

The British theatrical legacy of Sir Peter Cushing

ALL IN THE BLOOD: THE THEATRICAL ANCESTRY
OF SIR PETER CUSHING

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**ALL IN THE BLOOD:
THE THEATRICAL
ANCESTRY OF SIR PETER CUSHING**

By

Michael McGlasson

PREFACE

Since the time of his death in 1994, much has been written about British actor Sir Peter Cushing, best known for his horror and fantasy films with Hammer Studios during the 1950's and through the 1970's. Several biographies on this cult character actor have been published and Cushing himself even wrote two autobiographies during the 1980's, but author Michael McGlasson has accomplished the seemingly impossible by revealing information related to Cushing's ancestors that has never seen the light of day.

For those who are unfamiliar with the career of Sir Peter Cushing, which I doubt would be the case if you are reading this book, imagine an actor who placed 110% of his effort into every performance, ranging from excellent to sub-par films, television episodes, theatre productions and radio dramas. As an actor, Cushing approached every role with the same hard work ethic and was known by many of his fellow cast and crew as "Props Peter," due to his special ability to either introduce his own props into a scene or take an existing prop and incorporate it into his performance. Another nickname given to him by some of his close friends and fans was "Saint Peter" for his Christian-like conduct in both his life and career.

Unlike many performers of his day, Cushing never spoke ill of his costars, directors or producers, nor of anyone else who came into contact with him. To some, it appeared almost contradictory that the man who murdered, created monsters and caused general mayhem in his film roles was a devout Christian, a man deeply in love with his wife Helen and who avoided

using derogatory terms and loved animals to the point where he became a strict vegetarian and supporter of many animal rights groups.

Although first “introduced” through his large body of genre films and by reading interviews in various magazines, I quickly learned much more about the real Sir Peter Cushing, the man whom I came to admire for his human qualities of hard work, love, devotion and kindness. In 1995, Joyce Broughton, Sir Peter’s longtime secretary, established an appreciation group called the Peter Cushing Association with Brian Holland which eventually became a conduit for fans of the actor in order to stay in contact with each other and discuss his film career and life. After joining the group, I soon took over the responsibilities of running it after Brian Holland stepped down in 2000. Not long after accepting the leadership, I came into contact with Michael through the Peter Cushing group at Yahoo! and later met with him at a film convention in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in 2003.

In 2002, while writing my own biography “In All Sincerity. . . Peter Cushing,” Michael graciously offered to assist with the editing of the book. At this time, he was also conducting some research on his own and wrote an article on Henry William Cushing, Sir Peter’s paternal grandfather, called “It’s All In The Blood: The Bram Stoker/Peter Cushing Alliance.” Portions of this essay were subsequently used in the first chapter of “In All Sincerity,” and I am very thankful that Michael was able to help out in this way.

To those who believe in destiny or some higher power, what Michael has uncovered demonstrates a unique connection between Sir Peter Cushing, known for playing Dr. Van Helsing, the adversary of Count Dracula, and his grandfather Henry William Cushing who

appeared on the stage of the Lyceum Theatre with the famed Sir Henry Irving in numerous productions of *Faust* which some say served as the inspiration for the character of Dracula, created by Bram Stoker in 1897. Thus, the information that Michael has uncovered about Henry William Cushing is truly a remarkable feat of sleuthing, worthy of another character played by Sir Peter—the great Sherlock Holmes, considering that Peter Cushing himself was apparently unable to uncover as much information for his autobiographies.

But Michael did not stop here. Determined to delve even deeper into Sir Peter's ancestral past, Michael continued his quest and not long after obtained a copy of Henry Cushing's obituary as well as additional playbills listing him among the cast lists. Initially, I thought this new information which he had uncovered would *surely* be the last remaining documentation one could turn up on the ancestry of Sir Peter, but Michael proved me wrong and traced the family lineage back to the fifteenth century in England. And to my profound amazement, he also discovered that another Cushing descendant was an actor in the early 1700's, the acting gene being firmly implanted in the Cushing DNA by one John Cushing.

What you are about to read is a thorough and meticulously researched look into the ancestry of Sir Peter Cushing and his theatrical roots, and if you're a fan of Sir Peter or are just generally interested in British theatre, then I believe you will be well-rewarded for your curiosity.

Michael McGlasson has done the acting world a service by revealing some of its previously unwritten past, and personally, I am most glad that he did.

