

Imaginary sister gives a lesson in ducking and diving

Veteran actor HARRY LANDIS looks back on an East End childhood, the origins of his acting career, and the battle against racism

We are all aware of anti-Semitism to one degree or another, perhaps older people more than the young. After all, in the last 30 or 40 years black people have borne the brunt of racism, thus taking the focus off Jews to a great extent.

Anti-Semitism shaped my thinking from a very early age. As an only child living with my Polish mum in the East End in very poor circumstances in Paragon Mansions, Stepney Green, life was very hard. In the same way that Fashion Street in the East End was named by some wag that probably saw the joke – although these days it is the height of fashion – so Paragon Mansions was a sad slum and I am not sure how we got there. I remember very clearly one Saturday night, aged about six or seven, huddling in the corner of the room on my mother's knee while the window of our room was being smashed and women's drunken voices were screaming: "Jew bastards get out!"

The lot of the middle class Jews living in north London was probably less harsh in this regard, but in the East End at the time of Mosley and his Fascist followers things were different. The Jewish Board of Guardians in Middlesex Street was where my mother went for a chit which allowed her to go to the soup kitchen in Brune Street. That soup kitchen is still there for all to see. Now converted into flats, the front of the building is listed and the writing above the entrance says: "SOUP KITCHEN FOR THE JEWISH POOR (5662 -1902)".

With me in one hand and a saucepan in the other, my mother would stride in and follow the queue to get a dollop of stew and a loaf of bread. Outside by the exit I remember a group of about 20 or 30 non-Jews asking for some bread and my mother breaking her loaf in half and handing it over.

The Jewish Board of Guardians was a rather forbidding place. Applicants had to sit in front of a committee. They were not very friendly and cross-examined people with the air of disapproval that Jews should find themselves in these circumstances. My mother lied and said she had two children, so as to get a bigger ladle of stew and bigger loaf. I was running around the hall not taking much notice, when the chairman called me over. "Tell me," he said, "have you got a sister?" Some instinct took over and I said: "Yes." "What's her name?" he asked. Quick as a flash I said: "Rosie". My mother got the extra and I got lots of kisses and my first lesson in ducking and diving in East End life.

At the same time Moseley's British Union of Fascists were marching and I well remember groups of 20 and 30 walking along Whitechapel shouting: "The Yids, the Yids, we've got to get rid of the Yids!"

One day three 12- or 13-year olds grabbed me and said: "Red or Black?" They looked giants to me, a small 7-year

old, and although I had seen enough street corner meetings to get the message, I pretended not to understand and they let me go.

Aged 15 and working in a factory, I used to go to the Hackney Empire every Monday first house – showtimes were 6.20 and 8.30 and Monday's first house was cheaper than the rest of the week. This was because Monday afternoon was a quick run of music with the orchestra in the pit and Monday first house was something of a dress rehearsal with occasional hilarious results. On Tuesday in the tea break on the factory floor I would perform the show I had seen – Max Miller's jokes and the impressionist's versions of Syd Walker, Claude Dampier, Robertson Hare and Churchill. All dead and forgotten with the exception of Churchill, and Charles Laughton or James Cagney perhaps. The shop steward, who I had noticed kept the *Daily Worker* and the *New Statesman and Nation* by his machine, told me I should be on the stage. "Have you ever seen a play?" he asked. "No, but I go to the Hackney Empire," I replied. "Where do you see plays?"

He told me that in London plays were performed in the West End, but these were plays about posh people and that people like us were depicted as maids or comic taxi drivers for light relief. There would be a smart set on stage, with french windows, and all would end happily. There was however, he said, a small theatre at Kings Cross that put on plays about ordinary people like us. He was going with his wife on Sunday and would I like to come?

Well, I went along and I was totally gobsmacked. The play was called *All Change Here* by Ted Willis, who wrote *Dixon of Dock Green*. It was about a bus strike and how it affected a family in the East End, the father being a bus driver. It was totally accessible to me. The people in it spoke just like people in my street and it moved me so much that at the end it took me a time to recover. I auditioned for the company and over a few years learnt about acting.

One day a member of the cast who was a headmaster suggested I should become professional. "After all," he said "Alfie Bass, David Kossoff, Bill Owen and several others had done so from Unity Theatre." So why shouldn't I? He got a form from the London County Council, which was giving scholarship grants providing you could get into a drama school. I auditioned and got a place in the Central School of Speech and Drama and the LCC gave me a grant to go to the college.

