

WHEN MAKE-BELIEVING IS THE REAL THING



Lee Ingleby has played a wide range of characters, zigzagging between theatre, film, and television. Shortly before he started filming new episodes of *Inspector George Gently*, the versatile English actor talked about his work, the best feeling in the world, reading faces and audiences, his immune system, and the Royal Air Force.

By Marta van Dijk

At the [National Theatre](#) in London, overlooking the River Thames, Lee Ingleby (35) says he has been interested in film and theatre from an early age on, but never thought of becoming an actor until he joined an after school drama class when he was well into his teenage years. “I was inspired by my drama teacher, Mr Wellock, who had such a zest for life and a passion for what he was teaching. We put on a play, I got the lead role in it, and I just loved it. Suddenly I had found it, I loved the whole process. It came out of the blue and then I never looked back, I really felt what I wanted to do. But I was always helped along the way by inspirational teachers who were amazing at what they did.”

Drama school

Ingleby describes himself as someone who was very shy and liked to hide away when he went on to study drama at the [London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art](#). Looking back at the time he spent there, he recounts: “When it comes to acting they can show you methods, but I think ultimately you have your own methods, it’s something that you discover yourself. But drama school taught me to breathe a little bit, to find that confidence. I’m still not overly confident, but I’m not painfully shy any

more. I've found a nice balance. And drama school expanded my knowledge of what I wanted to do. I didn't really know how a theatre worked, and that is important to know in terms of your progress and development as an actor I think, because it allows you to have that technical mind as well as the creative, artistic mind."

Career

Right after finishing drama school, he started working and has played over 50 characters to this day across the field of theatre (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Pillowman*, *Our Class*), television (*Nature Boy*, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Street*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Crooked House*, *The Worst Journey in the World*, *Inspector George Gently*), film (*Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), and short film (*Post It Love*, *Through the Window* and *All the Way Up*, for which he was awarded best supporting actor at the Monaco International Film Festival in 2010). He has also done a considerable number of audio plays. "I get challenged by trying different things and doing something different from my last job, if I can. It doesn't always work that way because practicality gets in the way, you need to pay your mortgage. So whatever job comes up, sometimes you have to go with it because that's the reality of needing to work, and sometimes you do things because you like the writing, you like the part, but it pays absolutely no money. So in a way it's a labour of love, and then you can do a film where it does pay quite well, and that allows you to do some theatre. And I suppose work breeds work, once you get the ball rolling you're up and running, but it's hard to get that ball rolling sometimes. I was very lucky I got it rolling straight away, and I have been able to try different things and zigzag between theatre, film, TV, and the styles within as well. I count my blessings, that I'm having fun still. The moment I stop having fun, that's when it becomes a job."

The best feeling in the world

He is passionate about his work and can't quite picture himself in a nine-to-five job. "I don't think I'd be very good at accounting or sitting at a desk." He also says he gets "antsy, touchy, and bored easily" when not working, although this is a bit of a catch-22. "Actors are always complaining when they're not working, and then they

complain when they are working. You complain you work too much, then you complain you're not working at all." What he enjoys most about acting is "tapping into the mindset of a character and exploring that, and then creating the character and bringing it to life, collaboratively with the director, the other actors and the set designer." This creative process ideally culminates into "the best feeling in the world, when you feel as though you've completely lost yourself within the character."

The Street

As there is often more than meets the eye, even with people we think we know quite well, he likes delving into the corners of a character's heart and mind. "We all have our little things, some people just have more things than others. I suppose as an actor those are the things you want to try and bring on stage or set. Even though it's never mentioned, it's nice to have that in your head because it adds an extra dimension to your character." He also likes to see the good in everybody and thinks that "whoever you're playing, a coward, or somebody who is frightened, or a murderer, you've got to see the human in them, otherwise they're not real. It's tapping into those human qualities what makes it much more interesting." Which he did exquisitely in *The Street*, playing Sean O'Neill, an abusive husband that doted on his children and pigeons. "Getting it right was tough, it was difficult. On the surface it may be simple, but the more you invest and delve into it, as an audience as well, you realise that it's hugely complicated." He gives much credit to the script for unfolding the complexities of domestic violence. "There's a brilliant scene where he's going off to court and says goodbye to his children, but the camera stays on her (*Yvonne O'Neill, played by Christine Bottomley*). And what she is looking at is, how can this man be so loving and adoring to these children and so horrible to me? How does that work?"

Master and Commander

Research into the setting and the background of a story has gradually become more important to him. "When I did *Master and Commander*, there was this whole world to explore in terms of life on board ship. It's like you're drinking it all in because it's completely different to anything you've ever experienced. And then for the character

I was playing, it was about superstition and being bullied. There was all that to explore as well, and over time I learned where to look for research and how to take it on board, whereas initially I was worried about the acting. I quite enjoy doing research, I enjoy history and psychology. Sometimes I get side-tracked and start looking at things which have no relation to what I'm doing.”

