

Can a child ever give their consent to be judged, and treated, as an adult?

A chilling and powerful play exposing the mind of a child-killer, *The Age of Consent* delves into the psyche of two characters. One a teenager awaiting his release from a correctional facility after serving his time for the murder of a child; the other, the mother of a child performer whose main rule of entertainment is the three T's: Talent, Teeth and Tits. What unites the characters is a sense of denial, as well as the humanity that can exist behind even the most monstrous abuse.

'A brilliantly developed piece that begins by making you laugh and ends by making you shudder' *Daily Telegraph*

'Moving, hard-hitting and thought-provoking'
Evening News

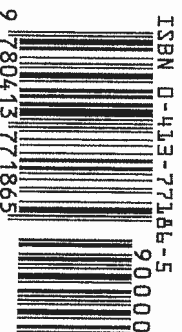
'Urgent and compassionate' *Scotsman*

The Age of Consent premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2001 and opened at the Bush Theatre, London, in January 2002.

THE AGE OF CONSENT

PETER MORRIS

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The Age of Consent premiered at the Pleasance Theatre, Edinburgh, on 1 August 2001. The cast was as follows:

Stephanie Timmy

Katherine Parkinson
Ben Silverstone

Directed by Edward Dick

This production transferred to the Bush Theatre, London, and opened on 9 January 2002.

Stephanie When we were starting out, I told Raquel: the one cardinal rule, of this nasty business we call show, this is what I said, I said, Raquel, there are three Ts in Entertainment. There may be only one T in Typoo, but there are three Ts in Entertainment. Which is a fact, incidentally. I mean, Raquel's fucking illiterate so she wouldn't notice, I just wanted her to use it as a mnemonic device, but if you actually spell Entertainment it has got three Ts in it.

Anyway, I told Raquel, those three Ts are: Talent, Teeth and Tits.

Now Raquel's only six, she'll be seven in November, so she's really only fully developed in the talent department right now.

But she's doing her best with the rest.

I mean, I show her, give the world a big smile, like they can't keep their eyes off you, and then thrust forth your bosom like a cockney songbird. *Thus*. Raquel's a bit young to know Barbara Windsor from anything other than *EastEnders*, but I've shown her some photographs of when those hills were alive with the sound of music, if you know what I mean. And it's adorable now, before she goes in for an audition I'll just say to her, 'RAQUEL!', call her to attention like, and she just looks up at me and whispers, 'Teef and tits, Mum, teef and tits!'

Now I never met the late Italia Conti but I perhaps suspect the distinguished dago had nothing on myself, Miss Stephanie Dunn of Overton, Basingstoke, Hants, when it comes to polishing the diamond of youthful stardom.

I don't want to overstate my case here, nor do I want to whinge. But it must be said, it's not easy to be a single mother. Especially at my tender age. The sort of papers I read would probably refer to me as a 'gynslip mummy' but my photo hasn't graced those papers – yet – and frankly, if I'd kept the gynslip on a little tighter I wouldn't've ended

up wheeling Little Miss R in her pram down the aisles at Superdrug of a Saturday night, instead of doing something a little more appropriate for a woman of my age.

I mean, I was nineteen when I had her. She's six now. And that's been, what? Six years on my own. I've no family to speak of, to lend a hand in raising her, and as for being a single mummy, the gentleman in question seemed to think of his role largely in terms of anonymous sperm donation, conducted under slightly less hygienic conditions than usual. I like to say to Raquel, with me and your Darth – that's what I call her daddy now, I call him Darth, like the faceless dark lord of evil in *Star Wars* – I say, with me and your Darth it was panda bear sex, because a panda bear *eats shoots and leaves*. Get it? God forbid that Darth should *ever* send his daughter a brass farthing in child support, or a gift certificate for Top Shop, or a couple of Max Factor Misty Pink Lip Glosses, anything that a girl of Raquel's age might possibly appreciate. The silence from that man is deafening and, to be fair, I'm not really sure where he is now, since initially I met him on holiday at Kusadasi and the address I had for him in this country may now be out of date.

