shore Life

Check it out!

The Blues community has always stepped forward to help out and donate its talents for a multitude of benefits. But they really shine when one of their own needs help.

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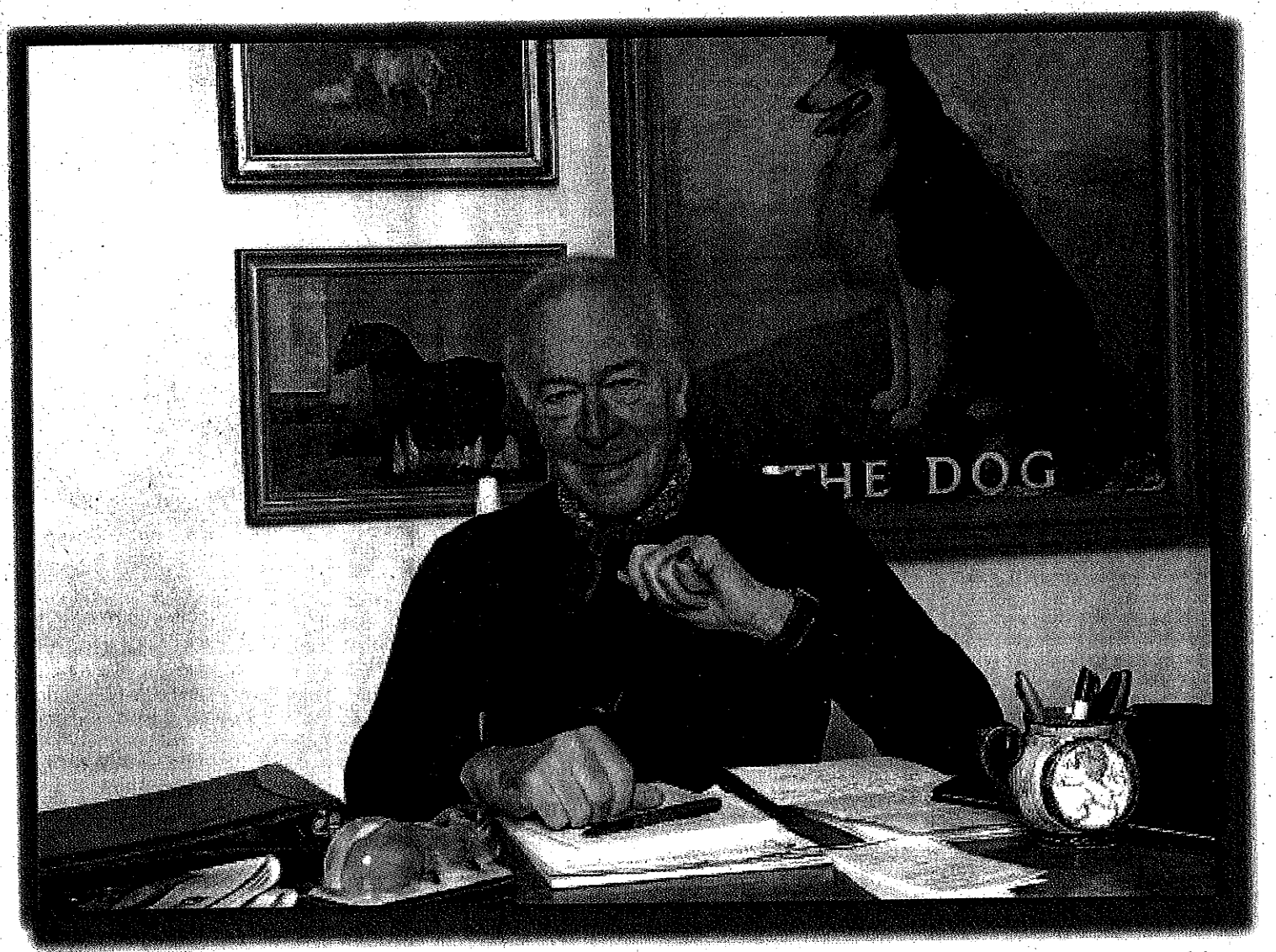


Booze and Hamlet - Every bit the racounteur, Christopher Plummer dazzled audiences with his no-holds barred honesty and biting wit and tales of the good old days of the theater when the liquor flowed and so did the soliloquies on stage.

IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER UNLEASHED IN MADISON

By Lisa Reisman
Special to Shore Line Times

Christopher Plummer isn't one to mince words. He's disarmingly open about his disdain for the role playing the Austrian naval officer Captain Von Trapp opposite Julie Andrews in the legendary 1965 film "The Sound of Music." And for that matter about a seven-hour operation at Yale-New Haven Hospital in 1973 to remove kidney stones.

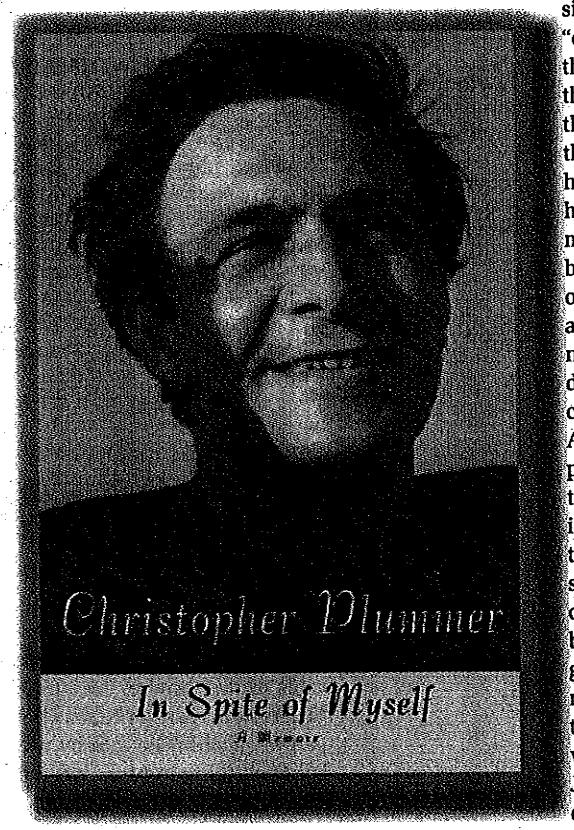
Delightfully enough, the 79-year-old acting legend also doesn't seem to take himself too seriously. Indeed, while fumbling with his microphone -"this is driving me mad," he was heard to say in his ever-so-slight English accent - someone in the crowd of 160 at a recent public appearance called out: "Take it off!" Plummer was at the Mercy Center in Madison promoting his memoir "In Spite of Myself."

"Soliciting?" he asked in mock indignation to gales of laughter. "Why, I've only been here five minutes."

From the outset, Plummer's roguish good humor was out in force. Not that it seemed to take much effort. In addition to being one of the most brilliant actors of our time, as R.J. Julia Booksellers owner Roxanne Coady put it, the two-time Tony Award winner is both a naturally gifted raconteur and inveterate comic, as is evident from his new book. Clad in a grey jacket with his trademark patrician bearing, the silver-haired Plummer charmed, illuminated, and entertained throughout the evening with his quick wit, utter lack of affectation, and unrepentant honesty.

Questioned, for example, on the regretful tone he strikes on the subject of the actress Natalie Wood, an exception to the generally exuberant, rollicking account of his life and career in "In Spite of Myself," he exclaimed: "Well, of course – just think of those liquid Russian eyes: my regret is not having had an affair with her!"

Virtually from birth, it seems, Plummer has been on familiar terms with glamour. As the great grandson of Canada's third prime minister and railroad magnate, he grew up in a world of Victorian gentility, of mansions and yachts and extravagant tea parties. His mother, a highly cultivated and doting divorcée, took her only child to everything she could in a Montreal that was in the 30s and 40s, a sophisticated seaport city thriving with "more theaters and nightclubs and cabaret than there were days of the year." Along the way, she introduced him to such luminaries as the young Judy Garland, Edith Piaf, and Maurice Chevalier. She also took care, however, that he learned to ski out of fear that he might – and here Plummer's voice assumed a comedically high register – "turn sissy."



Plummer skipped acting school and went pro as a teenager, coming of age in the boisterous New York theater world of the 1950s. He learned his craft by watching colleagues like the comedian Edward Everett Horton and Jason Robards, sat at the Algonquin Round Table with Tennessee Williams and Laurence Olivier ("a wonderful bull artist"), and bar-hopped with George C. Scott, Elaine Stritch, and Colleen Dewhurst.

