

# Tom Burke and his father, David, also an actor, talk about guilt and conquering dyslexia.

Interview with Tom and David Burke in the Sunday Times, March, 2nd, 2014.



## Tom, 32

When I was a little kid, all my friends' parents seemed really straight and normal. Compared to them, my mum and dad led a rather weird life. One day, Mum took me to see Dad at "work" and he was having this sword fight in front of hundreds of people. Like any kid, I just started cheering him on: "Go on, Dad... stab him!"

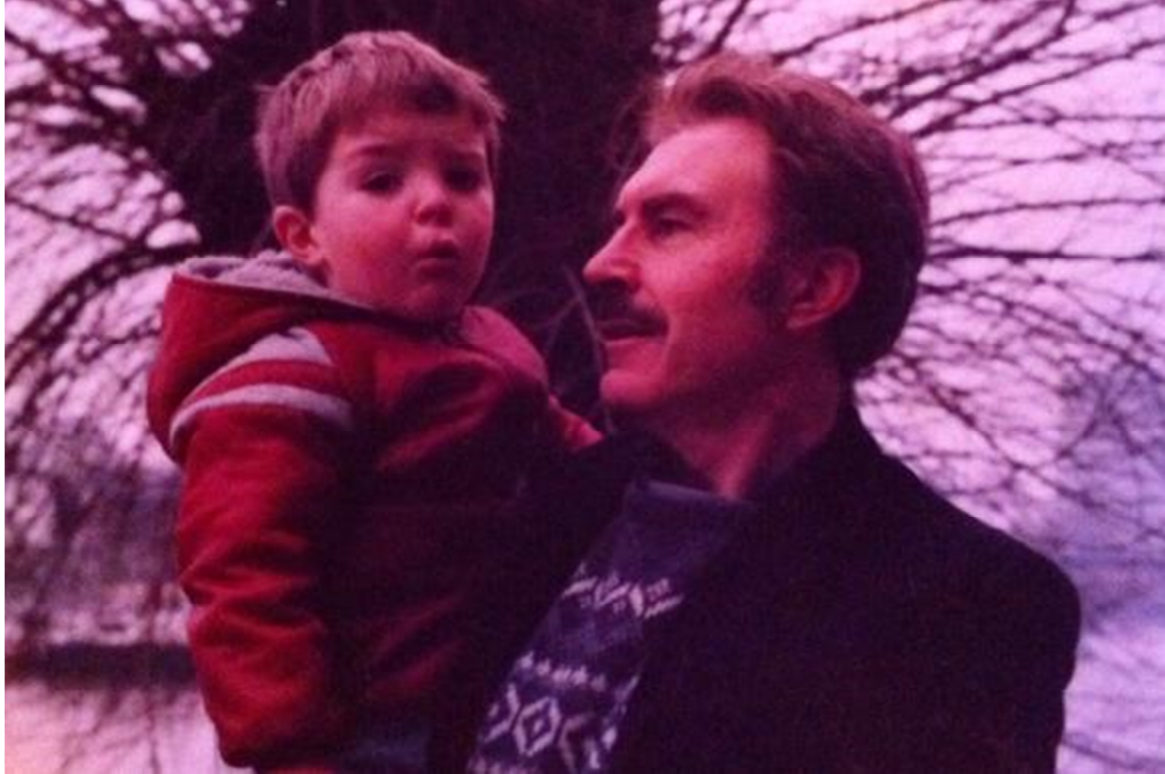
That was when they were both at Stratford with the RSC, but don't ask me how old I was 'cos I'm numerically dyslexic and still struggle with stuff like that. When I first started school, I remember looking at a blackboard and it just seemed to be covered in writing. I was supposed to be copying what was on it, but I couldn't separate it into words. I just filled my page with random letters and numbers.

An expert eventually diagnosed me with dyslexia, but some of the teachers back then didn't really believe in dyslexia; one headmaster said it was just a fad. To be honest, I already felt like a bit of freak and having a label just made things worse. But Dad was brilliant. He was always talking to me... always trying to help. Eventually, him and Mum sorted out a proper dyslexia teacher and then got me into a Steiner School, near where we lived in Kent. Academically, I still struggled, but my imagination was finally being engaged.

