

'IT'S OVER THERE, BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SKY'

The ebullient Joan Sanderson had made a comedy career out of playing tyrannical battleaxes, notably the no-nonsense school secretary Doris Ewell in *Please, Sir!* (1968-72). As the aggressively hard-of-hearing Mrs Richards in *Communications Problems* (S2, E1), her relentless insistence on always being right leads to Basil's unforgettable rant about what you can and cannot expect to see out of a Torquay hotel room window. 'I mean, what does this deaf old bat expect, Sydney Opera House, perhaps? The Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Herds of wildebeest sweeping majestically...'



'NOT COMPLETELY SERIOUS, BUT SLIGHTLY SERIOUS'

Having valiantly tried to keep peace in the domestic bickering of *Till Death Us Do Part* (1966-75), Una Stubbs was enjoying herself as the self-centred Aunt Sally opposite Jon Pertwee's *Worzel Gummidge* (1979-81), when the call came to be in *Fawlty Towers*. She plays Alice, the sweet, naïve, and somewhat ineffectual wife of Roger, as played by the ebullient Ken Campbell, in *The Anniversary* (S2, E5). The party of friends of the Fawltys are well aware that Sybil has stormed off following an argument, and that perky Polly is substituting for her... with hilarious results!



'WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, PARIS?'

The ever urbane and dashing matinee idol Conrad Phillips had achieved television popularity as the hero of the Swiss mountains in *William Tell* (1958-59). An unflappable stooge for Morecambe and Wise and Dick Emery, Conrad was cast as Mr Lloyd in *The Wedding Party* (S1, E3). It is a character he could have played in his sleep, but the actor brings real laid-back affability and an elder statesman charm to the role. He certainly bewitches Polly and holds together the all-out bedroom farce of the episode with experienced aplomb.



Lee married Danish model Birgit Kroencke in 1961 and they had one daughter, Christina

Making it count

He's known best for his roles as Dracula and *The Mummy*, but Christopher Lee's life off screen was more eventful than any character he ever played in the movies...

Over a career that spanned seven decades, Christopher Lee starred in more than 200 movies, so many that he was once listed in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the actor with the most film credits. But Lee's life off camera was, in many ways, more colourful and dramatic than any role he ever played on screen. This was a man born to Italian aristocracy, who was a cousin of James Bond creator Ian Fleming and who was a spy for the Allied Forces in the Second World War. In his well-travelled youth, he crossed paths with figures as varied as JRR Tolkien, MR James and the murderers of Grigori Rasputin. He even worked for the British Army's most elite unit, later saying, 'I was attached to the SAS from time to time but we are forbidden – former, present, or future – to discuss any specific operations. Let's just

DID YOU KNOW?

Towards the end of his life, Lee released several albums in the heavy metal genre, including 2010's *Charlemagne: By the Sword and the Cross*.

say I was in Special Forces and leave it at that.'

Lee was, of course, one of the titans of the big screen in the 20th Century. From his parts in movies such as *Dracula* (1958), *The Devil Rides Out* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), right up to his role as Saruman in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies (2001-14), he was always a commanding and charismatic presence. With his matinee idol looks, 6ft 5in frame and sonorous voice, he was born to be a movie star. But with his societal connections, Lee could have been anything he wanted – diplomat, intelligence officer, politician, even opera singer. 'I was born with the gift of a very good voice,' he once said, admitting regret at never taking it up professionally.

Lee's background was impossibly glamorous. His mother was an Italian Countess who was famed as one of the great beauties of the Twenties, and his father a much-decorated veteran of the Boer and Great Wars. An only child, Lee was educated at the prestigious Summer Fields School in Oxford and later Wellington College in Berkshire, where he distinguished himself as a classical scholar. After

school he travelled to Paris where he witnessed Eugen Weidmann's death by guillotine – the last public execution performed in France.

Lee was 17 when the Second World War broke out, joining the RAF where he was swiftly promoted to Flight Lieutenant. 'Serving in the Armed Forces was the best thing that ever happened to me,' he would say later in life. 'I did not know how other people lived.'

GUNG HO AND GIFTED

Fluent in Italian, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Swedish, Danish and Greek, he would put his language talents to good use when he was recruited by British Intelligence, where one of his jobs was decoding German cyphers. Later, after joining the elite Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), he was sent to places such as Egypt, Tobruk and Benghazi, where his missions included sabotaging Luftwaffe planes and airfields. Lee's war service led to medals for bravery from the British, Yugoslavian, Czech and Polish governments.

Even after the war, Lee continued his fight against fascism, joining the Central Registry of War Criminals, a job that involved hunting down fugitive Nazis. 'We were given

dossiers of what they'd done and told to find them, interrogate them as much as we could and hand them over to the appropriate authority,' Lee revealed. He also visited many former concentration camps, including Dachau. 'Some had been cleaned up, some had not,' he said in 2009, describing what he saw there as, 'real horror and blood'.

His experiences with the Central Registry of War Criminals would prove traumatic for Lee and, deciding he'd seen 'enough horror to last a lifetime' he began to think of what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It was his cousin Nicolò Carandini, by then the Italian Ambassador to Britain, who suggested, 'Why don't you become an actor?'

Told by some agents that he was too tall to be a movie star, Lee soon found work in which his height was an advantage. He may not have been proud of those early Hammer films, but his casting as *Dracula*, *The Mummy* and *Frankenstein's Monster* cemented Lee as one of the horror studio's most bankable actors and kickstarted a big-screen career that would run until the 2010s.

Many of Lee's most famous movie roles aligned with some of



An early role for Lee in 1948's *Trottie True* with Roger Moore, Jean Kent, and James Neylin

his real-life experiences. In 1966, he played Grigori Rasputin in Hammer's *Rasputin the Mad Monk*, 40-odd years after his parents introduced him to the Russian mystic's assassins. Then, in 1974, he played the villainous Scaramanga in the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun*, written, of course, by his step-cousin (and regular golf partner), Ian Fleming. (He later

claimed that Fleming had suggested Lee play Dr No, before the first Bond film was made in 1962).

Of course, the signature role of Christopher Lee's later life was as the malevolent wizard Saruman in the three *Lord of the Rings* films and then in Peter Jackson's trilogy of *Hobbit* prequels. And of all the actors on those sets, Lee was the most familiar with Tolkien's novels.

He called the books 'the greatest literary achievement in my lifetime,' and he was the only cast member able to say they'd crossed paths with the author, who died in 1973.

'I met him with a group of other people in a pub in Oxford he used to go to, *The Eagle and Child*,' the actor recalled in an interview in 2003. 'I was very much in awe of him, as you can imagine, so I just said, "How do you do?"'

Lee passed away in 2015, a few months after the release of the final *Hobbit* film, *The Battle of the Five Armies*. With some celebrity deaths, obituary writers are struggling for interesting facts beyond that person's career – not so with Christopher Lee, who lived one of the most storied lives of any actor. Forget *Dracula*, *Henry Baskerville*, *Lord Summerisle* and *Saruman* – the greatest role Christopher Lee ever played in life was himself.



Younger cinemagoers will recognise Lee as magician Saruman or evil Jedi, Count Dooku



The Man with the Golden Gun was Lee's second time starring opposite Roger Moore

DID YOU KNOW?

Christopher Lee's niece is the actress Harriet Walter, star of such series as *Law & Order UK* (2009-14), *Succession* (2018-23) and *Ted Lasso* (2021-23).