Stars

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. Eleven remarkable stage and screen stars, whose careers span the 20th century, are profiled in a new book written by an Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus.

Dennis Brown's *Actors Talk Profiles and Stories From The Acting Trade* chronicles an eclectic group of performers ranging from Academy Award-winner Gregory Peck to silent-screen siren Lillian Gish. Twenty-three other esteemed actors including Patty Duke, James Garner, and Kevin Kline also reminisce in *Actors Talk* about auditions, how they got started, and the "mysterious X" that sustains them. The actor portraits are scripted from decades of interviews conducted by Brown, some dating back to when he was a CBS television publicist.

Brown, a 1967 Illinois Wesleyan University drama graduate, writes in the book's introduction: "Because actors are storytellers foremost, what follows is a veritable cornucopia of stories . . . stories about naivete and insecurity, about choices made and lessons learned. Stories lived, and now shared."

Of Actors and Interviews

Actors Talk is the product of actors and interviews. Consequently, Brown has some very definite opinions about actors and interview technique.

"What makes for a great actor?" Brown asked. "The ability to reach across a stage or out from a screen, and affect our emotions. The ability to make us see things in a way we haven't seen before. But how do actors do it? That is much more difficult to articulate. There's an alchemya mystery about actors that's not easy to analyze.

"George C. Scott [who recently died] might be the best actor ever," Brown said, "but what went into his makeup was something dark and dangerous. Jon Voight [who is profiled in *Actors Talk*], on the other hand, is almost angelic.

Scott's demons made him the actor he was Voight has found a completely different route to his gifts."

Brown, a former book reviewer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, has a three-part recipe for a successful interview: curiosity, research, and enthusiasm. He admits that sometimes

great actors don't give great interviews. Therefore, the criterion for inclusion in Brown's book wasn't fame or celebrity, but the actors' abilities to articulate their careers.

Brown said this is what he was looking for in his interviews: "Could they be so contagious in their enthusiasm in describing their careers what they do that when the words were typed they didn't flatten out."

Simply stated, to meet Brown's stringent test, these men and women of the stage and screen had to come up with their *own* compelling words, rather than reading lines written by others.

Therefore, some who passed Brown's test are not well known, for example, William Biff McGuire, principally a stage actor, but who readers will recall from roles in films like *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Serpico*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, and *Midway*. Brown said he tapped McGuire for one of the 23 "side" profiles because he "told me a story I had to use it knocked me out."

Gregory Peck: A Humanistic Viewpoint

Among the book's most engaging chapters is Brown's portrait of Gregory Peck, entitled simply "Atticus" after Atticus Finch, the attorney Peck portrayed in his Academy Award-winning performance in the courtroom classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, based on the Harper Lee novel.

"As a man, I don't know where to begin," Brown said, referring to his friend Peck. "All of his actions, all of his statements begin from a humanistic point of view. He is an acutely sensitive man. He tries to live his life in such a way that he shows his love for actors and acting and to bring honor to his profession."

Brown is the architect of the one-man show, *A Conversation with Gregory Peck*, which the legendary superstar has been performing throughout the United States and Canada for the past five years.

Jessica Tandy: A Real Practitioner

Reminiscing about the late Jessica Tandy (Academy Award, *Driving Miss Daisy*), Brown recalled that they got to talking one day on a film set. "Three hours went by," he said, "and she had promised me only one hour. She lived, breathed, and slept the theatre acting that's all she wanted to talk about. In that respect, she goes against the theme of the book a book about life. But, she was a real practitioner of the acting craft."

A Different Face of Danny Kaye

If there is controversy in the book, Brown expects it will surround the chapter about comedian Danny Kaye.

"In public, Danny Kaye was a rubber-mouthed comedian very funny and a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF [a United Nations' children's organization]. But, in the industry, he was known as being difficult, a curmudgeon. I saw both sides of him equally and I try to show both sides in the chapter.

"Of all the interviews in the book the short and the long ones," Brown added, "this one has the least substance, which is to say, if you were reading it with a yellow marking pen, there would be less underlining in this chapter than in others. But, this chapter probably will be remembered the longest it's a real character study.

"As an interviewer," Brown concluded, "I fall back on the kind of writing I like to read teach me something I don't know, tell me something I want to underline and remember. Danny was a character, not a teacher. I loved him, but I saw him hurt people and I saw him get hurt."

Brown spent much time with Kaye during the filming of *Skokie*, a made-for-television movie about a neo-Nazi march in a Chicago suburb with a large Jewish population. They shared a suite in a Skokie hotel and, according to Brown, "hit it off."

Lillian Gish: The First Lady of the Silent Screen

Brown knew silent-screen star Lillian Gish (*Birth of a Nation*, 1915) during the last decade of her life. "All she wanted to talk about was the inventing of movies," Brown recalled. Gish, who received a special Academy Award in 1970, was convinced that the silent era of filmmaking was superior to the "talkie" era, which began in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson.