But I never let the stress of being a single mother become a stress *per se*, if you take my meaning. Raquel and I are friends, really, in fact that's what I say. I say, think of me as your best friend, Raquel. So when I need a date for the cinema, it'll be me and Raquel, arm in arm, giggling over our sweet popcorn going to see Guy Ritchie's *Snatch* at ABC Cinemas Basingstoke. And naturally, she has her own ideas of fun as well. So if Raquel wants me to hang upside down with her against the wall of the broom cupboard to play 'bat babies', I am perfectly happy to play 'bat babies'. I haven't got a husband and she hasn't got a father, but what does that matter when we're bonded? Sisters are doing it for themselves, right? We even rush to read the latest issue of *More* magazine together, since I make sure we have the money to maintain her subscription. Although as you can imagine that leads to some rather complicated and dare I

say *arcane* mummy-daughter chats every fortnight when the new issue comes in the post. But then again, I don't want Raquel to be shielded in any way from the truth because knowledge is power and I feel that with a little education Raquel could improve herself vastly, and let's face it, *Smart Girls Get More*, and in my case, *Stupid Girls Just Get More Than They Bargained For*.

But what it comes down to is money, right. And that's when I started thinking, well, I think Raquel and I were watching *Crufts* on the telly and I thought to myself, right, child-rearing, such as it is, you've just got to be firm and communicate in one-syllable commands, and then the rest of it's down to breeding and grooming. I mean, not that Raquel is dog-like in any way, but let's face it. Child Stars, yeah? The only difference between a prize poodle and a Bonnie Langford is the length of the ringlets. With some discipline I could put Raquel's natural maturity and outgoingness to a good use. I mean, I want Raquel to be the best she can be. This could give her focus.

I think that was the initial inspiration, and with a little research I was off and running. Once I learned that Raquel's fee for a panty, say, could be well in excess of Equity minimum, when you consider ten shows a week, playing at ninety per cent, and chapone's fees on top of it, I thought, well, fuck this for a game of jolly buggers, that's more than I earn as the Periodicals Liaison Officer at the Central Basingstoke Public Library. So I made the decision. I packed up my cubicle at the CBPL, and quit my job to concentrate on Raquel's career. Although, as her agent, and manager, it has to be said that I'll always be working harder than she does, to promote her synergistically in the media and aim for full career development. But right now I've taken the money that Raquel's nan left for her and paid for two and a half weeks of evening classes in media business management . . . and I'm going to invest the rest in our relocation to Colliers Wood. 'Cos if Raquel really wants to be a star we can't stay here. I mean, put it this way, darlin',

there's no branch of the Groucho Club in Basingstoke, is there.

But you have no idea how energised I am. I am completely happy and spending my days teaching Raquel to sing, to dance, and even some elocution and fencing on the side. I finally feel like a mother.

Timmy is playing a computer game. After a bit, he puts it down and speaks.

Timmy I'm giving up on the PlayStation. They got us everything for it . . . the analog joystick and the memory cards, the Logitech wingman and the gun system and the Rumble Pak. But end of the day, it's fucking dull. Plus, you discover other things to do. The obvious. Wanking. Which is, let's be honest, pretty much like a computer game for the clever people. Thing in your hand, and stuff going past your eyes too fast, then bang, shoot, game over. It's a bit more fucking *sticky* than a PlayStation, but it doesn't cost anything. And it's useful, I mean, if you really think about it, the clever people are the ones who don't end up with kids. 'Cos they just wank. The stupid people *reproduce*. I mean, I'm not being racist or anything, but there's a lot of stupid poor people in India, right, it's not their fault, I suppose . . . but all they seem to do is have more babies. And make really bad films. If they ever need someone to sort out India, they should send me as a missionary to teach the natives how to wank. I could be the Mahatma Gandhi of the hand-shandy.

Although if you think about it, if you think there's really too many people filling up the place, you can't really just say 'India' because it's anyone. *Anyone* who has a baby is the problem. And that means the people who can afford it, even the people who only have one, any person who's squeezing out a puppy 'cos . . . well, 'cos a baby is a baby.

See, when I got here, the one that we had to have . . . for the PlayStation . . . and it shows you how long I been here because nobody plays it now, it's all bigger-faster-more for the kids who're still well into that stuff and if they played it now they'd be bored but back then we thought it was the bollocks . . . was *GoldenEye*. You probably played it. We all did in here. Back then. It became a competitive thing.

Anyway. You're James Bond. Or something. The plot isn't really important in a computer game. But one thing it does . . . if you play enough . . . if you play too much . . . it starts to work on the way you see the world. It's not like you think you're James Bond, that would be all right. But after you played it for three, four hours . . . then when you go outside, or walk down a hall, it's a bit like the game. D'you know what I mean? Worried that someone's gonna pop out from behind a corner to kill you. Looking around anywhere you go for surveillance cameras and . . .