I can just about remember Dad playing Dr Watson [opposite Jeremy Brett in the 1984 TV series *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*], but I think he missed being with Mum and me, and he gave it up after only one series. As I got older, I felt really guilty about that – I thought he'd given up this brilliant opportunity for me. It bothered me so much that, many years later, I had to ask him about it. He said: "It was my decision. I didn't just want to work; I also wanted to be your dad. On top of that, I was getting bored of saying, 'Good heavens, Holmes!'"

This might sound odd, but I always felt I was an actor. It was just... there. Mum and Dad are actors, my godfather's Alan Rickman, my godmother's Bridget Turner and Fiona Shaw is Dad's cousin. I'm sure people have funny ideas about why I've got jobs, but I can assure you that someone like Alan Rickman does not cast you in a play just because you're his godson.

Yes, there was encouragement and I was always made to feel welcome, plus I was never star-struck by other actors. Then again, being star-struck is weird. I've worked with people like Johnny Depp, John Malkovich and Kevin Spacey and I was absolutely fine. Then I happened to meet Kylie Minogue and I was a gibbering wreck! I was like a little kid, back on the sofa watching Neighbours.



#### **David, 79**

I was 46 when Tom was born and my wife, Annie, was 33. Quite late to have kids, I suppose, but there had been a few complications... Annie got breast cancer. She came through all of that successfully, but she was warned against having children because the doctors said that being pregnant might stir up all the bad stuff again.

There was also the added problem that Annie had polio as a child and had been left with a weak leg, which meant that carrying a child for nine months put a great strain on her body. But Annie didn't care about any of that; she was determined to have a child and, when it finally happened, it felt very, very special.

I was working a lot after Tom was born, but Annie had more or less given up her acting. Most of the time I was up in Manchester filming *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which made me feel terribly guilty. I was leaving my wife and baby alone in an isolated country cottage, and couldn't expect Annie to go hiking up the motorway every weekend. So when we finished filming the first series, I decided to go back home. But I have no regrets. Family is more important to me than any of that stuff.

I'm not saying it wasn't fun. When the first episode of *Holmes* went out in 1984, it was obvious we'd pulled in a big audience. I remember walking around London the morning after it had gone out thinking: "So, this is what it's like to be famous. OK, Dr Watson, get ready for the autographs." Sure enough, this bloke looked at me and came over. "All right, mate," he said. "Are you still working for the Gas Board?" That was as famous as I got!

There's no way I could be in a show like *Sherlock* today. Sure, every actor wants to be successful, but I honestly couldn't deal with what Martin Freeman has to deal with. Back in the '80s, there was

no such thing as celebrity culture... thank God! I hate celebrity culture. All that showbiz and razzmatazz. It stinks!

Although Tom was a bright boy, he was having a really hard time at school and we knew there was something not quite right. It was Annie who first latched on to the dyslexia, but the school he was at just wasn't geared up to deal with it. As far as they were concerned, they had high standards to maintain and woe betide any child who fell below them. We've got photographs of Tom from that time and he looked so unhappy.

He seemed to have this permanently frightened look on his face.

Annie and I knew we had to do something drastic; that's when we started looking at a Steiner School. As a parent, education is one of the scariest things you ever have to think about. You want your child to do well. The funny thing is, I'd been through the same thing when I was a kid. I'm pretty sure I was dyslexic, but they just didn't call it that back then. You had what they called "learning difficulties".

I suppose acting was my way of getting past all that stuff. My mother was an Irish peasant and we were a massive Catholic family living in Bootle, a working-class area of Liverpool. My mother's four sisters were all nuns and she was devastated when I told her I wanted to be an actor. She stopped dead in the street, looked up to heaven and just kept repeating: "No, no, no." One of her sisters gave up sweets for a year as penance. I think she hoped that would somehow balance the books with God.

We never tried to push Tom into acting, but Annie and I used to put on plays in the local village hall and there just came a point where we knew he had an aptitude for it. He wanted to do it and it would have been perverse to try and stop him. Whenever we watch him now, I always end up turning to Annie and grinning like an idiot. "Darling, do you realise that's our son!"