

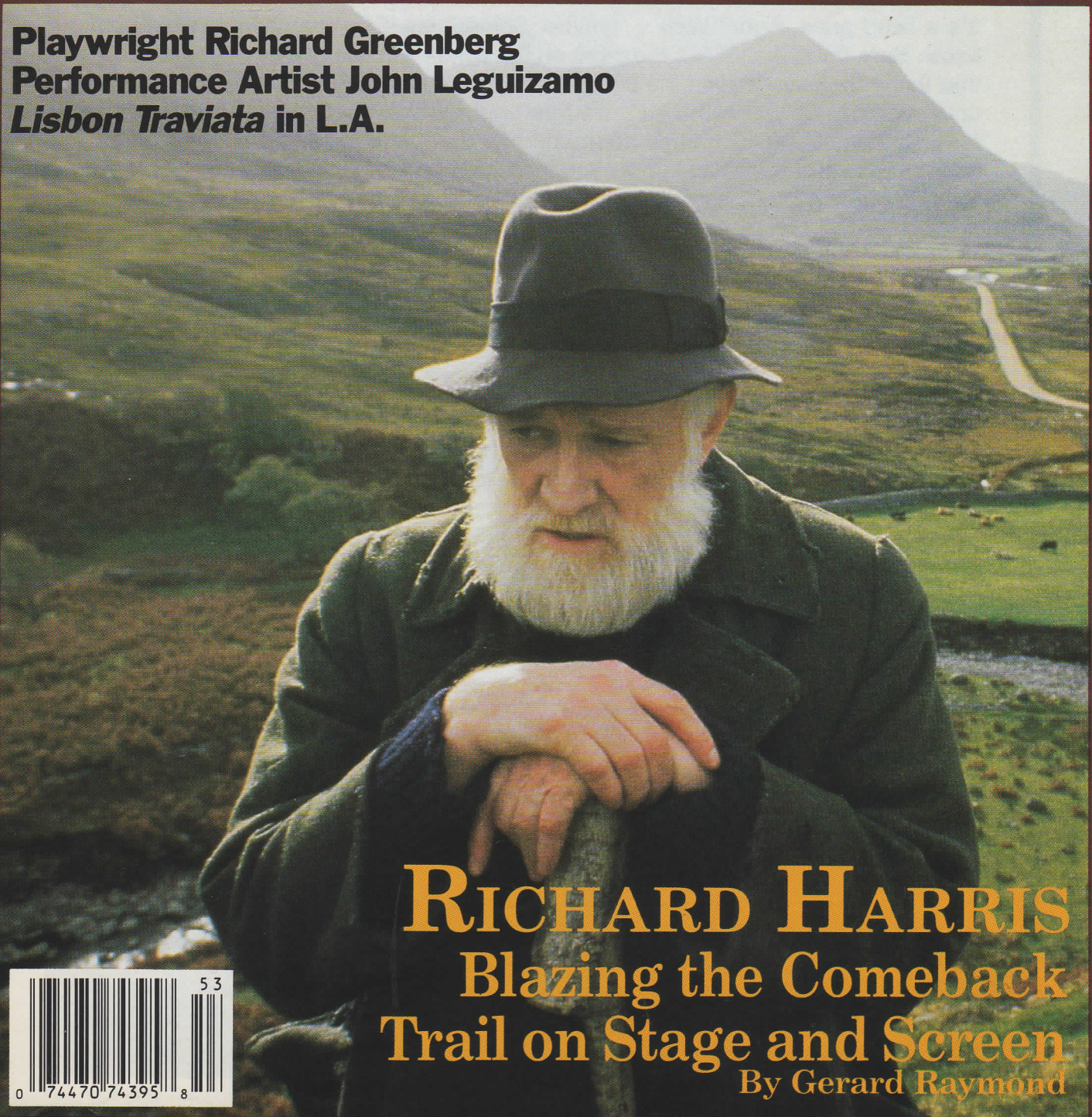
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**RICHARD HARRIS**  
Blazing the Comeback  
Trail on Stage and Screen  
By Gerard Raymond