I know. Pretty funny, really, if you know what . . .

Ironic. 'One could say.'

Anyway.

But let's face it, having a shifty doesn't really get any more interesting after a few years even if you keep doing it, it's just . . . fucking childish, I mean, it's addictive but totally totally predictable, never really gives you anything different, a surprise result, like 'Christ on a bicycle! I've started coming in different colours! Purple and orange technicolour dream-cum!' . . . or whatever, I mean, wanking's like the National Lottery, it's a mug's game, really, know what I mean . . . so what I do, I *read*. Like, books. Makes them happy, makes me happy, and fuck it, I'm clever now, you got to believe that, I can read, I can read hard books. Fucking Shakespeare. Whatever they say about me they're not going to say I'm not clever now.

Not sure how *useful* it is, reading. I mean, if they had any real sense they'd be teaching us to get pissed without ever getting sick. That's a real skill for life. But I'm sure they're

right, they want me to wait. Can't build up a tolerance just yet. At least something'll still be fun when I'm first out. At least I'll finally learn what my mum saw in it for all those years.

The woman who works with me, Janet, some of the younger boys call her Janet the Gannet, but I never, but she tells me I should remind myself every day of how far I come since I been here. 'Cos when I came in here I wouldn't even admit to what I done, that I was just this tough little customer, with a shaved head, and *fat* . . . I was fat when I first got here, which is good, to look at me now, makes me think people might almost not recognise me when I get out, which is the point. But I stayed this little fat bastard for a long while out of boredom eating. Which is no surprise. 'Cos I *was* bored. But end of the day, that kept them sweet. I'm not bored any more but I still try to look it, 'cos there's not much difference between looking like bored out of your fucking zombified brain, and looking rehabilitated.

And that's what rehabilitation is. It's not enough they know you'll never do what you did again. If they wanted that, they'd put up a fucking camera everywhere you go. Then watch and nick you just as you're about to do it. They could do that if they wanted. I mean, look at fucking *Big Brother*. They let us watch a bit of that in here, just the celebrity one, so that you could watch Anthea Turner cleaning her teeth and Vanessa Feltz shaving her back or whatever, I mean, it's pathetically dull really but you start watching because . . . because it's not interesting, not really, but it's kind of horrifying, like going to a zoo where they've got Anthea Turner and Jack Dee and . . . Chris Eubank instead of monkeys, well, Chris Eubank is a monkey already, but what's horrifying really is that you realise how easy they could do this to you, or maybe they are doing it to you, or something at least that's not far off the mark.

But in here, it's the other way round.

In here . . . what they like is to set up the camera inside your own head. So that you're watching yourself. So that every time you do something there's a bit of you watching you do it. Inside your head. Can you imagine?

I mean, I'm nineteen and I've been here long enough for them to install the camera in there. And in that time I haven't — except for the couple of trips outside — but in that whole time I haven't looked at a girl more fit than Janet the Gannet. And do I need to tell you the Gannet is not the most attractive bird in the zoo.

So what happens if . . .

I mean, say it's at a pub. And I'm not completely minging and I try to be nice, I mean, I think now I'm a nice person but say there is a girl there. Who's my type. Which I can tell you is kind of like a shorter Kate Winslet, I mean, not like I know how tall Kate Winslet is really, but for some reason when they let us see *Titanic* she looked really lovely, I thought, but she looked like twice as tall as the bloke she was shagging, when they were in that back of the car and you saw the hand up against the steamy window I thought she was, like, dismembering him or eating him alive or something. But anyway. That's my type, you can imagine your own type if you want. But I meet a girl. And I say, what? 'Hello, gorgeous.' Or . . . see, I don't even know how it would start. 'Cos here's a case where all I've got to work with is books and films and still I know that's not the way it works. But say I just get to talking, you know . . .

Hey. I like your hair.

'Really? I bought it discount at Tesco's.'

Or I don't even know what girls say.

'I like your hair too.'

I can't even make up the story, it's just . . . it's what I want so much and I don't even know how it will go. I mean, all I

can say is that I want it so much that it has to happen, but how do you make it happen?

She comes up to me, maybe . . . in a club somewhere. 'You look lonely.'

I am, I'm here alone.

'No friends?'

Nope. I'm the lone ranger, me. I am travelling incognito.

'Fancy coming back to mine?'