Reminiscing about that time, Plummer spoke wistfully of a more celebratory and less Puritanical era in theatrical history, when Broadway stars propped up the bar at Sardi's and P. J. Clarke's rather than earnestly taking up Buddhism, Scientology, and Kabbalah and when "the art of conversation was still very much alive." The challenge, he said, was to be witty. "If you weren't witty, you were a bore." The last few decades have been "so dull, so politically correct, so safe. You can't make an outrageous idiot of yourself without being terribly criticized."

Part of the conviviality, he acknowledged, came from the simple fact that "drinking was the fashionable thing to do in the 40s and 50s; the 60s (which he describes in his book as "the miasmal sixties") became more of a drug scene, and drugs are not nearly as conducive to being communicative. As for the propensity of actors to drink during work at the time, Plummer shrugged unapologetically. What better way to get rid of those niggling inhibitions? he asked with a sly grin. Just have a few drinks. It was, in addition, a test of virility: "If I can drink all night and still be hung over and go and play Hamlet in the matinee and get through it, then 'I am a man, my son.'"

It is, as the title suggests, "in spite of" this bon vivant lifestyle that Plummer has managed a long, successful career as a tireless working artist, not least in carving out a reputation as an enormously versatile Shakespearean actor.

"No one who writes in the world writes more simply than Mr. Shakespeare when he is at his best," Plummer said, "and the only way to play Shakespeare is to think of it as simple and magical and full of humanity."

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Booze and Hamlet: Christopher Plummer unleashed

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Upon which he quoted a verse from "Hamlet," his beautifully modulated voice and impeccable diction leaving the audience in silent awe. "There is no part written as beautifully as the part of Hamlet," he said by way of coda. "He has everything in him: wisdom, anger, poetry, wit, culture."

Considering the distinct shift in tone when he speaks about Shakespeare, it's evident that Plummer reserves high reverence for his vocation, and this is borne out in his memoir: Acting, he writes, "has taught me music, poetry, painting and dance; it has introduced me to the big bad world outside; it has made me face rejection; it has taught me humour in its blackest and gentlest forms; it has made me think; it has even taught me about love. It has shown me the majesty of language, the written word in all its glory, and it has taught me above all that there is no such thing as perfection – that in the arts, there are no rules, no restrictions, no limits – only infinity."

Which, clearly, makes it all the more galling to him that his celebrity should arise from a role that is one small piece of his massive body of work. Plummer did little to hide his feelings about the "humourless and one-dimensional" Captain Von Trapp, theatrically letting out a long sigh, dropping his head, and then looking up to the heavens, even as members of the audience gushed about his transcendent performance. While conceding that "The Sound of Music" was beautifully made and a wonderful movie for the family, "it's just not fun to be admired for something you did not have a great deal to admire about." He titles his chapter on the movie "S&M" because it was a "masochistic thing to do to his career" and elsewhere refers to it as "The Sound of Mucus."

"Thank God my leading-man career did not last," he said: playing leading men, as well as saints, he described as "boring as bejesus." He couldn't wait to become a character actor, "the more evil the better" and credited his role as "60 Minutes" Mike Wallace in "The Insider" for "goosing" his acting longevity and leading to parts in "A Beautiful Mind" and "Syriana."

In 2009, he has two films coming out: the Tolstoy biopic "The Last Station," in which he starred with Helen Mirren ("a woman who adores taking off her clothes at the drop of a hat") and "The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus," on which he worked with Heath Ledger before the young actor's tragic death.

Near the end of the evening, Ann Green of Westbrook recalled to Plummer a short stay he made at Yale-New Haven Hospital in 1973. He was, at the time, starring in Neil Simon's "The Good Doctor" at the Shubert Theater. She referred to the problem as "some minor thing"; as it happened, she was one of his nurses. As a token of thanks for her care, he had presented her with a gift, she said, holding up a small marionette.

"No no no, it was kidney stones," protested Plummer, overturning Green's efforts toward discretion.

Based on the excruciating details that he proceeded to share of the seven-hour operation, no one could accuse Christopher Plummer of being withholding, not during the evening at the Merc Center nor in the sprawling story of his life as an actor in "In Spite of Myself." He is candid to a fault, almost, dare one say, in spite of himself.