Christopher Gullo

September, 2005

INTRODUCTION

“The Unknown is always intriguing.”
Peter Cushing in *The Skull* (1965)

On the morning of August 11, 1994, Sir Peter Wilton Cushing, O.B.E., entered the misty regions of the unknown at the age of eighty-one after a prolonged and often debilitating illness. Appropriately, the hospice in which he died is located in the city of Canterbury, the birthplace of Christopher Marlowe and author of the tragic play *Doctor Faustus*, a tale concerning a man who wishes to possess ultimate knowledge and gains it by selling his soul to Mephistopheles, one of Satan’s dark angels. Ironically, Cushing the actor did just about the same thing in the role of Baron Frankenstein, the obsessed and devoted “mad” scientist who obtained ultimate knowledge through his radical experiments with the dead which resulted in the creation of a human monster bent on destruction in such films as *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958) and *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1963). Conversely, Peter Cushing also portrayed Dr. Van Helsing, the famous vampire hunter in films like *Horror of Dracula* (1957) and *Brides of Dracula* (1960), in which he valiantly seeks to destroy ultimate knowledge held by his arch-nemesis Count Dracula, introduced in 1897 in the Gothic novel *Dracula; Or, the Undead* by Irishman Bram Stoker.

For those who hold a deep and abiding affection for British horror cinema, Peter Cushing symbolizes the penultimate villain and hero, for due to his remarkable talents as an actor, he could express the entire range of human emotions linked to some very disturbing yet charismatic figures, such as Baron Frankenstein in *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1969) and the “Jack the

Ripper” personage of Sir John Rowan in *Corruption* (1968) and with a number of others that border on complete selflessness and utter English gentility like Arthur Grimsdyke in *Tales From the Crypt* (1971) and Dr. John Rollason in *The Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas* (1957).

In addition, the largest percentage of horror film devotees and almost every Cushing biographer considers him to have been one of the kindest and most compassionate human beings that ever walked the face of the earth which is upheld by simply reading any of a number of reminiscences by his fellow actors and actresses associated with Hammer Studios where Cushing obtained his “big break” in 1957 in *The Curse of Frankenstein* and brought Hammer to international recognition. Tim Lucas, writing in *Film Comment Magazine* in 1994, states that Peter Cushing “will be remembered as horror’s first truly heroic actor” and that he vividly “seemed to inhabit the sliver of space between the fingers of Michelangelo’s God and Adam” and was “like the Arm of God, channeling a greater spiritual current into the . . . battles of Good vs. Evil than . . . had ever (been) known before or probably ever will again.”¹

Understandably, the death of Peter Cushing in the city of Canterbury created great sadness in the hearts of those who loved and admired him, whether fans, family members or fellow performers. But more importantly, his passing was the culmination of a long ancestral legacy dating back to the days when actors were considered as part of the lowest stratum of society, mostly because they were non-conformists and often lived a life filled with self-imposed hedonism. It could be said that Peter Cushing’s last dying breath symbolized the dissolution of more than two hundred and fifty years of theatrical ancestry and that when his body was cremated the ashes joined those of his progenitors, especially in regard to his paternal

grandfather Henry William Cushing, once involved in what some have called the greatest theatrical company that ever tread the boards of London's once-magnificent Lyceum Theater during the middle and waning years of Queen Victoria's long and highly influential reign.

As Madeleine Bingham observes, "Of all the shadows of the past, actors and their craft are the most shadowy. . . the setting of the actor is gone. His voice has gone, or only survives as a cracked reproduction. Most important of all, his audience has gone, for the audience creates the actor, and the actor creates the audience." ² Of course, Bingham is referring to a select group of performers who reached their prominence on the English stage some twenty years before the emergence of the cinema and reliable recording techniques. For this reason, we are unable to know exactly how these performers delivered their lines or how they expressed themselves visually and vocally, even with the help of first-hand recollections and memoirs. All we have are photographs, prints and drawings, poor substitutes for actual film footage.