"She became a missionary for silent films," Brown said, "and by the time she left us she had made a persuasive case with me. I don't think we should go back [to the silent era], but I have developed a new appreciation for the value of non-verbal moments in movies."

To prove his point, Brown points to the scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when the character Bob Ewell spits in the face of attorney Atticus Finch, played by Gregory Peck.

"That moment is the one most mentioned [about the film]," Brown explained. "Everyone is waiting to see what Atticus will do. Not a word is spoken."

Brown's Interviews

The book's interviews stretch back to when Brown a graduate student working on a master's thesis interviewed Christopher Walken, then an unknown actor playing Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, a production of the Shakespearean classic in Stratford, Ont., Canada.

Among others profiled in *Actors Talk* are Beulah Bondi (who played Jimmy Stewart's mother seven times in films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*),

Barry Bostwick, José Ferrer, Sterling Hayden, Stacy Keach, George Rose, and Paul Winfield (*see sidebar*).

Included among the 23 side profiles are Richard Chamberlain, Bert Convy, Jackie Cooper, Louis Gossett, Jr., George Grizzard, Frank Langella, Edmund

Lyndeck, Roberta Maxwell, Dorothy McGuire, Cameron Mitchell, Sam Neill, Geraldine Page, Joan Plowright, Harve Presnell, Joyce Van Patten, Fritz Weaver, and Billy Dee Williams.

Brown Profiled

Brown is a Los Angeles-based author, screenwriter, and lecturer.

His first book, *Shoptalk: Conversations about Theater and Film with Twelve Writers, One Producer and Tennessee Williams' Mother*, was published in 1992. A *Washington Post* review described Brown as a reporter of "compassion and contagious curiosity." Veteran screen star Hume Cronyn (husband of the late Jessica Tandy, who is profiled in *Actors Talk*) praised it as "the best book of interviews I've ever read."

Brown's television-movie adaptation of the classic civil war short story, *The Perfect Tribute*, starring Jason Robards as Abraham Lincoln, was broadcast on ABC-TV in 1991 and 1992.

In 1986, Brown, in a launcher hand, is almost angelic. Scott's demons made him the actor he was. Voight has found a completely different route to his gifts."

Brown, a former book reviewer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, has a three-part recipe for a successful interview: curiosity, research, and enthusiasm. He admits that sometimes great actors don't give great interviews. Thereof *Murder, She Wrote*, as well as for her highly-rated original television musical, *Mrs. Santa Claus*.

Currently, Brown is assisting actress Mia Farrow as she prepares a one-person presentation. Brown has written for the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,070 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine* ranks Illinois Wesleyan University 12th among the nation's top 1,600 private colleges in

providing a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Also sharing IWU's rank are Princeton University and Dartmouth College.

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Editor's Note: *Actors Talk Profiles and Stories From The Acting Trade*, written by Dennis Brown, will be published in late November by Limelight Editions of New York City. The 288-page book retails for \$25. For more information, call Limelight Editions at 212/532-5525. To contact Dennis Brown for interviews, call: 323/663-4539

Paul Winfield a.k.a. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

An Actor Comes Face-to-Face with History

Actor Paul Winfield researching his upcoming portrayal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for a six-hour television mini-series was chatting with Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain civil-rights leader, in her Atlanta home in 1977.

Over tea, they discussed the King family, how Mrs. King brought up four youngsters as a single parent, and other issues.

At one point, Mrs. King asked the actor if he would like to see Dr. King's suitcase the satchel sent from Memphis after her husband was assassinated.

And, then Mrs. King revealed a startling detail: She had not opened the piece of luggage since her husband had been gunned down by a sniper's bullet in 1968.

They went to the family room and Mrs. King rummaged around shelves in a storage area, locating the overnight bag.

When the valise was opened, they found three white shirts, dress slacks, underwear, and parts of speeches the Nobel Peace Prize-winner was drafting.

A bouquet of plastic flowers, wrapped in plastic, rested nearby on the room's fireplace. It was the last thing Dr. King had sent his wife. Why plastic flowers? Mrs. King said that in their last telephone conversation Dr. King said he wanted to send his wife something that would last. The next day he was assassinated.

These types of insights run throughout Dennis Brown's book, *Actors Talk Profiles and Stories from the Acting Trade*, which will be published this month by Limelight Editions of New York City.

Actors Talk is "not just actors talking about acting, it's actors talking about life," Brown said, referring to the Winfield-King incident.

Actors Talk is a collection of interviews Brown conducted over several decades with some of Hollywood's screen sirens, ranging from Academy Award-winners Gregory Peck and Jessica Tandy to legendary funny man Danny Kaye and silent-movie pioneer Lillian Gish.

The book contains 11 major interviews and 23 smaller pieces, chronicling the acting philosophies of performers like Richard Chamberlain (*The Thorn Birds* and *Dr. Kildare*) and Patty Duke (*The Miracle Worker*), to Jon Voight (*Midnight Cowboy* and *Enemy of the State*) and Joan Plowright (*Enchanted April* and *Avalon*).

Brown is a 1967 drama graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University.