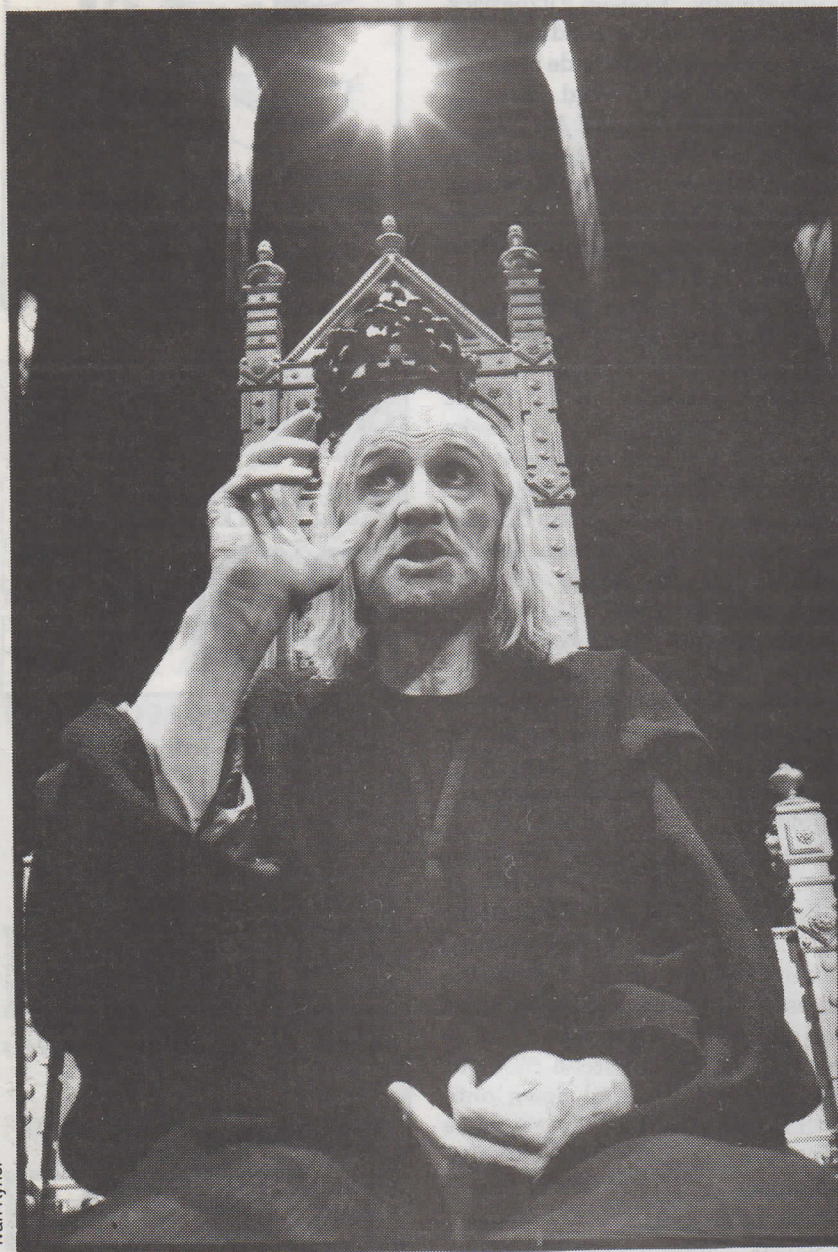




# The Lion in Winter

Richard Harris gets serious with Pirandello's *Henry IV* and the movie *The Field*

by Gerard Raymond



Ivan Kymel

Richard Harris as Henry IV in the West End.

**W**HATEVER HAPPENED TO RICHARD Harris? You might have thought he was finished as an actor—completely spent from excessive drinking, second and third rate movies and five years touring with *Camelot*. Harris thought the same. “I was just a wandering out-of-work actor. I had not made a picture in eight years and in the eight years prior to that I had only made rubbish.” This year, everything changed.