Short films

Being a keen amateur photographer who likes to visit the [National Portrait Gallery](#), he says that looking at images of people can shed light on certain emotions of a character he is to play. “Sometimes there is a visual reference to what I want to express. I think there is a lot to be said for looks and feelings, and you can read an awful lot just by looking into somebody’s eyes.” This is what also draws him to short films. “I like doing short films like *Post It Love*, there is no dialogue in it. There is another one I did recently, *Through the Window*, which is again so simple and quite moving really. I find that a beautiful medium and a great visual thing, to feel as though you read people just by looking in their faces, which is what you do day to day.”



On stage

When on stage, he thinks it is crucial to 'read' the audience and connect with them. "You shut the audience out of your peripheral vision as it were, but you've got to bring them in as well, and be aware of them. I suppose it's like an energy and a charge, and you can sense it, it's almost like a third eye. You get the immediate feedback right there. I think an audience will kind of dictate how you progress in a character, so you have to be aware." On doing a play he says: "It's kind of euphoric, especially if you feel as though you've had the audience, and it's great because if you've got a lengthy scene you do sort of slip into it, you're in a black box, it's live, and you have that journey, whereas if you're doing a scene on camera it sometimes becomes very technical. Especially a shot of you just picking up a cup, there's nothing there." At times he finds the aftermath of a play to coincide with an under-performance of his immune system. "Quite often you'll be on a project for a long time and when you've finished it, you find yourself within days becoming ill. For some reason you've had so much adrenaline and so much charged energy that your immune system is high. And when you relax, suddenly you're tired and you're ill, it's really odd, you just want to be in bed. Not always, but sometimes."

Nature Boy

Like acting on stage, acting on camera occasionally has a rather profound effect on him as well. "When I had done *Nature Boy*, it kind of stayed with me. For a few weeks after I found myself being more susceptible to my emotions, I was more emotional than I usually am. I remember watching a film and I was in tears at the end of it, like it opened a wound. I think you're opening things in your mind and being because you tap into emotions, false emotions in a way because you're playing a character that is very upset or grieving. It can be quite powerful indeed, without you actually realising it. And then you start to concentrate on other things, but I suppose there are many things that affect you without you realising it, like the death of somebody or the birth of a baby. I think you constantly find yourself being surprised by how it affects you." Directed by Joe Wright (*Pride & Prejudice*, *Atonement*), *Nature Boy* is a rite of passage, a love story and a road movie, telling the gripping story of young David Witton (played by Ingleby) in search of his father. "I'm proud of

it, it's really beautiful and it was so demanding, I was shattered by the end of it. But I love it when it's hard work, when it's demanding, physically and psychologically. It makes you earn your keep."

Favourite films

Talking about films which have impressed him, he mentions [*Twelve Angry Men*](#). "It's set in one room, just twelve guys on a jury, and it's twelve different characters. It's brilliant. I like heavily character driven pieces, I don't mind dialogue. Just two people talking, I find it fascinating. And I just love [*The Breakfast Club*](#). But like *Twelve Angry Men*, it's a play really, just a handful of people locked together in a room. There are no special effects or massive amounts of drama, but it's very touching and human. People scoff at it, but I think it's great, it's very moving, and you've got five completely different characters who all each have a journey. It's really good, very simple." Another film he really likes is [*Amadeus*](#). "I saw that one when I was 14, 15, and I must have watched it hundreds of times. I'll never get bored of it. The whole world is so rich and it looks so beautiful, and the characters are really enjoyable. I have always come back to it and if I could play a character in any film it would be in that. I'd love to play Amadeus now and then Salieri when I'm older. I love the film, I love the music, I love the cinematography, I love the costumes."

George Gently

Costumes from days gone by have a certain appeal to him. "Wouldn't it be great if we walked around with knickerbockers on and a cane!" He also likes the costumes he is about to wear as he teams up again with Martin Shaw to film new episodes of *Inspector George Gently*, a crime drama set in the 1960's. "I suppose I quite like the character that I play, so I like his style, even though I think he is a bit of a div. I like the fact that he's very stylish, he takes great care in his appearance, he makes sure he looks sharp and dapper, because of the era and his age. It was kind of important to people to look smart. And he likes the fact that he is a copper, but not because he is serving and protecting people. I think because it gives him an awful lot of power over people, and that's what drives him."

Future plans

As for the future, Ingleby has a clear sense of direction. “I’m more focused, I feel as though I know where I want to go and I’m just a bit more mellow I think, more chilled out, more at ease with myself. I’m starting to find other interests that fulfil me, but it all has to do with the arts. I like the visual things, maybe directing one day, I’d love to do that, writing and directing. It’s going to be contained within theatre and film.” Long gone are the times when he had no idea what profession to choose. “You have a career day at school and I was just standing there thinking, who do I talk to? I ended up wandering over to the RAF because it looked interesting, but I had no intention of signing up. Just somebody to talk to, to show willing.”

Photos: [Ian Phillips-McLaren](#)

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