Sure, love, let me just ring my probation officer first and they'll observe us through the window from a parked car. You see what I mean? If it gets serious, well . . . if it gets serious I'd have to tell her, or if not my probation officer will tell her . . . But even if . . . I mean, at that point if she's still there she's probably fat and desperate, or else she's mad, or else she wants to sell her story to the papers, or maybe she just . . . loves me. Maybe. I mean, that could happen, there's somebody for everybody out there and it's amazing, when you think that even . . . I dunno . . . even Pat Butcher can get sex occasionally.

And say that I get the chance to actually . . . well, do it.

And there it is.

But it's like they put a camera right there in my head and the camera's still working. Watching me. How do you handle that? Or does everybody have that? Where they watch themselves in their head as they have sex and realise how fucking silly they look. I hope Pat Butcher has that.

But in that case . . .

I do what I do.

I tell myself it's all good.

Which is partly why I don't read the papers.

I mean, I'm not allowed to read them, but I've got hold of them sometimes, and it's not worth it. The education I had, they're beneath me in terms of reading material now, basically.

You got to believe that I'm clever. Eight years ago the police were saying I was barely literate. Like I was some kind of fucking wolf-boy they found living under a rock. But I did six GCSEs and I did an A level in English and I'm doing an A level in design and technology. Had one-on-one teaching in this place. You don't get that at fucking Eton, as my mum said the last time she bothered to visit and I told her she needn't bother again. Sayonara. As they say somewhere.

And that's why I'm in the papers, still. 'Cos I don't deserve it so good. The last time I did look at the fucking papers, a long while ago, against my better judgement, that's what it was . . . Although one bloke wrote a letter, saying, 'One could say it's a shame he had to kill someone to get an education in this country.'

That bloke was in the *Guardian*.

'One could say . . .'

It's always the fucking *Guardian*, isn't it?

Stephanie Raquel and I have been learning about this industry the hard way. Through Christopher Biggins.

This is after Raquel, with only a minimum of coaching from me, really – she's a natural – got cast as the littlest Darling sibling in *Peter Pan* at the Basingstoke Anvil, postponing our move to Colliers Wood for panto season.

Now I hate to tear the scales from your eyes, but although Christopher Biggins may have been on *I bloody Claudius* and although he may have portrayed the camp but loveable Mr Painter on *Rent-a-Ghost*, and although he may be a close confidant of that ageless mantrap and Hollywood icon Joan Collins, let's be perfectly clear, he's also a right shit.

And, if I may paint you a bit of a word picture here, Christopher is the size of a garden shed and camp as a row of tents and, considering his wardrobe consists solely of kaffans, he's tentlike all round really. It's a bit like encountering a millennium dome of suet swathed in brightly coloured jute. Although don't get me wrong. The man has talent. (He also has teeth and tits.) And he was an integral part of the finished performance as Captain Hook, though I daresay he was getting paid a fuck of a lot more than my Raquel, so he could afford to be talented.

But someone with talent who doesn't give a hundred and ten per cent . . . that's just not on. And I thought it was a bit out of order that he didn't learn Raquel's name, and she was playing a leading role.

Now I don't know what is customary and what is not in an Equity dress rehearsal. But I already suspected that Mr Biggins might bear a grudge against my daughter, because, frankly, I have taught her to steal a scene so gracefully that you don't even see her doing it, like Raffles the Amateur Cracksman removing your wristwatch as you converse with him. I mean, Raquel's a natural, she doesn't have to sweat at it like someone who, let's face it, is going to be doing panto for the rest of his life and in ten years he'll be Widow Twankey in Scunthorpe when Raquel's in Hollywood where she belongs, pulling a Gwyneth as she accepts her Oscar.

What I'm saying is, Raquel was prepared to upstage Biggins – no inconsiderable feat, I'd like to add – but I sensed, as she was about to make her entrance for the big plank number, that it was going to be war. I can't tell you how I knew. Just a chill went over me, as I stood in the wings, as Raquel waited to enter. I didn't even smile as I leaned down and whispered into her ear: 'T and T, Raquel.'

So she grins.

And thrusts.

And then she enters.

And all eyes are on her.

And so naturally, Mr Biggins shouts out and stops the rehearsal. I don't remember if he shouted CUT or what. But then he squints down as Raquel makes her entrance and says, 'Excuse me, does this child have the palsy?'

Now I'm sure that Christopher, for any number of reasons, didn't understand that Raquel was simply presenting herself in a naturally feminine way. Teeth and tits, darling; don't they teach you that down in Hove?