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Harris won the Evening Standard Best Actor award for his performance in Pirandello's *Henry IV* in the West End, and he has a good shot at an Oscar nomination for his new film, *The Field*, which opens in New York on December 21.

“It was an extraordinary year for me,” Harris acknowledges. “It was hard work and it has paid off, it revived my life. I just hope that I will be taken seriously again.” In his hotel room in New York, Harris, who is now 60, looks in great shape—tall and imposing, vigorous and passionate. Very much an actor who takes full advantage of the Irish music in his voice, he gives a terrific performance even while discussing the pitfalls of his past.

Feeling that his career was over, Harris picked *Henry IV* so he could “go out in a blaze,” hoping people would say “look what he could have been like.” In Pirandello's tragicomic play, a man prefers to remain a lunatic even after he regains his wits. It was Harris's first serious dramatic role in 27 years.

The production opened in London in May of this year, after a disastrous tour, having lost a leading lady, two directors, two designers, and two translators. It was actually restaged and redesigned four weeks before it arrived at the Wyndham Theater in London. “We opened with the lowest advance in the history of British theater,” Harris claims, with some exaggeration. “We knew we had to get the reviews, otherwise we would have opened on a Wednesday and closed on a Saturday. But we turned it around, we surprised everybody.”

Shortly after signing the contracts for *Henry IV*, Harris was offered the small role of a priest in *The Field*. But he set his sights on the lead character, Bull McCabe. “The moment I read it I knew how to do it.” The Bull, “the purest pagan in the world,” is a formidable Irish farmer



**“You can abandon the stage for a while to do a picture like *The Field*, but not to do pictures like *Orca the Killer Whale*.”**

who has nurtured a plot of land over a long period of time. He regards it as the heritage that he has to pass on to the next generation and is so totally obsessed with it that he will kill to keep it.

Wearing appropriate make-up and adopting characteristics of the Bull, he slyly tested for the part during his initial conversations with director Jim Sheridan and producer Noel Pearson. The financiers for the film were naturally not keen on Harris for the role. One American distributor expressed surprise that Harris was still alive.

“I did an awful lot of bad movies and I have to take responsibility for it myself,” Harris responds. “You can abandon the stage for awhile to do a picture like *The Field*, but not to do pictures like *Orca the Killer Whale*.”

**N**ot all his films were duds, how-

ever. He won international acclaim and an Oscar nomination in 1963 for his robust performance as a coal miner who becomes a professional rugby player in Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life*, written by David Storey. Harris is also particularly proud of *The Molly Maguires* (1970) and *A Man Called Horse* (1970). Of the latter film he claims, “We were the first to dignify the American Indian. When I read the script, I said we Irish are the Indians. In our own country we were almost eliminated through genocide by the British.”

The pre-1990 Harris will best be remembered by *Camelot*. He first played King Arthur in the 1967 movie version opposite Vanessa Redgrave. Then from 1982 through 1987 he toured with the stage production through, it seems, every small town in America. He owned the *Camelot* company so this five year stint made him “financially very independent.”

It enabled him to live very comfortably in the Bahamas and, when the time came, allowed him to pump 100,000 pounds into the London production of *Henry IV* “without missing it.” But the actor insists that the most valuable part of the *Camelot* tour was that it made him confident of his stagecraft.

During the tour, he experimented with different rhythms of speech which laid the groundwork for his bravura performance in *Henry IV*. Alternating between tragedy and comedy, teetering on the thin edge of sanity and insanity, Harris’s *Henry IV* was a pyrotechnics display of an actor’s craft. He proudly recounts that Alec Guinness visited him after a performance and complimented him on the “complete symphony” in his voice. “I think doing *Camelot* for so long made me aware vocally of where the voice could go and couldn’t go.”



In the “field,” Richard Harris as Bull McCabe (right) and Sean Bean as his son, Tadgh.

Avenue Pictures





John Hurt's Bird O'Donnell (left) is overshadowed by Harris's Bull McCabe in *The Field*.