Such is the case with Henry William Cushing (1842-1899), a member of Sir Henry Irving's famous acting troupe at the Lyceum Theatre between late 1889 and 1899. In his *Autobiography*, Peter Cushing provides a short but enticing physical description of his grandfather as seen through the eyes of a very young and impressionable English boy:

"With great clarity, I remember the daguerreotype photograph of my paternal grandfather. . . the formidable face of a disciplinarian which petrified me, his stern eyes behind the pince-nez seeming to follow me about the room whichever way I went. But I never met him, and photographs have been known to lie." ³

Although this leaves much to the imagination, it is obvious that Henry Cushing was posing for this daguerreotype (this is unlikely; daguerreotypes went out of fashion in the mid 1850's) for a special occasion, perhaps as a gift for his second wife Emily or as a memento for his children George and Maude. The pince nez, for those unfamiliar with Victorian-era accouterments, is a pair of small eyeglasses that clip to the bridge of the nose and were popular during the 1880's, proving that Peter's "daguerreotype" was a tintype, a form of photography with the image placed upon a thin sheet of tin. Peter also notes "photographs have been known to lie," a subjective quip that the portrait of Henry Cushing is not what it appears to be. As an alleged "British Bohemian," Henry Cushing could not have been the petrifying "disciplinarian," at least in the context of the strict, uptight Victorian gentleman that adhered unflinchingly to the morals of society. This would include negative opinions on certain kinds of social activities, such as carousing the taverns, frequenting and enjoying "bawdy" performances and attending theatrical events that featured immoral or indecent subject matter.

Of course, Henry Cushing the actor did not participate in any form of "bawdy" entertainment, although he might have occasionally seen shows of this nature while "carousing" with his fellow Lyceum performers. But for the most part, Henry was a devoted father and husband and did quite well when it came to providing for his family while living at his home in Nunwell in the borough of Wandsworth, a short walk from the River Thames to the north and not too distant from the infamous Tower of London.

For Peter Cushing, the theatrical career of his paternal grandfather was a fascinating subject. In his *Autobiography*, he relates that his aunt Maude presented him "with some beautiful

souvenir programs of Sir Henry Irving's productions at the Lyceum Theatre," and one of these programs was especially intriguing—"There, in the "Dramatis Personae" of Shakespeare's historical play King Henry the VIII. . . sandwiched between Mr. Reynolds. . . and Miss Ellen Terry. . . was Mr. Cushing." In retrospect, Peter's thoughts then "went back to that portrait on the shrouded parlor wall with a new respect, and something akin to awe."⁴ The realization that his grandfather was linked with the great Henry Irving, Ellen Terry and other prominent Lyceum players must have affected him greatly, perhaps so much so that at this very moment he decided to follow his grandfather's lead and become an actor.

Peter also reveals that Henry Cushing "was by profession, a quantity surveyor, or so I had always been led to believe." He obviously had some doubts about his grandfather's true vocation, wondering "how grandfather managed to be an actor as well as a quantity surveyor," due to "both professions requiring one hundred percent of one's time." For some strange reason, Peter's father never offered any acceptable explanations for this dilemma which induced Peter to consider the idea that Henry Cushing "had been equally unforthcoming," thus creating a mystery regarding his life as an actor and alleged quantity surveyor.⁵

Predictably, Peter mentions that while searching through "a file of family documents," he stumbled on "a batch of birth, marriage and death certificates" which contradicted what he had been told about his grandfather (and maybe even his aunt Maude and step-uncle Wilton Herriott). "No mention of a quantity surveyor," he concludes, meaning that Henry Cushing may not have been a member of this highly- educated and skilled group of engineering professionals. In 1948, George Cushing absentmindedly told his son that his "Uncle Bertie" was "banished to

Australia in 1901; we've never heard of him since." This "Uncle Bertie" possessed an "artistic temperament" and was something of a "wanderer," implying that he was much like his uncle Henry Cushing, the familial "rogue and vagabond." According to Peter, this "uncle Bertie" was Albert Walker Cushing, the son of Thomas Cushing, the younger brother of Henry William Cushing, making him Peter's great uncle.

At the conclusion of Peter's recollections about his theatrical relations, he admits that all of this insincerity amounts to "a skeleton in the cupboard," where it is "likely to remain."⁶ In truth, the cupboard certainly holds more than one skeleton and if the information presented in this book becomes common knowledge, the bones will begin to rattle and perhaps, after more than two hundred years, will finally be laid to rest.

NOTES

¹ 1978: 17.

² *Henry Irving: The Greatest Victorian Actor*. NY: Stein & Day, 1978, 17.

³ *Peter Cushing: An Autobiography*. UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987, 10.

⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

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