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**“We’re all
fascinated
with our past”**

Stockard Channing and
David Westhead on
bringing Beckett to
the Edinburgh Fringe





Interview

We're taking pictures all the time and documenting our lives, this is about aspiration, the past and memory

Stockard Channing and David Westhead will be in Edinburgh next month for a Fringe production of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. The *Grease* and *West Wing* star is directing her friend, as his character contemplates life and mortality. The pair talk about their friendship, the relevance of the play and the charity that all proceeds of the production go to



Words: Janet Christie Portrait: Tom Harrison

Ask old friends Stockard Channing and David Westhead a question and they're off and running, interjecting, laughing and finishing each other's sentences as they talk about bringing Channing's directorial debut play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, starring Westhead to the Edinburgh Fringe next month.

They're familiar faces from TV and theatre – 82-year-old Tony and Emmy Award-winning actress Channing was the coolest thing about *Grease* as lead Pink Lady Rizzo, played First Lady Abbey Bartlet in *The West Wing* and starred with Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock in *Practical Magic*, before doubling down on her first love of theatre and becoming a major player in London's West End after relocating to London in 2014 following the death of her long term partner, cinematographer Daniel Gillham.

Meanwhile best buddy actor and producer Westhead, 63, also made his name on stage with *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, *Royal National Theatre*, and *The Royal Court Theatre*, before earning a host of TV credits, including *The Bill*, *Criminal Justice*, *Bramwell* and *W1A*.

So why did they choose *Krapp's Last Tape*, the 1958 play by master of the absurd, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, with its dark humour leavening themes of exile, failure and an incomprehensible world to bring to the Fringe?

Channing: David can answer that because he's the one who chose it.

Westhead: OK, so 25 years ago, there I am in Lithuania...

Channing: This is very long story. I've heard it a million times.

Westhead: I had a day off filming and thought I might see a bit of theatre, didn't fancy Shakespeare but at the top of one of the posters was a bit of paper with an arrow saying 'Krapp's Last Tape'. I followed the arrow and 20 metres down the road there's another, then another and 20 minutes later I'm on the 12th story of a Soviet apartment block in some bloke's front room with five others and in the corner there's the bloke with a tape recorder doing *Krapp's Last Tape*. I thought, 'that's genius', I'll do that when I'm old enough."

Which 23 years on is now.

"I thought I haven't been on stage for a while, who am I going to ask to do this? It wasn't a difficult choice. I bullied my mate into directing me."

According to Channing: "We were having dinner when he asked me and I said 'I have no desire to do that'. But then..."

Two years on Channing and Westhead have toured the play in various venues up and down the country, with the entire production, set, costume, lights (built by Geoff and Pete, tradesmen who were doing some work in Westhead's home) all packed in his Ford C-MAX car, driven by son Alfie who runs the sound.

"I think it's a hugely Edinburgh festival show," says Westhead. "Because you're on your own against the world in the theatre and you try to make the audience part of the experience. Then you go out after and you're part of a communal experience in the city. It'll be great to be part of the vibe and because I'm done at half past two I can go and see other shows."

"Basically acting is about making a reality that communicates to an audience, taking a text and making it alive," says Channing. "That's it. What has appealed over the couple of years we've been doing this show to audiences ranging from 32 to 250 people, is it's relevant to the age we live in. We're taking pictures all the time and documenting our lives and this is about aspiration, the past and memory."

Krapp's Last Tape is about a 69-year-old man with a tape recorder who has been recording himself every year on his birthday since he was 20. As well as making a recording, he listens to a tape from his past, chosen at random, and on this occasion is listening to his 39-year-old self, who has just listened to himself at 23.

"For the 39 year old, life is going to be wonderful, and we see this man at 69 who has not had a successful life, hearing this and commenting," says Channing.

For Westhead, now in his sixties, the play has come of age.

"The funny thing is I'm almost the same age as the character, and you've experienced everything that's talked about: parental death, abject failure, lots of ambition, huge loss of love on a consistent basis. It's things that you can associate with.

"People get scared of Beckett," says Channing, "but this is unbelievably accessible and something every human can relate to. We're all fascinated with our past and aspirations for the future. But to be in the room with your own self at 39, at 23, is impressive."

Also keeping things simple is the fact that the Beckett estate doesn't allow any changes to the script or staging.

"I have a pair of white boots, which are referred to as 'a surprising pair of white boots', tapered towards the end, size 10 and a half. Well, I'm an eight and a half so I've got the end of it packed with newspaper," says Westhead.

The pair met in 1999 filming in Luxembourg, when they were cast as husband and wife in *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, adapted from the fantasy novel by Wicked writer Greg Maguire, and have been friends ever since.

"Having known each other 26 years, we have memories we share and can look back on," says Westhead. "I couldn't trust anybody more than I trust Stockard, her ability to direct is forensic."

Channing agrees: "We tap back into all these years, go and see films together, evaluate performance and our taste is very similar. You know, we mouth off. And we like each other. So that kind of trust is real and that's a very important thing."



David Westhead in *Krapp's Last Tape*, main and right

Who do they think the play will appeal to?

"Well, it's saying whatever the audience wants it to say and people relate to it on whatever level they want. And we've had all ages watching," says Channing.

Westhead adds: "Young people get a lot out of it, because they find all the funny bits funny because they are universal, and also at the moment it's not easy for young people and the future is very uncertain, so looking back on a man whose past was uncertain melds together very well. We've been surprised how well it goes down, given that it's something that goes in the back of a van. It's insane."

It's obvious the absurdity of the operation appeals to the pair and is entirely in keeping with a Beckett performance, but it's also integral to keeping costs down as all profits from the performances go towards a charity set up by Westhead and photographer John Cole in 2010, The Wembley to Soweto Foundation.