The last time Harris took to the London stage in a dramatic role was in 1963, in Gogol's two-hour monologue, *Diary of a Madman*. That same period in which he made *This*

*Sporting Life*, his contemporaries Albert Finney and Peter O'Toole were also launching promising stage and screen careers—Finney in Tony Richardson's *Tom Jones* and

O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*. "We were the young rebels of the sixties," says Harris. "We challenged the British acting establishment represented by Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson, Michael Redgrave and Paul Scofield. What went wrong?"

"I thought that my life was going to end tomorrow. Having come from a very restricted Catholic Irish background in a small town, I wanted to drink all the vodka I could drink, seduce all the women I could seduce and fly all the aeroplanes I could fly more than I wanted to play the parts that I wanted to play. I had this thing that I couldn't go to bed because if I did, I would waste eight hours on sleep when I could be out doing things. Of course that became the objective of my life and the career just went down the tubes."

Even today Harris is not comfortable with being an "elder statesman." "The strange thing about my generation is that it was more important for us to rebel than to do. We came along and pushed the older generation off their pedestals but we never adopted the role. We shrugged it off." That role was taken up by the next generation, actors like Ian McKellen and Derek Jacobi who are ten years younger. "I find they are brilliant technicians but very dull. They are playing all the roles and they will probably all get their knighthoods."

Harris believes that there is no hope that his generation, Finney and O'Toole included, will be knighted. "Finney couldn't find his way to Buckingham Palace for a start or they couldn't trust how he'd show up!" he chuckles. They were never around enough, he says, to establish the solid body of work that generations before and after them accomplished. Nevertheless, this year has proved that the '60s "rebels," unreliable as they have often been, are not to be discounted. Finney played the gangster boss in *Miller's Crossing*, and O'Toole received unqualified raves for his performance in Keith Waterhouse's *Jeffrey Bernard Is Unwell* in the West End.



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“Coming from a restricted Catholic Irish background. . . I wanted to drink all the vodka I could drink and seduce all the women I could seduce.”

“**H**arris plans to bring *Henry IV* to Broadway before the '90-'91 Tony cut-off date. “Winning awards is not all that important but it is an acknowledgement of your work.” Next fall, he plans to form his own actor-manager company for a season of three plays in the West End. One of the primary aims of the Richard Harris Company will be to provide a training ground for young actors.

“There is no place in England today for young actors to train,” Harris complains. In his day actors would put in a three-year apprenticeship with a regional company, cutting their teeth on the classics in repertory. O’Toole went to Bristol, Finney to Birmingham, and Harris trained with Joan Littlewood’s Theater Workshop. “There are some brilliant young actors in England working in bars who are looking for work, and I want to bring them into

my company.”

Harris hopes to start his season directing *Julius Caesar*. In his interpretation of the play he will act out the scenario of the English theater in the '60s. *Julius Caesar* will be an Olivier-like establishment figure. The conspirators will be like the young actors who think “you’ve been at the top for too long, we are as good as you are or better than you.” Harris will probably play *Caesar*. *Macbeth* will follow with a *King Lear* slated for 1992.

Watching Harris in *The Field* you can get a taste of what his *Lear* might be like. “I have a shocker for you in *Lear*,” promises Harris with a gleam in his eye. He explains that he will not take on a role unless he finds the right hook. “There has to be a *coup de théâtre* somewhere down the line.” In *Henry IV* he invented a thrilling piece of business which enhanced the original text.

After deluding himself that he is an 11th-century monarch through half the play the character suddenly announces, “I’m so bloody bored with this.” At that point, Harris took off his wig and make up, not only indicating that the character has regained his wits but drawing the audience into the whole illusionary game of the theater itself.

“I thought I would go out with *Henry IV* and *The Field* with a kind of dignity,” says Harris smiling. “I wanted prove to myself I could do it. It was a way I could maybe prove to my boys who are all going into the business.” (Harris’s eldest son, Damien, is a film director and his middle son, Jared, will play Hotspur in Joanne Akalaitis’s production of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV at the Public* next year.) “But now, of course, I have the taste of it back and I want to go on and on. But I want to go on doing good things.” □



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