But I smelled trouble. So at this point I leapt on to the stage and said, 'Excuse me, I think Mr Biggins is trying to upstage my daughter.'

And he said, 'Not at all, I'm just worried she's having a fit.'

So I shouted out to the director: 'Seeing as Mr Biggins has the reputation for being difficult to work with, can you take extra care to see that my daughter does not get trodden on by him? I think the fear of that may be putting her off her stroke.'

But later, backstage, as he was wrapped in a kaffan – and may I add, if you're out there somewhere, Mr Biggins, starring a kaffan fools no one – he catches my eye in the hallway and says to me, 'Look here, you woman,' – as though that were a bad thing to be! As though I weren't already more man than Christopher Biggins will ever be and more woman than he'll ever have in one tidy package. But that's what he said, he said, 'Look here, woman, don't you dare try to cross me like that again.'

And I said, 'Mr Biggins, I wouldn't try to cross you with Sir Edmund Hillary and a skilled team of sherpas.'

The rest of the run was like navigating a minefield. But I think that I can say, fully aware of the irony, that *Peter Pan* helped both Raquel and myself to grow up. Raquel learned to hold her own against the best in the business. And certainly one thing I learned was that you don't have an

affair with the lighting designer. He may not even have been the designer, I think he was the follow-spot operator. I struck up a friendship with him purely by chance because it was the easiest place to watch the show every night. And he was charming enough, he looked a bit like a younger and more attractive Asian version of Les Dawson. And after certain intimacies had taken place, I could ensure that Raquel had a brighter spotlight than Biggins at all places and times for the rest of the run. But I was under the impression that he might have some influence on casting. Still. It's a virtue in itself to establish a good working relationship with the stage crew. That's what giving a hundred and ten per cent is all about.

Timmy is stitching button eyes on to a teddy bear.

Timmy Today we had an outing. The Gannet took us to Harry Ramsden's. Afterwards one of the lads said, 'I think the Gannet's a bulimic, she just forgets to throw up.' But that's the funny thing about Janet, you don't see her eat, ever, I mean, she only had, like, a pickled egg, but somewhere during the day or night she must find the time to shove a hell of a lot of food down her. Janet the Planet, more like.

I don't want to make fun of her. She's nice, really. She drove us back, three of us, in her car, playing Tracy Chapman really loud. Her car, I mean, we didn't even go in the van.

Anyway. Getting some work done before lights out. This is the final project for my A level in design and technology.

The assignment was: to make something beautiful.

I don't know what they expected us to make.

I'm making a fucking teddy bear.

Which, let's face it, when you've been in a place like this eight years and you start having funny ideas to yourself, I

mean, things start to seem normal in your mind, and one of them, I suppose, is that I can sit here sewing a teddy bear and not look like a Big Gay. Course if anyone says anything I'll fucking rip his eyes out of his fucking sockets and eat them like pickled eggs, won't I, Teddy? Somebody already did that to Teddy, looks like. Prison life is brutal, Bear.

But let's be honest, right, what a load of fucking toss. 'Make something beautiful?' When I think about what . . . what I think is beautiful . . . well, one of the first outings they ever took us on was to Cadbury World in Bourneville. At the time it was fucking amazing. I was, maybe, twelve, thirteen. They give you free samples. All Cadbury's, I mean, I didn't even realise that, I started asking for the wrong stuff, like Smarties, but they let you just . . . wander around. You could stay as long as you liked, and we went through slow. And you could see the bars of chocolate coming off the conveyor belt, and you could dip your own chocolate centre into the vat too. Some of the lads figured Janet took us there 'cos she just wanted free sweets but I thought it was the best thing I'd ever seen. I always used to like things like factories and machines . . . there's something, just . . . I don't know . . . I remember when I wouldn't turn up for school and I'd just go for a long walk, usually on my own, before I . . . just doing fuck all, though, basically, but *looking*, where you could just see the grasses growing up over the used-up factory. Rusty machinery. And in its own way it's kind of . . . beautiful. Not in a *Star Trek* kind of way, where people think, this is so *modern*, like it looks like the future. 'Cos what I'm talking about, it's not modern, that's part of what's beautiful about it. It's not the future. It's like . . . a past that has always been ruined, before you were even born it still wasn't working, and you're looking over a world that's already been wrecked by the same . . . failure . . . the same sad, whatever made it break down, violence or just . . . getting depressed . . . like machinery can get depressed . . . but what you see there is exactly what you can taste in the