Emerging from the backdrop of the World Cup in South Africa, it has provided photographic training and life-skills to disadvantaged young people across Africa, Europe, the UK, Russia, the Middle East, the United States and Brazil, with the youngsters becoming professional photographers and teachers.

One of these is Tom Harrison who learnt



Krapp's Last Tape, *Upstairs at The Roxy*, 1:25pm, August 5-31, for tickets see assemblyfestival.com/whats-on/krapps-last-tape. All profits from the show go to *The Wembley to Soweto Foundation*, www.wembleytosoweto.com

photography with the charity in 2012 and has since gone on to win portrait photographer of the year and took some of the images of Channing and Westhead accompanying this interview.

"We've worked with people from the townships of South Africa to the favelas of Brazil, through to gang-related young people in LA, and that's extraordinary because all of them have massive potential. It's just that education has passed them by, but now we're trying to give them a key to unlock the door that takes them elsewhere. We've got an East London kid who worked at Poundland who's now in China running her own photography course in Chinese, having got a business degree from Beijing University," says Westhead.

For Channing, the move into directing was unexpected and she returns to the Chinese dinner when she said: "This is not really what I set out to do with my life."

However, once she read the text and watched recordings of performances she was hooked.

"It's fascinating," she says, but is modest about her directorial role. "The only thing I've really done, because the text and costumes are fixed, is the tempo [the speed, pacing, and rhythm of action and dialogue]. It's like being a conductor. The character comes out of the text and David's own personality has taken it forward.

"Beckett wrote it specifically for the actor Patrick Magee who took 33 minutes to smash through it. John Hurt took an hour, and we take about 43. It's almost like a dance routine, step, ball, change, and you move and an order gets in your body and you just do it. And that's where David is now."

Westhead confirms the running time, laughing as he explains the sole aberration.

"Alfie and I set up the show, and as they gave us clearance to start in two minutes I said, 'Alfie, I've forgotten the bananas – which are an integral part of the show. He legged it to a greengrocer and came back, literally a minute later, with bananas. The only problem was these bananas were massive and that put two minutes on the show."

With timing crucial, Channing and Westhead are delighted to hear about the one o'clock gun, when a cannon is fired at the castle, providing an alarm for their show which starts at 1:25pm Upstairs at The Roxy.

"When you hear a cannon that means run to see *Krapp's Last Tape*," says Westhead.

With a background in both theatre and film, what is it about being on the stage that has drawn them both back, Stockard having started out in Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* after she ran away from university to 'join the circus'.

"It's the foundation of everything else," she says. "It's my home, what changed my life and it's become my foundation. If I look at a film script, I'm looking at it the same way as I look at a theatre piece, because you're playing someone in a set circumstances and it's always about that.

Westhead agrees: "It's what I'm trained to do. The reason I concentrated on film and television is because I had two kids and couldn't afford to go on the stage. Now we've booted them both out of the nest – one of them comes on the road but he doesn't get paid very much – it's happy days."

Which is another of Beckett's famous plays. Any plans to do that next?



JOHN COLE

"We'll see," laughs Westhead.

As for Channing, she'll be on cinema screens shortly alongside Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock in *Practical Magic 2*, the follow up to the 1998 American romantic fantasy *Practical Magic*, reprising her role as Aunt Franny 28 years on.

"Making the first one was a life experience and the first day I stepped on the set this time and saw Nic and Sandy we were just screaming and hugging each other. A lot has happened in all our lives in 28 years. And it was a film that was never a success at the time. People didn't understand what it was but it has a fan base that's massive so Warner Brothers invested in the new film."

It's time for the pair to hit the road but we can't let Channing go without asking about *Grease*. Does she still have her Pink Ladies jacket or anything else from that film? Her answer is short and sweet.

"No. Nothing. Who knew? I needed a job and I did the job, and that was a very long time ago. I don't look back. Unlike Mr Beckett, I don't look back."

Channing and Westhead are all about the here and now, and outside there's a car to pack and a play to perform as the old friends become Edinburgh bound.

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Private schools being treated as 'bottomless pits of money'

◆ New chair of Fettes says sector
is of 'huge benefit to Scotland'

EXCLUSIVE

Catriona Stewart
Education Correspondent

Government must stop treating the private school sector as "bottomless pits of money", the new chair of Fettes College has said, as he warned students from disadvantaged backgrounds are missing out due to the imposition of VAT on fees.

John Edward has taken over as Chair of Governors at the prestigious boarding school and, in his first interview, expressed frustration at the lack of public and political appreciation of the private sector.

And Mr Edward, former Head of the European Parliament's Office in Scotland, said that, while tech giants are

"barbarians", it was too late to attempt to row back on technology and AI in schools.

Mr Edward was the chief executive of the Scottish Council for Independent Schools (SCIS) from 2010 to 2023, although his background is in EU policy. He previously worked in Brussels for Scotland House and the European Policy Centre.

"Everything I'd done before was explaining a sector to the wider world and to politics, or explaining politics to the wider world," he said.

"In a way the schools job was the same because the sector is not terribly well understood, except to the people who are in it or of it."

Mr Edward, who describes Fettes as "one of the best schools in Britain", says people

Continued on page 4

Cross country: Relay calls at home of Saltire



PICTURE: EUAN CHERRY/GETTY IMAGES

Lauren Brogan with the King's Baton as the Commonwealth Games relay reached the Flag Heritage Centre in Athelstaneford, East Lothian, where the St Andrew's Cross originated at a battle in 832 when Picts and Scots defeated Anglo-Saxon invaders **Opening ceremony, page 18**

Argentina v Scotland



New schedule
too demanding
says Tuipulotu

Sport



Magazine
David Westhead
and Stockard
Channing bring
Beckett to the
Festival Fringe