While I had the advantage of some years of acting, this was in modern and contemporary political plays. I needed drama school to learn about where I fitted in to Shakespeare, Restoration and classic drama such as Ibsen, Shaw and Wilde.

My first job was a tour of two Shakespeare plays and I was always elected by every cast I was in to be its representative, just as a shop steward in a factory. As my career progressed into plays in the West End, films and television I progressed at the same time in the Actors Equity union, eventually becoming president of Equity, serving for six years.

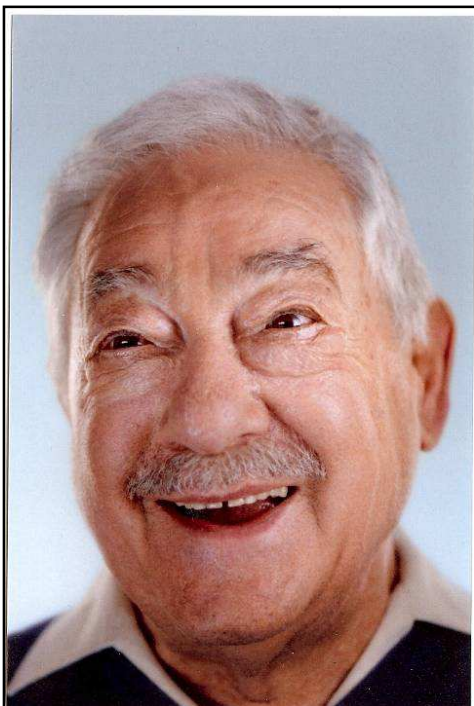
I am sometimes stopped by people who say: "I know you, you're that Jewish actor." I never know whether they mean I am an actor who plays Jewish parts or an actor who happens to be Jewish. Yes I have played many Jewish parts, but I have also played Greeks, Russians, Arabs and even an Italian Catholic priest. So I am happy to be seen as an actor who happens to be Jewish but not to be considered someone who only plays Jewish parts.

After all we no longer think of black actors as actors that play parts only related to the colour of their skin.

After a long struggle in which Equity played its part, black actors now play detectives, doctors and many other roles with no reference to their ethnicity. It was not always so.

Times have certainly changed. In the 1930s, what with the political upheavals of the times, it was not felt that being Jewish was something to be advertised. Keeping a low profile was the order of the day. Speaking Yiddish was beginning to fade out. Today it is back with a vengeance: Oxford University now does a degree in the language. Alfie Bass, whom you may remember from *Bootsie and Snudge* was a joiner who earned his living in carpentry when he acted at Unity Theatre. He told me he had changed his name from Basselinsky because he found it hard to get work with a Jewish name. Bass was the name he kept when he became an actor. In the US it was the same. Bernie Schwartz became Tony Curtis, Issur Danielovitch Demsky became Kirk Douglas and Pauline Levy became Paulette Goddard.

Today people proudly keep their real names and, while prejudice still exists of course, all minorities hold their heads up high in the knowledge that society today has accepted that all people have human rights. We should all be vigilant to ensure that never again will racism be allowed to exist without being fought.



Harry Landis



The Brune Street soup kitchen – now a block of flats – where Harry Landis and his mother would queue to get a dollop of stew and chunk of bread

Harry Landis, born in 1929, has had a long and successful stage, film and television career. In the West End he appeared in Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* at the Royal Court, John Osborne's *Time Present* at the Duke of York's, RC Sherrif's *Journey's End* at the Cambridge, *Fame*, also at the Cambridge, and *Six Men of Dorset* at the Shaw. Film credits include *A Hill in Korea*, *Private Potter*, *Billy Liar*, *Bitter Victory*, *The Longest Day*, *Dunkirk*, *Doctor in Distress* and *All You Need is Kill*. Television appearances stretch back to *Dixon of Dock Green* and include *Z Cars*, *Softly Softly*, *Chicken Soup With Barley*, *Bar Mitzvah Boy*, *The Saint*, *East Enders*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Minder*, *Lovejoy*, *The Bill*, *Holby City*, *Doctors*, *Way to Go*, and *Woman of Substance*. And much, much more. He recently had a lead role in *Friday Night Dinner* on Channel 4

