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(Born: 14 August 1950)

PEACE CHILD ORIGINS

A PERSONAL PEACE CHILD HISTORY



For me, the history of *Peace Child* starts in 1971, when I spotted this picture of this gorgeous young lady in the pages of a casting book at the National Film School. After some persuasion and helped by her mother, I was able to cast her in my first film, *The Dinner Party*. A cornucopia of adventures followed – involving her running in her underwear through Hertfordshire meadows, crazy sailing trips of the west coast of Scotland, restoring (- and fighting with a sitting tenant in -) a beautiful house in South Hampstead and, eventually, a New Year's Eve Wedding in 1979. Two wonderful children – Alexander and Natasha – followed, accompanied by an ever present third called *Peace Child*. All three have dominated our lives and all three have made us very, very happy, and very, very proud.

We are still married some 45 years later – and as well as happiness, she has given me the benefit of her immense wisdom, common sense and empathy. Together, we have shared the highs and lows of the Peace Child adventure along with a fair amount of disagreement on such matters as diet, alcohol consumption, flatulence and personal hygiene.

The actual *Peace Child* history started for me one night in March 1981 – when I answered our front door of our South Hampstead home, and found a man standing there who looked the spitting image of Cat Stevens. I was just on my way out to an ACTT Union Meeting – which I absolutely had to go to. I left him with Rosey, whom he appeared to know – and when I returned, two hours later, he was still there, drinking cups of tea and wanting to play me some music. For some reason, our stereo was bust – so we broke into my brother's flat down stairs where – by another snafu – the light bulbs had all gone. So we sat in the dark – and I heard, for the first time, the magnificent, plangent music of David Gordon.

I was moved, but I had no idea how I could help. David gave me a copy of a colourful book, The Peace Book, and asked me to read it. Which I did: it was a somewhat simplistic, Disney-esque story of some nameless children from unnamed countries bringing peace to the world. It had the nice trick that it was set in the future – with an old story-teller explaining how the children did it when he was young. But it was NOT the kind of story that one could imagine being combined with David’s majestic music. It would be like having Disney’s The Jungle Book set to music by Wagner or Vaughan Williams – rather than the wonderful songs of the Sherman brothers.

So I told David – No can do! But he was very persuasive: there has to be a way, he thought. He took me out on a drive to the country – to Caversham, where we talked about his life and his commitment to promoting peace. Rosey had been in touch with him for some time – and she, and her mother, were equally persuasive. Rosey had just given birth to our first wonderful baby – and looking at him, and watching a re-run of Peter Watkins’ famous War Game film about what happened to parts of Kent after a nuclear attack – I realised that working for Peace might make for a more meaningful life than just making commercial films.

Rosey’s mother, Eirwen, had said: “This is something that might change your lives for ever....” I had no thoughts about that – at that stage. If I thought about it at all, I wrestled with: how to marry David’s wonderful music to this slight and simple story. Some ideas started to formulate and one morning, in April 1981, I got up early – and went to my study and started writing. I was supposed to go on a film recce to some factory in North London – but I was in full flow, so I told the cameraman to go without me. By lunchtime, I had 14 pages – and I wrote at the top: PEACE CHILD. And I sent it off – by Fax – to David and Eirwen. Soon after, I got a phone call – and that evening, Rosey and I went round to Eirwen’s home in Hamilton Terrace – where it was agreed that I would write and direct, Rosey would produce, Mel Bush and David would oversee – and the World Disarmament Campaign, managed by Michael and Eirwen Harbottle – would be the over-all producer. Bernard Benson, the author of the Peace Book, had secured £40,000 to underwrite the first production in the Royal Albert Hall.

So – we began.

The actual casting, rehearsal and production of the RAH production is a blur in my memory. Certain parts stick out: the arrival of Geoff Westly as an audition pianist for one of the cast. He was so good, we invited him to MD the show. And he was BRILLIANT! I remember the time we took the entire cast up to an abandoned carpet warehouse at Staples Corner to rehearse the movements – it being the only place big enough to lay out the three stages we had planned for the Albert Hall.

And – of course – I have told the story many times about driving Magnus, Dominic, Jessica and some other cast members home to Hampstead – and hearing them chatting about in the back seat about what they would actually say to a US President were they to meet with him: their ideas were funny and brilliant - significantly better than what I had written for them to say. So I changed the script and gave them new lines to say at the next rehearsal.

“But that’s what I was saying in the back of the car?!” said Magnus.

“I know,” I said, “Now you’re going to say it in front of thousands of people in this play!”

“Really??”

“Yes – really.”

“That’s cool!”

So came about the Peace Child mission to ‘empower young people’ – by taking their best ideas and showcasing them for adults and their peers to see – whether in a musical play, a debate, a book, a conference – or anything!

On the night itself, several memories persist: my father brought me a copy of the Listener, with a Gerald Priestland article in it about Don Richardson's story of the Peace Child in Papua New Guinea – a story that has informed Peace Child's mission ever since. A CND person came up to me, angry about the line: "Keep your bombs...." at the end of the play. "We have to ban all bombs....," she said. Yes – but as the Peace Child says: "Bombs are not the problem: the problem is whatever it is in your heads that make you feel you need them."

And – the mess-ups: Peter Straker careening around the underground tunnels in the Albert Hall, seeking the right entrance to come in to sing 'Child for a Day' – and looking so flustered, I doubted he could sing a note: and then he sang it. Like an Angel! And my whole fixation about ending the show with Fred Astaire's scene from the end of 'On the Beach' – and the projector didn't work – and it took me all of an agonised minute to understand that it absolutely didn't matter: that the audience felt the show was complete as it was – that nobody needed any clever twists at the end to tie it up.

Some months later, I met some one who had arrived late for the show – and crept into the Upper Circle to watch it. She felt the energy as she climbed the stairs – and when she opened to door and came into the arena, she said: "It felt just like diving into a swimming pool of champagne! The whole atmosphere in the hall was fizzing..."

Also later, we heard that Nobel Peace prize winner, Sean McBride, had leant across to his fellow Nobel Peace prize winner, Philip Noel Baker, at the end of the show and said: "This needs to be seen in Washington!" "And Moscow..." said Philip – thus laying out my life's work for the next 6 years.

But for me – that night – Peace Child was done. I had no plans to do anything further with it – and the following week, I went back to Transatlantic Films and carried on preparing my film productions. Until David Gordon again turned up and told me that I had to go to Washington. I remember Gerry Jampolsky, the author of "*Love is Letting Go of Fear*", coming round to our home and offering help and contacts in Washington DC to launch Peace Child in the USA. And a couple of friends of David offered to buy me a ticket to Washington to go explore the possibilities. And so it grew, and grew – until Rosey and I realised that we had a tiger by the tail and we needed to follow where it led.